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FINAL SAY

# The New Guard

Fashion lover and society maven **SUZANNE ROGERS** seeks out the **NEXT WAVE** of design talent at London's **CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS**.

BY SUZANNE ROGERS



*This past February*, in its coverage of London Fashion Week, *Vogue* asked, “How rarely in these oh-so-clinically ordered days are people actually desperate to gate-crash a fashion show?” The event that ignited such clamour wasn’t Burberry’s remarkable Henry Moore-inspired show or the dazzling Mary Katrantzou collection that recalled the 1940s magic of Disney’s *Fantasia*. No, it was the bold, daring, richly imaginative work of 16 graduate design students from what is widely regarded as the world’s foremost fashion school (and talent incubator), Central Saint Martins. The competition among the students is fierce, as I learned firsthand from my daughter Chloe (currently studying Fashion Communications at CSM), who shared jaw-dropping tales of intense rivalries and cunning skulduggery.

The show has been a cornerstone of London Fashion Week for years, and has served as the launching pad for such game-changing innovators as Simone Rocha, Christopher Kane and, most famously, Alexander McQueen, whose debut runway presentation wowed Isabella Blow and set him on the path to superstardom.

The proceedings began on a sombre and deeply moving note, with one minute’s silence in honour of gifted alumnus Richard Nicoll, who died unexpectedly last October at age 39. The show was not only an exquisite showcase for the participating students but also for its skillful orchestrator, Fabio Piras, now in his third year as course leader.

The CSM show’s brass ring is the prestigious L’Oréal Professionnel Creative Award, this year shared by two victors, Gabriele Skucas and Stefan Cooke. Though first and foremost a knitwear designer, Skucas opened with the gor-

geously understated pairing of a lustrous cream-coloured blouse and black wool pleated skirt, and then heralded her technical abilities with superbly crafted knits and crochets. Cooke, a textile major, proved a master of innovative construction and complex textures, with jackets and pants fashioned from wide swaths of elastic, and repeating trompe l’oeil patterns alongside argyles and tartans.

The spectrum of stunning women’s collections ranged from the retro appeal of Skucas’ stellar knitwear, skirts, and blazers, recalling the genteel elegance of a bygone Ivy League era, to the outré raffia, tinsel, and music-tape-embroidered chiffon dresses (daringly paired with stripy knits) from Gabriella Sardeña and the tulle and silk moiré effervescence of Tom Guy. But it was menswear that stole the show. Though very wearable and invariably chic, the men’s collections were dynamically fashion forward and endlessly imaginative. Particular standouts included Joshua Walters’ unique, monochromatic takes on such staples as trench coats, boxy jackets, and loose-fitting trousers and the lean silhouettes favoured by Li Gong throughout his 1960s-themed assortment. Witnessing his vivid combination of an electric-yellow turtleneck, bottle-green jacket, and pants that accented that same green with pale blue and apricot stripes, it was hard not to imagine a youthful Mick Jagger in all his crowing, Carnaby Street glory.

As in previous years, what impressed me most was the absolute fearlessness demonstrated by all 16 designers. No one played it safe. These intrepid young artists pushed themselves to creative heights not seen on other runways. They follow no rules, each collection defined by its own distinctive identity.

Suzanne Rogers photo by Chris Nicholls; CSM images by Chris Moore at Catwalking.com.