

Fair is fair, and foul is foul

by Kaori Nakano



The ninety-meter-long hallway of the National Art Center, Tokyo, served as the runway for the TAE ASHIDA 2019 Spring and Summer Collection. Displaying clothes ranging from “Street Couture” incorporating the sensibility of street fashion to the acme of high fashion elegance, the thirty-five unique models of every race sported a multiplicity of hair styles, colors, and makeup. The rich variations of the clothes created through a combination of the latest technology and the most advanced techniques sparked a chemical reaction and, coupled with the presence of the android reporter in the audience, expressed the hope for a truly diverse society in the future.

This collection reflected the underlying themes of the fashion world for the past year or two, diversity and inclusion—affirming

diversity, embracing differences and making a place for them in society as we live together in harmony. These ideals have engendered a variety of fashion phenomena, large and small.

The “woke model” that I wrote of in this series last year is one of them, and the emergence of plus-size models such as Ashley Graham, and the so-called “gray-naissance” featuring elderly models such as Carmen Dell’Orefice sporting gray or silver hair, can be read as chapters in the great tale of diversity and inclusion.

But this trend toward diversity has produced some results that are not necessarily universally or unconditionally embraced; certain forms of “free expression” arising from this celebration of individuality that upend all previous standards of beauty and are disturbing to many

people have emerged as well. For example, the style known as "scumbro" in which luxury street brands are worn in a sloppy, disheveled fashion, as if intentionally tossing on layers of second-hand clothing. Though "scumbro" just looks bargain-basement, the addition of luxury-brand sneakers and other touches marks it as a new, "diversified" form of snobbism—and is what makes it so provocative.

Observing the young celebrities who are zipping along at the forefront of our times in their scumbro style, I am reminded of the famous lines from Shakespeare's *MacBeth*: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." In honoring diversity, the foul can become fair, as the concepts of beauty and attractiveness are expanded.

The "tacky" aesthetic has emerged from this way of thinking. "Tacky" describes a low-brow bad taste that at the same time is somehow incredibly attractive, a testament to our age of diverse aesthetics. Its style appears to have been created by combining items—sporting the *de rigueur* logo of an internationally famous brand—purchased at a suburban discount mall or a Southeast Asian street market. But its fans see that as epitomizing its "art" and "creativity" and are excited by what they regard as its daring expression of a powerful uniqueness flouting the universal ideal of beauty.

The basis supporting this aesthetic that regards the trashy as "art" and "cool" is expanding, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute, which holds an annual exhibition on a topical cultural theme, has announced that "Camp" will be the theme of its spring 2019 exhibition. Camp is an aesthetic of theatricality, extravagance, vulgarity, and irony, combining to create a style of irresistible appeal. It became widely known following Susan Sontag's 1964 essay, "On Camp." Examples of camp in fashion history include the exaggerated gowns worn by drag queens, Lady Gaga's infamous "meat dress," and looking farther back in time, Oscar Wilde's sartorial splendor based on the Aestheticism movement of his day. The essence of camp is the employment of over-the-top irony as a challenge to the dull and narrow-minded

sensibilities of polite society. If the tacky is cute bad taste, camp is an extravagant, theatrical bad taste with a social agenda.

But now I find myself pulled up short—by the contradiction that the promotion of diversity has led to the affirmation of an aesthetic of theatrical vulgarity.

But diversity does not mean that anything goes. The flower of diversity can only blossom when it is firmly rooted in the criterion of the "fair." In addition to "beauty" fair also has the meanings "true," "good," and "just." The charm of camp is always in the eyes of the beholder, and I imagine that the Costume Institute's "Camp" exhibition will inspire its viewers to ask themselves what they hold as "fair." In this time of turbulence in global society, when the definition of the "fair" has become muddied, I think that both society and the fashion world need to return to the original set point of "Fair is fair, and foul is foul." A society that embraces the unfair proposition that "foul is fair" is a society in danger.

But as someone who usually throws on whatever clothes are at hand, it's hard to give up the convenient excuse, "No, really, I'm going for the 'tacky' look on purpose."

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