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Friday, November 21st, 2008

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Did the biggest fashion show of the year live up to the hype? You bet.

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AIR WARE: Kathryn Towers' arty frock
IMAGE: john valls

BY KAREN VITT | 503 243-2122

[January 22nd, 2003] Red balloons. Firecrackers. Opera. Errant nipples. These were the ingredients of the "XOX, Seaplane Runway Show," a much-hyped event that took Southeast Portland's much-talked-about indie boutique's vision of "clothing as art" one step further: clothing as *performance art*.

On Saturday night, a crowd of 1,000 social scenesters withstood long lines before swarming the Pearl District's Wieden & Kennedy building. In between sizing each other up, everyone was asking the same question: Can Seaplane pull this off?

Apparently, it can.

"I was pleasantly surprised," remarked one attendee, Josh Derry of local dub label BSI Records.

The 14 disparate local designers featured were able to create a visual spectacle that was uniquely Portland in its campy, Courtney Love appeal, yet with just enough sophistication to compete on something more than a regional level.

Refreshingly "real" models with natural figures sashayed through W&K's stadiumlike atrium in an elaborate parade of deconstructed dresses, cheeky hot pants, hoop skirts and Miss Havisham castoffs. Much of the work "was a little fantastical, but still functional," noted film editor Melissa Henderson.

Seaplane co-owner Holly Stalder started the show off and set the tone for the evening, her creations at once feminine and gritty, with just a touch of militancy. Up next was Stalder's Seaplane partner Kathryn Towers, who offered more polished pieces. One delicate meshy dress, scattered with circular fabric appliqués, perfectly illustrated the duo's "clothing as art" mission.

Following the Seaplane girls was Lizastica, whose Oscar-worthy backless gown was a highlight of the night. The fresh selection of Nordic-inspired society looks from Dyed, a line by WW's own Elizabeth Dye, succeeded with velour tops and skirts with delicate leaf details, whimsical fur hats and a complicated gown crafted entirely from sweaters. After Sofada's bikini'd babes, the whole evening came to a screeching pause when an opera-singing pixie belted out an aria for Linea. That "made everyone a little uncomfortable," noticed one art student. Things lightened up again just prior to intermission with Anther Pistil's collection of delicately shredded dresses paired with rubber boots--perfect for Puddletown.

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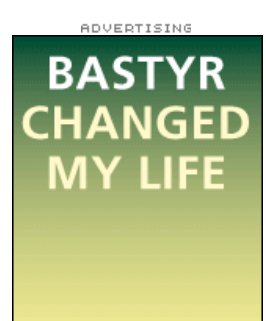
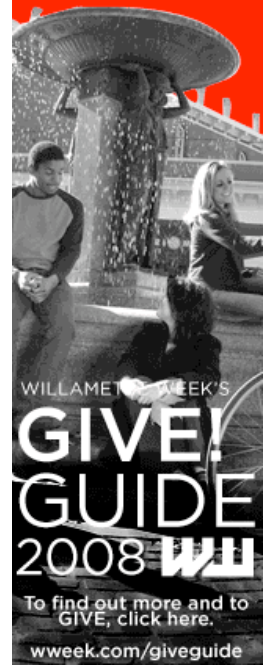
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Once the schmooze break was over, the evening flew off in a whole new direction with Cameron's comedic cabaret of matching models wearing over-the-top, ultra-short flirty green rompers, black wigs and giant sunglasses. Frocky Jack Morgan's butterfly-adorned hoop skirts came out in a blur of Chinese firecrackers and big hair. After those antics, no gimmicks were needed to enhance the beauty of Narcissia Dial's Victorian-inspired cutouts and Kwai Toa's funky pinstriped jumper.

Adam Arnold got the biggest audience response, though with the smallest collection: his duo of cartoonish aviators, who walked in carrying giant red balloons, looking like couture versions of Japanese wind-up robots. Claire La Faye, the most talked-about designer after the show, turned out an '80s-glam set of sequin-adorned army jackets paired with ball gowns, fur-trimmed metal tees and a memorable patchwork gown. Birds of Prey closed the hourlong show with a body-baring collection of complicated, sparkly tops held in place by bits of string, and a beauty of an orange lace slip dress shimmering with pale sequins.

And then there was the nipple. The applause was loud as the final model moved down the makeshift runway, perhaps as much for the fact that her breast was hanging out as for her asymmetrical top.

"Vive Portland!" rooted one local musician in support of local design--or maybe he was just excited about that nipple. Either way, Portland design just got a lot more exposure.

Look columnist Elizabeth Dye was one of the designers featured at the XOX, Seaplane Runway Show. That's why WW asked fashion writer Karen Vitt to give us her thoughts about the show. Ms. Dye will return next week-- after a much-needed rest.

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