

Fashion Designer Rick Owens, “Throbbing, Dripping Dionysian”:

Classical Reception and the Punk/Goth Intellectual

Classical reception scholar Stacie Raucci has recently called for the field to engage more deeply with contemporary fashion (Raucci 2019). Apparel constitutes not only a \$1.4T industry (as of early 2019: Common Objective 2019) but also a ubiquitous mode of social expression and an art form with its own department of the Metropolitan. This paper examines uses of antiquity by men’s and women’s luxury fashion designer Rick Owens (b. 1961), recently the subject of a Rizzoli monograph (Owens 2019) and profiles in *GQ*, *New York Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *Vogue*. For Owens, the paper argues, classical reception contributes to the construction of a complex persona as a punk/goth artist-cum-intellectual.

A self-described “throbbing, dripping Dionysian” (Owens in Schneier 2019), the California-born, Paris-based Owens has bestowed names from Greek and Roman myth and other ancient cultures onto numerous collections, including “Faun,” “Sphinx,” “Babel,” and “Phlegethon.” The clothing designs, runway show styling, and surrounding press resonate with these themes in deeply considered ways. In Owens’ Spring/Summer 2016 line, “Cyclops,” thick diagonally slung garments reminiscent of animal pelts proliferated, as did single-eye motifs. On the catwalk, male models wore monstrous wigs; female models carried each another strapped to their abdomens, transforming the wily male hero’s escape into a celebration of women supporting women, a theme emphasized in Owens’ show notes (Stansfield 2015). The designer’s Fall/Winter 2018 collection, “Sisyphus,” featured stony gray tones and heavy, burdensome felt drapery. The myth, Owens told interviewers, reflected a line of internal questioning about his value as an artist: “Why do I think that my stuff is so worth telling that I

have to force it? And then that makes me think of aggression: How much does it take to really be a designer; to insist that you be listened to?” (Owens in Leitch 2018).

One might think Owens’ thoughtful receptions of myth would clash with his reputation as a “hedonist” married to an “elf witch priestess” (collaborator Michèle Lamy; Sullivan 2018), a “feral warrior king” who “likes the slutty stuff” (Blanks 2019) and declares, “I want to be the shirtless guy all the time” (Owens in Blanks 2019). His classical allusions might likewise seem at first incongruous with his punk/goth design aesthetic: as the “godfather of goth glam” (Scheier 2019), Owens employs a dark palette, androgynous styling, and plentiful hardware, fabric holes, and combat boots, among other hallmarks of punk and goth fashion (on these styles generally, see Steele and Park 2008; Bolton 2013). Articles on Owens, however, highlight the designer’s intellectualism, observing that he reads poetry, listens to opera, and visits art museums. The frequency with which critics call attention both to Owens’ *outré* public image and to his highbrow pursuits suggests that they and their readers find pleasurable *frisson* in these contrasts—as does, very likely, the artist himself. When Owens evokes mythology in his shows, the present paper contends, he signals that such juxtapositions of high and low, tradition and counterculture define not only his lifestyle but also his work. Classical receptions cue runway viewers to the cerebral, conceptual dimension of Owens’ art; they also create humorous discordance in spectacles where models can resemble “damaged alien alley rats with vacant eyes” (Sullivan 2018). Together with his technical virtuosity and the high production value of his shows, Owens’ engagements with the ancient world help to identify him as an avant-garde *artiste*, a goth for thinkers with impeccable taste.

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