

Indian fashion designer Manish Arora's exuberant designs celebrate life, one candy-coloured embellishment at a time

BY ADELE CHONG

ASIAN POWER

On a spring day in 2009, M.I.A., the English-Sri Lankan recording artist and all-round provocateur, arrived at the 51st Grammy Awards. Equal parts sass and swagger (an operative word that would figure greatly in her much publicised performance later that night), she treads, no, struts, her way down the red carpet. While M.I.A.'s experimental dress sense is already the stuff of pure pop legend, she manages to outdo even herself, rocking a wildly wrought ensemble and an especially conspicuous accessory: her baby bump. Big with child (the event reportedly coincided with her due date) she places a hand over a playfully cocked hip and starts hamming it up.

Cameras flash incessantly; all eyes fall on her defiant pout, her untamed ombre hair. The outfit of choice, a flouncy mini-dress paired with electric-blue sneakers, lends a coquettish allure to M.I.A.'s usual tough-girl stance, proffering the look of a cheeky Amazonian princess who'd just made off with Rainbow Brite's Sunday best. To the delight of spectators, she takes things up a notch, gliding a hand slyly over her voluminous skirts and cinching the dress over her protruding belly; accentuated by alternating layers of blue and loudly patterned fabric, the bump seemingly takes on a presence of its own, the dress becoming its flamboyant accomplice. The crowd goes wild. It's no small feat for a woman on the tail end of her last trimester to make anything vaguely resembling florals look this badass.

Not surprisingly, M.I.A.'s anti-Cinderella moment at the Grammys would delight no one more than Manish Arora, the creator of the dress that spurred it. The Mumbai-born fashion designer would later excitedly declare in a Style.com video on the event, that for him, the success of the collaboration arose as a result of the different extremes that worked serendipitously in one another's favour. "[I think what made it a success was] a combination of my [style] which is really prominent, because her music is brilliant, and her being pregnant. All that put together just worked very well," he says.

The stir generated by the dress, which initially emerged as a noteworthy pick from Arora's circus-inspired 2009 spring/summer collection, would signify yet another feather in the New Delhi-based designer's cap—in a sense, it wouldn't be wholly inaccurate to say that the label's evolution has been one electrifying moment to the next since the debut of Arora's eponymous label in 1997.

Long tapped by fashion insiders as a talent to watch for, the designer is no stranger to either theatrics or applause. With a slew of collections under his belt, including two for Paco Rabanne as a one-time creative director for the label, Arora has cultivated something of a reputation for his unapologetically daring approach to material combinations and a flair for ostentation, carving a niche for himself as a go-to favourite for the likes of glitzy show-stoppers like Lady Gaga and Katy Perry (a dress with a carousel bodice jived with the singer's own zany sense of style).

Blurring the lines between costume and ready-to-wear, Arora's high-spirited collections notably take a cue from fantastical worlds daubed in technicolour as well as the textile-focused techniques that define traditional Indian craftsmanship. Since his industry debut, Arora's pronounced love of play has been apparent in everything from cosmetics to sportswear; in the past, he developed an affinity with dynamic collaborators such as MAC, Reebok and even Disney, for whom he dreamt up a commemorative collection featuring the media corporation's most iconic cartoon characters.

His dramatic creations have long perpetuated a comparison with British designer John Galiano, the former creative director for Christian Dior whose whimsical take on womenswear and irreverence for convention made him the toast of the fashion jet-set. Like Galiano, Arora's designs, particularly those extolling his signature pink and gold palette, exude a giddy joie de vivre that audibly affects the women who wear them. Drawing once again from his beloved India, the clothes also give shape to aesthetic elements that find their roots in Hindu mythology; silk shirts boasting exaggerated sleeves and trousers made with a defiantly structured fit are, for instance, directly indicative of body armour worn in the Mahabharata. "Colour and culture have inspired me through the years," he says.

His print-heavy autumn/winter 2013 collection took this to a head, emanating the devil-may-care vibe of a new muse, the Burning Man Festival, while a Josephine Baker-inspired collection for spring/summer 2014 also pulled out the stops, giving the impression of a man that knows a good party when he sees one. But beyond the veil of pure spectacle, the clothes, Arora says, are conceived as vehicles for the telling of visual narratives. "I truly believe that life is beautiful and each lived day inspires me. For me, every emotion and experience can be translated into a beautiful colour that tells a tale."

As well as its own flagship boutiques, the label's diverse output is currently carried by big-name stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue in Dubai and Harrods in London. With some of the world's most upscale retailers clamouring for his creations, Arora is barely able to find time to recharge between collections, though a yearly trip to Goa is always on the cards. Away from the sun and surf, however, he happily settles for the buzzing ambiance of his New Delhi atelier, where newly sourced fabrics and sample swatches in the midst of assembly await his magic touch.



Manish Arora womenswear
spring/summer 2014.

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