

Proving Their Worth?

Discount Lines Are Upping the Ante For High-End Runway Success

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It's no longer enough for designers to send a few pretty, high-priced frocks down a runway and expect audiences to take notice, not when they're delivering satisfying doses of fashion to mass merchants for bargain-basement prices. In a desire to expand their audience and improve their bottom line, American designers have inadvertently raised the standard for what impresses on a runway.

The spring 2008 fashion shows began here Wednesday and designers are struggling to make a convincing argument that any of these above-the-knee dresses, wide-leg pants and high-waist shorts are worth the hundreds of dollars or more that they will eventually cost.

Earlier this year, the fast-acting bargain hunter could have gotten a [Proenza Schouler](#) frock from Target, where a special collection from the design team was available for a limited time. [Badgley Mischka](#), famous for once-in-a-lifetime red carpet gowns, has a lower-price Platinum line that sells for half of what the signature one does. [Vera Wang](#) offers a similar discount with her Lavender collection and has designed an even less expensive line, Simply Vera, for [Kohl's](#). This summer, customers could go to the Gap and buy artful white shirts created by some of the industry's much ballyhooed rising talents, such as Thakoon Panichgul, Doo-Ri Chung and Laura and Kate Mulleavy, who design under the label Rodarte. The signature collections from these designers sell for 10 to 30 times as much as what they delivered to the Gap. So why spend the extra money?

If the garment is not made by hand or lavished with expensive beading, how does it earn its way into a shopper's closet when there are so many less expensive -- and equally enticing -- options? If a designer pencil skirt doesn't come with its own fairy tale, what makes it different from every other run-of-the-mill garment? There have always been those who cast a skeptical eye on the expensive and esoteric merchandise peddled on designer runways, but now the designers themselves are forcing the question.

Designers are spreading themselves thin as they dabble in so many price points. For some, it's a choice -- a matter of more money, more mansions, more expensive vacations. But for the majority, it's a necessity. To finance their flagship business, they have to moonlight or take on special projects. For consumers, this is only good. Fashion designed by the same people whose work hangs in those fancy Madison Avenue boutiques is now readily available at Target, H&M and other mass merchants.

But if so much fashion is trickling down, is there anything jaw-dropping left at the top?

The Adroit Salesman

Not every designer can be [Ralph Lauren](#). This year he celebrates his 40th anniversary in the fashion business, and he marked the occasion by presenting his spring collection in [Central Park's](#) Conservatory Garden, following it with a black-tie dinner that had all the breathtaking elegance that only Jay Gatsby himself could conjure. All too often these self-congratulatory events fall flat. They

become a misty-eyed display of nostalgia instead of an expression of forward-looking, exuberant optimism. After so many decades in the industry, certainly no one would have faulted Lauren if he wanted to look back and savor his success. But for all of the \$75 Polo shirts that Lauren has sold over the years, Saturday night he proved that there is still a lot to be desired at the tippy-tippy-top of his empire.

He sent out an aristocratic collection of womenswear inspired by Ascot, horse-racing and, of course, polo. Fitted jackets with demure peplums topped trim skirts that fell just to the knee. Black leggings created a lean and powerful silhouette when paired with riding jackets and body-conscious shirts. Dresses made from jockey silks and a series of long floral gowns with cascading ruffles added a jolt of color -- lilac, yellow, strawberry pink -- to a palette in which black and white dominated.

It was a collection that simply aspired to be beautiful and rich -- not provocative -- and it did both with easy confidence. There were moments that raised aesthetic doubts, such as jodhpurs sprinkled with glitter, but a designer has earned a right to a bit of costume drama when he has managed to transform his brand from a fashion statement into a cultural one about American aspirations.

Lauren took his bows slowly, walking the full length of the long runway, hugging and kissing everyone along the way. It was fashion's equivalent of a flag-waving victory lap. Then, with a flick of his hand, he signaled for the runway's backdrop to slide away, revealing a lush, terraced garden lit by chandeliers and moonlight. Waiters in white jackets and slicked-back hair, who had been studiously groomed by the company for the occasion, stood holding trays of champagne. A fountain launched a geyser of water into the air. And Lauren's models, in fluttering gowns and dramatic evening hats, stepped from his runway fantasy into a fairy-tale landscape.

By the time the lamb chops had been served and New York's Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) had toasted Lauren for his philanthropy as well as for all that he symbolizes in American culture, the seduction was complete. Oh yes, one *needed* a thousand-dollar evening gown and maybe a cocktail dress, too. Lauren still has the ability to romance the Amex card right out of your wallet.

Doctrine of Extravagance

Few designers are as facile at myth-making as Lauren. They have the pressure of being judged on their clothes alone, not on the stories they weave. But designer [Thom Browne](#) and the sisters who created Rodarte try to give customers a sense that by shopping high-end they are getting a philosophical statement or an artistic manifesto.

Browne has an aesthetic viewpoint that is eloquent and audacious. His spring menswear collection, shown Thursday afternoon, toyed with the notion of beach holidays, old-fashioned Fourth of July celebrations and Americana. He continues to emphasize his signature and influential shrunken suit silhouette with trousers that hover above the ankle bone and jackets with cropped sleeves and a close fit.

But he goes further. Some blazers have sleeves that just cover the biceps. He layers them over daintily woven knits and shirts with sleeves so long they extend over the hands and are knotted together in back like a well-tailored straitjacket. Is that a subversive way of noting that the business uniform as we've always known it is constricting rather than liberating?

Browne shrinks tennis sweaters and slices them open at the hemline. He re-imagines a dinner jacket as a white-on-white embroidered blazer trimmed with tiny rosettes. The traditional notions of masculinity and femininity collide in Browne's work. He shows suit jackets with trains -- not a slightly exaggerated tailcoat but the kind of train that would be found on a wedding gown. For spring, he lines it in white terrycloth. He embroidered a jacket and pants in a thick bouquet of fabric flowers, turning a gentleman into a slightly monstrous walking rosebush.

Browne has something to say about masculinity and the way it's perceived culturally. A man who buys one of his garments with its distinctive cut is agreeing to help broadcast that message. Browne is leading a protest against preconceived notions, the mundane, and to some extent, the slow death of the creative spirit.

Imagination Run Wild

Laura and Kate Mulleavy use the runway as an art studio. From the beginning, their work, much of it handmade, has had a serendipitous quality. So many bits of fabric, lines and ideas all seem to collide and, if something beautiful comes out of the cacophony, it is as if by chance. The beauty of their work is in the sense of discovery. The longer you look at a garment, the more you are intrigued trying to dissect a seam or understand the way in which a ruffle is constructed.

But sometimes ideas collide and the result is disastrous. For spring, Rodarte is a mix of dresses with iridescent blue pleats and insets of sheer lace, loosely woven sweaters in blues and pale peach with metallic threads, uncomfortably revealing lace dresses and narrow trousers with awning stripes formed by inverted seams. These are ambitious ideas executed awkwardly, causing the collection to veer wildly from intriguing to ungainly to "Egads!"

Experimentation is admirable, and it's what kept the audience waiting on a hot Saturday afternoon in an un-air-conditioned loft with perspiration dripping down its collective back. (Couldn't someone have passed a tin cup to buy these designers some industrial fans?) Gaining access to something utterly new and undiluted is what makes shoppers willing to pay a premium for a garment. But simply being odd for the sake of standing out, trying to pass off eccentricity for creative genius, those are among the surest ways drive people to the Gap in search of a palate-cleansing plain white T-shirt.

Wearying Monotony

What happens if a designer isn't a philosopher or an aesthete? Is it still possible for a frock to sell itself by virtue of a compelling design? Not if a designer's high-end collection is virtually indistinguishable from the discounted ones.

When Mark Badgley and James Mischka presented their Badgley Mischka flagship collection, one couldn't help but note that it lacked the lushness that suggests wealth and luxury. It was a collection of relatively ho-hum sportswear, of high-waist trousers, cotton shorts and cocktail dresses that too often mistook matronliness for sophisticated reserve.

Vera Wang seemed to be inspired by a mournful artist living in highly romanticized poverty. Her signature collection was a mix of oversize knit polo shirts with insets of fluttering chiffon, sack dresses with paper bag necklines and convoluted tops that are cinched and tied yet still manage to almost fall off the body. The collection speaks of the sort of self-consciously intellectual woman who likes her

films with subtitles, her meals with coulis and foam and her humor more ironic than funny. That's not chic, that's annoying.

Designer Behnaz Sarafpour's work barely stands out. A pretty pair of black shorts with a crisp white pleated swing top is a combination that would appeal to any number of women. But they are likely to be better served seeking it out at Club Monaco prices. A long white seersucker gown looks comfortable and elegant on the runway, but one could almost hear the sewing machines in some dingy distant factory revving up to produce the knockoffs.

Designer [Max Azria](#), whose BCBG collection has long had a reputation for churning out trend-driven clothes at reasonable prices, could not resist the allure of high-minded design. His self-named collection is more expensive and is intended to be a more personal statement of his aesthetic sensibility. Speak up, Max! We can't hear you! For spring, he presented a collection of lingerie-inspired sundresses in pale shades of pinks and lavenders.

He has become the go-to guy for [Hollywood](#) starlets who want a filmy little embellished dress for a talk show appearance or a [Starbucks](#) run. His front row was lined with girls-of-the-moment: Ciara, [Natasha Bedingfield](#) and even [Nicole Richie](#), who does not exactly look pregnant but does look like she has had several nutritious meals. Azria continues to be a reliable source for such breezy dresses, but really, how many does anyone need?

Having an identifiable sensibility is essential at the high end. A customer is paying a premium to purchase the designer's refined taste level or unique eye for color and proportion. The collection of Bill Blass party dresses presented Thursday morning was created by an in-house design team. ([Peter Som](#)'s first collection for the brand will be for fall. He's the fourth designer hired since the founder's retirement and subsequent death in 2002.)

The frothy, feminine sensibility of the dresses belied the label's history -- no matter that the team claimed to have been inspired by looks from the company's archives. Blass famously provided a tailored wardrobe of smart, sexy clothes for powerful women. He did not build his reputation by dolling up the so-called "pretty young things" who dominate the society pages with their ringlet curls and ability to fill their days by seemingly doing little but getting ready for the next party.

And for the house to claim, in its presentation notes, that a pale pink chiffon gown with handmade chiffon roses can command confidence that is "more dynamic than any power suit" is, essentially, ridiculous. It comes across as little more than a cynical explanation for the decision to join the fashion pack and create yet another batch of expensive party dresses for the tiny percentage of young women who can afford them and the fewer still who even want them.

The Value of Ingenuity

Designer Doo-Ri Chung re-imagined white shirts and shirtdresses for the Gap, but wisely saved her defining aesthetic for her core work. It'll cost you, but it's worth it.

In the collection she presented Friday evening, she whetted the audience's appetite with her signature draped jersey dresses in pale quartz hues. One dress with a corset-style bodice relaxed into ripples of jersey that flowed around the hips and swept open when the model walked to reveal a flash of her thigh. But Chung also pushed her aesthetic forward, using her skill with fabric to create gently tucked

and pleated skirts in organza with a tulle overlay. The technique was dazzling and controlled. One more tuck, one more splash of [Swarovski crystals](#) and the balance would have been thrown off. Chung offered an example of what it means to be able to look at a garment -- a complicated garment -- and know precisely when to stop fiddling, ruching and bedazzling.

And the team of Proenza Schouler may have offered Target a taste of its philosophy, but the feast was saved for their signature work. The collection shown Friday night was a bold expression of a forceful viewpoint -- fitted waistcoats, tiny skater skirts, surprising textures from raffia to feathers to antique gold embroidery. The collection reeked of money and it celebrated tailoring and polish.

From the beginning, the designers Lazaro Hernandez and Jack McCollough worked to create a sensibility that would appeal to a woman as well as a young girl on her way to maturity.

The clothes are not overburdened with whimsy. They are not boring. And they most certainly are not cheap.