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Cultural happenings in New York and elsewhere, both online and off.

Regular

I MET ALEXANDER MCQUEEN at The New Yorker Festival, in 2000. He and his friend Stella McCartney were joining the writer Anne Hollander and the designer Andrée Putman on a fashion panel that I was moderating. When we got to the stage, the house was full, and I was so nervous that I have forgotten what we talked about. In the green room, McQueen and McCartney had been, at first, a bit surly and standoffish. They stuck together like two kids at an old ladies' tea party, defying the smoking ban, planning a visit, after the panel, to a tattoo parlor, and making snarky jokes. But maybe they were as intimidated as I was. My first question struck McCartney as too pretentious, and she she rebuffed it curtly: "Hey, we're only designers," she said, or words to that effect, "not intellectuals; what do you want from us?" As the discussion warmed up, however, McQueen was eloquent, and he revealed an aspect of his character that is sometimes forgotten in accounts of his famous pugnacity. Like any true master, he was a deep, humble, and passionate student of his art.

McQueen learned that art on Savile Row. His supreme gifts as a tailor—a sober British virtuosity—are sometimes downplayed in accounts of his runway shows, which were inevitably theatrical extravaganzas: Rites of Spring (but also of fall, winter, summer, and resort.) There was joy and melancholy in his work, splendor and barbarity, reverence and vandalism. He was born and lived in gray London, but in some respects he was one of those lonely magicians of film and fiction who are exiled to a desert island. I sometimes thought he was Ariel, Caliban, and Prospero in one person. His muse was a Miranda, but, unlike the dutiful daughter of "The Tempest," she had grown up wild, among brutes, mourning a dead mother, and she was wounded and defiant.

Like the ingenious castaway he resembled, McQueen could fashion a masterpiece of couture from the skins of creatures who had died or moulted on his beach; from the the leaves, plumage, reeds, fungus, and fur that he scavenged in his jungle; and from dreams of a lost world. His senses were attuned both to the beauty and the menace around him. A dress, he proved, can be a talisman of sex and death; a paradox of confinement and escape; a hybrid of nature and artifice; or the sheath for the body of a mutant species.

In his last and perhaps most sumptuous show—presented yesterday in Paris—McQueen seemed to have been dreaming of the court that Prospero left behind. He was quoting from the poetry of Renaissance fashion, and working ...

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