



LEE **RENDEZVOUS**
ALEXANDER McQUEEN ANN RAY

The late British fashion designer Lee Alexander McQueen (1969–2010) redefined the field with his extraordinary ability to blend exquisite craftsmanship with highly imaginative storytelling. Mythologized in his own lifetime, the world saw McQueen variously as fashion’s “*enfant terrible*” (terrifying child), a troubled genius, and one of the era’s most visionary designers. Yet there were few who truly knew the intensely private man. The exception is a tight-knit group of collaborators that included jewelry designer Shaun Leane, milliner Philip Treacy, model Annabelle Neilson, and fashion photographer Ann Ray—the only artist granted exclusive access to McQueen’s world on and off the runway. In total, Ray shot forty-three collections over the course of thirteen years, creating a massive body



of work and an indelible record of McQueen's process. Through sixty-five photographs selected by Ray herself and more than sixty dress objects including ready-to-wear, one-off samples, and examples of haute couture that span the arc of McQueen's career, this exhibition offers an opportunity to reexamine the life and legacy of a beloved but widely misunderstood figure and to disentangle the person from the persona.

Born into a working-class East London family, McQueen's career in fashion began with a tailor's apprenticeship on legendary Savile Row when he was a teenager. In 1992 he graduated from the prestigious fashion program at Central Saint Martins and, with support from socialite and fashion editor Isabella Blow, founded his eponymous label. Blow encouraged him to go by his middle name, Alexander, which she felt sounded "grander and more romantic" than Lee. Working on a shoestring budget, his early collections deftly combined traditional English tailoring with dark themes including death, power struggles, and violence, as is evident in the now infamous *Highland Rape* collection from the autumn/winter 1995 season. Rather than understanding that the collection was inspired by bleak moments in Scottish history, the media described it as "misogynistic absurdity." For McQueen, who was of Scottish ancestry, this history was personal, and he chose to make some garments in his family's tartan. Despite criticism from the press, McQueen was able to hone his talents during this period and refine what would become two of his most well-known silhouettes: the very low waistlines referred to as "bumsters" and his sharply tailored knee-length frock coats.

Fig. 1:

Ann Ray. *Follow the Thread*, 1997.
Archival gelatin silver print from original negatives; 11 3/4 x 15 3/4 in.
Courtesy of Barrett Barrera Projects

In 1996, McQueen was appointed creative director of Givenchy. It was a stressful chapter for the twenty-





seven-year-old, who was suddenly responsible for his own label as well as one of the world's most storied French couture houses. Already aware of his legacy, he wanted someone to record the ephemeral, fleeting moments rarely documented by the editorial fashion press. In 1997 when he met Ray, who had previously worked with Givenchy in Japan, she quickly became that person. As with many of the other artists and designers McQueen enlisted to help realize his vision in the early days of his career, he could not afford to pay her. The two therefore established a barter system: "I like your images but I'm broke. Give me your photos, I'll give you clothes," McQueen said to Ray. She accepted the proposal, and over the next thirteen years, the two artists would periodically have "*rendez-vous*," what Ray describes as "weird, unexpected . . . warm, essential meetings." Ray captured everything with her camera, from the frantic minutes before McQueen's runway shows to the more contemplative moments in his London design studio. She often chose to document unheroic moments, such as conversations with a seamstress (fig. 1) or adjustments to a garment in progress on a mannequin.

Although this period was very demanding for McQueen and saw personal struggles, it was also a time of great professional abundance as his runway shows became more theatrical, his references more eclectic, and his silhouettes more exaggerated and extravagant. A major example of this is seen in Ray's photograph *Insensé II* (fig. 2), which captures the final moments of McQueen's spring/summer 1999 show, *No. 13*. Model Shalom Harlow staggered and swayed on a rotating platform to a soundtrack of Camille Saint-Saëns's "Le cygne" ("The Swan") as two seemingly sentient robots aggressively sprayed her white gown in alternating streams of black and neon green ink. The performance lasted mere seconds, but it would be immortalized as a defining moment of late twentieth-century fashion.

Fig. 2:

Ann Ray. *Insensé II*, 1998. Archival gelatin silver print; 70 3/4 x 47 1/4 in. Courtesy of Barrett Barrera Projects

Shouldered with producing upwards of ten collections per year, McQueen was

in equal parts fascinated and horrified by the machinations of the global fashion system and his role within it. As he explored themes of power and exploitation with his own label to great critical acclaim, he struggled to find his place in the rigid hierarchy at Givenchy and departed in 2001. McQueen continued to address topics as varied as the transience and impermanence of beauty in *Voss* (spring/summer 2001), the religious zealotry of the Salem Witch Trials with the defiant feminist subtext of *In Memory of Elizabeth Howe, Salem, 1692* (fig. 3), and the tradition of important British queens as told through the whimsical fantasy of *The Girl Who Lived in a Tree* (autumn/winter 2008).

The final chapter of McQueen's brief but remarkable career witnessed the death of his friend and fiercest supporter, Isabella Blow, in 2007 and that of his beloved mother, Joyce, in 2010. A soaring tribute to Blow, *La Dame Bleue* saw McQueen return to his roots through the craft of tailoring as well as he and Blow's mutual love of birds, among other formal attributes (fig. 4). *Plato's Atlantis* (spring/summer 2010) is his interpretation of Plato's allegory of the lost city as a prophetic warning about the devastating effects of unchecked climate change. Wearing reptilian facial prosthetics, teetering "armadillo" heels, and garments featuring digitally transferred animal prints, the models seemed to have been transformed into animal-human hybrids who had evolved to survive in a surreal underwater world created by rising sea levels.

Critics widely praised *Plato's Atlantis* as McQueen's most important collection to date. Sadly, though, it was also the last project finished in his lifetime. Lee Alexander McQueen died by suicide on February 11, 2010. As the world reeled from the loss of a singular creative mind, the twenty-first-century global fashion machine that McQueen had helped create—but at times felt

Fig. 3: Alexander McQueen. Green velvet gown with copper flame embroidery, *In Memory of Elizabeth Howe, Salem, 1692*, autumn/winter 2007. Courtesy of Barrett Barrera Projects. Photo: Barrett Barrera Projects





Fig. 4:

Alexander McQueen. Rainbow moth print dress, *La Dame Bleue* collection, spring/summer 2008. Courtesy of Barrett Barrera Projects. Photo: Barrett Barrera Projects

exploited by — continued to grow and evolve. The Alexander McQueen label, under the creative direction until 2023 of trusted confidant and former head of womenswear Sarah Burton, finished the collection he had been working on at the

time of his death; with Seán McGirr as its new creative director, it remains one of the world's most sought-after luxury brands today.

During the years Ann Ray spent working alongside McQueen and his design team, she took over thirty-two thousand photographs that now reside in the collection of Barrett Barrera Projects in St. Louis, Missouri, which also owns the largest private collection of McQueen's work in the world. Through the combination of Ray's photographs and McQueen's garments in this exhibition, a story emerges of remarkably inspired artists who drew support from their intimate circle of friends.

Adapted by Katie Delmez, senior curator, from text provided by Barrett Barrera Projects

Cover: Alexander McQueen. Red and black tartan dress with black lace, *Widows of Culloden* collection, autumn/winter 2006. Courtesy of Barrett Barrera Projects. Photo: Barrett Barrera Projects

FASHION TERMS

Atelier	A workshop or studio, often used by an artist or designer.
Autumn/winter and spring/summer	The primary fashion seasons. Designers present new collections on runways during Fashion Weeks in cities such as London, Milan, New York, and Paris. Fashion Weeks take place months before each season so that buyers and press can work in advance.
Bespoke	Custom-made for a particular person.
Bumster	Very low-cut pants that reveal part of the buttocks, debuted by McQueen in his first collection in 1993.
Bustle	A padded undergarment or wire frame used to add fullness at the back of women's dresses.
Couturier	Fashion designer.
Empire waist	A fitted bodice that ends just below the bust, creating the illusion of a high waist.

Frock coat	A formal men's coat with a skirt cut just above the knees.
Haute couture	French for "high sewing" or "high dressmaking," refers to clothing made to order for private clients.
Milliner	A person who makes women's hats.
Panniers	Also known as side hoops, refers to undergarments that extend the width of skirts, giving the illusion of larger hips.
<i>Petit mains</i>	French for "little hands," refers to skilled craftspeople who execute haute couture designs.
<i>Prêt-à-porter</i>	French for "ready to wear," refers to clothes that are made in standardized sizes and sold in finished condition—the opposite of haute couture.
<i>Toile</i>	French for "canvas," can refer to the fabric itself or to a test garment often sewn from calico or plain, unbleached cotton fabric.

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