Koché Cruise’s homage to melting pot Marseille

By Godfrey Deeny - 20 June 2018

It was instructive after weeks of cruise collections to attend the Koché version in Marseille, seeing as it was staged on an actual cruise ship, albeit not quite a luxury liner.
The season began six weeks ago in Paris with Chanel on La Pausa, a massive mock liner built inside the Grand Palais. It ended Tuesday night – after excursions to Chantilly, Saint Paul de Vence and Arles courtesy of Dior, Vuitton and Gucci respectively – with a show on top of the Danielle Casanova, a ferry that travels from Marseille to Corsica, Algeria and Tunisia.

This co-ed collection was a celebration of Marseille’s unique melting pot of races and cultures; and a statement about the renewal of the port city of Marseille, as much as a statement of fashion. Christelle Kocher, founder and designer of Koché, was the third designer invited by Open My Med, a program created by the Maison Mode Méditerranée (MMM), the ambitious local fashion school. And much of her dashing, athletic, fun and funky collection referenced Marseille and the city’s unique mix of cultures, where Armenians and Africans, Provence and Paris rub shoulders.

A blend of the sporty with the sublime, and very much in the tradition of Kocher, who famously mixed up Paris Saint-Germain football jerseys in one show.

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“Cruise is about travel. I wanted to bring the idea of travel to Marseille, and its special racial mix. Ethnic references like a new djellaba made of aertex, meeting femininity and gangster. Fashion is meant to send a message, no?” said Kocher.

In a kicky show, where the cast marched around the entirety of the ship’s top 11th floor, one could enjoy excellent chiffon dresses and tops embroidered with mirrored bugle beading in the patterns used in Moroccan henna designs. Post show, Arab artists offered tourists the same patterns with henna dye even after midnight in the city’s bustling and atmospheric Vieux Port. It was also raw yet poetic – very feminine floral robes fluttering in the evening breeze; turquoise lounge suits with lace inserts; racy Provencal dresses; track pants for a jaunt exotic weekend, and the house’s signature kimono-cut coat in Merino wool. For the guys, sweatshirts reading “Le Sud Bébé,” rude-boy style gangster suits and even facemasks in the henna pattern.

“I wanted an imaginary country, not too literal. I also wanted a cast that reflected the mix of this city - North Africa, Moorish, local artists, street casting and even the ship’s captain,” smiled Kocher, as the sunset turned the distant Chateau d’If, of Count of Monte Cristo fame, rose behind her.

As part of Open My Med, Koché invited a group of artists to create installations in disused stores on rue de la Republique, and inside J1, a dynamic new art space in a former warehouse in the city’s docklands. One store was a virtual pop up installation; another had its own wallpaper reading “Live dangerously until the end!” A clear reference to the city’s wild reputation as a international hub for drug trading, ever since Gene Hackman shot French Connection 2 here back in 1975.

However, Marseille presents a different image today, with its clean trams, legendary Cercle des Nageurs swimming club, where Kocher hosted a lunch, and brilliant new MUCEM museum, which opened a brilliant exhibition of Ai Wei Wei this week. Remarkably, the Chinese artist’s father, the poet Ai Qing, sailed from Shanghai to Marseille in the 1920s, going on to Paris to work as a lacquer worker and discover the literary and artistic life of the capital.

“Marseille loves fashion and Marseille is fashionable,” said the city’s deputy mayor Didier Parakian, whose grandfather emigrated to Marseille from Armenia a century ago.

It was also strikingly ambitious of a fledgling brand like Koché to stage a cruise collection – seeing as her cruise competitors are multi-billion houses like Vuitton or Chanel.

“Well, it’s a pretty unique invitation that Marseille offered me. It’s a white paper to write whatever you want. And I am very grateful to them for that. And with every show I do, I want to send a strong message. That’s why I went for an authentic casting, from artists to the ship’s stewards. It was important to me to give a positive image of this great city,” laughed Kocher, who later partied with artists like Lucille Uhlrich and Diego Bianchi, who walked in the show.

Koché’s show was the third in the project Open My Med, following designers Yacine Aouadi and Jacquemus. The latter returns to Marseille on Monday, June 25 for his debut menswear show. Both of them supported by Woolmark, which also helps finance Jacquemus videos and Koché’s show in the Strand Bookstore in New York.

“We like to put our money where our mouth is,” explained Stuart Ford, general manager for the Western Hemisphere at Woolmark.

Open My Med has also given prizes to some 104 MMM graduates creating a community of designers in the region. “This coast has always been a source of inspiration to artists and to designers from Azzedine Alaia to Yves Saint Laurent; and with Open My Med we want to value the young creators of the Mediterranean basin, and make our cultural model shine,” explained Aurélia Vigouroux, co-director of MMM.

Koché now retails in 65 boutiques, from Galeries Lafayette to Dover Street, though its best customers remain...
ecommerce websites like Net-a-Porter, explained the house’s managing director, Jean René Bouton, pre-show.

There was nothing terribly chic about this ship, whose job is to transport people and cars on vacation in Corsica, or home to North Africa. A Titanic luxury ship it was not, though that only added to the democratic sense of this collection and indeed of the Kocher brand.

Exiting the show, one could not help noticing that one of the liner’s destinations is Oran, which knowledgeable fashionistas will know is the birthplace of Yves Saint Laurent. Even if Koché is miles distant from the YSL oeuvre, Yves would probably have got a kick out of this event.

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