Designers: Jeffrey Banks
Samantha Black
Stephen Burrows
Donna Dove
Epperson
Michael Jerome Francis
Byron Lars
Tracy Reese
Omar Salam
LaQuan Smith

February 7–April 26, 2014
Opening reception: Thursday, February 6, 6–8 PM

Black Dress: Ten Contemporary Fashion Designers

ABOUT THE DESIGNERS

Jeffrey Banks

Coty Award-winning designer Jeffrey Banks began his creative education at Pratt Institute in the early 1970s. While still a student at Pratt in 1971, he embarked on a professional career as a protégé of Ralph Lauren and later moved to a position at Calvin Klein in 1975 before starting his own brand in 1978 at the age of 23. Inspired early on by the sophistication of photographer Richard Avedon’s fashion spreads, his collections reflect the elegance of classic Hollywood but always with a contemporary edge. In addition to being an exceptional designer, he is also an executive businessman, who has evolved his business into an empire, which includes everything from men’s wear and accessories to bedding and home decor.

Samantha Black

Samantha Black (B.F.A., Fashion Design, Pratt Institute) was featured on Project Runway in 2012. In addition to her formal education, she has interned with both St. John and Michael Kors, and Alexander McQueen. These experiences led to a job as a lead designer for the women’s division of the brand Jemey’s. Soon after, she launched her own line, B Line. She understands her work as a continuation of the idea that black designers create “urban fantasies.” Her designs are distinctive, exquisitely tailored, and rich with detail. Her collections include designs that faithfully accentuated a woman’s shoulders and bust through lace reveals and tailored accents. She currently designs under a second label, her namesake Samantha Black Line.

Stephen Burrows

2014 marks Stephen Burrows’ 48th birthday and his 50th anniversary in the fashion world, demonstrating his pioneering work that tastefully accentuated a woman’s physique and set industry standards. Born to a poor family in New York City, where he grew up with the works of contemporary visual artists throughout New York. He quickly produced layered and theatrical looks. His designs—ranging from garments to brooches—are meant to be interchangeable and create layered and theatrical looks. He believes that the expression of this garment acts as an armor, giving the wearer a feeling of strength and power. He also embraces other sustainability philosophies such as hand-craftsmanship and local production.

Byron Lars

Byron Lars, known for his ability to mix textures and patterns, started his own line in 1991. He was named “Rookie of the Year” by women’s wear Daily. Soon after his designs with pattern, texture, embroidery, and lace captured the attention of prestigious retailers such as Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus, and Bloomingdale’s. His success also led to an invitation to design limited edition Barbie dolls for Mattel. His current line, Byron Lars Ready to Wear, continues his exploration of shirts and shirt dresses with a deliberate, accessible pricing structure.

Tracy Reese

Tracy Reese began creating fashions as a child alongside her mother in her hometown of Detroit. She attended the Fashion Institute of Technology and eventually moved to New York, where she received an accelerated degree from Parsons The New School for Design in 1994. She worked for many fashion design houses and eventually became the head of the Women’s Portfolio for Perry Ellis. Reese launched her own collection in 1996. Her distinctive style—narrow influences and bright colors—was met with rave reviews. She went on to create separate collections of home fashions and more affordable women’s wear, many of which are available in her flagship boutique in New York City. Reese is also a board member of the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

Omar Salam

Born in Dakar, Senegal, Omar Salam is the founder and head designer of his own label, Salamina (which means bright light), named in honor of his late mother. Salam began his fashion career with a sales position with renowned French designer Madame Sonia Rykiel and was eventually promoted to visual director of her New York City branch. After seven years, he left for a drum set at Christian Lacroix, before deciding to risk starting his own brand.

LaQuan Smith

Young designer LaQuan Smith has taken a page from fashion royalty and has the fashion world on notice. His collection was a mainstay at Project Runway’s fashion evens, proving his worth to the fashion industry. He has worked closely with public figures such as Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Alisa Keys, Tyra Banks, and many others.

Michael Jerome Francis

Environmentally conscious designer Michael Jerome Francis is a skilled tailor who gives new life to reclaimed fashions such as suits for slaveholders and members of high society. Only a few of these pioneers received recognition, such as Elizabeth Keckley, dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln, fashion designer and costumer Zelda Wynn Valdes, who created the iconic Playboy bunny outfit and dressed actress like Dorothy Dandridge, Marlene Dietrich, and Mae West. Today, his black fashion is admired by celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Alisa Keys, Tyra Banks, and many others.

Donna Dove

Donna Dove, born in Trinidad and now based in Harlem, is both an artist and a fashion designer. Her creations meld these two interests, serving as a framework for historical and cultural references. Trinidad and its context continue to have a strong influence on her creations as evidenced through her use of vibrant color and her particular take on colonial fashions. For Black Dress, Dove takes us on a journey through fashion history with a reenactment of Ann Lowe’s wedding dress for Jacqueline Kennedy.

Epperson

Epperson, a primarily self-taught designer, was featured on Project Runway’s sixth season. On the show, he became known for his slipknot belief in his personal vision, which can be characterized by two constants: deconstruction and an emphasis on the individual. A native New Yorker, Epperson thinks of his garments as protective urban wear.

Omar Salam

Today’s resourceful designers have sought financing through Kickstarter campaigns, online boutiques, and exposure through reality television. Meanwhile, they’ve expanded their client bases closer to home in places like Harlem and Brooklyn, exchanging traditional downtown and million Manhattan fashion boutiques. As an alternative to the established fashion retail destinations of Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue, the exhibition of Black Dress offers the imagined destination “Style Avenue,” a mock street scene in the gallery, complete with shop windows.

In order to illustrate how these designers’ creations come to life when worn, Black Dress is complemented by a video directed and produced by Carrie Mae Weems, named Harlem (2010), photographer, and video artist. The video will feature models Nyilv Paul and Derrin A. Clarke, wearing garments by each of the designers. Celebrity stylists Ty-Ron Mayo worked alongside Weems to create the looks for this piece.

We hope that Black Dress will both showcase the featured designers and illustrate their success in the context of black fashion history. In any case, it is a necessary, broad salute to their achievements.

Professor Adrienne Jones, Paula Coleman, and Walter Greene

Adrienne Jones, concept developer and co-curator, is a tenured professor in the Fashion Design Department at Pratt Institute. She has more than 50 years of experience as a designer, golfer, photographer, stylist, and consultant. Jones is also a painter and photographer.

Paula Coleman, guest curator of Black Dress, is an art dealer and curator with more than 10 years of experience producing innovative exhibitions and art projects. Coleman is currently the director at the Renaissance Fine Art Gallery. She is the founder and director of The Coleman Project, an ongoing series that exhibits the works of contemporary visual artists throughout New York.

Walter Greene serves as the fashion consultant for this exhibition. Greene is the fashion editorial director of ProfilesV Magazine, a fashion/entertainment publication.
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With video by artist and 2013 MacArthur Foundation Fellow Carrie Mae Weems

Pratt Manhattan Gallery
144 West 14th Street, Second Floor, New York, NY 10011

Gallery hours:
Monday–Saturday 11 AM–6 PM, Thursday until 8 PM

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