

BLACK DRESS: Ten Contemporary Fashion Designers

February 7–
April 26, 2014

Opening reception:
Thursday, February 6, 6–8 PM

Pratt

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Pratt Manhattan Gallery
144 West 14th Street, Second Floor
New York, NY 10011
212.647.7778
exhibits@pratt.edu

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

www.pratt.edu/exhibitions

Ten Contemporary

Designers:

Jeffrey Banks

Samantha Black

Stephen Burrows

Donna Dove

Epperson

Michael Jerome Francis

Byron Lars

Tracy Reese

Omar Salam

LaQuan Smith

With video by artist
and 2013 MacArthur
Foundation Fellow
Carrie Mae Weems

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 1973 before starting his own brand in 1978 at the age of 25. Inspired early on by the sophistication of photographer Richard Avedon's fashion spreads, his creations reflect the elegance of classic Hollywood but always with a contemporary edge. In addition to being an exceptional designer, he is also an astute businessman, who has evolved his business into an empire, which includes everything from menswear and accessories to bedding and home decor.

Samantha Black

Samantha Black (B.F.A. Fashion Design '05) was featured on *Project Runway* in 2012. In addition to her formal education, she has interned with Jill Stuart, Michael Kors, and Alexander McQueen. These experiences led to a job as a lead designer for the women's denim division of the brand Jimmy's. Soon after, she launched her own Sammy B line. She understands her work as challenging the perception that all black designers create "urban brands." Her pieces are elegant, sophisticated, exquisitely tailored, and rich with detail. Her 2012 collection included designs that tastefully accentuated a woman's shoulders and midriff through lace reveals and tailored accents. She currently designs under a second label, her namesake Samantha Black line.

Stephen Burrows

2014 marks Stephen Burrows's 48th year as a fashion designer. He made his name in 1973 at the Battle of Versailles fashion event where, as a relative newcomer, he competed against the established fashion elite. In 2006, the Council of Fashion Designers of America honored him with the distinctive Board of Directors Special Tribute. Known for his cut and bias technique, he has recently expanded his vision to create several new lines such as S by Burrows, developed for a venture with Home Shopping Europe (HSN), and a knitwear line SB73, based on his color block creations from the 1970s.

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 carnival 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 a page from fashion history with a recreation of Ann Lowe's wedding gown 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 stubborn 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.

Michael Jerome Francis

Environmentally conscious designer Michael Jerome Francis is a skilled tailor who gives new life to reclaimed materials such as old curtains, couch covers, chandelier beads, and shoe laces. His products—including everything from garments to brooches—are meant to be interchangeable and to create layered and theatrical looks. He believes that the structure of his garments acts as an armor, giving the wearer a feeling of protection and power. He also embraces other sustainable philosophies such as hand-craftsmanship and local production.

Byron Lars

Byron Lars, known for his striking ability to mix textures and patterns, started his own label in 1991 and was named "Rookie of the Year," by *Women's Wear Daily*. Soon after, his designs—rich with pattern, texture, embroidery, and lace—were bought by 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 Beauty Mark, 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 later moved to New York, where she received an accelerated degree from Parsons The New School for Design in 1984. 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—retro 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 Sukeina (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 short stint at Christian Lacroix, before deciding to risk starting his own brand.

LaQuan Smith

Young designer LaQuan Smith has carved out a niche for himself in the fashion world, demonstrating ambition and resilience. When he was 13, his grandmother gave him a Singer sewing machine to practice. Soon after, he was creating his own patterns and techniques. Sidelined by a struggle with cancer, he prevailed and began his career with an internship at the magazine *Blackbook*. He quickly evolved into a designer whose youthful and exuberant fashions are sought after by celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Alicia Keys, Tyra Banks, and many others.

BLACK DRESS: Ten Contemporary Fashion Designers

Black Dress celebrates ten black designers who each possess a singular vision and—perhaps just as importantly—the resourcefulness and perseverance to succeed in the fashion world, which has historically downplayed their earlier counterparts' achievements. The exhibition explores how the background of each designer—some have come to New York from such diverse places as the Caribbean, Detroit, and Senegal—has affected his or her work. It also marks a new chapter in fashion history rich with a greater range of creative influences and professional opportunities.

Historically, black fashion was rooted in the tailors and dressmakers who often sewed the finest gowns and 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/costumer Zelda Wynn Valdes, who created the iconic Playboy Bunny outfit and dresses for actresses like Dorothy Dandridge, Marlene Dietrich, and Mae West; and Ann Lowe, who designed the wedding dress for Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy.

Today, all designers have new tools available to foster their professional careers. *Black Dress* spotlights the innovative ways designers have branded themselves and generated business, establishing strong word-of-mouth networks, private ateliers, and cooperative retail operations.

Adrienne Jones, concept developer and co-curator, is a tenured professor in the Fashion Design Department at Pratt Institute. She has more than 30 years of experience as a designer, patternmaker, 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 15 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 *Profiles98 Magazine*, a fashion/lifestyles publication.

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, eschewing traditional downtown and midtown Manhattan fashion bastions. As an alternative to the established fashion retail destinations of Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue, the exhibition design 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, famed MacArthur Fellow (2013), photographer, and video artist. The video will feature models Nykhor Paul and Devin L.T. Clarke, wearing garments by each of the designers. Celebrity stylist Ty-Ron Mayes 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**

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PRATT MANHATTAN GALLERY

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Photo: Carrie Mae Weems
Designer: Tracy Reese
Models: Nykhor Paul, Red Model Management
Styling: Ty-Ron Mayes

Adrienne Jones, concept developer and co-curator; Paula Coleman, guest curator,
and Walter Greene, fashion consultant.

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