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Connecting Threads: Rick Owens, The cultural disruptor

Rick Owens is a marvelous and crafty designer who has lingered in the fashion scene for over a decade. Originally making his living through pattern making and knocking off designer brands for a small company, who could have assumed Owens would take the modern fashion world by storm? Rick Owens is a luxury streetwear designer, who has made innovative architectural choices in their works, which range from shoes, clothing to furniture. His brand “DrkShdw” is highly adored by streetwear fans. This designer’s catalog has been labeled gothic, grunge and extremely nonconformist. The brand’s popularity has been deemed cult-like, due to the fans constantly seeking to purchase second hand or resold products. When exploring the brand we can make connections to the targeted consumers based on pricing and representation in advertisements. We can also create a relationship with the designer and their heritage, seeing if this influences their designs. Rick Owens is an internationally loved designer and it is evident in the fanbase for their works.

The Rick Owens item I have chosen to build my project around are his Nylon sock boots. This variant of the shoe differs from other sock boots being that it is made in nylon and it reaches over the calf. Other sock boots are calf length, they also come in vegan leather and knit fabric. This thigh high unisex shoe, which is made from nylon for the legs base, has a rubber sole. The nylon is black and this shoe only comes in this colorway. But with different variants for the length and shape of the toe box, as well as being platformed. The bottom of the shoe is cream at the sole. The toe box of the shoe bares a stark resemblance to an American cult classic, the Chuck Taylor Converse shoe. The apparent twinning of the shoes has raised questions from fashion consumers, wondering if it was an intentional rip off. The New York Times article “Rick Owens on Corrupting the Classics”, allows an intimate understanding of the Rick Owens’ brand. Owens answers many of the hallmark questions regarding his brand, more specifically his shoe concepts. According to the New York Times interview conducted by Jessica Testa, Owens owes a lot of his inspiration to rock bands and converse shoes. When asked during the interview if Owen’s owned converse and if that inspired him, his response was:

“No, no, of course I did. We all did. Everybody that wanted to look like the Ramones. And the Ramones were my style idols. They still are, kind of.

I associate Converse very much with the Ramones, and that’s what makes Converse seem like kind of a scrappy outsider symbol to a lot of people.” (Owens 2021)

According to the Times article Owens's has drawn inspiration from their childhood. Deeming his mental moodboard to have aesthetic stylings taken from the Ramones, who popularized the converse look in the latter 1970s. Owens expresses how his designs are not so much knock offs, but a restructure of the shoes foundation and are also collaborations, regarding his collections with Adidas and Converse. As of more recent years the production of Rick Owens has changed due to these collaborative efforts, in the NYTimes article Owens says;

“I start by asking them, “What are your limits?” I don't want to spend a lot of time pursuing this idea if I find out that this mold is going to cost 10 million euros. I need to know the technical limitations and legal limitations. What can I distort legally, and what is too far?” (Owens, 2021)

This interview allows for the Rick Owens fan base to note the social relationships involved with producing this object and many others in his collections. According to another source, the OnPointFresh's website, the Rick Owens “DrkShdw” brand is produced by an apparel company called Olmar and Mirta in Modena, located in Italy. The company is a factory on a smaller scale with about 100 employees. They are responsible for the manufacturing of Owenscorp's brand items, including the Nylon Sock Boot and many other shoes, like the Ramones previously mentioned. However, it is peculiar in essence that there is not much information on the production of the shoe. It is unknown the age ranges, pay wage and races working in these factories assembling these shoes. On the other hand, there are no scandals regarding unfair treatment or lack of pay with the production of this line, or heat for the manufacturer itself. Debuting his DrkShdw brand in 2002. During that year George W. Bush was president and nations like the U.S, Canada and China were suffering from a major stock market crash. There is not much data on the pricing of Owens' 2002 collection unfortunately. It would be quite absurd to launch an extremely expensive and subversive brand in spite of the huge economic crash. The prices of Rick Owens since 2013 have ranged from 400-3,000 dollars for a variety of items, according to the brand's website and popular reselling clothes app “Grailed”. Another concept to consider, the debut of his 2002 collection was quite anti- fashion for that era. The early 2000s were filled with bright and sparkly outfits with mixed textiles, which an obvious juxtaposition to the neutral color palette and avant garde- grunge style promoted by Owens.

Another important facet of this item are the social relationships involved in it's exchange. While my Nylon Sock Boots are out of season dating back to FW '14. They can still be bought and sold on second hand platforms like Grailed or Depop. The prices are not often cut, but when the item is out of season you can get some great grabs ranging from 400-600 dollars. The value of second hand Rick Owens merchandise, contrary to regular belief, is not stunted. In the streetwear community, the brand is widely recognized as a culture change. The deconstruction and reconstruction of these items makes them special and unique. Each piece has an allure of its own and the more vintage or dated the item, the more aesthetic and artistic value it has. The racial demographic of buyers for this brand is not publicly posted. However, the brand has a multicultural consumer base. Rick Owens and the sock boots are seen in Japanese streetwear. The African American buyer can be said to have put Rick Owens on the trend platform around 2016, when PlayBoi Carti, a Hip-Hop referenced the designer brand in a song. Another famous hip-hop artist currently re-popularizing the shoe is Lil Uzi Vert, who is known for his out of norm music and style. References for these images can be found via Instagram or the rappers' twitters.

Rick Owens is an innovative and non conformist brand, which does not aspire to be like any other, while remaining simple and chic.

“I like distorting things architecturally, in a more profound way than adding a print or a decoration on top. I like to disturb the very foundation of the product they’re doing.”
(Owens, 2021)

The brand is popularized for their remakes of iconic shoe styles like Converse, Doc Martens and Nike, it is one of a kind. The striking pieces are iconic because the consumer can instantly tell a Rick Owens piece from anywhere, because of the architectural design of the garment. The representation for Rick Owens’ pieces are quite genderfluid and phantasmagorical. From styling choices shown on the website, to the actual runway productions, Owens’ controversial design expounds fashion and shoe making.

“PARIS — The models at the Rick Owens show Thursday night looked like glamorous aliens, as if creatures from some science fiction movie had wandered into the designer’s atelier and raided his sample room. Some of the women in his fall 2019 show looked deathly pale, as if every drop of blood had been sucked from their veins. Others had disfiguring protrusions growing from their cheek or running parallel to their nose. Their facial peculiarities marked them as oddballs, weirdos, pariahs.” (Washingtonpost, 2019)

Quoted directly from Robin Givhan’s Washingtonpost article titled “Rick Owens turned his models into aliens and oddballs — and they looked so glamorous”, describes a 2019 runway show for Owen’s spring collection. The models were given makeup to look alien-like and completely uncanny. The bizarre image includes a semi bald head (the front), with long hair in the back, black eyes and other props on their faces altering it as the quote mentions. Having models appear this way pushes the narrative of a gender neutral and unisex brand. When stereotypically masculine and feminine features are unrecognizable or juxtaposed to the opposite body, it eliminates the binary concept of gender. This nuance is seen in more modern fashion and entertainment tropes today. Another part of this social aspect is the brand's owner.

Rick Owens, himself is a bisexual man, dating men before marrying their spouse Michelle Lamy in 2006.

While Owens’ clothes are gender neutral and quite unisex, there has been flack about how he utilizes diversity in shows. In Rick Owens 2014 womenswear show in Paris, he featured a predominantly African American step team in substitution for models. Controversy sparked about the performance art because the energy was seemingly more aggressive than Owen’s typical dark gothic and romantic essence;

“The decision to send African-American women stomping down a Paris catwalk with nostril-flaring scowls likely fed the “angry black woman” stereotype for many, an image

so prevalent it has even been applied to first lady Michelle Obama, widely recognized as one of the world's more elegant women.” (Stodghill, 2013)

In a 2013 article titled “Rick Owens Paris Fashion Week angry models: Member of black women's step team says 'ugly' faces were forced”, the author describes how scandal and controversy were a brew due to the black representation in this show. The display is not a traditional runway with a catwalk. It is an 11 minute ensemble where the models are step dancers. The performance is theatrical and energetic, which is not foreign to this genre of dance. The dancers modeled four different color ways, brown, beige, black and white. What sticks out throughout this dynamic performance is the faces the dancers are making. While some can say it was an artistic decision others may see a common theme in fashion, exploitation of the black image. The article suggests some may take offense because the women were utilized in a racist manner. These women danced powerfully and made faces labeled as aggressive. One of the performers explains in the article, how they were coached to make these “ugly” faces. To many these faces felt like exploitation of the black image. This is a popular issue within the fashion industry. White artists typically use the black essence in their fashion without crediting what culture or person the concept came from. This is a problem when it comes to cultural appropriation. However, cultural appropriation is not on the issue, but it is the idea that the representation of ethnic groups is important.

“When black women are portrayed as overly agitated, ferocious, unkempt, or animalistic,” wrote Amanda Williams about Owens’ show on theGrio, “it is an affront to black beauty. Like all women, black women want to feel happy, sexy, alluring, maintained, elegant and beautiful: all the ways white women are portrayed in contemporary fashion photo and runway productions.” If black women could consistently receive that portrayal, that would be truly satisfying fashion diversity.” (Stodghill, 2013)

If marginalized groups are shown in inappropriate ways around the world it promotes cultural ignorance. People in some places may be able to see art televised publicly, but may not have the technology to further research the meanings behind what is shown. This leads to stereotyping based on race. The ethnic image for black Americans and black people overall is shown in a distorted context and disparagingly represented. The true question is *why* Owens ordered the women to look “vicious”, as worded by Stodghill. It is obvious that intelligence and thought are what make up the designer’s essence, therefore this was a distinct artistic choice here. Not a coincidence. When the women perform they start by banging on their chest with literal scowls on their faces. Although the Soul Steppers did want to be a part of the showcase because it was a magnificent opportunity, they did express their disagreement with the conceptual choice to look aggressive, according to Stodghill.

While one may focus on the mass appeal Rick Owens has on millennials and generation x, it is more important to focus on the appropriation of black culture within the fashion industry itself. Specifically this brand. Artists are nonchalant when they knock off black imagery or misrepresent black people in their work.

“ At the risk of people dubbing it direct cultural appropriation, Owens admits that it was dangerous waters: "I knew that, at the first level, doing the show in that way was cool and that at the second level it was not something I'm supposed to mess with. If I had been thinking about what was politically correct, I would have left it alone." He later goes on to say that he "wasn't so nervous about a negative response. I never really am."”
(Complex, 2015)

This excerpt is a quote by Owens from a 2015 *Complex* article by Skylar Bergl titled “Rick Owens Talks Controversy (And His New Marble Toilet)”. Owens expresses that he was aware of the controversy with the shows running. He explicitly says he was not trying to be politically correct and was not nervous about a negative response. The issue at hand here is the carelessness for how the other culture being utilized for this art is being perceived. While the brand as a whole gets the avant-garde theatrical effect having this performance under its belt, the performers are seen separately. Although the ensemble is exciting and energetic within context and costume, the image of the dancers is embolden in the mind. Not because of the striking fashion, but because of the stereotypes present in their representation. Owens did not use these women of color to show beauty or diversity, he chose them to show strength and aggression.

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