

# MOSCOW DOESN'T BELIEVE IN TRENDS

## NEW YORK DESIGNER RACHEL COMEY PAINTS THE TOWN RED AT RUSSIAN FASHION WEEK

Three important dates to keep in mind for this article. On December 8, 1991, Boris Yeltsin and the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus announced, after several rounds of vodka, that the U.S.S.R. no longer existed. On September 8, 2001, New York designer Rachel Comey launched her eponymous label with a small but vital menswear collection. On October 30, 2003, Comey and her crew (myself included) flew ten hours and eight time zones to the somewhat more commercially liberated capital of Russia to show her Spring/Summer collection during Russian Fashion Week. She landed in Moscow to sunlight—the only break from the slate-gray sky clouding the entire trip—on Halloween. What proceeded to occur over the next four days, until Russian models paraded down the runway in her techno-kaleidoscopic silk patterns and deceptively clean-lined dresses, proved to be a mix of All Hallows' Eve, Flag Day, the feast of the patron saint of vodka, and the launch of Sputnik.

Fashion is big business in Moscow. In a town literally divided into two classes—the very rich and the very poor—one of these groups takes its tastes in clothes very seriously. Russian Fashion Week is the apogee of this new national obsession. Designers from St. Petersburg and Moscow, along with invitees from all over the world, take their turn on a walk through the Russian market. Comey, along with glitter-clad cataract As Four, was brought to RFW to represent the urban terrain of New York. As soon as the designer settled in the hotel—ominously connected to the "World Trade Center" business hub and home to a gilded wooden rooster in the lobby that crowed and flapped its wings on the hour—she was sent to a modeling agency to cast her show. Where most tourists find their first taste of cultural difference in restaurants or shopping malls, Comey's clan found it in the models—heavily made-up with silver-glossed lips, or hunky, lumberjacking older types right out of '80s GQ. Comey is foremost a menswear designer, so the first problem bared its giant, hirsute shoulders: her clothes were made for skinny, downtown Manhattan rockers whose scruffy hairdos boast a larger circumference than their waistlines. The gang had to scramble to do a bit of street casting, running up to a coffee boy here, a wan photographer there, to find her male mannequins—and accidentally redefining Russian male beauty in the process.

Much of the designer's time was reserved for interviews, where local journalists wanted to know which celebrities wore her fashions (Marilyn Manson; Beck, who outfitted himself in her clothes on a recent tour; Bowie, who was one of the first to buy her designs). Others asked (presumably without irony) why the rest of the world found Moscow to be so gray. One TV reporter even berated her for dressing her female models in Adidas sneakers ("A Russian woman would never wear that!").

Thankfully, not every moment was spent on the business of fashion. There were day trips to the Kremlin and the Pushkin; evenings eating shashlik at a Georgian restaurant where waiters clapped (presumably without irony) to the delivery of skewered meat; nights spent with entrepreneurial American ex-pats looking to make fortunes on the new economy and score Russian wives in the process; later nights squeezing lemons in mouths after taking endless shots of Russian Standard vodka to the nods of hot former Soviets; clubs with a wall of holes to reach your hand into and come out with any imaginable drink; bars with tiny dance floors swaying to "Stairway to Heaven"; one decadent night spent with the head of Russian Fashion Week, Alexander Shumsky, that ended in a limo ride to Red Square at five a.m. to experience St. Basil's and the site where Soviet ICBMs once rumbled over the cobblestones.

Comey's show of inky blues and canary yellows, when it finally did take place, ran smoothly, a demonstration of independent New York might in the latter days of Moscow's fashion calendar. But at that point it was already hard to determine how long it had been since the plane had landed, what was new Russian and what was old Soviet, difficult to separate the monumental buildings from the overcast skyline and the feeling of hangover from jet lag. "Moscow is beautiful, but it is not romantic," one affable Muscovite told us in a car ride along the river. "It's not like Paris, not like Kiev." All of this is true, we were sure. And somehow, the city remained a bit more foreign, more untouchable, even after a week, because it was something we had all seen on television for so long but still couldn't figure out once we got there. **Christopher Bollen**

