

By Amy Serafin

The Garment Games

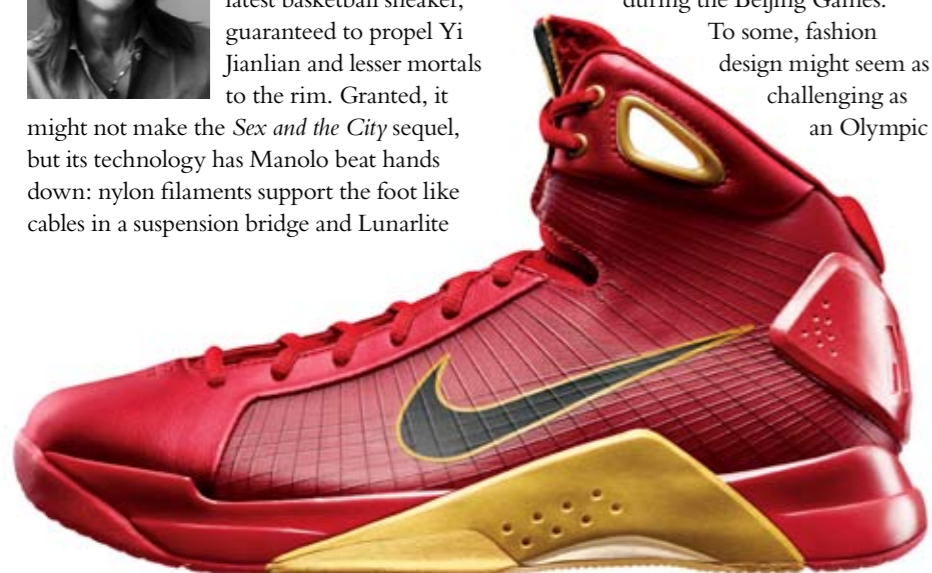
THE JUDGES OF FASHION CAN BE TOUGH TO PLEASE. FROM PARIS, HERE'S THE UPDATE ON GOLD-MEDAL DESIGNERS AND THOSE STRUGGLING TO MAKE THE CUT



CUT-OUT BOOTIES might be all the rage, but the hottest shoe at the moment is the Hyperdunk, Nike's latest basketball sneaker, guaranteed to propel Yi Jianlian and lesser mortals to the rim. Granted, it might not make the *Sex and the City* sequel, but its technology has Manolo beat hands down: nylon filaments support the foot like cables in a suspension bridge and Lunarlite

foam gives spring to the forefoot. Nike is seeing plenty of gold these days as the largest sportswear brand in China and the uniform provider for 22 Chinese sports federations during the Beijing Games.

To some, fashion design might seem as challenging as an Olympic



event: the clock is always running, competition is fierce and creators can't help glancing back over their shoulders. It's especially daunting for those who have to live up to a predecessor's style. Some pull it off with flying colours. Stefano Pilati just keeps getting better at Yves Saint Laurent, creating both men's and womenswear with enviable flair. Frida Giannini has built a loyal following at Gucci, where she replaced Alessandra Facchinetti in 2005 after the latter found herself stuck under the shadow of Tom Ford. Now Facchinetti has a chance to prove herself at an equally – if not more – intimidating task, filling the shoes of the great Valentino Garavani while he watches from the sidelines. (Talk about performance anxiety.) Her first ready-to-wear collection, a discreetly lovely debut, is in stores now.

At Chloé, where Phoebe Philo's memory still looms large, designer Paolo Melim Andersson was given three seasons to find his bearings before he was shown the door. While Andersson produced some nice work, he never managed to convince management that he could uphold the house's girly, free-spirited style. Replacing him is Hannah MacGibbon, who previously worked on the Chloé team, as well as for Valentino. Faithful PMA fans have one last season to buy his final offerings for



the brand.

After Emanuel Ungaro retired in 2001 from ready-to-wear at the house that bears his name, the company ran through a parade of three designers before calling up Esteban Cortazar last winter. (Franck Boclet, formerly at Smalto, took over Ungaro's menswear last year.) The 24-year-old Cortazar was born in Colombia, grew up in Miami and made his official New York debut under his own moniker in 2002 while still a high school student, the youngest designer ever to show at Fashion Week. A year later, he coaxed retired supermodel Cindy Crawford back onto the catwalk.

His first Paris runway show for Ungaro took place last February, another kind of trial by fire. And while Cortazar is no stranger to the feminine sex appeal that defines this label, he's kept his first collection relatively subtle, with silky fabrics, off-the-shoulder goddess dresses and quiet tones of taupe and grey. The critical response was mostly positive – though it remains to be seen how clients vote with their credit cards. (This October, watch for a little Ungaro-MAC make-up synergy, when the two companies present a limited-edition cosmetics line reflecting the colours on the runway.)

At Dior Homme, Kris Van Assche has had a mountain to climb after the cult following inspired by his predecessor, Hedi Slimane. His second collection for the label, currently on the shelves, contains shrunken jackets and slender, legging-like trousers along with pleated harem trousers. An array of unusual details includes cut-off neckties and butterflies, while the common denominator is the colour – or lack thereof – as practically every piece comes in a variation of black (matt or shiny). Clients longing for more dazzle will



From far left: Nike Hyperdunk and Yi Jianlian; Ossie Clark; Dior Homme; Emanuel Ungaro (all autumn/winter 2008)

find fluorescent brilliance at Dior Homme next spring.

There's the challenge of following in the footsteps of a living designer, and then there's the lurking legacy of legendary designers who are no longer with us, yet still loom larger than life. Twelve years after Ossie Clark was killed by a former lover, his name is being revived by British Internet entrepreneur Mark Worth. Clark was synonymous with Swinging London in the 1960s. Working with his wife, textile designer Celia Birtwell, he dressed

the likes of Paloma Picasso and Marianne Faithfull before developing a drug addiction and seeing his romantic style fall out of fashion in the punky 1980s. Now Worth has bought the brand and hired Israeli-born designer Avsh Alom Gur, a graduate of Central Saint Martin's who worked with Donna Karan, Chloé and Roberto Cavalli. The house's first collection was shown last February at the Serpentine Gallery in London. It consisted of sixteen looks in warmly bold colours: burnt orange for a halter dress, a lipstick-red ruffled blouse, a turquoise snakeskin skirt and matching jacket and a printed dress worthy of Birtwell.

Another British legend, Biba, recently came back on the scene, only to go belly up again. Biba was created in 1964 by Barbara Hulanicki, who came up with the formula of selling runway knockoffs for a fraction of the price. At its height the brand occupied a six-storey temple on Kensington High Street filled with beautifully emaciated young girls in barely-there miniskirts, rock stars from Jagger to Bowie, and plenty of drugs to go along with the sex and rock 'n' roll. Biba disappeared in 1975, then was reincarnated two years ago as a more upmarket label. But the rebirth was not destined to last, proof that some nostalgic journeys are better not taken. ■