

'Paris'

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Piers Atkinson's A/W '11 collection isn't a celebration of the Paris you reach via St. Pancras International or Stansted Airport. His latest is a nod to 1930s Paris – its heyday of tête-à-têtes in seedy back alleys, lovers on park benches at dusk, drag queens in late night cabarets. But it's also a Paris that is, at its heart, like any big city – London, Berlin, New York – that draws the dreamers, the poets, artists and romantics out of the darkness of small towns and countryside to the light of its cafes, bars, clubs and theatres, to the heat of its vices, to the warmth of its conversations.

The signature elements of Atkinson's earlier seasons return, here transformed by the nocturnal, sodium glow of the city. Dark navy, grey and blacks preside, as does the gold of jewellery worn out on the town, the downy plumage of the showgirl, the veil of the femme fatale. Extravagance is moulded into the contours of the *rive gauche*, and glamour is having a tryst with vice (note those metal studs, now gold). To his trademark erotic Atkinson adds a hint of the narcotic: a lysergic squiggle of antennae jutting from a cloud of feathers; the dim luminescence of dark blue orchids – will-o-the-wisps to lure you back a century to some Parisian opium den. And, fittingly, last season's 'Dalston' finds its mirror incarnation in this season's title piece, in both humming neon lights and reflective gold.

It's worth remembering that Paris's most famous photographer came to the city as a young man from Poland. Brassai was presumably drawn to the city as many are – by the vibrant flurry beneath its streetlamps, the music pouring from smoky doorways, its charming reprobates and its beautiful freaks. Or perhaps because it's the best place you can go to enjoy the company of like-minded people while simultaneously seeking out the unfamiliar. When he arrived, an older Polish artist introduced him to the artistic circles of the city and, when this mentor was gone, Brassai welcomed more young artists from his homeland into their group. But this involved not so much a continuity of tradition or a passing of the torch, but an exchange of ideas, an intergenerational cross-pollination.

Looking at these homages to Brassai, it's clear Atkinson also shares this belief that the city's artistic milieu welcomes everyone, that 'bright young things' come in all kinds of wrappings and colours and with all manner of birthdays. Among his subjects here are established figures – including early mentor Zandra Rhodes, actress Jenny Runacre, DJ-in-demand and New Wave icon Princess Julia (East London's Kiki?) and designer and frequent collaborator Judy Blame. They also include new young talent such as fashion PR dynamic-duo Ella Dror and Ashley Smith and young milliner Jordan Bowen. Dalston in its 20teens, all this seems to say, is our Paris 1930s.

In Derek Jarman's 'Jubilee', Runacre's Elizabeth I was transported by court magician John Dee to a dystopic punk Britain, in what some critics say was Jarman's way of showing Britons what they'd lost. In referencing a bygone Parisian utopia, however idealised, Atkinson might be trying to tell us we've got it just as good.