

'Hot Voodoo'

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Surely one of the most jaw-dropping entrances onto a stage ever performed can be seen in Josef von Sternberg's 1932 'Blonde Venus', when a glamorous Marlene Dietrich emerges from a gorilla suit to perform the song 'Hot Voodoo!'. Strutting amidst fake lianas, ferns and the other ersatz foliage of an extravagantly constructed jungle, Dietrich pulls the furry paw gloves off to reveal jewelled fingers, then lifts the gorilla mask off her head, replacing it with a white bubble wig sprouting shiny jagged arrows. It's the climax of the transformation, switching hats from beast to blonde, primate to primadonna, fur to her.

Piers Atkinson's SS12 collection makes a nod to this memorably outrageous moment and pays homage to the fantastical artifices of the stage, which then as now were the creative imagination's attempts to improve upon an imperfect and unpredictable world. It also revisits that period's fixation with the tropics, Africa, the Orient, the jungle – and most specifically Hollywood's romanticised, fanciful interpretations of what to most people was still unexplored territory.

This collection is all vivid, outrageous colour and reflective lustre. The hues of its bird-of-paradise flowers and parrot feathers are almost impossibly rich, so hyper-natural as to seem artificial, plastic, which of course they are. It's like the jungle itself: explosively fecund, Nature with a capital 'N', yet so alien to our urbanised lifestyles as to appear extra-terrestrial.

Feathers and flowers abound, but what really ups the ante is the profusion of wildlife. Atkinson camouflages giant, diamante-encrusted stag beetles amidst effulgent floral arrangements, the insect antennae arching out with a combination of grace and menace. Insects are everywhere: a bejewelled and glittered praying mantis perches on a headband; a green locust mounts a headclip; a multi-coloured giant beetle adorns an afro-pick; ants crawl up a veil of mosquito netting. Atkinson says a key inspiration for the collection was watching Attenborough's 'Life in the Undergrowth' which, he says, 'is as outlandish as any science fiction.'

Frogs make a return to Atkinson's hats – not the fairy tale would-be-prince of AW09 but his sci-fi neon yellow and electric blue brethren, here perched on a baby blue mini-beret, there alone on the lid of a cap. Then there are the birds. In 'Twitter', blue and yellow starlings perch astride broad green leaves and a peony, the male's tail fanning up into fine swirls – an outrageous hat on first inspection, but no more so than many of Atkinson's pieces. Until, that is, you clap your hands and the sound-activated automaton bird begins tweeting away, swivelling its head left and right and fluttering its wings. Camp has soared to new heights atop a Piers Atkinson hat.

All this might overshadow Atkinson's more simple, classical pieces, if not for the sheer elegance and beauty of the latter. The signature cherries return in a duo of

spectacular, crystal covered incarnations, while gorgeous glittered parrot tail feathers are the simple crux of a number of pieces. New straw boaters in a range of colours sport a simple band of fabric, either a plain orange or a 'banana leaf' 1970s Zandra Rhodes print.

For all its extravagances this collection is about the simple beauty of hue and luminescence under the spotlight, the same one so evident on the silver screen. That starlight glimmer radiating off Dietrich's sequined blouse shines here in the collection's use of crystals and ultrafine glitter, while the silver glow of Sternberg's celluloid prints and the Technicolor of early Hollywood fantasies such as 1939's 'The Wizard of Oz' are conjured up in the wonderfully garish hues of Atkinson's portraits of artists Andrew Logan and Duggie Fields, designers Julie Verhoeven, Fred Butler and Bethan Wood, and performers Russella and Mr. Roy.

It's a witty collection, but perhaps also contains a more serious subtext. The aesthetically reconstructed realities of the stage and screen they reference represent any creative platform. They simultaneously pay tribute to and parody life – here the spectacular fecundity of the natural world. The irony is that the stage, the cabaret, the artist's studio – these are for many artists a chosen alternative to the traditional cultural 'norms' of daily life. In many cases the artworks are their creators' true progeny, their continuity, a shot at immortality like Dietrich's in celluloid. In this light the bejewelled bugs call to mind the scarab amulets of the Egyptians, dung beetles representing the cycle of life and death, and the singing birds the avian automatons of the 19th century, part of a long tradition of attempting to simulate life. They are art as talisman, warding off mediocrity – and, in a sense, death – by affirming the enduring power of creativity. They truly are magical – 'Hot Voodoo' indeed.