

## Bloods on the catwalk

***The New Barbarians Fall Collection 2007***

***La Pocha Nostra***

***Arnolfini, Bristol***

***10/11/07***

The last time I got a severe case of the shivers during a live art show was thanks to Goat Island's *When will the September roses bloom / last night was only a comedy*. Whilst the bland, treacly tones of James Taylor oozed from the PA, Litó Walkey stood still on one leg for a good seven or eight minutes. One song ended, another one began (as if the sound op had dozed off, leaving the whole CD playing unintentionally) and Walkey simply stood centre stage, one leg raised, in a crepuscular half-light.

I'm no particular fan of James Taylor (or indeed of standing on one leg for any length of time) but after about three minutes I suddenly realised I was shaking. At first I thought it was in sympathy with the performer, or maybe even because of the cold, but I quickly discounted these theories and yet still couldn't stop myself wobbling... and that wasn't particularly good news as I was behind a camcorder at the time, filming the performance. Despite everything, despite the formality of Goat Island's house style, despite the fact that the immediacy of the event was being filtered through a viewfinder before it hit me, I was being consumed by something unnameable and shaking like a leaf.

I mention this because it happened again during La Pocha Nostra's *The New Barbarians Fall Collection 2007*, in a similarly unquantifiable way. Rajni Shah had been parading spider-like up and down the fashion show runway for some time, naked but for a black choker, with an animal snarl and dark arterial blood smeared across her face. Slowly, quietly, Sarah Jane Norman – similarly unclothed except for various thin black trusses dissecting her body and a rubber mask of what looked like Condoleezza Rice over her head – made her presence known at the opposite end of the catwalk. I can't even remember what was playing on the soundtrack at the time because by then the entire experience had battered me into a helpless submission. 90 minutes of noise, fury and fashion, culminating in La Pocha Nostra and their associate artists making me vibrate with the heartbeat regularity of a quartz crystal... and by means that couldn't have been more different from Goat Island's.

Days later, details of *New Barbarians* are still repeating upon me like snatches of a half remembered dream, sneaking up, unexpected and often unwelcome, triggered by some innocuous element of my daily life. BAM! There's Alex Bradley, hauling himself the length of the catwalk by means of the connecting spars of two lighting clamps, the metal props attached to his wrists, instruments of torture, clunking painfully into the wood of the runway. BAM! Roza Ilgen, her form entirely covered in human hair, short-arsed, sporting breasts and a beard like some long lost evolutionary byroad: Captain Caveman, Morlock, Bigfoot, arms splayed out, a perverse Christ, the audience cheering her

enthusiastically. WHOOSH! The sound of a mad Mexican woman jabbering away down a telephone line, unintelligible, distorted, insane. BOOM! BANG! Guillermo Gómez-Peña suddenly breaking into a native American chant, all the while pouting ridiculously like Derek Zoolander. GO!

Presented in the mode of a fashion show, *New Barbarians* keeps all the rituals, bluster and bombast of such events intact. The audience have been told to “dress for the catwalk” and most have obliged. There’s a foyer preview, free drinks, a rat pack of photographers (all uniformly name-badged “PAPARAZZI SCUM”) and once we are led inside the auditorium there’s VIP seating at the runway’s edge, a hammering soundtrack, plus Folake Shoga’s disjointed and deliberately mashed-up films projected onto a screen above the throng – cutting rapidly and queasily between ethno-geographic documentaries, rehearsal footage, adverts, military recruitment films and middle east news stories. There’s the obligatory show manager hustling models to and from the stage with a constant air of unflappable yet pissed-off efficiency. Gómez-Peña, founder member of La Pocha Nostra, holds court on a platform opposite the runway, freezing the noisy proceedings regularly in order to deliver verbose treatises in a patchwork of languages, physically inhabiting a space somewhere between a Hopi tribal chief and Klaus Lagerfeld. His consort is a snappily-suited female announcer who gives voice to the catwalk at random, speaking over the soundtrack in measured sing-song tones, offering performers for sale, encouraging the audience towards acts of rebellion or cultural vandalism. It is relentless, and total. It also has that single most important clash of textures prevalent in the world of fashion: the constant, repeated intertwining of the profound and the utterly meaningless, holding the event together like warp and weft. There’s the all-pervading sense that what we’re witnessing is the creators throwing a huge amount of stuff at the wall, and seeing what sticks. It’s exuberant, funny, unapologetic... and occasionally feels as if it’s in danger of collapsing under its own weight.

La Pocha Nostra have spent much of the last fifteen years conjuring up and making flesh this world of border and hybrid cultures, building a creative lab where cultural phenomena undergo a type of rapid, barely controlled fission. The forms (it doesn’t feel right to call them ‘outfits,’ somehow) on the runway tonight are the gene-spliced bastard children of the communications satellite and the nightclub, bearing the family traits of hip-hop, sado-masochism, youTube and airport terminals, cheap handguns, DVD boxsets, protest marches and internet porn, speaking cross-Phillipino-Icelandic with a Brazillian / lowland Scottish accent, listening to klezmer-grindcore on their iPods and spending their holidays on the fucking moon.

As they tour the world, Gómez-Peña and a crew of three or four permanent cohorts ‘collect’ associates, throwing further spices into their melting pot. The diverse bodies are all artists, all complicit, all having made themselves beautiful in their own eyes, no doubt via some mediation on the part of their hosts. As a result of this diversity it’s unsurprising that many fascinating socio-

political concerns are manifest in each model parading back and forth before us: power play appears to be a fundamental building block of their interactions; gender is not so much bent as blended, a thick chromosomal soup; and the models borrow 'clothes' from every religion and religious impetus that crawls beneath the sun. BAM! Harminder Singh Judge, gas-masked and with the multiple arms of a Hindu deity, strapped to a crucifix CRACK, THWACK a Nike swoosh on a stiletto-heeled terrorist's hijab BANG! Jiva Parthipan performing an exuberant, grinning Kath kali dance with a handgun stuffed into his crotch.

The crossbreed cyber-sexual rebellion of *New Barbarians* might sound disconcerting, but it's not what gave me the shakes. It wasn't even the implication that somewhere beneath the fashion show there was a bubbling bloodbath of righteous violence. What I was watching, after all, was a distillation of a million things, people and places that already exist, active, actual, accessible either physically or technologically, far from alien or inhuman in any conceivable way. The danger wasn't in the shapes, nodes and ideas.

I certainly wasn't shaking with indignation, as I loved the damn thing: feeling oddly, happily at home. I've heard since the show that some people actually found *New Barbarians* offensive, but it's completely inconceivable to me why. I can't understand how anyone could be offended by such a vivid celebration of the possibilities of human synthesis. Sure, there was plenty of perverted religious imagery; much nudity (some of it in the areas euphemistically and uselessly described as 'graphic'); and little, if any, explanation of what you were seeing and why it was there – only a sly announcement before the catwalk burst to life that the audience shouldn't take all they saw "entirely seriously."

But still, what's offensive about that? La Pocha Nostra's magpie tendencies are wonderfully indiscriminate, irreverent in equal measure towards male, female, Christian, atheist, Buddhist, left, right, rich, poor. Basically, if you're human, you're fair game. To me, being offended by *New Barbarians* is about as logical as being offended by Rio De Janeiro, Singapore or Los Angeles – all of them by no means short of culture clashes, bastardized religions, ridiculously beautiful people and plenty of senseless violence.

And maybe that explains why I was shaking. It was like an overdose. Perhaps if you can picture the entirety of Singapore, Los Angeles, Rio De Janeiro, London, New York, Paris, Milan... imagine every last inch of them crammed into a hypodermic and injected forcibly straight into the base of your spinal column. An instant download of more dirt, glitz and mixed messages than you could possibly handle.

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