



Homme girl

When **Anne Valérie Hash** showed her first ready-to-wear collection, it received a lukewarm reception as menswear made for women. But ten years on, the French designer is finally embracing her femininity – and bringing Beirut's 'passionate coquettes' along with her

Gender-bending actress Tilda Swinton may be one of Anne Valérie Hash's most visible fans, but it's difficult to imagine the queen of glamorous androgyny in her latest collection. This spring, Hash has lightened up. There are still traces of the strong lines and masculine tailoring that epitomise her ready-to-wear looks, but they've been overshadowed by the softer elements that typically play a supporting role. When she designed the collection, Hash had never been to Beirut. Yet this may be the season she wins over Lebanon.

'I wanted to mix the west with the Middle East,' Hash explains, as we try to find a quiet spot away from polished women oohing and ahing over her spring ready-to-wear looks, which launched in

Beirut that afternoon. Enchanted by the region, she traded the colour palette with which she is most comfortable – pale, neutral hues – for bright, jewel tones that look most at home against a copper sunset. 'This collection is "Blue Tangerine",' she says. 'It's a mix between an occidental blue, which is a cold colour, and this soft, Oriental tangerine.' Other elements borrowed from the Middle East include macramé details and loose pants that cocoon the hips.

Contradiction – in this case between draping and clean lines, luxurious silk and artisanal knots, the muted and bold – has become the Hash paradigm. When asked about the range of labels her clothes have been assigned,

from eccentric and whimsical to polished and crumpled chic, she says they're equally appropriate. 'I love imbalanced beauty,' the designer explains, pausing to think. 'But I also like an imbalanced mood, because nothing in life is balanced.'

This collection may represent orchestrated asymmetry, finally tipping the scale in favour of femininity and away from the androgyny we've come to expect from Hash. 'When I launched the brand I was in contact with a lot of men and I was much more masculine in my life. Then I got married and had children, and I had to fight for so many things.' More than ten years later, the designer is beginning to soften: 'Now that my children are five and six, I feel like I'm more relaxed, more stable. I can be a woman.'

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Despite launching her collection in Beirut several years ago, she admits that past seasons failed to resonate with local women. She wonders aloud whether the nuanced approach of Lebanon's 'passionate, feminine coquettes' to fashion is a reaction to tension

in the region, and contrasts local style to what she calls a more 'intellectual' European look. As models glide past in draped silk dresses, it seems that for Lebanon and Hash the stars have finally aligned.

When the designer left for Lebanon, someone in her office joked that she should bring back more colour to Paris. But even that seemed a stretch for Hash, who expected to have little influence on the local crowd and receive even less in return. After being briefed on Lebanese tastes, she arrived with a take-me-or-leave-me attitude, preparing herself for a mixed welcome. The personal pep-talks may have been a waste of time; now, adult women are clamouring to take photos with the excited, if slightly baffled, designer.

'I'll definitely come back to Beirut,' she says with a smile as a group of fashionable guests catch her eye. As we say our goodbyes, Hash hints that life may be more balanced than she's willing to admit: 'And I think I'm going to learn to put on makeup.'

Anne Valérie Hash available at Sophie's Choice (01 993131) Sabbagh Bldg, Moutran el Howayek Str, Beirut Souks