

# A STAR IS BORN

At his first official Fashion Week unveiling this past February in New York, André Leon Talley and a slew of the fashion world's trendiest and most-sought after style leaders were present and buzzing. But all eyes were fixed on LaQuan Smith and his Water Goddess collection.

BY AMY ANDRIEUX

espionage, having led a life far from fashion's elite—raised in a working class family in Jamaica, Queens, a cancer survivor at 18 and rejected by FIT twice—21-year-old maverick LaQuan Smith is certainly on the rise.

Mornings at the Society of Illustrators in New York, especially on Mondays, are not usually this hectic. Today the scene is abuzz at the fifth floor gallery most known for hosting workshops on contemporary visual arts, converted into a makeshift atelier just for the LaQuan Smith show, where the young fashion designer will be debuting his first collection.

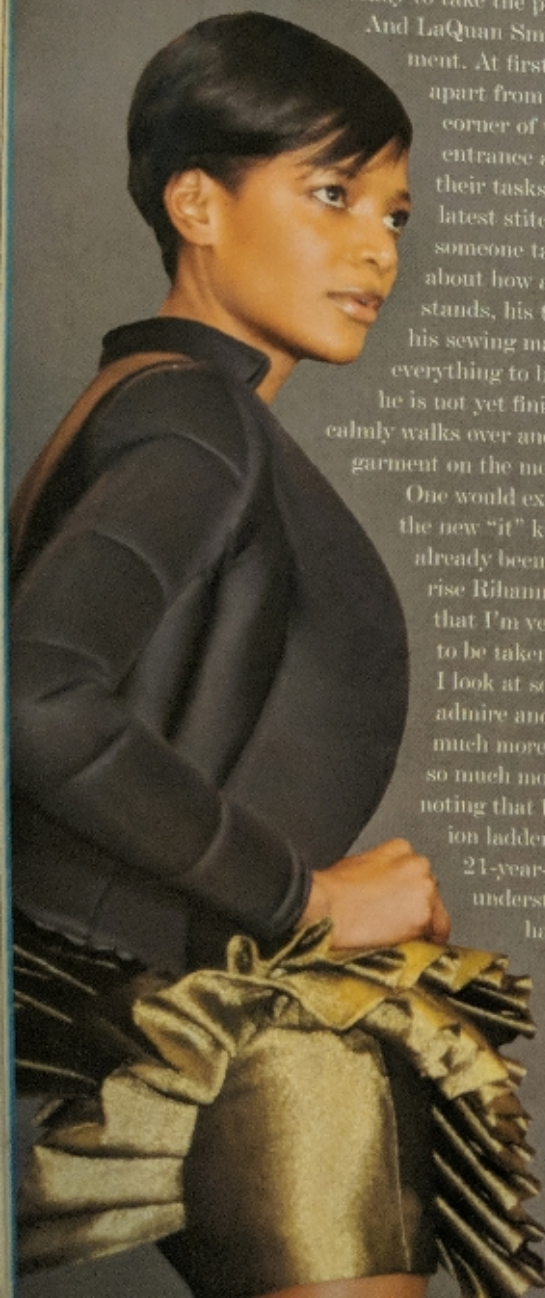
Fashion publicist Kelly Mills, who discovered Smith during his party-crashing days, is running between floors finalizing the timeline, handling the soundcheck and making revisions to the guest list as her cell phone rings incessantly. Submerged below street level, the glam squad of hair stylists and makeup artists, including Ashunta Sherriff (Alicia Keys' personal makeup artist), for Smith's Water Goddess collection are setting up what appears to be a run of musical chairs to the unseasoned eye. Models are rushed into makeovers, last minute fittings and then are off to get photographed for Smith's first lookbook. There is even a nail technician backstage, who is prepping faux tips dipped out in rhinestones and ultraviolet colors for the girls before they queue. Adding to the production's frenzy are the early arrivers—journalists and a few tastemakers hoping to get an insider's glimpse of what's brewing behind the scenes just one hour before show time.


But it's the motley crew of young people, made up of Smith's camp of closest friends and supporters, who are doing their best to make the entire process seamless. Donning skinny jeans, Jordans and modern takes on chic '80s-inspired coifs, it becomes obvious that they are a part of the new class of fashion heroes who are both eagerly nostalgic and ready to take the plunge into the future of couture.

And LaQuan Smith is at the center of this movement. At first it is difficult to tell the designer apart from his producers. He sits in the far corner of the room, with his back to the entrance and everyone clamoring to finish their tasks by deadline, quietly observing his latest stitching. Focused, he only breaks when someone taps him on the shoulder to ask him about how a piece should be draped. When he stands, his tall slender frame barely obstructs his sewing machine from view. He totally wants everything to be perfect and so he tucks the piece he is not yet finished working on under his arm, calmly walks over and answers the inquiry by fixing the garment on the model himself.

One would expect a different demeanor from the new "it" kid on the block, whose wares have already been consumed by fellow stars on-the-rise Rihanna and Lady Gaga. "I understand that I'm very young in fashion, and especially to be taken seriously and respected in fashion. I look at so many different designers that I admire and they're a lot older than I am, so much more experienced than I am. So I have so much more work to do," Smith says humbly, noting that he's aware of the climb up the fashion ladder that lies ahead of him. "But as a 21-year-old designer, I just want people to understand my life, my vision and what I have to say for women."

Water Goddess is his first collection. It took almost two years to complete due to lack of funding and resources, all the while living as an average teen in his grandparents' home in St. Albans, Queens. But the world is finally listening. "I have no job," Smith says. "The little money that I am making is from [sell-





ing] dresses here and there. So the money I got for this collection was [from] little investments—\$20 from my grandpa, maybe \$50 from my mom, or my friends and great supporters. I mean it took a while, it was a struggle and at times I did get discouraged because I was wondering, 'Wow, I'm showing at Fashion Week and I don't even have a budget for this collection.' But you know, somehow things work out."

On view, the collection featured 20 looks reminiscent of what one would expect to find in Bianca Jagger's closet during her Studio 54 days. An eclectic mix of puff sleeves, neoprene and mesh fabrics, fitted dresses, two-piece suits and bodysuits in ocean hues of foam green, electric blue and tan, "It was all about the sensuality of a water goddess," Smith says. "And I know some people are thinking, 'Okay, what is a water goddess?' I just really got inspired by the ocean and sand. I started looking at *The Little Mermaid* and the fact that [the main character] Ariel had so many sisters, you know. So when you saw the collection, you saw the different types of girls. I represented sophistication. I represented sex appeal. I represented elegance, class, and I feel that [those are] the many different features to a woman. That's what women embody. And that's what I wanted to see portrayed in my clothes."

Catching the attention of notable onlookers like André Leon Talley and others responsible for determining what's hot or not in the game, and who officiated Smith's welcome into high fashion with applause, the burgeoning designer says their appreciation was something he wasn't expecting regardless of all the early murmurings. "I wasn't expecting André Leon Talley to come. I just wasn't. I don't know who I expected to come; this is my first show. So the people that came were definitely important, definitely elite in fashion. Everybody, from the magazines to the celebrities, it was just overwhelming." After realizing the magnitude of his transcendence from urban teen to fashion powerhouse, he pauses to collect himself as tears well up in his eyes. "I'm just at a loss for words. Obviously I didn't get to see the show, but I'm hearing so much about everyone being so happy with the collection and responding in a really crazy and amazing way to the collection. So I'm very happy and appreciative that people were able to understand my vision."

