

L.A. FASHION WEEK

In the waistland

At L.A. Fashion Week, the accent is on the middle, with soft touches.

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It must be Los Angeles Fashion Week. Paris Hilton was in the front row with the hot new accessory in her lap — a small child rather than a small dog (those she left to the runway). A Paris Hilton look-alike with the same fake 'n' bake tan and Chiclet smile was air-kissing people who didn't know her name, and budding designer and tireless self-promoter Esther Nash was up to her old seat-stealing tricks. They weren't the only ones. Everywhere, wannabes with pumped-up cleavages and lips flirted with the photographer's eye, desperate to be noticed.

The spring runway season began Sunday at Smashbox Studios in Culver City and will continue through Thursday with 36 shows featuring denim brands Buffalo Jeans and Antik, Bravo's "Project Runway" finalist Kevin John, upscale designers Bradley Bayou, St. John and more. Although the event — now in its sixth season — has not succeeded in drawing big-time editors and retail buyers, there is a sense that it is here to stay due, in large part, to the burgeoning number of events being scheduled around it.

The first Los Angeles Fashion Awards, to be hosted by Melissa Rivers, will be held Saturday, honoring local designers and retailers. And Vogue magazine is amping up its West Coast presence by hosting a tea party at the Chateau Marmont for Derek Lam, Project Alabama, Costello Tagliapietra, Trovata and other finalists in an annual competition that recognizes young talent.

And because Los Angeles loves an excuse to party, there will be plenty of chances. The festivities started over the weekend when Smashbox Studios founders and Max Factor heirs Dean and Davis Factor took over Mr Chow for 100 of their friends. "The problem wasn't getting people to come," Davis Factor said. "It was getting them to leave." Usher arrived uninvited after midnight and joined the fun, which left several revelers nursing champagne hangovers in the front row Sunday.

Later in the week, Levi's and GQ magazine are celebrating themselves with artist-designed editions of the 501 jean. Rampage is inaugurating a new store at the Beverly Center, and Fred Segal Flair is feting a new Barbie-themed clothing collection in Santa Monica. Street wear brands Enyce and Tsubi, which are not even based in L.A., are using Fashion Week as an opportunity to schmooze. And Gwen Stefani will promote her Harajuku Lovers line at an after-party following her concert Friday.

And for those who actually want to do business, the Beverly Hilton is again hosting the Design Suites, makeshift showrooms where more than 50 designers will show their lines to buyers and the media. There is even an alternative fashion week, P. Ka Bu, that will be held downtown over the weekend and which has a reputation for having runway shows that start more than an hour late, instead of the customary half hour.

But it was Kevan Hall who kicked things off in high style Sunday with his strongest runway collection yet. Never mind that the sponsorship tie-in was strange, requiring the audience to don wireless headphones to listen to the ocean sounds accompanying the show. This was a coup for Hall, who was at risk of being pigeonholed as a designer for the more mature set. There was plenty here for all ages, from streamlined suits to sophisticated mermaid dresses, with an emphasis on superb workmanship and just the right touch of embellishment.

Hall said he got the idea for his Lost City of Atlantis theme while walking on the beach in Mazatlan, Mexico, where he collected the shells and beach glass that inspired the fine details. He began with a new, more slender silhouette for day — a calf-skimming oyster linen trumpet skirt with a ribbon of organza at the hem, and a jacket shimmering with abalone shells on the pockets. Diamond-shaped cutouts showed a hint of skin under the arms on a sea-grass silk day dress, and athletic-looking black-and-white color blocking on a straight shift brought to mind a bathing suit.

But it is Hall's evening gowns that have made his Beverly Boulevard atelier a regular stop for celebrities such as Felicity Huffman and Rita Wilson. Hall reined in his sometimes overly complicated drapes and tucks, focusing instead on classic shapes. A black lace ballerina dress with a plunging neckline was picture perfect, as was an ethereal-looking coral anemone print chiffon dress.

"I asked myself, 'If a modern woman had to live underwater, what would she wear?' " Hall said. Why not a mermaid gown wrapped in ribbons of blue-green taffeta or a strapless cocktail dress with 50 yards of oyster tulle beaded with fire coral branches? Hall's beaded tile tunic would look as chic with diamonds as it would with denim.

Louis Verdad was the other marquee name who showed on Sunday, familiar to some for his work with Madonna, thanks to stylist Arianne Phillips, who jump-started the designer's career. Verdad's inspiration was a Sunday in the park. He replaced front-row seats with park benches and lined the runway with leaf and flower cutouts and live grass, which a canine model tried to do his business on. But more than some Wisteria Lane-induced dream, Verdad's vision was fueled by his dedication to the nonprofit Parks for People L.A., a trust for public land that is attempting to create 25 parks over five years in the city's most underserved areas.

It wouldn't be Verdad without a bit of camp, so the show opened with a busty uniformed maid pushing a dog in a baby stroller hot on the heels of an elegant diva in an hourglass-shaped taupe silk shantung jacket with puffed up pockets and peplum accenting spring's most important asset — the waist — worn over a narrow pencil skirt. The collection had a retro 1940s and '50s feel, as it always does, but it was not overly costumey. Verdad softened the shoulders and hard edges and toned down the details.

The strongest pieces were "kitty blouses" in florals or polka dots, with cap sleeves, bust darts and black piping like a cat's whiskers. Bermuda shorts looked fresh in black cotton with three button pockets, or beige glen plaid with a petal shape. Two-tone oxford shoes and straw fedoras were a nice touch.

For evening, Verdad succeeded by not taking himself too seriously. A lighthearted cocktail dress in quartz pink was shirred around the waist for a sexy fit, with a button-bow belt and notched cap sleeves, and a silver-and-gold Lurex bib blouse was worn with a diagonally ruffled metallic flower print skirt. And his white silk chiffon bias cut dress with long sleeves was very old (and new) Hollywood indeed.

And lest we forget that Fashion Week is held at Smashbox, the photography studio owned by the brothers Factor and the headquarters for their Smashbox Cosmetics brand, there was a show celebrating makeup. Sephora joined Smashbox in featuring jungle-inspired looks for the face, alongside some very impressive body painting, all to benefit the Rainforest Foundation.

But even models swathed only in pink glitter were no match for the star of this show, a dancer with a feather Mohawk, marabou eyelashes and a Mardi Gras bead loincloth bumping and grinding down the runway. And to think the fun is only just beginning.

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