

Split Personality

Tom Ford is leaving his two mistresses, Gucci and YSL Rive Gauche. But is he leaving fashion altogether? Phoebe Eaton looks for clues in an interview she had with the designer less than two weeks before he quit

Photographed by Solve Sundsho

Gucci

Tom Ford (center) knows the right kind of glam: One part shock and two parts rock. From left: On Hana Soukupova: Bolero, \$1595, dress, \$4950, bag and shoes. On Mariacarla Boscono: Dress, \$2900, and bag, \$4950. On Elise Crombez: Dress, \$7850, bag, \$4950, and shoes. On Tiiu Kuik: Bolero, \$1595, and dress, \$3600. On Daria Werbowy: Bolero, \$1595, dress, \$16,000, and bag, \$4950. **Tom Ford for Gucci.** 800-234-8224. See Where to Buy for details. Fashion editor: Brana Wolf

It was 8 P.M. when the switch was thrown on the lights that would paint the twin torsos at the gate of the Rodin Museum in Paris an exuberant, irreverent magenta. A champagne-carbonated party, ritual foreplay at every Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche fashion show, was getting underway, even if the host was nowhere to be seen. But he was all anyone talked about: What would become of Tom Ford, the impossibly young, impeccably groomed, conspicuously talented, shamelessly flirty, sexually outrageous, verbally courageous, always tan, always deliberately stubbled, always unbuttoned-down-to-there guy who had upended two major fashion houses (first Gucci, then Yves Saint Laurent) and then presumed—yes, *presumed*—to design for both labels at once? Tom Ford, who had also helped lasso Stella McCartney, Balenciaga, Alexander McQueen, Sergio Rossi, Bottega Veneta and Boucheron for the \$8-billion-plus Gucci Group, where he, the self-styled creative director, hoped to make them cash cows.

But on the evening of the show on October 12, the real drama was going on behind the scenes: Ford and the genial Gucci Group president and CEO, Domenico De Sole, were bickering over control of the company with Pinault-Printemps-Redoute (PPR), their deep-pocketed French backer. The fate of the two men who had hauled Gucci back from the brink now hung in the balance, as both camps spanked each other in the press.

"If you feel that you can't go on," went the pumped-up Gloria Gaynor anthem kicking off the spring pageant of low-slung genie pants, multibuckle trench coats, Charleston-ready evening dresses and wolf-whistle spectator heels. But with a faint echo of Samuel Beckett, the words also signaled an existential fatigue. There was talk of De Sole, 59, retiring, and Ford, 42, ascending to the position of CEO. There was talk of Ford replacing himself as chief designer at Gucci, which he insisted he had no intention of doing, at least for the time being. Or there was the chance that Ford might find himself back in Santa Fe, where he grew up, raising fox terriers and horses, or so he joked when I caught up with him after the show, less than two weeks before a November 4 press release would be faxed everywhere with news that he and De Sole had reluctantly decided to pack it in. (Ford will leave the company in April after presenting his fall collections for both brands.) At the time of our interview, Ford said he was "cautiously optimistic" that he would be staying right where he was.

It's well-known that Ford hit a rough patch when he rode into Paris after Gucci Group acquired Yves Saint Laurent in 1999. The French are a congenitally tough crowd; when the designer grabbed the reins at YSL Rive Gauche a few months later, every location he'd browsed for his first show suspiciously withdrew from contention. He soon found himself designing his own black box of a tent, referred to by some—with a Gallic shrug—as "the mausoleum."

"The French were a little bit rough on me in the beginning," Ford conceded. "But I think they've warmed up." And hadn't Bernadette Chirac, the wife of the president, fluttered by on the arm of PPR's François Pinault to say hello at the show?

To be faithful or not to YSL's abdicated creator has always been the question—for the house's hardy perennial fan base but also for Ford himself. "Tom added sex, it's as simple as that," Betty Catroux said, as she took her seat. There was a time when the platinum-blonde muse-a-go-go had been all about Yves, but now it was Tom's zebra-pelted runway that danced across her mirrored shades.

It was Yves Saint Laurent who'd sent the first bare-breasted model down a runway in 1968, but this time around at the Rodin, there

was an unexpected show of skin when some straps broke and one girl's frock flounced out of position. "Poor thing," said Ford, still distressed by the memory days later. "It was, like, suddenly some breasts were walking down the runway. And that wasn't the point!"

The year before, of course, it *was* the point. Saint Laurent had shown several surrealist collections in his day, and "what he

did deserves to be continued," said Ford. He too would twirl Salvador Dalí's mustache, by painting some models' nipples an amusing shade of purple. "Probably not one of my best ideas," Ford admitted with a giggle. "But we are an animal that puts color on our eyelids. Is it any more strange to put it on our nipples?"

Tom Ford had always been more fluent in the Swahili of "volume lag," "points of distribution" and the "discretionary spend" than his predecessor and many of his own peers. "YSL was the personal company of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé," he pointed out. "If they needed a new house or boat, they signed a new licensing deal in another country and never saw the product." Licenses run amok were ruining the brand, so Ford and De Sole snatched them back, as they had at Gucci, attempting to work the same magic.

But the price of delivering to his shareholders was unyielding stress, and Ford was only getting three hours of sleep a night. In his dreams, he was always running his fingers through the hair he had as a kid—all "feathered and layered and Farrah." Hair and its tendrils of Samson symbolism has wound its way through Ford's life. It played a starring role the first time he made a major career change, at 19, when he was an actor and his stylist on a Prell commercial famously informed him his hairline was on the retreat. Accepting that he would lose this battle, Ford ditched any thought of being the next Richard Gere then and there.

But not show business.

"You can get through almost anything if you can act—even tough things," said Ford. "The day of a show, you have to be nice and polite and on, and you've done this collection where you are putting something out there—like purple nipples—just for everyone to say, 'So *stupid!*' Sure, sometimes they think it's great. But just putting yourself out there is exhausting. After a show, I have something like postpartum depression, even before I read a review."

The reviews mattered a lot to this designer who lived by the fax and died by the fax. "After a show, the reviews follow me around wherever I am. Domenico De Sole trusts me to produce collections that sell and get decent reviews. And yeah, I read them, and sometimes I get upset. But I get over it in two or three days." ➤

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Ford's slinky negligee-like Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche silk-crepe number will put a spell on you. Dress, \$8895, cuffs, and pumps, **Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche**. 800-832-3485. See Where to Buy for details

There were those in the audience who sniffed at the separated-at-birth symmetry between what he was doing for Gucci and what he was doing at Saint Laurent. “Sometimes people say that, but people are always saying things like that,” an exasperated De Sole observed after the lights came up at the Rodin Museum. “You know what people are like.” The suits at PPR were reading the papers too. Shouldering all those labels was perhaps too much for their megalomaniacal creative director, so PPR wanted YSL to be handed off to someone else. But Ford would have none of it.

He described his job as dressing two characters in a film. “They may both be beautiful and they may both be roughly the same age and they may both have money and they may both be sexually available. But the Gucci woman is sweeter, more naïve. She may be like, ‘You’re a great guy, let’s fuck.’ The Saint Laurent woman is more twisted, more perverse. She is going to tie you up and slap you around before she finally lets you have sex with her. And a lot of that doesn’t come so much from Yves, it comes from all those provocative Helmut Newton pictures of YSL clothes from the ’70s.”

The YSL woman this season had big hair on the runway. *Exuberant* hair. Hair more fabulous than Farrah’s. “It is not meek hair,” asserted Ford, who wished the YSL customer had daywear as exuberant as the evening clothes hanging in her closet. But then, it was her musky after-dark decadence that lured him to the house in the first place. Ford was addressing this, just as he had rectified her shoe and bag and jewelry situation. There had been enamel cuffs this season at YSL, for example. But next door at Gucci, there were cuffs spritzed with enamel, too.

“I think about this all the time,” said Ford. “YSL and Gucci are completely different. Often I’ll do a stiletto, Prada will do a stiletto, Versace will do a stiletto, Marc Jacobs will do a stiletto and [he shouts], *It’s the stiletto season!* But everyone’s stiletto is different.”

He remembered an acting teacher who once told him to decide which shoes his character would have worn; put them on and he’d become that character. Ford prefers high, high heels: “If I could get myself into higher heels as a man, I would probably wear them, because I’m not that tall.” He pointed to his cowboy-style boots that jack him up to a precise six-foot-one.

Shoes have always been wildly important to the bottom line, and Ford started producing more of them than ever. “The next great bag may be a shoe,” he said, noting that people can get fed up with bags. Not that Ford hadn’t been lucky with them—his string of hits at Gucci include the Hawaiian-print Jackie O. and the bamboo-handle logo. Over at YSL, the horn-handle Mombasa still has the fashion flock in a frenzy. And lately, Ford was rolling in clover over his giant horse-bit chain clutch, introduced last year at Gucci—“a big, big, big hit” (Ford tends to file his adjectives in triplicate)—and tweaked this season with jewel-encrusted serpents. He was still unsure about the three complementary dresses, each slithering with its own silvery snake. “Maybe the idea

was corny,” he confessed. Luckily, the magazine editors weren’t scared off—though a few pulled the word *tacky* off the shelf.

“Tacky is such a dumb word,” said Ford. “But sometimes tacky sells really well.” In his wildly glam collection for Gucci, the snakes recalled Versace at its most viable, as did the neon marabou jackets that appeared elsewhere on his runway, along with the metallic-fringe purses and dresses that looked like Ford ran them through Enron’s paper shredder. When I asked about rumors the Milanese house had recently approached him about a job, Ford responded with a smirk and a “No comment.” And Donatella Versace wasn’t talking. (“It behooved [Tom and Domenico] to keep the idea out there that there was an easy plan for them to go somewhere else,” said a source close to the situation. “Gucci and Versace had planned to merge in 1995, and Domenico has known the Versace family for about 35 years. But these were nothing but rumors.”)

The snake-head pocketbooks are what a sharp-toothed critic might deem commercial. Ford remembered when he started out and was golden, “Calvin Klein said, ‘Enjoy it. When you’re on your way up, nothing you can do is wrong.’ And then you get to a level where some people start to hate everything you do because you’re ‘too commercial.’”

“I am a commercial designer,” Ford said flatly. “What I do is create a perishable commodity that is going to be sold and that people are going to wear.”

This is a business built on the perishable commodity. Ford had asked Beyoncé Knowles to record a special version of “Crazy in Love” for Gucci’s spring show. “No one can sit still when that song is on. I was going to cover the runway with one million candy hearts that said GUCCI.” Then Marc Jacobs played “Crazy in Love” at his show. Heartbroken, Tom dumped Beyoncé. “The clues for what’s happening next year are there for the good sleuth,” he said. “Thing is, we’re all looking for them.”

And Ford was good at finding the trail. The post-9/11 recession deflated sales in the past two years, in part because his customers tend to buy more when traveling. “Luckily, the last season or two have been good, so we’re on a roll again,” Ford said—before everything unraveled, that is. Even if he had preferred to replace himself as Gucci’s designer, it was none of PPR’s business. “Whether I replace myself here or there should be of no concern as long as we deliver a certain performance.” Ford went on: “When we became a multibrand company, we knew how long it would take to build Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen. Both are absolutely exceeding their business plans. And we told the market YSL would be profitable in 2005. This is at the crux of our agreement or disagreement: If we continue to have this autonomy—as long as we deliver results—we’ll be there. If not, then we won’t be.”

In a *Wall Street Journal* article, Bernard Arnault, chairman of rival luxury group LVMH, claimed he had given Dior designer John Galliano creative pointers. Was PPR looking for that role at Gucci Group? “They won’t get it. And I don’t approve of it,” Ford said. ▶

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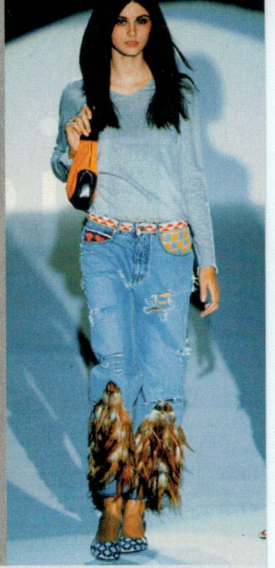
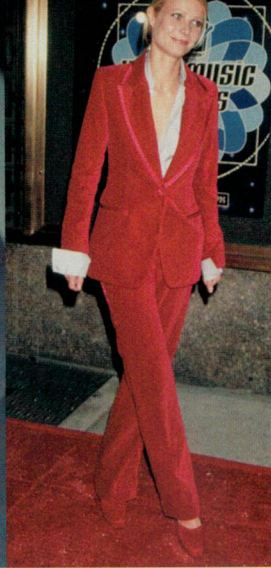


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Puttin' on the Gucci glitz, Ford seduces with a dress decked with crystals and topped with antique nude marabou feathers. Bolero, \$1595, dress, \$16,000 bag, \$4950, and shoes, **Tom Ford for Gucci**. 800-234-8224. See Where to Buy for details. Hair: Orlando Pita; makeup: Pat McGrath; manicure: Elsa Deslande; production: Ben Faraday for Octopix.

BEAUTY BAZAAR

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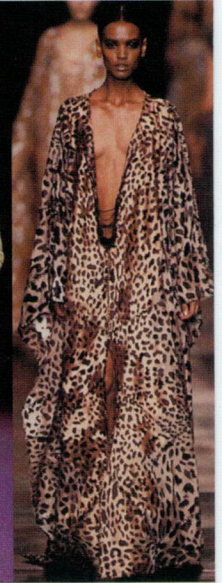
August '96
Niki Taylor wears the **Gucci**
pants on *Bazaar*'s cover

Fall '96
Gucci goes
Halston

Disco verve: Gwyneth
Paltrow in a **Gucci** suit

Spring '98
Gucci's sex appeal:
A peek of a jeweled thong

Spring '99
Denim redefined
at **Gucci**



Fall '00
A golden **Gucci**
collection

Spring '01
Body-conscious
at **Gucci**

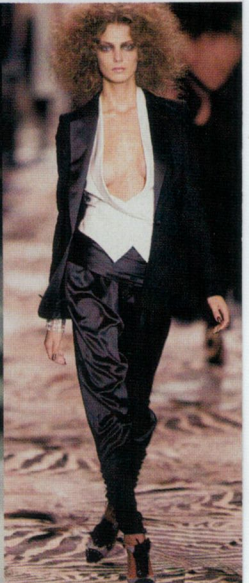
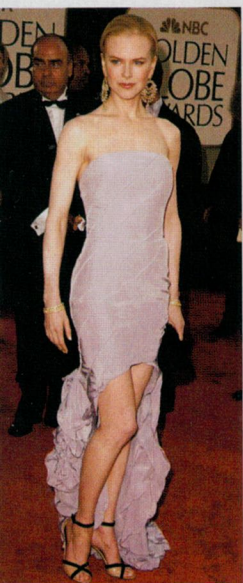
YSL Rive Gauche
Ford's first outing

Fall '01
Gucci
Go-go glamour

YSL Rive Gauche
Peasant perfect

Spring '02
Gucci
Sweet meets sporty

YSL Rive Gauche
A safari standout



Fall '03
Gucci
Corset drama

YSL's velvet gold-
mine on Demi Moore

November '03
Meg Ryan in **YSL Rive Gauche**'s resort
collection on the cover of *Bazaar*

Spring '04
Another **Gucci**
glam-a-thon

YSL Rive Gauche
The latest smoking