

The Cutting Edge/Michael Gross

THE GREAT STATE OF MONTANA

EVER-CONTRADICTIONARY CLAUDE

THE CHANT CAME FROM THE BACK OF THE BIG tent in the Louvre's courtyard. "*Montana, on s'en va,*" the photographers bellowed. "*Montana, on s'en va.*"

Montana, we are leaving.

Roving backstage last March, when the Paris collections for fall were shown, Claude Montana was unmoved. He was an hour and a quarter late starting his autumn 1989 fashion show, and the models were cross-eyed from wee-hours fittings the night before. But they would have to wait a few minutes more, because things were not yet perfect. And of course, Montana knew the photographers' threat was empty. They'd already stood squeezed like sardines for two hours, guarding their precious positions at the end of the long runway, because photos of this show would be coin of the realm. Montana is the moment's brightest light in French fashion. No wonder he wanted things right.

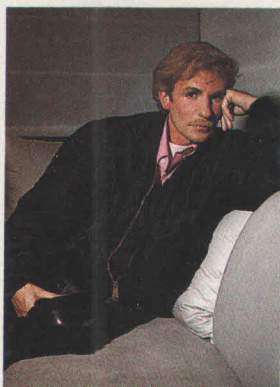
Five minutes later, when the lights finally went off, it was as if the energy in the tent had snapped on simultaneously.

Slowly the models emerged in Montana's provocative clothes: cuddly cashmere sets, bathrobe coats and furs with startling collars, almost sculptural boleros, sloping A-line jackets, and pants so perfectly slim that all others—in a season of slim pants—were momentarily forgotten. But best of all was Montana's focused and warmly austere palette of blues, browns, and grays. It was a mesmerizing performance.

Unlike so many other designer shows in recent seasons, Montana's have not been hit-or-miss affairs. In each of his past four lines, a single idea has been thoughtfully articulated in a stunning succession of themes and variations. Compared with Montana, everyone else is heading in six directions at once.

Montana's precision perfectly reflects the times. For fall, he uprooted his swaggering amazon of the late seventies and turned her on her

head. Despite this radical change, sales of his women's and men's lines are stronger than ever. And he recently introduced a signature fragrance to America with a personal appearance at Bloomingdale's.



Claude Montana.

There, Stan Stephens, governor of Montana, made the designer an honorary citizen of his state and gave him a black cowboy hat.

"You know exactly what I like," Montana said, tucking the hat under his arm (he's very particular about how he appears in pictures). Though Montana is no typical cowboy, the governor said, he is "a very interesting man."

A contradictory man, too. This designer of some of fashion's most assertive clothes—this marketer who sets nude men wrestling in European fragrance ads—speaks so softly he can sometimes barely be heard. He is also a shrinking violet, hiding in a bathroom after his show one year or, after another, escaping in his chauffeured BMW to the Left Bank apartment where he sometimes takes to bed.

But he is no Camille. Although sensitivity—and a layer of makeup—often lurks beneath the cloud of Marlboro smoke that wreathes his face, Montana *always* wears a street tough's uniform of black leather pants over lizard cowboy boots, and a bomber jacket over a jean jacket or hooded sweatshirt.

Montana's family, immigrants from Barcelona, ran a hotel for workers at a

gold mine in Tarascon, France. During World War II, Montana's father joined the French army; he met his wife while fighting on the border. She was the daughter of wealthy Germans fleeing the Nazis. Claude, their second son, was born in Paris in 1949. "I was a liberation child," he says. "I'm not true French, but I am a true Parisian."

As a boy, he was an unhappy Parisian in his father's strict house, frequently compared with an older brother he derides as "the perfect child." Montana says he and his sister Jacqueline, now his partner, "were like a team. . . against . . . I hate to use the word 'against'—but it was like that."

In the late sixties, he began to drift away from his family. He "was not on the barricades" during the May 1968 French student-and-worker revolt, he says. Instead, he was at the Cannes Film Festival "with a wealthy friend" when it was disrupted by a bomb. They escaped to Geneva for two months "until things quieted down in France."

When he was twenty, he told his parents that he wanted to improve his English, and got their permission to go to London with a friend. He and his friend started out sleeping in the studio of fashion photographer Hans Feurer. "We carried on, and after a month, there was nothing left," Montana says. Without working papers, they couldn't get jobs, so they became jewelry designers, using an old Mexican recipe for papier-mâché, adding glue to attach fake stones. When Montana and his friend were discovered by the editors of British Vogue, the



From Montana's fall collection: feline-fur bolero, pantsuit and coat, bathrobe coat.

jewelry was featured on the magazine's cover.

Montana became part of Swinging London: "I was kind of a personage at night. People knew me." That was, in part, because he was a dandy dresser. The day *Vogue* discovered him, he says by example, "I was wearing a brown velvet suit with bell-bottom pants, a pale-blue satin shirt, and enormous black and gold cuff links made with fake amethysts. Typically seventies."

Returning to Paris one step ahead of British immigration officials, Montana supported himself making jewelry, doing free-lance illustration, and even working as an extra at the Paris Opéra. At rehearsals, he watched Marc Chagall paint the Opéra's famous ceiling, and he met and befriended several dancers ("I have a great respect for people who do incredible things with their bodies," he says). He also became friendly with a ballet company's costume designer, who set up a job

interview for him with the designer for Mac Douglas, a fashion firm that specialized in leather. "I did a little book with sketches," Montana recalls. "I mean, I had no idea. I got the job. He probably liked me more than he liked the sketches."

A year later, the designer quit and recommended Montana as his replacement. In 1973, Mon-

tana introduced his own line. He attracted attention with a top-heavy, triangular look. It combined "punk before its time" with "a New York influence" from the leather bars of Christopher Street and the docks. Montana calls it "this tough leather look. I can't remember *how* I decided to do it. People *let* me do it."

At Montana's first fashion show, his leather look drew praise from the French. "But the Americans called me a Nazi," he says, "which I'm not at all." Regardless, the controversy excited the fashion world, he says, "so the season after, of course, was even more packed. There was fighting at the door." In that 1977 show, models in chain-drenched black leather stalked the runway as dogs howled and whips snapped on the soundtrack.

As time went on, Montana's shows became costume extravaganzas. "When I see the videos, I think what nerve I had," he says. "Army, navy, Spanish-look, Renaissance, black Sicilian widows, American

football players, the fall of the Roman Empire." The late critic Hebe Dorsey once called one of his shows "Montana's Tour of the World in 45 Minutes." "It was true," he admits. Finally, he realized that his "travels" were taking him nowhere. "It might have been fun on the runway, but it was crazy," he says.

Several years back, when he was ghost-designing the Complice collection for Genny, which then manufactured his line (Gruppo GFT does today), Montana eliminated shoulder pads—and aggressive themes—but hid his decision beneath an accessory overload. "That was a lesson," he says. "I pay a lot of attention to the cut, so I want people to see the clothes. I know what is a mistake."

His willingness to risk making mistakes is Montana's greatest strength. So although the Complice line didn't do well, he stuck to his guns, evolving from a designer leather boy into a fashion poet. Standing his signature triangular look on its head

turned out to be a rewarding change—critically. But women still wanted some shoulder aid, and Montana has heard their pleas. His resort collection, which will arrive in stores this winter, reinforces the shoulder with small pads.

"I try to do my own work with my own vision," Montana says, pouring himself a glass of champagne from a

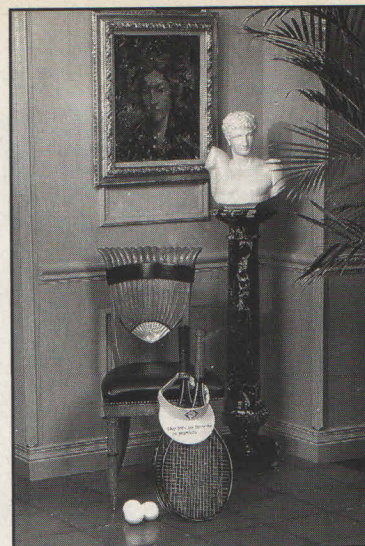
magnum. "I don't see myself among the world of designers. I don't wake up in the morning thinking, 'I'm a designer.'"

A designer's life intrudes nonetheless. A public-relations woman enters, clucking about Montana's hectic schedule. He follows her down the hall in the Royalton Hotel, in which Revlon—which distributes his fragrance—has reserved two penthouses for his visit. It is 6 P.M. He still has a photo shoot to do, so he sits for a makeup refresher as the P.R. woman reads his schedule. He's expected at cocktails with Revlon's tycoon-owner, Ronald Perelman, and his wife, Claudia, at 6:30. Then there's a dinner and a disco party in his honor.

The ever-contradictory Claude Montana will not attend the last event. "I was a club kid," he says. "I still am." Then his voice drops to a whisper. "I should maybe be less a club kid. I need to be more calm." It's as if he's listening to the clothes as he designs them.



More from Montana's fall line.



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