

DRESS FOR

Photographs by
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Shoulder pads, pencil skirts and button-downs:
meets three designers, from the iconic to the

SUCCESS



THIS PAGE

Grey wool blazer, £425, grey wool top, £195, and grey wool trousers, £350, all **RAEY at MATCHES FASHION**. White leather boots, £418, **BY FAR**.

Sterling-silver earrings (worn throughout), £355, **FAY ANDRADA**. **OPPOSITE**

Jersey jacket, £620, and jersey skirt, £370, both **EMPORIO ARMANI**. Leather boots, £545, **ROBERT CLERGERIE at NET-A-PORTER**

the 'power dressing' of old is long gone. ELLE emerging, redefining women's workwear today

ARMANI

by KENYA HUNT

lines in business couldn't look more different from the prototypical careerist in the 1989 film *Working Girl*. Uber's new chief brand officer Bozoma Saint John, a lover of bright, flamboyant dresses, and *Into The Gloss* founder Emily Weiss, a sweater-and-jeans loyalist, both come to mind. So it's ironic that workwear has come full circle back to the suit when most office dress codes have moved away from it. After percolating throughout the spring/summer and pre-collections, power dressing in the traditional, tailored and heritage-printed sense hit a tipping point for autumn, blanketing the runways from Stella McCartney and Céline to Off-White and Gabriela Hearst just as it was on the verge of extinction in real life.

For Giorgio Armani, the man famous for being an early architect of the idea with both his eponymous and Emporio Armani lines, the new wave of workwear is a case of going back to the future. He started cutting suits for women in 1975, a year after showing his first men's collection. 'That was after my sister and some women friends wanted to wear what I had designed for men. They wanted simple, soft jackets, in which they would be able to move freely and naturally,' he explains from Milan. His feminine, elegant

take on suiting was revolutionary in a decade in which women were climbing the career ladder in record numbers, most of them dressed like men, in boxy shapes and shoulder pads. 'I was able to experience first-hand how much fashion influences customs and perceptions. It's the primary means of outwardly representing oneself and a powerful tool, the value of which should never be underestimated, in any context,' he says. His trademarks: jackets and trousers in easy, elongated silhouettes and a chic, neutral colour palette that implies wealth became a currency in the workplace. To own an Armani suit was to have arrived.

'I realised that my work responded to an existing need for professional attire that would give women a sense of dignity and an attitude that would let them satisfy the demands of professional life without having to give up on being women. I tried to render that into a strong image. And from there the phenomenon of the power suit was born.'

The idea exploded in the Eighties, with Armani, Anne Klein, Donna Karan and Ralph Lauren all taking the rigidity out of the suit and replacing it with a sense of femininity and sensuality. 'It was precisely the construction and stiffness of certain suiting that relegated women to the role of "dolls". With my styles, I wanted to offer suiting that would communicate authority, while remaining comfortable and fluid,' he says.

Four decades later, Armani has maintained his commitment to the task, throughout the many phases and faces of tailored workwear – the Jil Sander minimalism of the Nineties, the clean tailoring of Phoebe Philo-era Céline, and the revamped suiting from a range of designers in stores now. Though his definition of power dressing has changed with the landscape, as have the women who wear his clothes.

The concept has changed radically since the Seventies when the author John T. Molloy wrote *The Woman's Dress for Success Book*, instructing the female work force to consider the male gaze because 'it is a stark reality that men dominate the power structure', before advising 'to never wear a shirt and tie' or 'pinstriped or chalk-striped suit'. No doubt Molloy would have cringed at the reimaginings of those very things on the women's runways. Perhaps the designers had all seen the results of the 2016 study published in the *Social Psychological and Personality Science Journal* linking clothing to strategic thinking, negotiation skills and feelings of power, revealing that people were more likely to perform like a boss when wearing more polished workwear – pinstripes and all. For Armani, the beauty of work wear lies in its progression. 'The evolution of my style has followed a path parallel to that of women's emancipation. Today, women make their own choices and decisions independently, and not to please any man or society.'

THE ROW

by BIBBY SOWRAY

It's fitting that The Row has become a byword for workwear. By the age of 18, twin sisters Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen had thriving acting careers, having starred in the American comedy *Full House* since they were nine months old. They launched their first clothing line at the age of 12,

and spent their teens wearing cut-to-size Chanel and Marc Jacobs for their sitcom *So Little Time*. While most of us were planning gap years, they were taking control of Dualstar, the multi-million-dollar company they founded when they were just six, to handle multiple merchandise lines and direct-to-video films loved by tweens the world over. As such, they spent their formative years surrounded by women in the upper echelons of business, while becoming ground-breaking businesswomen themselves. They may lack formal design training, but they have enough hands-on experience to put many of their qualified contemporaries to shame. Proof? They were the second-most-Google'd fashion designers of 2016. ▶



THIS PAGE
White tricotone jacket,
£660, and black velvet
trousers, £430, both
EMPORIO ARMANI.
Sterling-silver earrings,
£355, FAY ANDRADA
OPPOSITE
Cotton shirt, £900,
double-faced wool
skirt, £3,350, and
leather boots, £1,020,
all THE ROW at
MATCHES FASHION.
Earrings, as before

popular in the Eighties, but
before then
WOMEN were working hard long

'POWER DRESSING' became

- Mary-Kate Olsen



Named after London's Savile Row, The Row began life as a quest to design the perfect T-shirt. That snowballed into a seven-piece collection that included stretch-leather leggings and a cashmere-wool tank dress; plush versions of basic pieces that could be added to any outfit for a sense of low-key luxe. Now, it's the go-to for refined elegance. Tailoring is key, and there are no look-at-me details or eye-catching embellishments; these are quiet clothes that speak volumes.

It's a new type of power dressing, a type that aims to nourish the wearer's requirements, as opposed to meeting the perceived requirements of the outside world. 'We want our clients to feel comfortable and confident in any circumstance, so we always question what that is and keep that in mind,' says Ashley from The Row's New York studio. 'The autumn collection wasn't about work wear, or feminism, or power dressing. The idea of strong and fine tailoring has always been a part of The Row's DNA.'

But don't get them wrong, they're not eschewing the wave of activism that swept the AW17 catwalks. Rather, they support it in their consistency. 'Everyone copes with today's world differently,' says Mary-Kate. 'Power dressing may have been popularised in the Eighties, but women were working long and hard before then – and dressed the part.'

RAEY

by SARA McALPINE

How do you think about workwear when our work keeps changing? Not only has public-sector employment in the UK dropped by 15.5% since 2008, with tech fast replacing staff, but we're increasingly ditching the nine-to-five-desk job. A quarter of 18 to

34-year-olds are now working as 'slashies' with multiple jobs, or portfolio careers, according to a study by Barclaycard*.

We're not dressing for one job, we're dressing for a reported average of four, a fact the team behind Raey, the ready-to-wear line launched by multibrand retailer Matches Fashion, is aware of. 'It's about practicality,' insists Rachael Proud, the Topshop and Christopher Kane alum now overseeing design and buying for Matches' in-house label. 'When I'm designing, I'm thinking, "Would I be able to wear it? Would it fit on me as someone wearing multiple hats throughout the day, as I know a lot of women do now?"' That's one of Raey's founding principles, creating luxury basics that fit seamlessly into the modern woman's wardrobe. But what does 'modern' mean in the context of a working woman's lifestyle?

'Simple: can you run for the bus in it?' says Rachael, quick-fire and to-the-point. It's obvious where the no-fuss sensibility at the base of Raey comes from (and worth noting that the line takes its name from its head designer). As for the notion that practicality and polish are mutually exclusive, she says 'bin it'.

'Raey is predominantly for women who work, but I want you to do whatever you like in it. Whether you're going to work, to your friend's house or to your gran's. It's designed for you to feel comfortable moving around in.'

And pockets are requisite: 'Everything has to have pockets, to make each piece functional,' she says. 'We also think, "How does this piece move when you bend your knees? How does it move as you're walking? Will this wear well? Is it easily washable? Is it long-lasting?"'

Rachael of all people would know. Her typical work day includes commuting through London at peak time from a morning gym class, overseeing the design and buying of Raey menswear and womenswear, responding to calls and emails, and dealing with strategy, as well as all the admin that comes with managing a large team. 'I couldn't do all that in what you might call "Apprentice dress",' she says referring to the fitted skirt suits and heels usually worn by contestants on the show.

Raey is all about nailing the building blocks of everyday dress, with jewel-toned silk-satin slips and camisoles, fine-gauge

cashmere in versatile colours, and a skirt length suited to all shapes and sizes (whether that be vertiginous, flat, curvy, or vertically challenged).

This is welcome news for young women in the early stages of their careers, as well as those on the upper rungs of the ladder, as Rachael's attitude to inclusivity extends to price-point. 'I think in all respects, practice ranks above preaching, so if we're committed to giving women the choice of beautiful basics that can be dressed up and down, we want to give them the choice of buying those staples in multiple colourways with accessible prices.' Pieces from the current collection range from £85 to £2,100, and include featherlight coats in a wool engineered by luxury clothiers in Japan, as well as fluid silks sourced from mills in Italy.

'There's a green coat from the September drop that I'm definitely eyeing,' Rachael says before adding that 'basic' does not have to mean a palette of black, navy and grey. In fact that's where Raey gets it right, navigating the fine line between fashion and style, slipping with ease from seasonless basics in core colours to bolder, trend-led looks.

So will we see Rachael legging it behind a bus in September's puffa-coats and side-split blouses? 'You'd better believe that if it's on the website, I can run in it – and let it be known, for the record, that I *can* run in heels,' she says. 'I just choose not to.' That's a sentiment worth drinking to – outside of office hours, obviously.



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