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FASHION & STYLE

## When the Fashion Cycle Meets the Cycle of Life

By VANESSA FRIEDMAN FEB. 7, 2018



Narciso Rodriguez at his office in Gramercy Park. Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

A week before his 20th-anniversary salon-style show, held on the Wednesday morning before New York Fashion Week officially opened, [Narciso Rodriguez](#) was in his Gramercy Park office showing off a gray flannel coat with three wooden buttons and a hood, lined in felted black wool.

It was, like most of his clothes, understated and chic and perfectly tailored. It was also about a foot long. It was a one-off, made for Ivy Carolyn, one of his 8-month-old twins. “I have come to believe smaller is better,” Mr. Rodriguez, 57, said. He wasn’t really talking about clothes. He was talking about work/life balance. It’s an unusual topic in fashion, where the choices between the professional and the personal have rarely been part of the

industry conversation the way they have in other sectors, like finance and law. For an industry that prides itself on being on the vanguard of social change, it's another way in which fashion lags behind.



Narciso Rodriguez and his baby Ivy Carolyn.

But after two decades in the business — after a stint in the spotlight at Loewe as part of the first generation of designers to take over old houses and jazz them up; after seeing fashion move from being about silhouette and seam to being about entertainment; after rejecting the gilded cage of creative directorship and returning to New York and an independent business; after weathering Sept. 11 and the recession of 2008 — Mr. Rodriguez had decided to put the matter on the pattern-making table.

“I don’t need a yacht,” he said. “I never aspired to that. I realized early on that being famous was not something I wanted to do. I aspired to have the freedom to do what I want.”

That means making what he wants, an idea clearly on display in Mr. Rodriguez’s retrospective capsule collection with Barneys New York, which debuted last week. One of the striking things about the effective tour through nine of his most well-known dresses, including those worn by Rachel Weisz and Sarah Jessica Parker and Jennifer Aniston (though not his most famous client, Michelle Obama), is the consistent commitment to the architecture of the body and a refusal to indulge in frou. Also, showing it as he wants, when he wants (that we’ve heard before) — while still being able to have breakfast, bath time and bedtime with his children.



Huh?

“I have been waiting decades for this conversation,” said Donna Karan, who, when she was working at Anne Klein, famously got a call from work just after she gave birth to her daughter, Gabby, because Ms. Klein was sick. “I said, ‘Do you want to know if I had a boy or a girl?’” Ms. Karan said. “And they said, ‘Yeah, but can you come back?’”

Family has been, up until now, the missing piece in the fashion world’s continuing conversation about the unsustainable pace of the collection system. There is much public talk about consumer product fatigue, the need for instant satisfaction and the impossibility of being genuinely creative every six weeks. Yet, despite the fact many designers have had families (Ralph Lauren, Miuccia Prada, Angela Missoni, to name a few), the human side of what is often characterized as an inhuman cycle has often not been addressed.

“But it’s not just about deliveries,” Ms. Karan said. “It’s also about families. It’s all part of the bigger conversation.”

Steven Kolb, the chief executive of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, agreed. “It’s definitely a big conflict in our industry,” he said. “The time commitment is enormous — it directly clashes with back to school, holidays — and that is driving big questions.”

Part of the problem, Mr. Rodriguez said, is this: “Families are not cool.”



Antique Russian children’s chairs in Mr. Rodriguez’s office. Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

Daniella Vitale, the chief executive of Barneys, who has two sons, said: “We are an industry obsessed with youth, image and appropriation. Kids, family and significant others never really fit into that.” They are representative of the routine, the settled, the familiar. They have no part in the myth of the obsessive creative (think Cristóbal Balenciaga, Christian Dior, Coco Chanel, even the Daniel Day-Lewis character in “[Phantom Thread](#)”). And many of those things were, for a long time, off limits to a substantial part of the fashion population: gay men.

At this point, however, social and cultural changes have significantly altered the landscape. And Mr. Rodriguez has become representative of a group of designers who are taking a different approach to the issue. They are not trying to be superpeople as much as real people. “This is a time when everyone is looking at the way they work, and changing it in different ways,” he said.

Christopher Bailey, the chief creative officer of Burberry, has two small daughters — Iris, 3½, and Nell, 2. “We’re talking about all these things more openly — gender, sexuality — and it’s about time the fashion culture changed,” he said.

Indeed, Mr. Bailey said that the desire to spend more time with his family was a factor in his decision to [leave Burberry](#) after 17 years: “Designers have to do so much today — marketing, social media, logistics — it can be quite challenging to put the brakes on and say, ‘Within all that, I’m going to prioritize my family and put as much effort an emphasis on that as on work.’”

Before he resigned, Mr. Bailey had already altered his routine. Instead of getting to the office at 6 or 7 a.m., he arrived two hours later; he was rigorous about going out only once a week and never spending a weekend away. Even so, he decided he wanted a bigger change. Similarly, Tom Ford has talked about how having a son has prompted him to reshape his working life.

In fact, Mr. Kolb said, one of the attractive side effects of the current discussion about New York designers [moving](#) from the traditional ready-to-wear schedule, with shows taking place in September and February, to the pre-collection schedule of January and July, is that it will leave August open for normal life.

“It’s about a business model,” Mr. Kolb said. “But a big part of the motivation is also balance.”

When Mr. Rodriguez’s children were born (Ivy’s brother is Callum Thomas), he took three months off. This may not sound surprising, but when Phoebe Philo had her first child, in 2007, she was believed to be the first designer at the top of a major global brand (Chloé) to take an official maternity leave since fashion became a global industry. (She was followed by Sarah Burton of Alexander McQueen.)

It was a marked departure from the past, when, said Diane von Furstenberg, who raised two children at the same time as her namesake line, “I used to joke the business was their third sibling.”

Then, when Mr. Rodriguez returned to work just in time for his show in September, he

gave up his usual 8 p.m. Tuesday night slot and held small presentations during the workday instead. “I realized what was important to me was having people here to see what we do up close, to focus on the nuance of material and cut, or what can’t be seen on Instagram,” he said.

He has also scaled back his time in the office to three or at most four days a week. He and his husband, Thomas Tolan, live in their country house in Westchester County (they are expanding their New York apartment to make it more child-friendly) and commute to the city. They have a nanny who works four days a week, but she does not live with them. “I have learned to edit,” Mr. Rodriguez said. “To be more precise with my fittings, delegate more to my team, and to be tougher with my own schedule.” He thinks the discipline has made his collections better.

To be fair, he has more ability to rethink his days than many other designers might: He is the sole owner of his business, and, thanks to a highly successful perfume license started 16 years ago, he has had a steady income no matter what is happening in the ready-to-wear market. It gives him a certain leeway in his decision making. To acknowledge, for example, that “things have changed.”

“Not just for me,” he said. “Shopping has changed. People are so much more conscious of having experiences and not being a slave to fashion. I felt the same way.”

In his office, baby gifts now share space with stacks of art books and collections (cars, rocks) and walls full of black-and-white portraits of models and famous friends in his clothes. Two antique Russian children’s thrones, given to him by Candy Pratts Price, a former editor at Vogue, are arrayed in front of a giant faux Warhol print of Elizabeth Taylor by Deborah Kass, one piled high with Baby Gap outfits. They are not accessories; they’re equal clutter.

“Today fashion is so driven by celebrity and marketing,” Mr. Rodriguez said. “That’s fine — it’s how it has evolved. But that’s never been the part that seduced me. For me, it has always been about the craft. Fashion hijacked my life a bit, but I have been here long enough, and made enough dresses, to know it does not replace, or even come close, to what I have at home.” Entering his third decade in fashion, he has opted for a third way.

“That shows other people it’s O.K.,” Mr. Kolb said. “You’re not proving your success by how many hours you spend in the office or how many events you are at. You prove it by what you make.”

When Mr. Rodriguez started his business, Ms. Vitale said, “he figured out that women want simplicity, femininity and maybe a little function without compromising who they are. He influenced so many designers.” Now the question is whether he will do the same with his willingness to make his family part of the fashion equation.

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