The Illusionists: The Science Behind the Fall Looks That Alter Your Shape

by Esther Adare
With a slew of festive parties filling up space in our agendas (and not forgetting the heady Thanksgiving feast in our not-too-distant past), now is the time when it can feel most challenging to look your sartorial best without dipping in and out of emergency juice cleanses, ramping up your gym attendance, or holding back on convivial indulgences entirely. But this fall, designers like 3.1 Phillip Lim, Mary Katrantzou, and Balmain have created futuristic, body-slimming prints and strategically placed embellishments that allude to a more streamlined version of ourselves, all with a simple trick of the eye.

“With a fairly straightforward visual illusion, our perception of shape is altered,” says Susana Martinez-Conde, laboratory director at Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix. “Even if we know elements are affecting our perception, we can rationalize it.” Which is why Mary Katrantzou’s gloriously sculptural dress gives the impression of a minuscule waist in relation to exaggerated shoulders and cartoonish jutting hips. “It’s essential for me that my clothes are flattering on the body,” says Katrantzou. “Pulling in the waist with a strategically placed image of a watch, or widening shoulders by placing a typewriter on the collarbone, became integral to my thinking of how everyday objects can be used to subvert that context and empower a woman.”

Empowerment, by way of neo-noir heroines, was also at the forefront of Phillip Lim’s mind for fall. “Comic books, by their very nature, use shadows and coloring to create illusions, and that’s what I wanted to do with this collection to some extent,” he says. Slick strips in a contrasting hue, painted around the periphery of his sheaths and suits, effectively “bring the slimmed-down figure into the foreground and make the rest of it shrink into the background,” says Martinez-Conde.

This elaborate technique gained popularity with Op Artists back in the sixties. Bridget Riley and Arnold Schmidt played with visual perspective to give the impression of vibrating, flashing lights or an offbeat warped effect to their work. When designers employ that today, either consciously or unconsciously, it works to the advantage of our figures, whatever they may be. Take Balmain’s pearl-encrusted sheath, which deceptively transforms a garçonne-chic androgynous into a vampy fifties siren: “Our visual system is drawn to corners and curves more than straight lines,” says Martinez-Conde of the look. “Here there are 90-degree angles at the shoulders, ribs, waist, and hips, the four points your visual system is going to be drawn to. Join them together with imaginary lines and you end up with an hourglass shape.”