

She uses clothes to redefine masculinity and explore her heritage – but for Grace Wales Bonner, it's not all about fashion. We caught up with the cultural polymath to talk art, AW20 and London's best library

State of Grace

By Grace Cain

Post-colonial critical theory, politics of identity, art history... if you think this sounds more like an academic reading list than a young fashion designer's mood board, it would appear you haven't met Grace Wales Bonner. Having graduated from Central Saint Martins during the halcyon days of sneaker drops and selfie sticks, this scholarly designer wasted no time in establishing her eponymous brand. In just six years, Wales Bonner's multidisciplinary approach to exploring male identity and black cultural narratives has earned her the resounding approval of the fashion industry: she counts the prestigious LVMH Young Designer Prize among her many accolades, and was named the winner of last year's BFC/Vogue Designer Fashion Fund.

But fashion is only one part of an oeuvre that increasingly spans the full landscape of contemporary culture. Creative collaborations – often with artists working beyond her own discipline – are central to Wales Bonner's philosophy. She's worked with the likes of musician Solange, multimedia artist Eric N Mack, and Dior's Maria Grazia Chiuri, to name just a few. And it's the work of photographer John Goto that informed Wales Bonner's AW20 offering – specifically his 1977 portraits of the British Afro-Caribbean community in Lewisham in southeast London. The evocative collection's brass buttons, tweed suits and polo-neck sweaters are all part of an ode to the Lovers' Rock scene, which combined politics and romance, British sartorial tradition and Caribbean style – much like Wales Bonner herself.

How would you describe the Lovers' Rock scene in London?

Diverse and mixed; a second-generation British and Caribbean community creating reggae music in response to the Jamaican music scene. Sweet and romantic; interracial couples and a mixture of different cultures.

In what way did it inform the AW20 show?

I began by looking at photographs of London in the 1970s, specifically those showing the British-Jamaican community – the second-generation Afro-Caribbean community. I wanted to reflect on that, and what it looked like.

How did you come across John Goto's work?

At an exhibition at Autograph in Shoreditch, which has an amazing cultural archive. His work just felt familiar.

And what was it about his portraits from Lewisham Youth Centre that inspired you?

Their individualistic sense of style – a mixture of classic dress, timelessness and elegance.

What are your personal connections to these references?

I spent quite some time in Lewisham when I was growing up, as my dad used to have an office there. John's photographs felt like a reflection of my family.

There is always a wonderful amalgamation of British and Jamaican references in your work. How did you conceptualise this for AW20?

I have always been interested in British traditional tailoring and dress – like Savile Row and Jermyn Street shirtmakers – but integrated with a different cultural perspective. It's mixing two worlds together in a quite modern way.



How did you find working with tweed?

I like working with traditional British fabrics and mixing these with different craft techniques, such as crochet, to create a playful mixture.

Who inspires you?

My creative process is informed by a multiplicity of perspectives and cultural influences. I'm lucky to work with many collaborators who enrich my work, and who enhance the opportunities to tell meaningful stories through Wales Bonner. Previous collections have been influenced by artists including Jacob Lawrence, David Hammons and Ishmael Reed.

How do you approach the collaborative process?

My approach is holistic. I'm inspired to consider a subject through another perspective, which allows more potential for creativity.

How does your interest in identity politics translate into your designs?

I'm interested in exploring lineage, and in how those who have come before me inform my work and shape the possibilities for future generations.

What are you currently reading?

I'm re-reading *Kalimba* by Petero Kalulé.

Do you have a favourite library in London?

I have spent a lot of time at the Stuart Hall Library, which has recently relocated to Pimlico.

Which London restaurant are you most looking forward to visiting now that things are opening up again?

Ikoyi.

What does luxury mean to you?

Luxury is about comfort. It is also about an intimate and soulful connection with clothing. I am personally interested in exploring an idea of cultural luxury.

What is your ultimate aim for Wales Bonner?

To elevate the location of blackness within culture, and infuse European luxury with an Afro-Atlantic spirit. □



Clockwise from top left WALES BONNER jacket £1,500; jacket £895; striped shirt £375 and trousers £350; all pieces are from the AW20 collection that referenced John Goto's 1977 photographic portrait series centred around the British Afro-Caribbean community at Lewisham Youth Centre

Menswear, Second Floor