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DENIM SAGA

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144 TREND REPORT

The most ubiquitous of fabrics, with a history dating back to the 17th century and a lead role in many subcultural revolutions, denim has recently been dominating the stage once again, undergoing a new transmogrification. Paying homage to its undying relevance, this report explores the startling ways in which designers are reconceptualizing denim through the warping lens of luxury fashion, emancipating it altogether from its material base.

Words by Matthew Linde
Taxonomy by Bertie Brandes
Artworks by PWR



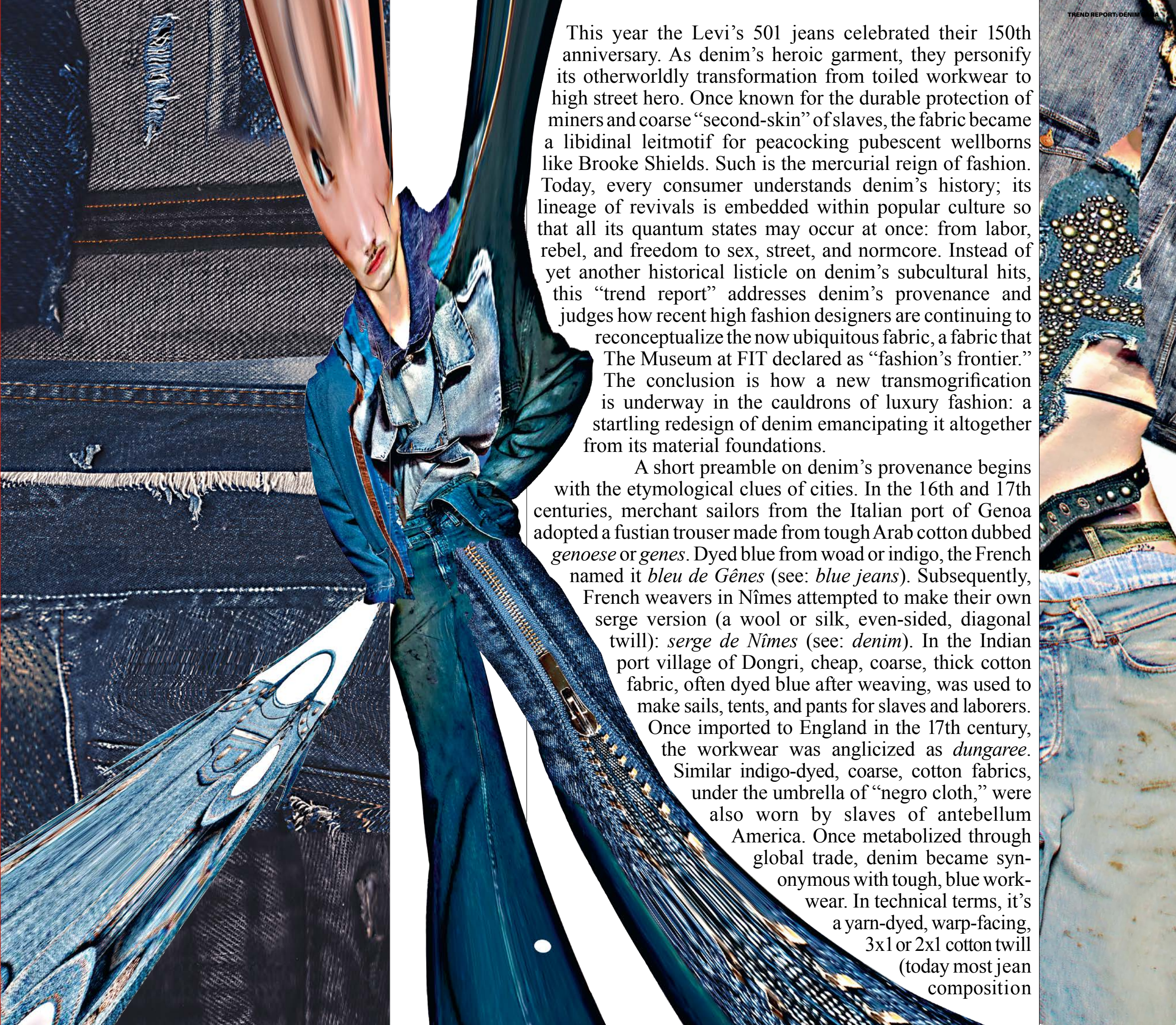
White Denim

Far from the Diet Coke and Colgate USA commercialism of blue denim, white jeans carry a distinctly European set of associations. The Helmut Lang pair worn religiously by Peter Saville through much of his career are bleached of their American associations, becoming a symbol of *less* and speaking to his lavish, late-night brand of minimalism. The thing about white jeans is that you can't expect them to stay white. Could there be a better vehicle for an artist like Saville, the man who gave an aesthetic voice to music as raw and painful as Joy Division, as artfully hedonistic as New Order, than a piece of clothing that can't help but offer up every spill, slip, and story? White jeans are not carpenter pants, though, and this is certainly not the uniform of the "artist-in-residence." In conflict with the working-class association with painter's whites, white jeans are also louche and sexy: they're smoking French cigarettes on the Amalfi coast. Helmut Lang's denim through the 1990s combined these traits perfectly—no wonder his pieces continue to skyrocket in value and credibility, more so with each failed reimagining of the brand he sold in the mid-00s—with a heavy speckling of paint splatters. Pre-distressed and priced far from the reach of the genuine working class, his jeans combine a pin-sharp sense of self-awareness with a cad-like sense of humor. Distressed jeans are ubiquitous now, and the high street's obsession with ripped jeans fuels one of the most polluting and physically harmful fabric production industries in the world. But along with the environmental tragedy is a tragedy of style, because this denim has nothing of Lang and Saville's chaotic glamour. When it comes to bad jeans, the world is distressed enough.



Japanese Denim

A certain kind of myth-making occurs when you get far enough away from something to project your own idea onto it. In fashion, subcultures are passed between continents and across decades in an exchange of ideals, warping and expanding as they move, until the thing that emerges—the myth—carries with it all the desires of the projector and the strangest traces of the original material. The Japanese revisioning of archetypal American fashion, denim workwear in particular, along with Ivy League aesthetics, is a perfect example of this. Jeans designed for physical labor in the States, complete with pockets and loops for specific tools, became synonymous with a hyper-specific menswear movement in Japan. Japanese books and catalogues obsessively document the different styles of American denim, transposing their utility into the cosmetic in a way that feels provocative in its inherent dislocation. A fetishization of all things all-American is occurring, an ironic stars-and-stripes idea of freedom that understands the darker side of the militarized American dream from experience. It makes me wonder what other myths are hidden in the styles of denim we reach for, that wear their meaning a little closer to their chests. While the Japanese appetite for American classics feels countercultural given the two nations’ history, perhaps there are projections hiding in the monocultural cuts to which we’re drawn to as well. What I find most striking about how we choose to wear denim today is how nostalgic it is. Levi’s’ entire identity is about reviving styles from the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Through the lens of myth, I wonder what story we’re telling ourselves in our compulsive habit of looking backwards. Lessons to be learned from history? “No New Ideas”? Whatever it might be, the key is in the back pocket of those 505s.



This year the Levi’s 501 jeans celebrated their 150th anniversary. As denim’s heroic garment, they personify its otherworldly transformation from toiled workwear to high street hero. Once known for the durable protection of miners and coarse “second-skin” of slaves, the fabric became a libidinal leitmotif for peacocking pubescent wellborns like Brooke Shields. Such is the mercurial reign of fashion. Today, every consumer understands denim’s history; its lineage of revivals is embedded within popular culture so that all its quantum states may occur at once: from labor, rebel, and freedom to sex, street, and normcore. Instead of yet another historical listicle on denim’s subcultural hits, this “trend report” addresses denim’s provenance and judges how recent high fashion designers are continuing to reconceptualize the now ubiquitous fabric, a fabric that The Museum at FIT declared as “fashion’s frontier.” The conclusion is how a new transmogrification is underway in the cauldrons of luxury fashion: a startling redesign of denim emancipating it altogether from its material foundations.

A short preamble on denim’s provenance begins with the etymological clues of cities. In the 16th and 17th centuries, merchant sailors from the Italian port of Genoa adopted a fustian trouser made from tough Arab cotton dubbed *genoese* or *genes*. Dyed blue from woad or indigo, the French named it *bleu de Gênes* (see: *blue jeans*). Subsequently, French weavers in Nîmes attempted to make their own serge version (a wool or silk, even-sided, diagonal twill): *serge de Nîmes* (see: *denim*). In the Indian port village of Dongri, cheap, coarse, thick cotton fabric, often dyed blue after weaving, was used to make sails, tents, and pants for slaves and laborers. Once imported to England in the 17th century, the workwear was anglicized as *dungaree*. Similar indigo-dyed, coarse, cotton fabrics, under the umbrella of “negro cloth,” were also worn by slaves of antebellum America. Once metabolized through global trade, denim became synonymous with tough, blue workwear. In technical terms, it’s a yarn-dyed, warp-facing, 3x1 or 2x1 cotton twill (today most jean composition

Denim was cloth *du jour* for prospectors, laborers, military, and prisoners. What followed was fashion's frontier into a Baudrillardian

Controversial Denim

In 1995, Steven Meisel shot a Calvin Klein Jeans campaign that caused such a level of outrage amongst the general public that it ended up being banned. The campaign itself is by no means shocking. Smiling models in jeans lounge in a sauna-like, wood-paneled cabin, bodies barely contained by the denim that rides up or hangs off them—powerfully erotic, painfully attractive. Something about it did not sit right with the public though. So was this an early instance of cancel culture in an increasingly authoritarian landscape? Or was the condemnation of upskirting and sexual objectification in fact progressive? These are questions on which the advertising industry still hasn't made up its mind. So much easier to just ignore them. The result is that this kind of unabashed sexiness—the self-knowing smiles, the unwavering eye contact (textbook Meisel) feels flagrant in comparison to the kind of impartial, unprovocative sexiness we see now, suffocated under the pretense of empowering shapewear or work-out clothes. If campaigns do evoke sexiness, it's either camp or ironic, never seedy, and often saved from the gray area by

the presence of some stratospheric star to avoid any doubt over the willingness of the participant and their status in the world. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing; taking a side feels fruitless, though there's certainly something to be learned from the response. In 1995, when this campaign was condemned for being too pornographic, actual pornography was threatening to enter every living room in the world. Previously relegated to magazines, borrowed video tapes, and blue movie picture houses, hardcore porn was on the verge of blossoming into what has subsequently become a very fucked-up, billion-dollar industry. As something we now accept as part of children's earliest exposure to "sex" and a serious addiction that is ignored and sometimes even celebrated, porn was absolutely something to be worried about and something to take seriously. Canceling a Meisel campaign obviously wasn't the answer and didn't have the desired effect, but it shows how understanding cultural anxieties beyond the curtain-twitching hysteria they initially appear as can lead us to answers we didn't expect to find.

hysteria of symbolic upheavals: bad-boy greaser, American West valor, patchworked hippie, lascivious youth, and universal leisurewear.

is complemented with 2% elastane). Only the warp yarns are dyed indigo (as a cost-cutting measure) but, thanks to the twill construction, they float over three or two weft yarns for the illusion of solid blue.

In 1870, the American tailor Jacob W. Davis innovated jeans with copper rivets to reinforce seam and pocket points for superior durability and, in 1873, he patented the already in-high-demand American design with businessman Levi Strauss. Denim was cloth *du jour* for prospectors, laborers, military, and prisoners. What followed was fashion's frontier into a Baudrillardian hysteria of symbolic upheavals: bad-boy greaser, American West valor, patchworked hippie, lascivious youth, and universal leisurewear. Amidst these subcultural revolutions, in the 1970s, "status jeans" arrived by way of mid-market designers. Whether you subscribe to trickle-up or trickle-down fashion theory, the chicken-or-egg question of denim's fashionability was now equally envisioned by a new designer class of denim propagandists, such as Fiorucci, Gloria Vanderbilt, Ralph Lauren, Mac Keen, Calvin Klein, Armani, Adriano Goldschmied, and Marithé + François Girbaud. They became so popular that, by 1978, the *Washington Post* declared it the "year of the status jean." In 1979, the *New York Times* foretold the designer jeans "craze" would "peak within the next two years." The paper quoted an apparel industry executive: "While the new styling and fabrics can sustain the look a little longer, we expect sales to peak by the end of 1980. You can only sell so many pairs." A stunning false prophecy in hindsight. In 1999, *Time* magazine garlanded the Levi's 501 with the title of *the* 20th-century garment. So great is the protean success of denim that anthropologists today muse, "At any given time, half the population of the Earth is wearing jeans." Between 2022 and 2026, denim's global market is expected to increase from \$57.3 billion to \$76.1 billion. An interminable production line realizes a global uniform. Amidst denim's postmodernist platter of meaning and stubborn ubiquity, fashion today is coalescing consumers around two major trends: the bedazzled return of Y2K and couture imitation.

The recent renaissance of fashion's Y2K era has done wonders in lifting denim's stock. Think Blumarine, Dsquared2, and Diesel, who, with the help of stylists such as Lotta Volkova and Haley Wollens, have seen their rhinestoned gewgaws, box-pleated uber-mini-skirts, and patchworked low-rises resurrected amid denim's appeal via social media virality and image-ready circulation. The original aesthetic—brewed in

BLUE JEAN BABY



Photography by Reto Schmid
Styling by Damese Savidan

ACNE STUDIOS
PENICILLIN-DISTRESSED OVERSHIRT,
SUPER BAGGY FIT JEANS,
SILVER CAN-PULLER NECKLACE



BOTTEGA VENETA
PRINTED LEATHER STRAIGHT DENIM,
COTTON WHITE TOP,
TEX MULE



BALENCIAGA
DECONSTRUCTED DENIM JACKET,
DOUBLE-FRONT DENIM TROUSERS,
FETISH SOCKS BOOTIES



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RETO SCHMID
STYLING BY DAMESE SAVIDAN
CREATIVE DIRECTION: ALESSIO ASCARI

MODEL: KASPER KAPICA

PHOTO ASSISTANT: GREGOIRE COLSON, QUENTIN
FABRIOL, HERNANDO MAZUERA
STYLING ASSISTANT: NOXANE NOEL
SET ASSISTANT: GAËLLE SELLIN
HAIR: CHIAO CHENET
MAKEUP: MAËLYS JALLALI
NAILS: ERI NARITA
PRODUCTION: ANNABEL FERNANDES



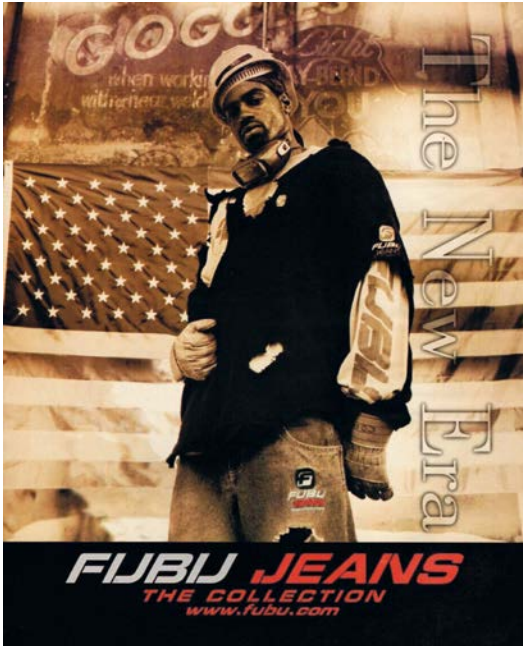
the primordial soup of Britney, Paris, Guess, Baby Phat, Miss Sixty, et al.—was most vividly revamped in Diesel’s Spring/Summer 2023 collection. With Glenn Martens of Y/Projects now at the helm, the label mined the vendible 2000s vintage. For this 71-look collection, a host of vintage denim treatments and washes were lavishly redeveloped—acid wash, reverse-sun-fading, organza-lacing, flocking, and fringed denim. It was as if depop bestseller prompts were inputted into AI, reimaging denim to higher and higher resolutions, generating that patina of oleaginous unreality: the Gen X denim label updated for a TikTok sales pitch. The recent Acne Studios denim campaign, starring their new face, Kylie Jenner, behaves similarly. Here, baggy distressed denim ensembles dripped in oil and dirt have immediate 4K impact, made only more viralized by Jenner’s body seen dripping in the same painted effect. The pieces will be big sellers. The young London-based designer Mowalola Ogunlesi has also been trafficking in nineties denim designs. Her namesake brand’s Spring/Summer 2023 featured matching jackets and jeans, with the lowest of low-rises, made from waxy metallic black denim and stonewashed blue. The Spring/Summer 2024 season also reaffirmed denim’s dirty panache across the soiled treatments of baggy cargos, full-length flared skirts, and strappy minis.

Less lurid are the nineties, dad-inspired, normcore jeans by another London designer, Martine Rose. Established in 2007 as a menswear brand, Rose has repeatedly explored the more subtle renditions of 20th *fin de siècle* denim, across bootleg, skinny, cargo, and flare. Her treatments—heat-pressed permanent crinkles and bleached stripes—provide contemporary delight, but, for the most part, her denim remains true to the halcyon looks of London raves and hip-hop, most notably her king-sized gabber styles. Rose’s collaboration with Hilfiger in 2022 reiterated her penchant for nineties reinvention. The “unapologetic collection of Tommy’s 90s staples—reconstructed by designer Martine Rose’s Miami-inspired vision of modern Americana,” as the copy described it, featured indigo denim innuendo “chaps” with the voided crotch evocatively constructed in white denim.

Over the past few seasons, discussions of “couture denim” have percolated the punditry. It started with Matthieu Blazy’s standout Spring/Summer 2023 inauguration at Bottega Veneta. The Italian house, traditionally a maker of leather goods, was refurbished in 2016 by Daniel Lee as the new “woman-friendly” ashram for lost Phoebe Philoites, providing a luxe work-play wardrobe for the exec matrician. In 2022, Blazy



TREND REPORT: DENIM SAGA



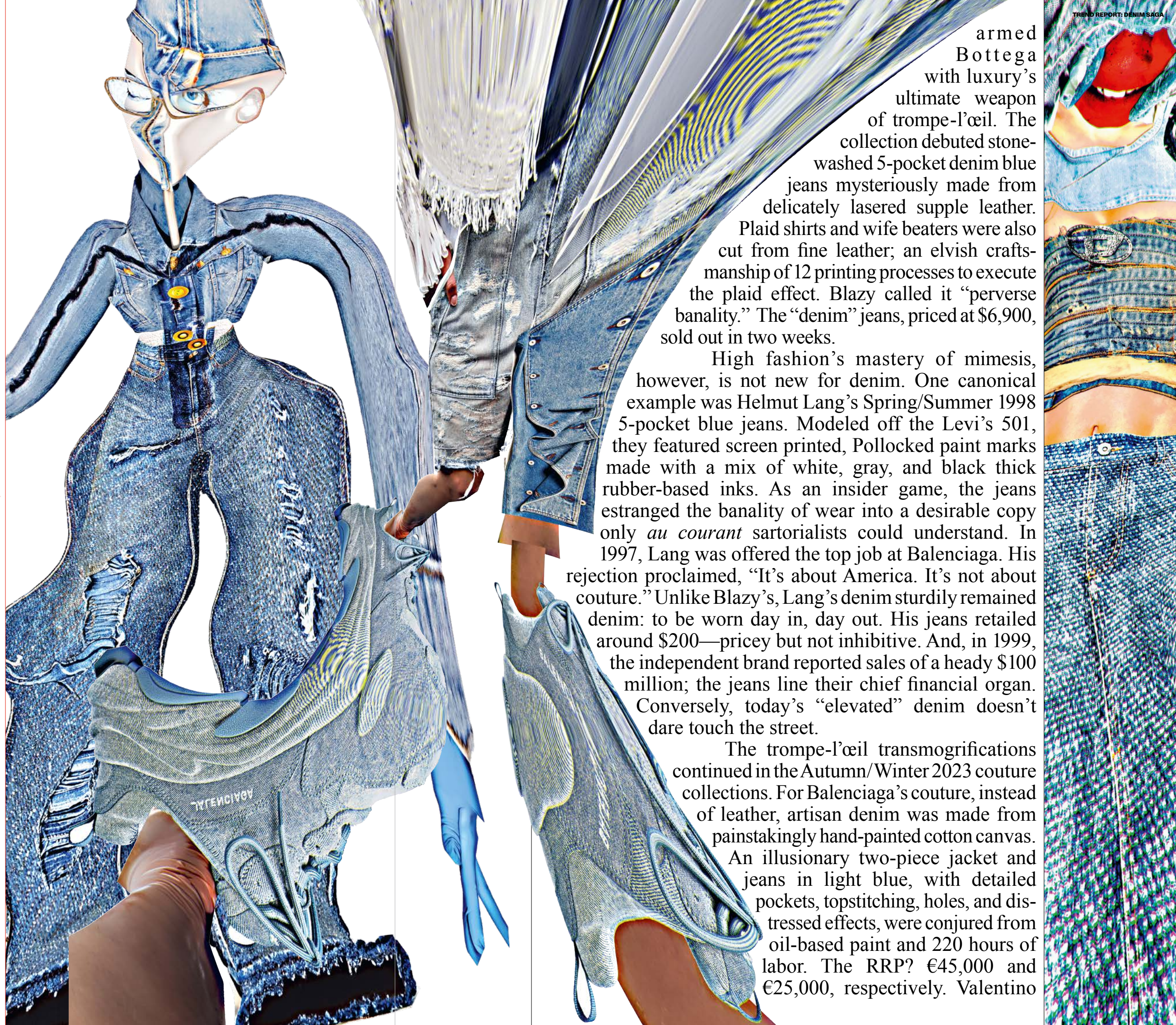
Street Denim

FUBU—*For Us, By Us*—is highly grailed streetwear label that was founded in Queens, NY, in 1989. For Us, By Us refers to the Black founders and designers, who had grown frustrated with fashion brands refusing to lend clothes to the rappers now finding global recognition through hip-hop. Early T-shirts bore slogans including “Free Mike Tyson” and “What happened to poor Rodney King?” FUBU moved on from these didactic messages fairly quickly, focusing instead on what we now know as the classic nineties American streetwear silhouette, with its iconic baggy denim jeans. Given this transition away from explicit politics, I wouldn’t call FUBU an activist group by any means, but their history, point of view, and entrepreneurial DIY approach spoke to a clear set of values. The original brand lived and died on bad business decisions, leaving us with one of the most frantic second-hand denim markets in its wake. Had it lived on in its original incarnation—in 2010 the company relaunched in the US, rebranding as FB Legacy—it seems like a no-brainer that FUBU would not have fallen foul of the culture in the way other streetwear brands that draw deep associations with Black culture have in recent times. But—are we so sure of that? It’s not a leap to say we’re living in a time defined, in some spheres at least, by a scrutinizing of authenticity. When consumer brands are the institutions with which we’ve chosen to align ourselves, they tend to be first on the dissection table. It’s rarely the production models or material costs that we seek to uncover; what’s scrutinized, rather, is the location of symbolic power. It’s a necessary practice, though I wish we might take into account environmental impact (denim is a notoriously wasteful fabric to manufacture) and materially exploitative labor structures too. Parallel to this scrutinizing of their intentions, these brands—who probably should have stayed small enough to reflect their offbeat ideologies and appeal to their countercultural fanbase—are now behemoths, churning out more product than ever. It pains me to say it, but, during these culturally turbulent times, I suspect FUBU is better off half-remembered and idealized as a folk tale from the golden age of streetwear.



Sexy Denim

Elio Fiorucci was the inventor of skinny jeans and pioneer of the Brandy Melville model of only designing up to a certain dress size. Ignoring the hellish Soho reboot in 2017—*I still wake up in a cold sweat thinking about it*—the New York minute when Andy Warhol and Fiorucci combined forces to redefine glamor was a transformative time for denim. No longer relegated to either utilitarian usefulness or safety-pinned sedition, with Fiorucci, jeans became synonymous with skin-tight sex appeal. In a world of glossy red lips, blown-out hair, and snow-white cocaine, the Fiorucci Buffalo '70 jeans became the go-to for Manhattan's most beautiful. Disordered eating had a uniform. Nowadays, having cycled through another disco pant era—and knowing the pain of wearing them at an airport—it's hard to get excited about super skinny, high-waisted denim. The incredible shape that well-fitting, hard-working, slim denim gave the body—that perfectly compact, pin-like long leg with the sucked-in stomach and weeny waist—has been supplanted by flesh. The emergence of obsessive gym culture and the normalization of plastic surgery means we see Kylie Jenner's impossible hips and waist emerging pin-up pristine from loose, low-waisted denim that lends the illusion of carelessness to a perfected female form. Slim denim is no longer needed: we have internalized it. The corset is replaced by the cross trainer; the skinny jean, by the scalpel. Whatever. The point is, even as I'm writing this, the trend will be shifting back. As soon as something feels truly irrelevant, someone comes along and makes it great again. If not skin-tight denim, then what? If not Fiorucci, then who?



armed Bottega with luxury's ultimate weapon of trompe-l'œil. The collection debuted stone-washed 5-pocket denim blue jeans mysteriously made from delicately lasered supple leather. Plaid shirts and wife beaters were also cut from fine leather; an elvish craftsmanship of 12 printing processes to execute the plaid effect. Blazy called it “perverse banality.” The “denim” jeans, priced at \$6,900, sold out in two weeks.

High fashion's mastery of mimesis, however, is not new for denim. One canonical example was Helmut Lang's Spring/Summer 1998 5-pocket blue jeans. Modeled off the Levi's 501, they featured screen printed, Pollocked paint marks made with a mix of white, gray, and black thick rubber-based inks. As an insider game, the jeans estranged the banality of wear into a desirable copy only *au courant* sartorialists could understand. In 1997, Lang was offered the top job at Balenciaga. His rejection proclaimed, “It's about America. It's not about couture.” Unlike Blazy's, Lang's denim sturdily remained denim: to be worn day in, day out. His jeans retailed around \$200—pricey but not inhibitive. And, in 1999, the independent brand reported sales of a heady \$100 million; the jeans line their chief financial organ. Conversely, today's “elevated” denim doesn't dare touch the street.

The trompe-l'œil transmogrifications continued in the Autumn/Winter 2023 couture collections. For Balenciaga's couture, instead of leather, artisan denim was made from painstakingly hand-painted cotton canvas.

An illusionary two-piece jacket and jeans in light blue, with detailed pockets, topstitching, holes, and distressed effects, were conjured from oil-based paint and 220 hours of labor. The RRP? €45,000 and €25,000, respectively. Valentino

In 1999, *Time* magazine garlanded the Levi's 501 with the title of the 20th-century garment. So great is the protean



Cowboy Denim

Ralph Lauren *men* used to be real men. They had leather belts and cigarettes, not elasticated waistbands and three-chamber vapes. They wore jeans so tight, dick pics were entirely unnecessary. Ralph Lauren pioneered a kind of male sexiness that slipped through the net of camp and slutty (while absolutely being both of those things) and emerged on the other side with its masculinity fully intact. I suspect his image of masculinity remains so iconic because, paired with his confidence, he has a subtle sense of humor, a tacit understanding that, while he may look almost egregiously sexy, he also knows he looks a bit ridiculous. Looking ridiculous in denim is very much still a thing, a case in point being the Bless *jeels*, a portmanteau of “jean heels.” What makes someone want to wear shoes made from the top part of a pair of jeans, which make it look like they’ve dropped their denim shorts and are walking around with them scrunched up around their feet? To be honest, you could say, “What makes someone want to wear ... ?” about a lot of clothes we’ve seen in recent years. There is an abundance of clothing that seems to have been dreamed up

with the single goal of making the wearer look ridiculous: huge red foam boots, enormous fluffy pick-up-artist hats, that season where streetwear boys started dressing like Bristol jesters. The era of Ralph Lauren’s Madison Avenue cowboys is over. As wealth is (allegedly) decentralized and gender roles are performatively unpicked, authority is obfuscated into something that is both nowhere and everywhere at once. It’s hard to play with masculinity in the ways Ralph Lauren did when the concept itself is so fraught with controversy. In response, the internet has birthed a kind of ridiculous fashion design that severs the need for any context at all, instead presenting surreal, computer-generated objects that float over the body in a sort of augmented reality. The new playful denim feels far from confident and far more like performative nihilism for the voyeurs of a crumbling economic structure. Ralph Lauren wears his sexiest denim to a board meeting. Dictators wear their most outrageous outfits before they’re toppled. We wear our jeels before a fall.

success of denim that anthropologists today muse, “At any given time, half the population of the Earth is wearing jeans.”



Everyman Denim

The usefulness of denim when drawing up the aesthetics of a new cultural tribe is evident in the diversity of its significance: cowboys, punks, and rappers. But wherever it goes, there it is. Or, rather, wherever you find denim, you’ll find a group of people looking to be recognized as individuals. It’s no coincidence that, historically, the image of the liberated American wears double denim along with their stars and stripes. Americans do it differently, and therefore they do it in denim. Or, rather, they did. Because, while so many cultural tribes have historically used denim to define their identity, more recently, the *lack* of denim can tell us something just as revealing. The symbolism of double denim as hard-working, self-governed, and anti-authoritarian is less prescient to those concerned with defining America today. The values have changed too. While Freedom is still the brand name, the brand values have shifted, focusing on censorship and exclusion over hard work and opportunity. Right-wing groups—the Proud Boys being the perfect example—have rejected denim in favor of the quintessentially suburban chino. Old-school, simplistic libertarianism is replaced by middle-class, middle-school aesthetics and a hysterical need to control and comply. As a vehicle for self-definition, denim is out. While we used to believe power was in the hands of those who wrangled it, now the subcultures are dressing like insurance brokers. They’re giving away their secrets in their outfits, and they’re mid, at best.



couture, designed by Pierpaolo Piccioli, also roleplayed the democracy of denim. Staged at Château de Chantilly, the opening look, modeled by Kaia Gerber, featured slouchy Levi’s-inspired jeans that were constructed entirely of glass-bead-embroidered silk gazar. The atelier created 80 individual hues of indigo-dyed beads to recreate denim’s scratchy texture with devastating glamour. Piccioli described it as “a simply paradoxical trompe-l’œil.” For a denim slightly more tethered to reality, there’s Loro Piana’s luxurious *CashDenim*. For their Autumn/Winter2023collection, the LVMH-owned Italian textile house released jackets and jeans constructed from a specialized 60% denim and 40% cashmere combination. They collaborated with artisan manufacturers from Japan’s Bingo region, whose looms specialize in the worshiped selvedge denim. Retailing at \$1,350, these jeans provide an “accessible” price point for the latest unreal denim.

Considering these developments, is tricking the eye perhaps luxury’s best and last defense for survival? That extreme wealth requires a conceptual disguise, a rebus-like challenge we play to affirm our taste. Fashion’s frontier—melting all that’s solid into air—marches on.



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