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Dirty Looks: Desire and Decay in Fashion

Barbican Art Gallery

25 September 2025 – 25 January 2026

Press Preview: Wednesday 24 September, 10am – 1pm

Lead Philanthropic Supporter: Tia Collection



L-R: Hussein Chalayan, *Temporary Interference*, Spring/Summer 1995. Courtesy of Niall McNerney/Bloomsbury/Launchmetrics/Spotlight; IAMISIGO, clay-dyed barkcloth dress, *Shadows*, Spring/Summer 2024. Photograph by Fred Odede. Courtesy of IAMISIGO; Robert Wun, *The White Moth, Time*, Haute Couture Autumn/Winter 2024. Courtesy of Robert Wun.

From scuffed trainers to 'bogcore' and dresses buried underground, contemporary fashion has long embraced its dirty side. But what does this desire for decay tell us about ourselves and the state of fashion?

Opening in September 2025, the Barbican presents ***Dirty Looks: Desire and Decay in Fashion***, an adventurous new exhibition exploring how contemporary fashion has harnessed the rebellious, romantic and regenerative potentials of dirt and decay. Uniting over 60 iconic fashion houses and emerging designers from across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, this major exhibition traces fashion's enduring fascination with 'dirty' aesthetics – from their emergence in the West as symbols of transgression and rebellion, to their evolution into radical forms of craft that question global consumption habits and redefine ideas of modernity, beauty and luxury.

First seen on the runway in the 1980s and championed by designers like **Vivienne Westwood** and **Malcolm McLaren**, the aesthetics of mud emerged as a subversive challenge to traditional notions of luxury, class and refinement. Around the same time, the work of **Issey Miyake**, **Rei Kawakubo** and **Yohji Yamamoto** introduced challenges to

Western notions of beauty and perfection, instead embracing aesthetics which denoted principles of transience, patina and humility, linked to wabi-sabi philosophies.

In 1993, **Hussein Chalayan**'s influential graduate collection *The Tangent Flows* featured garments buried with iron filings in his friend's London backyard. The rusted dresses expanded the notion of garments as living, organic beings which, like humans, are of the earth and return to the earth in a cycle of ruination and renewal. Today, while distressed clothing no longer carries the same shock factor, a new generation of emerging designers continues to revisit ideas of dirt and decay for their symbolic power – using them as tools to visualise renewal, resistance and new desirable futures for fashion.

Bringing together over a hundred looks from the past half-century, *Dirty Looks* considers the multifarious ways in which these ideas continue to re-surface, from a preoccupation with landscapes such as the bog, and the obsession with trompe l'oeil ruination and decay, to a new, more spiritual connection to the soil. Taking a broad view of what we label as dirt, the exhibition considers the subversive potential of fashion that confronts us with the "dirtiness" of our own bodies, as well as fashion's own waste streams. Examining the influence of colonial attitudes and celebrating indigenous perspectives from a variety of places, it also demonstrates what alternative practices – from upcycled materials and regenerated textiles to radical, repurposed deadstock – could offer the industry.

Grouped thematically, these concepts are expanded upon by a series of designer highlights in the upper galleries and original commissions by a new generation of emerging designers in the lower galleries. These emerging designers – including **Paolo Carzana, Alice Potts, Michaela Stark, Solitude Studios, Elena Velez** and **Yaz XL** – seek not only to reflect the deepening crises of our time – including environmental degradation – but also to visualise a paradise regained through practices related to folklore, neo-paganism and a celebration of queer and sex-positive communities. At the forefront of artistic experimentation, they touch the transient, romantic and modern qualities at the heart of fashion.

The exhibition design sees the distinctive spaces of the Barbican Art Gallery transformed by **Studio Dennis Vanderbroeck** – known for its performative and cutting-edge designs for fashion shows and theatre – in a radical reimagining of the ways in which fashion is displayed. Drawing from fashion's obsession with the illusion of wear and decay, the design will create a tension between the smooth, white spaces of the gallery and intentionally 'destroyed' surface treatments.

Shanay Jhaveri, Head of Visual Arts, Barbican, said: "*Dirty Looks signals the Barbican's bold return to fashion as a vital strand of our visual arts programming – one that recognises fashion not only as a form of artistic expression, but also as a lens through which to examine cultural, environmental and political urgencies. This exhibition brings together a remarkable breadth of global designers who are radically reshaping what fashion can mean and do today. With its focus on decay, renewal and the aesthetics of imperfection, Dirty Looks invites us to reconsider beauty, value and the regenerative power of making in a world in flux.*"

Highlights of the exhibition include:

- An installation of buried, oxidised garments by **Hussein Chalayan**, including looks first presented in his 1993 graduate collection *The Tangent Flows*. The practice of

burial, which involves covering clothes with iron filings and submerging them in the soil for several months, has returned over the course of his influential career in fashion. His notion of 'future archaeology' symbolises the life cycles of fashion, whilst poetically reflecting on time, transience, rebirth and regeneration.

- A site-specific installation of three looks from **Ma Ke's** handmade collection *Wuyong/The Earth* (2006-07), transforming discarded materials including wood, linen, plastic and tarpaulin using ancient crafts practiced by women in China's rural regions.
- A newly commissioned film and display by American designer **Elena Velez** featuring works from her Spring/Summer 2024 collection *The Longhouse*, which culminated in a mud-wrestle finale.
- **Bubu Ogisi's** recent creations for IAMISIGO, a Nigerian fashion label using natural materials as an act of repairing connections to the land that were severed by colonialism.
- London-based designer **Robert Wun's** four couture gowns from the collections *Time* (AW 2023) and *Fear* (SS 2023), including a wine-stained evening gown and burned yellow ensemble in silk, which elevate ideas of ephemerality and transience to reflect Wun's spiritual vision.
- A bespoke tableau of **Paolo Carzana's** three-season narrative *Trilogy of Hope* (2024-25), featuring handcrafted, naturally dyed garments made from organic and repurposed materials.
- **Solitude Studio's** use of cloth submerged in bogs in their collections, referencing the use of Denmark's bogs as a site of fertility and good luck offerings in the Iron Age. During this 'sacrificial' process the fabric is not only dyed by the soil but partially consumed by microorganisms within the bog.

Eight years since the Barbican's last major-scale fashion exhibition, *Dirty Looks* marks the beginning of a new era of fashion programming, building on the success of previous exhibitions including *The House of Viktor & Rolf* (2008), *Future Beauty: 30 Years of Japanese Fashion* (2010), *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier* (2014) and *The Vulgar* (2017). This strand of programming, led by Barbican Art Gallery curator **Karen Van Godtsenhoven**, focuses on fashion as an interdisciplinary and ground-breaking artistic practice, reflecting the changing landscape of fashion today and showcasing futures in which fashion can be harnessed as a positive creative force for its makers, wearers, lovers and our natural environment.

Featured designers in *Dirty Looks* include: **ACNE Studios, Miguel Adrover, Ahluwalia, Matty Bovan, Buzigahill, Paolo Carzana, Hussein Chalayan, Comme des Garçons, Piero D'Angelo, Giles Deacon, Diesel, Di Petsa, Phoebe English, Dilara Findikoglu, John Galliano, JordanLuca, Andrew Groves, IAMISIGO, Hodakova, Nina Hollein, Ivan Hunga Garcia, Ayumi Kajiwarra, Manon Kündig, Helmut Lang, Ma Ke, Maison Margiela, Yodea-Marquel Williams, Alexander McQueen, Issey Miyake, Hamish Morrow, Moschino, Yuima Nakazato, Louis Gabriel Nouchi, Rick Owens, Carol Christian Poell, Alice Potts, Paco Rabanne, Zandra Rhodes, Sterling Ruby, Marine Serre, Solitude Studios, Michaela**

Stark, Olivier Theyskens, Elena Velez, Vin + Omi, Viktor & Rolf, Junya Watanabe, Vivienne Westwood, Robert Wun and Xüly Bet.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

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Press images available online

The image sheet is available on [press room](#). Please contact the press team for high-res images.

Barbican Press Room

All Barbican Centre press releases, news announcements and the Communication team's contact details are listed on our website at <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/>

Press Tickets

All press tickets will need to be booked 48 hours in advance by contacting a member of the Barbican's Visual Arts Press team. Our inbox is monitored Monday to Friday, 10am-6pm. Please let us know if you have any access requirements.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Barbican Art Gallery, Silk Street, London, EC2Y 8DS
www.barbican.org.uk

Tickets

Tickets on sale [here](#) from August 2025.

Exhibition

Dirty Looks is at Barbican Art Gallery from 25 September 2025 – 25 January 2026 and is curated by Karen Van Godtsenhoven (Curator) and Jon Astbury (Assistant Curator). Architectural design is by Studio Dennis Vanderbroeck. Graphic design is by Wolfe Hall. The exhibition is initiated by Barbican, London.

Book

Accompanying *Dirty Looks* will be a catalogue published by SPBH Editions, with essays by internationally acclaimed authors including Fabio Cleto and Stefania Consonni, Sunny Dolat, Caroline Evans, Akiko Fukai, Sandra Niessen and Sara Arnold, Ellen Sampson, Lou Stoppard, and curators Karen Van Godtsenhoven and Jon Astbury, featuring original object photography by Ellen Sampson capturing the intimate, tactile and bodily qualities of the garments in the exhibition. Designed by Brian Paul Lamotte. Price: £30

Events

The exhibition will be accompanied by an exciting roster of multidisciplinary events including a "Dirty Weekend" across the Barbican (29-30 November) and an exclusive poetic performance by Studio Olivier Saillard, "Wedding dresses always end up single" (Les robes de mariées finissent toujours célibataires) in January 2026. Full details to be announced in due course.

Also taking place at the Barbican this autumn, acclaimed French-Vietnamese Director Caroline Guiela Nguyen makes her UK debut in Barbican Theatre with season opener LACRIMA, the UK premiere of her hauntingly beautiful, multi-lingual drama shedding light on the hidden personal cost behind the luxury fashion industry (25-27 September).

About Tia Collection

Founded in 2007, Tia Collection is a global art collection with a mission to support artists and museum institutions by acquiring and loaning works of art. Tia Collection aims to foster dialogue, stewardship, and scholarship of art through its lending program, partner exhibitions and publications.

Barbican Art Gallery

Our visual arts programme embraces art, architecture, design, fashion, photography and film. Many of our exhibitions explore the interconnections between disciplines, periods and cultures, and aim to imagine the world in new ways. Designers, artists and architects are our collaborators in this process.

Our exhibitions are complemented by comprehensively researched catalogues and a full range of public events. In partnership with renowned museums and art galleries, many of our exhibitions travel to reach both national and international audiences.

About the Barbican

The Barbican is a catalyst for creativity, sparking possibilities for artists, audiences, and communities. We showcase the most exciting art from around the world, pushing traditional artistic boundaries to entertain and inspire millions of people, create connections, provoke debate, and reflect the world we live in.

We are an international arts and events centre rooted firmly in our own neighbourhood, collaborating with local communities and putting the City of London on the map as a destination for everybody. Central to our purpose is supporting emerging talent and shaping opportunities that will accelerate the next generation of creatives.

As a not-for-profit, we rely on the generosity of individuals and organisations, including our principal funder the City of London Corporation. Every ticket purchased, donation made, and

pound earned supports our arts and learning programme and enables the widest possible range of people to experience the joy of the arts.

Opened in 1982, the Barbican is a unique and audacious building, recognised globally as an architectural icon. As well as our theatres, galleries, concert halls and cinemas, we have a large conservatory with over 1,500 species of plants and trees, a library, conference facilities, public and community spaces, restaurants, bars, and a picturesque lakeside oasis.

We're proud to be the home of the London Symphony Orchestra, and a London base of the Royal Shakespeare Company. We regularly co-commission, produce and showcase the work of our other associates and partners including the Academy of Ancient Music, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Boy Blue, Cheek by Jowl, Darbar, Doc'n Roll Film Festival, Drum Works, EFG London Jazz Festival, London Palestine Film Festival, Serious, and Trafalgar Theatre Productions.

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