Collection Review (NYFW 2026)

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Public School

The return of Dao-Yi Chow and Maxwell Osborne to the mainstage of fashion, after seven years of silence, has been a masterclass in narrative-making. The independent duo's Fall/Winter menswear collection sits in a comfortable niche for them: at "the convergence of the street and the atelier," as they wrote in a newsletter launched concurrently with their show. Public School has been profoundly lucky in this regard—Chow and Osborne's unique bottom-up framing of their style has enabled them to capitalize on a populist sentiment of resistance which arose during their hiatus but which is coincidentally perfectly aligned with their historic messaging. Their adoption of this aesthetic is made all the more "authentic" by their genuine return from the brink. There's a comeback story, of a company but also a nation, that is attempting to be sewn into Public School's clothes. This largely fictionalized pseudohistory of Public School, New York, and America is their *Dior and I*: the legend that imbues their clothes with meaning and value. Whether or not Chow and Osborne manage to transform the story of their label hinges, thus, on continued stable success.

Figure 1: My favorite look from the show (Source: WWD).

Public School's message of resistance translates into garments through a dark color palette, baggy and layered silhouettes, and the prolific use of symbolic iconography—most prominently gloves, sunglasses, and stylized headgear. Black leather driving gloves appear on the vast majority of models. They sport four cut-out circles above each knuckle, an implied fist on the hands of the models strolling calmly down the catwalk. In concert with dark, circular sunglasses (featured on precisely half of the men) they anonymize the wearer—obscuring completely their eyes and fingerprints. Disguising their models in this way attempts to place Public School in opposition to the "surveillance state"—which engages with all manner of techniques, certainly including a stylistic profile of your clothing, to unmask you—and the inauthenticity of runway celebrities, potentially calling into question the value of such foundational Western tenets as accountability to the rule of law or individualism. The tattoos of another model peak through large glove cutouts beneath a face obscured in a black cotton balaclava, gray eyes staring threateningly at the camera. With these small touches, Chow and

Osborne style their models with the implied violence of a measured revolutionary even when they're wearing a button-down shirt and tie.

Figure 2: A prototypical Public School model on the catwalk—note the three distinctive accessories (Source: WWD).

The wintery skullcap was not the only notable piece of headgear at this show, in a familiar motif of the Public School designers. The Fall/Winter 2017 collection saw Chow and Osborne spoof then-President Donald Trump's famous red MAGA hats with their own take: "Make America New York." The item was a radical success both culturally and economically for the brand. Now, nine years later and with President Trump in office once again, they debuted dark boiled wool berets. The hat is universally associated with a guerilla aesthetic made famous by the Marxist hero Che Guevara—and the show's black hats bear significant resemblance to his famous *Guerrillero Heroico* photograph. However, given how embedded in the New York culture Chow and Osborne purport themselves to be, the message of Public School's beret must bear a much more complex message than a simple overture to proletarian internationalism and anticapitalist unity. Curtis Silwa, last year's Republican nominee for mayor of New York City, was famous

for his ever-present red beret. The symbol is therefore a mixed insignia, emblazoned above Candian tuxedos and red bomber jackets, of dissatisfaction with the status quo—from all angles. But the designers' references continue even further: the berets are unusually tall. Their dark stiff fabric recalls a "rastacap," the traditional Rastafarian headgear that houses uncut, sacred dreadlocks. This third-party form unsettles the viewer, removing them from familiar shapes and commentaries and into an agitated state of presence. Religious iconography calls out to the viewer with imagery of a better world and a frustration with its flawed realization. Crystalizing this feeling of exasperation, the duo emblazons a YSL-reminiscent lettermark on a baseball cap: WNL, "We Need Leaders."

Figure 3: Public School's WNL hat (Source: Instagram).

The messaging of Public School's fashion rests on shaky foundations. Chow and Osborne would have the public believe that they have returned the same as they've ever been—bringing shapes and designs from their own lived experience on the streets of New York to the world stage. This belies the fact that, of course, the extent to which they can embody this persona has changed: by their own description, when they stepped out of the spotlight in 2019 they had "the collections, all the awards, the big shows, and…

the noise." The pair that broke out by "making something out of nothing" at Sean John is returning as a multi-award-winning household name—can they speak truth to power from such a height? The assumed revolutionary aesthetic necessitates the creation of an underdog story, and furthermore the discarding of any facts that might complicate that narrative. The disgrace of their first patron, Sean Combs? Unmentioned. The parallels between their appeal to the vibe of the common New Yorker and the populist forces that brought to power the orchestrators of "our unsettled current moment?" Dismissed. Their public direct-to-consumer Substack isn't marketing, it's documentation of "the highs and lows, finding beauty in the struggle… the New York stories that have made [them] who [they] are." Easy for them to say.

There are more than a few commonalities between the duo's origin fiction and that of Christian Dior. History's king of fashion described his ascent as the product of divine intervention: he was, inherently, so good at making dresses that his hand was forced into it, despite his own unfashionability and how unpleasant he found the business surrounding haute couture. Chow and Osborne also depict their prowess as natural and innate—neither were formally educated in fashion, both endorse "the authenticity of dressing… friends and family"—and their "pause" could be interpreted as a gesture in the direction of disdain for the fast-paced, shallow world of commercial fashion. Describing the show, one commentator claimed that "streetwear ran so menswear could stroll." A desire not to make fashion, some source outside the ephemeral world of garments, seems necessary in any fashion designer's narrative. But unlike the godfather of couture, the American duo are fashionable themselves. Appearing after the show draped in their own label, one would be forgiven for mistaking

them for two more models. This serves as yet another reinforcement of the David-and-Goliath tale that they preach: it is not divine inspiration that drives their dominance, but the victory of their own self-expression over the ocean of competing visions. Of course, any of Public School's own parallels with the biblical Philistine giant—their awards, name recognition, funding—are discarded.

Figure 4: Chow and Osborne, "NYFW['s] Darlings" (Source: GQ).

The above is a story, like any other in fashion. I suspect it will be one that wins out, if Chow and Osborne continue exhibiting consistently instead of disappearing to go soul-searching. It has notes that should make it quite popular: a comeback, an appealing "rawness," safe masculinity in a feminine field. There's a lot going for it, even if it is just as fabricated as any other. But perhaps I simply feel vindicated by their designs—I've owned maroon lambskin driving gloves for years, and I'm finally seeing some validation from the world of mainstream fashion. I'll be keeping my eye on their jackets and full-length pants going forward.