

KALEIDOSCOPE



Anne Imhof

GOTHIC REDUX

LARRY LEGASPI: Cosmic Extravaganza



LOGUE DOCUMENTING THE LIFE OF '70S AMERICAN COSTUME DESIGNER LARRY LEGASPI (1950-2001), EDITED BY
AS RECENTLY PUBLISHED BY RIZZOLI NEW YORK. IMAGE COURTESY OF RIZZOLI BOOKS. PHOTO CREDIT: OWENSCORP.

words by Matthew Linde

More than any other cultural production, fashion is constantly in the feverish process of archiving its own history, recycling past motifs and themes into present articulations. The work of any good fashion archivist, though, be they designer, blogger or scholar, is to upheave moments otherwise lost to the grand narratives of periodization. A new and exciting Larry LeGaspi monographic book by Rizzoli aims to do exactly that, unpacking the prophetic oeuvre of a designer who remains largely unknown. Authored by Rick Owens, who has been touting LeGaspi's forgotten enterprise for many years now, *Legaspi: Larry Legaspi, the 70s, and the Future of Fashion* includes contributions by André Leon Talley, Paul Stanley, Patti LaBelle and Pat Cleveland. Most famous for his costumes donned by KISS, LaBelle, George Clinton and Grace Jones, the book shows how LeGaspi became the underground doyen of galactic glam that came to permeate the outrageous exhibitionism of the 1970s. Born 1950 in New Jersey, LeGaspi moved across the Hudson to enroll in classes at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. Ambitiously independent, the designer almost immediately produced and sold his first line, Mother Superior Clothing, as well as opening the Moonstone boutique and studio in the West Village. There, he would develop a design grammar heavily influenced by the filmic adaptations of science fictionist H.G. Wells, the sculptural innovations of Charles James and the astral anachronism of Erté. Most importantly, it would be LeGaspi's social network and community of clients, collaborators and peers that would orient him as an underground fashion figure. At Moonstone, interiorly adorned as a lo-fi set design of the Milky Way, various musicians, artists, partygoers and acid causalities would come to visit. Music and its social experience became crucial for LeGaspi. As an avid fan of LaBelle's psychedelic soul act, he would often watch the trio perform in nearby West Village venues. It wasn't long before a creative partnership flourished, with LeGaspi designing their idiosyncratic stage ensembles fitted out with silver synthetic breastplates, feathered collars, peaked shoulders and thigh-high boots, made canonical by their 1974 Metropolitan Opera performance. In 1977, LeGaspi would establish his own uptown eponymous boutique on Madison Avenue, later transplanting it to 57th Street. During this period, he met Val, who became both his creative muse and wife (a marriage of companionship, as Larry was gay). A large focus of their business was on creating specialized one-off commis-

sions, often under expedient timeframes and without the bankrolled atelier of a Parisian house, the mythmaking machine that divides costume from couture. Moreover, LeGaspi's "couture" clientele were hardly members of any royal family, but rather a queer entourage that included the likes of Divine, John Waters and their avant-trash Baltimore friends. (Divine commissioned LeGaspi to create a waffle ice cream dress and piggy bodysuit for her stage play *Pork*.) Wrapped up in LeGaspi's work emerges a compelling relationship between costume and queering: both trade in performativity and a self-othering. It is precisely because costume is derided as fashion's inept sister that it can stake out new critical terrain regarding identity and modes of production.

To say that LeGaspi created only showpieces, however, would be a huge distortion. Throughout his career, the designer produced numerous seasonal collections that included more diffused yet equally sensual pieces, such as loosely draped matte jersey dresses, cocoon coats and asymmetrical bodysuits. At other times, these ready-to-wear ensembles were more extreme: in one *Women's Wear Daily* article, three new looks were detailed as an "exaggerated bubble dress with trapunto-quilted detailing, in an aqua silk and metallic blend; the gold-edged armadillo dress in sparkling black metallic and rayon faille, and the tubularly banded red column dress, in silk satin."

Perhaps LeGaspi's most signature design motif was, indeed, the use of the trapunto quilting technique, creating raised tubular rows across collars, shoulders or anywhere he wanted to engineer pronounced structure. Used in TV series such as *Blake's 7*, it expressed the soft sculpture armor of space travel. Another motif was his innovative adoption of newly manufactured fabrics like Thinsulate, produced by 3M in 1979, which was thinner and more compact than other polyester insulation fibres. That same year, LeGaspi famously constructed an arrestingly red parachute-like Thinsulate coat for Val to wear at the Met Gala.

Extending beyond the first-wave Space Age designers of the 1960s like Cardin and Courrèges, LeGaspi continued advocating their futuristic ideals—a sort of social emancipation via technological advance—while abandoning their austere uniformity in favor of a glam-inflected hyperbole. As the designer stated, "We've been in the Space Age for twenty years" and such a design discourse now entailed promises of cosmic extravaganza and Afrofuturism. ■



CELINE