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CRITICAL SHOPPER | ALOHA RAG

Obscure Labels of a Boldface Kind



Greg Scaffidi for The New York Times

Aloha Rag.

By MIKE ALBO Published: June 5, 2008

I RECOMMEND visiting the new hipster high-end clothing store Aloha Rag as soon as possible, because it's in the dead center of a freshly gentrified neighborhood that is about to become the city's next overhyped fashion and night life destination.

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The store is on Spring and Greenwich, right above Canal Street, where polished, glassy condos have been hoisted up, fussy restaurants and cafes have settled in. And this gleaming store will soon be joined by spaces for the sublime designer Rick Owens and the sophisticated boutique Atelier.

Like SoHo in the '80s, NoLiTa in the '90s, WeChe in the oughts and the meatpacking district in your nightmares, this area is shaping up to be a playground for people who own a luxury handbag for every day of the week. Real estate developers are trying to call the neighborhood Hudson Square, but I think SHNOT (South of Houston, North of TriBeCa) is so much better.

Aloha Rag's basement space is shiny, white and filled with light. The room is divided between women's and men's selections, with shelves under the large windows displaying accessories and shoes. Clothes dangle from the racks on shiny metal hangers, spaced meticulously equidistant from

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one another, making them all look precious and expensive, which they are.

A dark sweater by a Singapore-born designer named Rivy Ng was cut like a tuxedo jacket with tails (\$1,063). A cute lightweight blue cardigan by the brand 5+1 Annapurna was \$550. Offerings by the label Golden Goose made me guffaw: a purple hooded sweatshirt with an artfully torn

collar was \$310, and a pair of white elastic-waist sweat pants went for \$290. For sweat pants. Very ghetto fabulous, but until I'm in Mariah's entourage, I'll just wear my Champions while I slob around my apartment and spill red wine on my lap.

I walked through the store, intrigued by these rarefied clothes, mostly from labels I had never heard of, while an upbeat mix of jangly indie pop, by bands I couldn't identify, played in the background.

I spent a while at a rack of clothes by a designer named Henrik Vibskov. A T-shirt was printed with an interesting design that looked both like a Mexican blanket print and a blocky early '80s video game (\$108). A summery one-button suit jacket (\$508) and matching pants (\$252) were a pleasant sky blue. I was inspecting a button-front shirt in a muted pink and blue stripe (\$180) when a sweet-faced mustachioed salesman approached.

"Vibskov's stuff is amazing, right?" he said, explaining that the designer is from Denmark. He pointed out an interesting detail on the breast pocket of the suit jacket. "I don't know why, but his designs seem apocalyptic," he said.

Apocalyptic? Um, maybe if the suit was made out of a Hefty bag and Quiznos wrappers.

Nonetheless I sort of understood what he meant. This store, full of bold, clubby, beyond-my-income clothes, is the perfect place to find your wardrobe for an End of the World party. If Armageddon was this weekend, I would totally come here and deplete my bank account, especially if I were a woman or a tranny. Then I could buy a velour top by Jejia, beaded along the collar and sleeve edge, for \$790, or a flowing, sexy dress by Majik in a festively gaudy multicolored leopard print for \$880.

The name Aloha Rag is confusing, since the clothes are neither Polynesian nor raggy. A day later on the phone, Ren Chang, the manager, explained that the original Aloha Rag sold only vintage clothing when it opened in Honolulu in 1995. The owner, Tatsugo Yoda, began offering luxury brands along with his vintage selections after he was introduced to [Martin Margiela's](#) gorgeous clothing. (This, I know from personal experience, can distort your sensibilities forever.)

The store in Honolulu now carries the likes of Balenciaga, [Alexander McQueen](#) and Chloé for stylish Hawaiians. Its Web site, [aloharag.com](#), has also become immensely popular, especially with New Yorkers, who shop there after all the hot clothes are snatched up in Manhattan stores by rabid socialites and their personal assistants. The New York store, which opened in April, will feature new designers and exclusives with lesser known lines, including Jejia, Majik and obscure Japanese labels like Foundation Addict and Garment House Mania.

ALOHA RAG'S evolution, from a secondhand clothing shop into a high-end fashion destination, is yet another example of the zealously chic age we live in, when a \$285 baseball hat in a rainbow metallic print (available here from Majik) seems like a completely normal thing to buy, even if you can't afford your health insurance payment.

I am inescapably stuck in this era, and though I have the credit card of a Cro-Magnon, I had to at least try on these clothes. In the dressing room, a curtained-off area on a raised stage in the middle of the room, I pulled on garments by two designers I am familiar with. A pair of light-blue denim jeans (\$210) from Phillip Lim had '70s-style pockets on the thighs and made me look like Jack Tripper in "Three's Company." A V-neck tee by Tim Hamilton (\$143) was snug and well cut; and a pair of utility shorts, also from Phillip Lim

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(\$185), had squared-off pockets and rolled-up cuffs in a Swiss mountaineer style, a trend in men's shorts I have seen often this season.

I would have tried on more clothes, but I was getting tired. I thanked the staff for indulging me and walked over for a pricey coffee across the street. I tell you, shopping in SHNOT is exhausting.

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