



Yohji Yamamoto's dress in the courtyard at Dream Shop, an exhibit at Antwerp's MoMu fashion museum

SUPERSIZE ME

TALL AND CURVY, LOUISA KAMPS ALWAYS THOUGHT HER CLOTHES HAD TO BE SHORT AND TIGHT TO FIGHT—OR FLAUNT—HER SHAPE. BUT THAT WAS BEFORE SHE TRIED ON THIS SEASON'S REMARKABLE NEW OVERSIZE STYLES

I'll come right out with it: I'm a big woman. I'm 5'10", weigh 147 pounds, and wear a size 12 (10 in a good week!). Whew. Glad that's done. Because you see, tall and curvy women like me learn early on that there's something not quite right about our shape. Looking down at the whorled cowlicks on top of boys' heads during middle-school dance class, I felt hot with shame for looming over them. Sad and angry, too, because I knew none of the pip-squeaks would have asked me to dance if the teacher hadn't shoved us together. And yet—and yet!—the little bastards weren't too proud to take the opportunity to stare like box-stepping zombies at my already substantial breasts. My mother remarked around the same time in a well-meaning but clumsy attempt to acknowledge my suddenly obvious anatomy that a certain shirt made my chest look "puffy." The confusion I felt about my body at age 12—torn between wanting it to disappear and wanting to flaunt it—has been influencing the way I stand and move, not to mention my fashion decisions, ever since.

Over the years, tiny, formfitting clothes seemed to serve both of my warring goals. There were snug sweaters and slim-cut pants to girdle away unwanted inches (and, failing that, put those curves out there for all the world to eyeball) and short,

flitting skirts to showcase my long, relatively lean legs, which I love uncomplicatedly. While my parents often disapproved of how I dressed—and felt free to express their dismay well into my thirties—I took my dad's gruff cough and my mother's knit brow as a sign that I must be doing *something* right.

Recently, however, I realized I needed a change, of wardrobe and of brain. To be honest, teensy had morphed into shapeless and durable—basically, anything fleece with jeans—after I moved to a small Midwestern town and had a baby. So when I started to see some of the new fall collections featuring dramatically exaggerated silhouettes, I was instantly intrigued. Online, I glimpsed the different turns the oversize conceit took when it debuted on runways last spring: Marc Jacobs showed super-elongated, luxuriously slouchy layers and knits; Alexander McQueen went theatrical with high ruff collars and plaid skirts plumped with multiple petticoats; and Nicolas Ghesquière of



Yohji Yamamoto, fall '06

Balenciaga created a fun-house-mirror effect with precarious platform shoes and riding hats stretched up to resemble Beefeaters' helmets.

These clothes have an ironic rebelliousness. Some even swerve into surreality. They all require courage because they swat aside the body-hugging theory that so many women, myself included, subscribe to. My editors at ELLE arrange for me to try on some of the outsize clothes from several new collections. But as I plan my trip to New York, I start to get nervous about making such a radical departure. Will I look like a rodeo clown dressed in floppy, off-kilter clothes? And, mother of all fashion fears: Are they gonna make me look fat?

The Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto's

SoHo showroom is sleek, austere: A white-walled loft with racks of dark, jaggedly cut clothes at one end brings to mind the cloakroom of a Wiccan convention. The rap about Yamamoto is that he designs for art dealers and rock stars who can get away with dressing outside the normal bounds of propriety. He's been cutting clothes with experimental distortions for more than 30 years, and a recent series of retrospective shows drew throngs in Florence, Paris, and Antwerp.

Yamamoto's aesthetic—Japanese to the core—involves wrapping a woman's body in asymmetrical, overlapping layers. It's "another way to seduce," he tells me. "The erotic feeling of not showing" but making the onlooker guess what's underneath all that inky fabric, he says, "is exciting to me." This year, he's cooked up a series of menswear-inspired pinstripe suits and topcoats. I spot a floor-sweeping duster with two spare pant legs tacked to its hem, and a black suit jacket with a nearly identical jacket stitched to its back. The result is that four sleeves droop from the hanger. "It's Wall Street gone nuts," says publicist Carla Wachtveitl, grinning.

I get it, but still. Taking a deep breath, I slip on the piggyback jacket, and promptly crack up. I can't help it; I look strange, like a banker with another banker stuck to my back. I try on a midnight-navy two-piece suit. One trouser leg is almost three times as wide as the other (and the narrow leg is wide to start), and there's a leather belt on the inside of the waistband that cinches the two sides of the front together, so that a V-shape flap of fabric hangs beside my hip. The cuffs of the coat cover my hands completely. This time, though, I'm smitten.

With graceful curves at the shoulders and hips and a contrastingly slim torso, the suit reminds me a bit of Charlie Chaplin's poor-man's garb. Yet instead of adding bulk, the featherweight gabardine moves around my body fluidly. To my delight, I look not only quite tall, but lithe—flattered in not one but two directions. I could be a cool, sylphlike creature of the night. Or maybe a gallerist with Ninja-quick dealmaking skills—*ka-ching!*

As I spin in front of the mirror, I notice an effervescent bubbling in my stomach—the stirring of long-dormant fashion endorphins. This tricky suit is not *meant* to be businesslike in the conventional staid sense—indeed, that is its point—and, wearing it, the emotion I feel is strikingly simple: joy. The question of courage, for the moment, is moot. Why would anybody ever balk at a suit that has as much mad genius woven through it?

Wachtveid tells me that Yamamoto knows his clothes can be off-putting. "People must give them a chance," the designer likes to say. At the third exhibition, at Antwerp's MoMu fashion museum, he included a dressing room so visitors could try on his pieces. It was a huge hit—people lingered there for hours, Wachtveid says—and as I continue to mosey down the racks, I can understand why.

I've never dared set foot in Fendi's gleaming Fifth Avenue store, fearing that haughty salespeople would dismiss me with a glance. But I march straight in today—doing my best dogged-reporter impersonation so nobody mistakes me for riffraff. I'm shown two voluminous coats. The first is navy blue, with bracelet-length batwing sleeves. From under these, a second set of skinnier sleeves extends to my hands. I note the practicality—my wrists will stay warm in winter—and the versatile color. The publicist, Paige Pedersen, nods patiently. Being German, Karl Lagerfeld, Fendi's chief designer for 40 years, knows how to make a solid winter coat, she says.

After she threads a wide belt through slits cut in the enormous sleeves, Pedersen really has to tug to get it around my waist (the coat is a runaway



sample, so, say, about a size 10 in length and a 2 in width). But once the belt's gold buttons are done up and I look in the mirror, my hard-hitting shtick is history. "Wow!" I say loud enough to turn the heads of a curious knot of flip-flop-wearing, Starbucks-slurping teenage girls trying on fur coats nearby. The coat combines military simplicity with that stealthy Japanese come-hither thing—like an obi sash slicing through all this rich fabric, the belt brings out what is hourglassy about my body. The second coat is also a knockout: a gray wool version of the same slyly seductive, inverted-pyramid silhouette. On the runway, both coats were shown over tights, and the contrast—a very full top above a very narrow bottom—made the models' legs look about a zillion miles long. And my legs? They look about a million miles long, even in jeans. "What do you know," Pedersen says, "she looks good in Fendi!"

Interestingly, a capacious Chloé cocoon coat, in cocoa, teaches the opposite lesson about proportion. The catwalk model had it belted low around her hips—and with its somber post-Edwardian lines, it reminds me of something Virginia Woolf might have worn. Shouldering it myself, I'm struck by how light it is, despite its abundant fullness. When I tie the belt around my hips, however, I think I might have to put rocks in the pockets and head into the river. I look large and in charge—and not in a good way. But then I spot a second set of belt loops higher up. I move the sash to these and—voilà—the coat looks 100 percent better cinched below my bust. With loose folds of fabric now flowing down nearly to the floor from an Empire waist, its volume is concentrated over the bottom two thirds of my body. I feel regal and beneficent and—I can't help noticing as I take a few victory laps around the room—surprisingly beautiful.

By the time of my final appointment, at Derek Lam's showroom, I'm feeling bold, cocky even, about my affinity for these extravagantly cut clothes. I spot a big, fuzzy fox jacket that reminds me of something Rosalind Russell might have worn in *His Girl Friday*. But, alas, the coat's boxy shape does not do my figure any favors. The short, black, trapeze-cut cashmere cape jacket I try next, however, is an instant success. With the jacket swishing over the top of my hips, I feel flirty, but in a low-key way. Publicist Risa Scobie, who's just under 5', throws me another bone. She points out that I'm lucky I can wear this coat, because she never could. Scobie is built much like the cheerleaders the middle school boys coveted, and so—the impulse is a bit sadistic, I admit—I ask her to try it on. "See?" she says, and it's true. The coat positively dwarfs her.

With few exceptions, the abstracted lines of the outsize clothes so popular this season are truly figure-flattering: Sleeves cropped to expose slender wrists, collars dropped to expose long necks, bodies briefly pinched in at or near the waist—all of these tricks break up potentially overwhelming proportions by creating counterbalancing points of lightness. I get so animated, explaining this magic to friends I meet that night for a beer, that the bartender gives us funny looks. My theory, so many strapping women's theory—that shrinky-dink is our answer—needs serious revision. Clothes that artfully deploy bold volumes can make us look worlds slimmer than clothes that attempt to pack it all in, sausage-casing-style.

Beyond opening my eyes to a powerful new aesthetic, this style helped me see my size as an asset and to "own it," so to speak. It's bracing to dress in a way that inspires me to take up my full space—shoulders squared, ready for what comes my way—instead of slumping through the day in a dispiriting fleece, or, as I did in my supposedly hot-cha sweaters, shuffling down the street with shoulders hunched, conflicted about displaying my puffy chest. Yes, the oversize clothes can seem slightly preposterous, but their disinterest in being tight and slinky simply for the sake of baring flesh is refreshing. I felt loose and happy in the loose and happy clothes, but also grown-up and self-respecting. Sexy, in a thoroughly dignified way. I might have to go skimpy now and then—the inner adolescent never dies—but I'm grateful to be cracking into a brand-new fashion game. □

