BY TIZIANA CARDINI
March 24, 2025

Maximilian Raynor Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Barbara Franchin, the force behind Trieste's emerging designer contest ITS since 2002, has an unrelenting drive. Following the 2022 opening of the ITS Accademy—an impeccably curated archive-meets-museum showcasing 14,935 portfolios from past contest participants—she decided it was time for a revamp. Rather than awarding just one contestant, now everyone is a winner. "We changed the contest into a residency," she said, because "ranking the works as first, second, third started to feel increasingly uneasy to me—I wanted to offer more substantial support to each designer."

The rigorous selection process remains unchanged: an international jury reviews hundreds of portfolios from the graduation collections of top fashion schools around the world. Ten designers were selected, each receiving €10,000 and the chance to take part in a 10-day creative residency, during which they're engaged in experimental workshops, exploring craft techniques, refining their skills, and (hopefully) forging long-lasting connections. Their graduation pieces were later showcased in an exhibition at ITS Accademy, titled Borderless—a very timely concept. Remarked Franchin, "politics are increasingly challenging borders, both in terms of gender and national identities. The world today is in a rather grim state, making it more crucial than ever to focus on openness, acceptance, and inclusivity as sources of creative inspiration and intervention."

This year's winners showcased both diversity and individuality, with themes that ranged from personal and familial struggles to visions of dystopian futures to nostalgia for the playful essence of childhood. Upcycling and zero-waste techniques were central to all of the collections, underscoring the newcomers' dedication to responsible design.

RELATED VIDEO

Watch the 2025 Met Gala Red Carpet

This year's jury's special mention went to British designer Maximilian Raynor for his collection *Manor for Heaven*, which reinterpreted historical references through what he described as "an anarchic, chaotic, very London, very queer, norm-challenging approach." Envisioned as a fantastical anti-patriarchy protest set in a fictional purgatory, the collection featured shredded tweeds, shimmering ginghams, and oversized knitwear—all crafted from deadstock materials and assembled using zero-waste cutting techniques.

French designer Macy Grimshaw used the unconventional medium of paper, she explained, to "create something beautiful out of something as unstoppable as my grandmother's Alzheimer's." Aiming to evoke the fragility of memories that slowly fade, like paint peeling from walls, she printed photos and images of her grandmother onto leather, denim, and chiffon, encasing the shapes in layers of paper. Both touching and visually striking, the project captured with artful sensitivity the erosion of memory and the beauty found within loss.

Maya El Ahdab Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Macy Grimshaw Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Mojoda Dajomi Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Drawing from her personal experience as a 22-year-old disabled woman who uses a wheelchair full-time, Paris-based designer Naya El Abdab said she created a "collection for everyone." Prioritizing both comfort and soft structure, she incorporated finely pleated jersey and stretch fabrics alongside boning and padding to enhance the body's shape, as well as gizdles, molded from her own medical corset. "My disability became my greatest strength," she shared. "Confidence comes from embracing your body, not hiding it—self-acceptance has turned my vulnerability into art."

German accessory designer Mojoda Dajomi envisioned a near-future where, by 2085, water scarcity forces humanity to collect rainwater for survival. This not-so-unrealistic concept inspired Daughters of Water, a group of slightly intimidating dystopian guardians—somewhere between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Dune*—dedicated to protecting us against dehydration, elegantly outfitted in towering wax-cotton headgear designed to collect varying amounts of rainwater.

Patrick Taylor Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Gabrielle Swarzenberg Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Nostalgia for a childhood spent skiing and sailing with his family inspired London-born, New York-based knitwear designer Patrick Taylor. His collection featured playful padded forms, crafted through neoprene silhouettes that evoked the feeling of a child outgrowing his beloved sports gear. Vibrant bursts of color added a fresh energy, while the shapes appeared windswept, as if contoured by the motion of a sailing trip or the rush of sliding down the slopes. A similar lighthearted approach was embraced by Gabrielle Swarzenberg, a Belgian designer who since childhood has crafted hundreds of paper planes. She found a kindred spirit in Harry Smith, a Beatnik who, during the '40s and '70s, collected 250 paper planes of all sizes from the streets of New York. Translating this passion into actual outfits, she recreated their aerodynamic silhouettes in a collection of geometric garments, cut origami-style and treated to mimic the texture and structure of paper.

A group of talented Chinese designers stood out for their ability to merge research and innovation with cultural heritage and personal memories. Zhuan Cai drew inspiration from a visit to Shanghai's Yuyuan Garden, a place of poetic beauty that shaped his romantic collection. Blending elements of rural traditions, theatrical costumes, and artisanal techniques, he created elaborate outfits that felt both dreamy and contemporary. Fur, the ubiquitous presence in this season's collections, was the focal point for designer Yifan Yu, who explored it as a symbol of the human connection to nature—particularly in the Northern tribes that wore it during pagan festivities. Seeking sustainable alternatives, he developed all-natural materials, cutting them into zoomorphic shapes integrated into protective menswear designs. Qianhan Liu's collection was a tour de force of imaginative craftsmanship. While drawing inspiration from Eastern traditions, she explored the tactile potential of materials with remarkable skill—transforming leather into lasct-cut leaves, hand-stitched onto knit crochet to form a sculptural cloak, or printing it to mimic wood bark, which she then shaped into oversized pantssits and draped tunics. Accessory designer Cindy Zhanhan Li reimagined the everyday brush as a sensory tool, infusing it with both function and artistry. Her collection featured a series of ergonomic designs—some crafted as portable, handbag-like objects, others resembling flowing *chowdaren*—enhancing tactility and giving the ordinary brush a playful, sensual dimension.

Zhuan Cai Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Yifan Yu Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Qianhan Liu Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

Cindy Zhanhan Li Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione ITS

This year's jury included, among others, Andrea Rosso, OTB and Diesel Sustainability Ambassador; designer Maria Sole Ferragamo; Sara Sozzani Maino, Fondazione Sozzani's creative director; Stefano Gallici, Ann Demeulemeester creative director; Dame Zandra Rhodes; and philosopher Emanuele Coccia.

Alongside the designers' showcase, ITS Academy also inaugurated *Fashionlands—Clothes Beyond Borders*, an exhibition exploring the universal language of fashion. Curated by Olivier Saillard and Emanuele Coccia, the display juxtaposed flamboyant creations from past participants with Massimo Gardone's black-and-white photographs of humble, everyday garments, like socks, belts, T-shirts, that the curators described as "a sort of basic grammar of dressing that speaks to all bodies, simple shapes we see every day on everyone in the streets." The contrast highlighted the discourse—and the distance—between avant-garde expression and fashion's universal essentials.

Reflecting on this year's contest, Coccia observed, "there's a growing sentiment among fashion graduates that they don't want to follow traditional career paths within major fashion conglomerates. Instead, they're seeking alternative routes—more niche, more artistic—creating one-of-a-kind pieces that truly express who they are. The portfolios we've reviewed feel like daydreams, beautiful reveries imagining a different kind of fashion, where for a moment, art, dreams, and reality collide."

"These designers are like spring," chimed Franchin. "Spring is what makes winter bearable."