

Phony Times Call for Phony Jeans

[nytimes.com/2024/10/19/style/jeans-denim-print-acne-studios-rag-bone.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/19/style/jeans-denim-print-acne-studios-rag-bone.html)

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Acne Studios, the Swedish fashion house, makes \$800 jeans that look like something a roofer would wear to a rave.

They're coated in paint flecks, battered as a baseball mitt and burdened with enough metal trinkets that they should weigh 20-odd pounds. Except they don't. They aren't covered in paint either. And those wear marks? They're all a facade.

Each splatter, splice and wear stain on the jeans is printed. The chains and charms are a one-dimensional illusion. In the age of A.I. fakery, designers are getting in on the fake news and making jeans that aren't quite real.

Image



From afar these Acne Studios pants are quite convincing. Credit... Grant Brady Lopez

A Long Flirtation with Trompe L'oeil

Fashion history is a speckled battlefield of “trompe l’oeil” technique to make consumers marvel and gasp. As far back as 1927, the French couturier Elsa Schiaparelli was minting cheeky sweaters with flat, sham bows knit in them. (The term “trompe l’oeil” is French for “trick the eye.”)

The 1990s witnessed a wave of postmodern, illusionist garments — the British designer Katharine Hamnett’s jumpsuit that duped for a zoot suit, Jean Paul Gaultier’s dresses printed with images of women in bikinis and Martin Margiela’s whole collection of matte “sweaters” and “coats” printed, deviously, with photos of other garments.

These designs were often conspicuous in their fakery — inviting onlookers to be in on the gag. Take Mr. Gaultier’s trompe l’oeil jeans from 1997. The “denim” is printed smaller than the actual pants, exposing white beneath.

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Today’s fake jeans are intended to deceive absolutely. They’re also proving quite popular: Acne Studios’s version is sold out on its website. The summer’s bratty style icons, Charli XCX and Troye Sivan, have worn other photorealistic Acne designs, including a pair screened to look as if they have some leather chaps dangling off the front. Other surrealist styles, like Balenciaga’s \$1,490 fleece “jeans” with synthetic rips and tatters and the Swedish label Our Legacy’s artificially abused jeans, are sold out in several sizes on these brand’s respective websites.

“When I saw the jeans, my first initial thought was it actually is like dirty denim,” said Colin Huang, 25, a stylist and designer in Los Angeles who recently purchased Acne’s printed jeans. They’ve become his wearable, made-you-look party trick. From three feet away, he said, “you wouldn’t know if these pants were printed or not.”

Image



Charli XCX and Troye Sivan in West Hollywood in January. Credit: Affinitypicture/Backgrid, via Acne Studios

Image



Trompe l'oeil printed trousers from Acne Studios. Credit...Acne Studios

High Resolution, Maximum Illusion

In one sense, this audacious accuracy is a testament to just how scarily exact clothing production techniques have become.

“You can pretty easily scan” a pair of jeans and print them onto a pair of pants so it looks “sort of seamless,” said Trevor Gorji, the designer of Fugazi, a nascent streetwear brand that’s dabbled in trompe l’oeil pants.

No brand has cornered the denim duping market like Rag & Bone. In 2013, the mainstream brand introduced the Miramar, a series of terry-cloth and fleece sweatpants printed to look like jeans. The label now offers more than a dozen ersatz options, ranging from elephantine baggies to slender joggers. It added men’s options this year. Each pair, said Jennie McCormick, the chief merchandising and design officer, is built off an existing pair of actual Rag & Bone denim that is photographed and screened onto the cotton pants.

The result is the pants equivalent of taping eyeballs over your glasses while you’re sleeping at your desk. Couch comfort laced with a cubicle-appropriate facade. “It’s that novelty that draws people in,” Ms. McCormick said, “and then it is the comfort that perhaps keeps people

coming back.”

Image



Rag & Bone’s sweatpants that look like jeans combine the best of all worlds. Credit...Niko Margaros

But designer variations — those that cost and don’t really offer greater comfort than a pair of jeans — appeal more as a high-minded fashion statement.

“It’s this idea of fashion being a picture,” said Jonny Johansson, Acne’s founder and creative director. What Mr. Johansson meant was that today we engage with clothes primarily through our phones — we scan Instagram shots of runway shows and shop through apps without ever seeing the product in person first. Why, these deceitful jeans seem to ask, should rips and chains and paint flecks be three dimensional if they’re primarily going to be seen in a single dimension?

You could even go all William Gibson and see these jeans as a knowing commentary on how we can’t trust anything these days. Just like that A.I. photo of a “yassified” JD Vance or the digitally generated clip of a little girl riding an alligator during Hurricane Milton, our jeans just aren’t what they seem anymore.

“It’s very contemporary,” Mr. Johansson said with his dry Swedish wit.

Image



Miramar joggers from Rag & Bone. Credit...Fabrizio Amoroso

Image



A lookbook image of the Rag & Bone denim. Credit...Niko Margaros

The Cool Illusion

But surely not everyone is thinking this deeply about their jeans. Most trompe l'oeil trouser owners presented a plainer theory: They just look cool.

Image



Bryson Moore wearing his Our Legacy Digital Print jeans with spurious rips and bleach flecks. Credit...Bryson Moore

“To this day they’re the most interesting pair of pants that I have,” said Bryson Moore, 30, a content creator in Toronto who purchased Our Legacy’s Digital Print jeans last year.

Up close, Mr. Moore said, you can really take in the spurious rips and bleach flecks. “When you have the jeans in your hand, you can really sit there and look at them and you’re like, ‘Wow there’s been a lot of attention to detail,’” he said.

Mr. Huang in Los Angeles saw the dubious denim as a riff on people buying battered Dickies and Carhartts on eBay and Depop. They’re work wear, minus the work, plus a whole lot of extra money. Said Mr. Huang, “You’re essentially getting that look without feeling the dirt.”

