Saskia Vogel

UNDRESS ME NOW

Scanties and socio-economic curves

When stocks go up, so do ladies' hemlines, and vice versa, they say. So with the UK barely making its way out of the recession, what does it say that women have ditched their skirts entirely?

From TheCut.com to *Women's Wear Daily*, there seems to be a concurrence that Beyoncé's fondness for the corset, Lada Gaga's corset-knickers-fishnets uniform, and Rihanna's saucy slips have much to do with a spike in women wearing lingerie as outerwear. Retailers have benefited accordingly. Between 2008 and 2009, Selfridge's saw a 70 percent increase in corset sales. After Rihanna wore a white bandage slip to the American Music Awards, sales of Bordelle's £300 Angela Cage Bandage Slip increased 90 per cent. The Spring 2010 collections are still full of lingerie-inspired garments. Even erotic luxury retail brand Coco de Mer is being name-checked by the *Los Angeles Times* for embodying "bordello chic". Underwear as outerwear isn't going anywhere, and there's a cherry on top.

Stylist and *LOVE* magazine editor Katie Brand said she sent Louis Vuitton's Autumn 2009 models down the runway with bunny ears to add a bit of whimsy, but one wonders how bunny ears and the lingerie trend will translate to mass market fashionistas. Lingerie + bunny ears = Playboy Bunny. Right? Instead of more conservative hemlines during the economic downturn, fashion seems to be channeling the early thrusts of the women's movement… The age when Hugh Hefner was securing his title as bachelor extraordinaire and the Playboy Bunny became iconic, and when *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurly Brown responded to Hef by telling women to "go get 'em." One-night-stands and a disposable income, that is.

Some form of animal ears crowning a lingerie ensemble has been a Halloween fancy dress staple for years. "Sexy" doesn't even represent this costume category anymore. Manufacturers of sexy Halloween costumes have added a "super" to "sexy" to describe their current array of naughty nurses and wicked witches. Why? Because women are demanding fancy dress that looks like intimate apparel. Now that lingerie is in fashion, women have more opportunities to work it. Perhaps it's more than a desire to "flaunt it if you've got it." In an age where we are terrorized by religious extremists who like their women covered up, is lingerie fashion a sign of protest?

Underneath this trend is the return of the voluptuous curve. The waif is over, they say. "Real women" (read: fleshier women) are exclusively gracing the pages of German women's magazine *Bri gitte* and more are being sent down the runway. Kate Moss rose to fame when an underfed body was a mark of luxury. This body implied you could afford to starve. Amidst cutbacks and downsizing, fistfuls of breasts and juicy asses are once again desirable in the media.

Celebrities may have brought lingerie out of *FHM* and into *Vogue*, but this certainly isn't new. The 1990s alone gave us Madonna's infamous Jean-Paul Gaultier cone brassier. Beyoncé took Thierry Mugler's 1992 motorcycle corset off Emma Sjöberg in George Michael's "Too Funky" video and used it for her "I Am Sasha Fierce" album promotions. The mid-nineties also gave us the babydoll look, as worn by a bedraggled, red-lipped Courtney Love. So what can we make of this conundrum of fiscal belt-tightening and zaftig barely-dressed ladies? It's a back-to-basics reminder swaddled in a silky nothings: Eating and fucking, our primal urges, are also the height of luxury.

Helen Croydon

PAINTING IT ON

For decorative use only

"I will preserve my modesty won't I?" I ask earnestly.

"Oh yes." Assures Laura, picking up a huge frightening paintbrush, dripping with glutinous pastel pink liquid and moving it threateningly in the direction of my naked torso. It is very cold as it sploshes onto my skin, and tickly.

The first coat doesn't cover very much. Uh oh. I think. I should have gone for black. I chose a picture of a baby pink and white striped corset, matching French thong, speckled with magenta sequins, laced together with a sparkly silver ribbon at the back because the colours looked so striking. But I failed to foresee the transparency issue with pale pink.

I am being painted you see, in underwear. No, not painted in my underwear, but painted naked, with the outline of underwear onto my skin. I shouldn't complain. It was my idea. I wanted to test the benefits of commando-ism, whilst still preserving the inveigling powers of my lingerie.

Damn you, I had said to my bent bra hooks that no longer slide into their fasteners. Goodbye you ruinous knicker lines. Good riddance you off-white bras which sneakily jump into my coloureds washing pile when I'm not looking. Hello an extra ten minutes in bed every morning because I won't have to redress when I realise that new purple top isn't actually the same colour purple as the straps on that new purple bra. Actually, make that an extra 15 minutes because I will no longer have to turn my underwear – sorry lingerie - drawer upside down to find pants to match the bra. And then, when that fails, switch tactics to find the bra that matches the pants.

I regularly turn my two undergarment drawers upside down onto the floor. They stubbornly refuse to close and when forced to, they retaliate by spewing some of the contents out of the back. Without a need for underwear, I mused, I could empty them completely and fill them with things like more bags or belts, or necklaces. Or phone numbers.

Several years ago, when an ex moved out, my reaction was not, oh god, how are we going to split the sofa, but rather hoorah, I get a whole extra three drawers to add to my existing five. I took a whole day, gleefully separating my brassieres, panties and hosiery from one drawer into three. And then to my mathematical delight, there was still a drawer left over. So

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I spent another beautiful hour sub-dividing stockings and tights. The contents of those drawers have since bred like rabbits and I would be glad of the opportunity for a cull.

Body painting, I pondered, may also remove the need to wax. Imagine, If I could simply apply a thick brush of paint and be done with salons, salves and smelly solutions. Lingerie is redundant without the plucking and preening which must lie beneath it. What good is a garter if it is surrounded by sprouting blonde hairs. And what good are crotchless knickers if you can't enter the crotch for the trees. But maintenance is a hugely bothersome task, the efforts of which are grossly under-triumphed.

Let me explain. A bikini line requires attention every three weeks. Legs however will last a good four before having to resort to trousers. God gave us body hair, presumably to make sex less spontaneous. When the devil invented waxing, God appears to have made it all grow at varying speeds. Wax too much and we get ghastly red spots. Do it too infrequently and we look German. It is not a lunch hour task either. The skin needs to fully breathe for a good few hours afterwards, otherwise we start to look like we have measles. And we can't enjoy the benefits of a wax until a good 24-hours and two showers later because sticky bits get caught in every known, and unknown, bodily crevice, attracting black fluff from everywhere. Even if we're wearing white.

If we are going to go for low-denier stockings, we have to address chipped and outgrown nail polish issues too. The pedicure though, is frustratingly a five-week-interval chore. Which means that all three of the above mentioned beautifications only synchronise once every 60 weeks.

And so it is with all this in mind that I find myself naked in the living room of Laura Millar, who runs the body art site ***exclusivelythemed.co.uk***, as she tickles my latissimus and adorns my deltoids with bristles drenched in pink and white gloop.

Also witnessing me shivering and battling to keep my arms outstretched for four hours, is a young male photographer, who didn't quite know where to look. He was probably thinking, "Lord, I've spent all my life, trying to get girls unclothed, now I find, when they get to her age, they go and get the stuff painted on."

What is it then about underwear which makes it so titillating that it's even fun to wear it when we are naked? How can something which reminds you of bare flesh, be better than actual bare flesh? "Immediate nakedness would be like reading a book and finding out who did the murder in the first chapter," said one male friend. So it's the reveal then? Lingerie is the one final layer before taboo. It's the thrill of the imagination which keeps Agent Provocateur in business, rather than the practicality of a push-up bra.

I once heard a man say that a woman in a full head-to-toe burkha winked at him with the most deliciously made-up smoky eyes. He said it was the horniest thing he had ever experienced. Consider too the sexually repressive nature of Victorian fashions. The women may have been covered up, but the feminine form was flaunted by the curve of a corset and the creation of bulk around her hips and bust. The flash of an ankle in a heavily-clothed Victorian lady could make a man salivate. So more, it seems, is more.

All this would indicate that our underclothes play an arousing role in our wardrobe, rather than a practical one. If we chose to cover our intimate bits for comfort or hygiene, then why the G-string? Or the underwire bra? If it were for support, then why are we not parading the bedroom in sports bras and jockstraps? If it were for warmth I would not have been so mortified at myself for considering buying a set of thermal underwear from Primark the other day. It was -5 degrees on Oxford Street at the time. But still.

In tribal cultures they use body paint all the time – Aborigines, Maoris, native Californians, the indigenous people of Pacific islands, India and parts of Africa. Some do it for camouflage, some for celebration, some to show their social status, age or membership of a certain clan. In southern Sudan, Nuba men between the ages

of seventeen and thirty wear body paint to indicate their age. That strikes me as not unlike a fertile young woman in the West who dresses provocatively to show her availability to mate.

Perhaps tribal cultures are only doing with body paint what colder countries are forced to do with clothes. Even without the need for layers of warmth, we all share a universal urge to adorn our bodies in some way. Our toggery serves a far more complicated purpose that simply to shield, protect and keep us dry. Our dress is a tool which we use to signify our status, our character, our mood and our best physical assets.

And that is never more true with any garment than it is with underwear. All fashions for everything but smallclothes have, at some point, allowed practicality to dictate its direction. The rational dress movement of the Victorian era made rib-crushing corsets give way to less restrictive designs. And it was the chaffing caused by leather trousers which made them disappear from Top Shop as quick as they arrived. And thanks to this being the coldest winter since 1963, Ugg boots are acceptable dinner wear. I may have stopped myself buying thermal undies, but even I bought a pair of flat boots when the snow hadn't cleared after three weeks. They did this alarming and very ugly thing to my feet whereby my heel was lowered to the same latitude as the ball of my foot. Crazy. However it did stop me falling over on the ice again.

But lingerie? No. Practicality has never guided demand for style. In fact it is the opposite. BHS and Ethel Austin went all de rigeur on us when they saw what Primark did with budget underwear (don't ever wash it by the way – the stitching dissolves in water). Marks and Spencer also got with the programme. They eased off on the waist-high briefs and introduced things like Ouverts and tie-sides. Only one lingerie seller bucked the trend. La Senza down-graded its upper-end chic and aimed for the less racy middle-market. They brought in pink-heart-shaped camisoles and cotton night dresses - the type of thing you could wear in front of your mum. And look what's happening to La Senza.

The trouble in defining the role of ladies' underwear lies in the sexes. Men would have us believe it is a purely decorative garment in which to twirl around under a dim light. Women however want more – typical. We want the push-up power to give us a Nigella sized cleavage, but we don't want to be seen to use padding. We want frills to thrill but we want a smooth line under our shirt. We want it to be ripped off in the bedroom but we also want it to keep us warm. We are greedy. I was greedy. I wanted Laura's body paint to stay on. I don't know who I was going to show it to – other than my lodger. But it felt too deliciously Burlesque to wash off. What a bad move that was though, as I found when I turned up to a (rather important) business meeting straight afterwards with pastel pinks oozing up out of my neckline. Oops.

Imagine, I thought, if that corset could be painted on permanently. I could still wear my thermals but transform effortlessly into Dita Von Teese whenever I took my clothes off. I could transfix men into a state of titillation simply by standing, not having had to battle with one single suspender hook. It would be like semi-permanent lip liner, only covering a much larger area than the Cupid's bow. Or like dyed eyelashes, only with a greater choice of colours. It would be called perma-wear.

But I don't think that is meant to be. Faced with the reality of pink body paint smudged on the inside of my clothes, the tribulations of waxing, the awkward timings of pedicures and the sheer impossibility of lingerie drawer management, it seems nature would prefer us to remain a blank canvas. I am rather glad it has put so many obstacles in the way of grooming ourselves into a state of permanent sexual objectification. It is much better that we paint that image at our own discretion.

Helen Croydon is a freelance journalist and producer: **www.helencroydon.com**

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