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Altered States

SHOPPERS COME TO UNDERCOVER TO MANIFEST THEIR DESTINIES

BY ELIZABETH KAYE

UNDERCOVER—ONE OF THE few independents extant amid the J. Crews and Gaps overtaking Santa Monica's 3rd Street Promenade—operates on two principles: Sex Sells and You Are What You Wear. These are notions calibrated to a city that confuses seeming with being, one where it is widely believed and generally true that wearing the right thing can better your existence. Women come to Undercover seeking clothes that will get them noticed at Sky Bar and other places where stomachs are flat and butts are rounded. For this reason a trip here is not just a shopping experience but a way to observe the enactment of local customs.

The reigning commonplace of fashion—that clothes are wearable fantasy—pales in light of the more compelling and elusive query: Whose fantasy is it? For patrons of Undercover, the answer to this question is that clothes are the fantasy of Adam Shaffer, the shop's 34-year-old owner and buyer whose solipsism takes the engaging form of a conviction that a woman who looks good to him is a woman who looks good, period.

Shaffer is boyish, a reflexive flirt with no apparent reticence about declaring himself a lover of women. As the most ardent among us cannot help being, he

is fixed on trumping reality's deadening strictures through the act of making his fantasies material. Those fantasies—at least that portion of them that rightfully belong on hangers—are divisible into two varieties: those that are sexy, as in hand-painted jeans and satiny, off-the-shoulder sweaters, and those that are

tasy comes from neither originality nor fineness of taste but from the collective sense of what constitutes female allure as popularized by Hugh Hefner, who happens to be one of Undercover's regular customers. In this most personal of stores, any purchase buys into Shaffer's

aesthetic in ways both figurative and literal. Perhaps that is why a striking number of the clientele are men who are themselves no strangers to the Playboy ethos. As a rule, these men are joined in unions that owe their existence—however temporary—to the well-planned breasts, shiny blond hair, and long, lean torsos of their ladies of the moment. These men tend to be in their forties and newly divorced or chronically unfaithful or chronically bored. Consequently, they find in young women with such marketable virtues nothing less than a cross to be held up to the vampire that is the fear of aging.

It is men like these to whom Adam Shaffer appeals when he stages late-night fashion shows at clubs like Barfly, where

Hef himself, flanked by the requisite minions, looks on approvingly from the best table in the room, a tableau providing Shaffer with a claim on that other great American fantasy, the one popularized by Horatio Alger.

Picture Shaffer, more cute than handsome with his dark hair and eager smile,

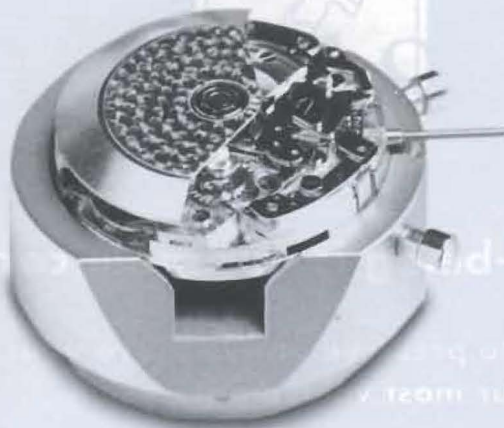


DREAM WEAVER: Undercover's Adam Shaffer

unapologetically sexy, as in bustiers contrived from black lace and red satin and hand-crocheted halters the size of bikini tops worn on the beaches of Saint-Tropez. These items accord with Shaffer's three-pronged aesthetic: "It's got to say something," "It's got to have some pop," and above all, "It's got to scream."

You can see that the force of his fan-

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CREATION THEORY: *The celestial ceiling at Undercover*

decked out for the event in brown Costume National pants and a camel Dolce & Gabbana jacket and surrounded—shades of Hef—by gorgeous women half-dressed in attire of his choosing. Then consider, as Shaffer will on such occasions, that a mere nine years have passed since he embarked on his first venture, making and selling hair accessories, an occupation that looked like a winner back in 1993, when every girl he knew had long hair and he needed to generate a living. Soon he had left his family's home in New Jersey, having invested the three thousand dollars that was his life's savings in a kiosk set on a busy street in the south Florida tourist town of Coconut Grove, from which he sold headbands and scrunchies. Within two years he was bored with scrunchies and anxious to get into a business that wouldn't have to be shut down every time it rained.

It was then that Shaffer visited Los Angeles, checked out the 3rd Street Promenade, saw more people in one place than he had seen anywhere that wasn't New York. Beyond that he saw the sense of possibility that emboldens pilgrims to the golden land, a sense that causes an unusual number of arrival stories to be etched with the kind of wonder generally reserved for events that are divinely ordained. "Something told me to come to Los Angeles" is how Shaffer puts it, and perhaps that same something prompted him to have Michelangelo's Creation copied onto Undercover's

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ceiling, allowing him to look skyward and take inspiration from the sight of God giving life to Adam.

SHAFER RELATES HIS EARLY EXPERIENCES at Undercover and gradual success—he is set to open a second location on Sunset—in the terminology of someone whose strong suit does not lie in verbal expression, using phrases like “I threw caution to the wind” and “The proof is in the pudding.” The passing years have not substantively changed his view of Los Angeles. As expressed in his store’s gossamer finery, it remains that of an outsider, one that has little to do with life as actually lived by ordinary citizens for whom the pursuit of glamour

is a less urgent matter than getting the roof fixed or doing the laundry. Undercover is about the Los Angeles imagined by people from other places and experienced by that small but noticeable segment of the population young enough or rich enough or beautiful enough to partake of pleasure unsullied by the nasty specter of responsibility. In such a realm, sexiness is the most negotiable form of currency and the word *uplifted* is used to refer to things other than one’s spiritual condition.

This is understood at one level or another by every woman sorting through

Undercover’s Plein Sud leather pants and Catherine Malandrino chiffon blouses, a search that is in fact a touchingly quixotic quest for what money can’t buy. For these women cream-colored suede skirts and fitted leather jackets are ammunition in the hunt for love and satisfaction that seems to never end: For the lawyer who runs her own firm, a low-cut blouse is a way to seek a



date; for the young woman lately jilted, a body-skimming jumpsuit is a way to make an ex-boyfriend jealous; for the wife leery of monotony, a beaded sweater is a way to fire up a marriage.

An article of faith at Undercover is that you can shop here even if you are not what passes for physically perfect. This is true, though it should be noted that a large customer at this emporium is one who wears a size 8. What the 8s and the 2s have in common is that they are practical enough or desperate enough to enter into the Los Angeles mating game, a practice based on what one of Shaffer’s four saleswomen terms “using your external self to develop relationships.” Does this mean that if you don’t want to look sexy, shopping at Undercover is a waste of time? “Correct,” she says. “This is not Anne Klein.”

See a woman emerge from behind the dressing room curtain and behold herself in the dimly lit, gilt-edged mirror, lips pursed, chest thrust out, and you are viewing the secret heart of a city whose belief in the western notion of transformation has yet to falter. At Undercover new clothes are an expression of self that takes on totemic power, so that dressing becomes a rite less of style than of alchemy, a way for women to do what can rarely be done: alter not simply their look but their destiny. (LA)

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