

The New Gentle Sex

by Silvia Bombardini

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It was in the wake of the economic crisis that the metrosexual saw it fit, as it arguably were, to retire from our ideals, our catwalks and our streets. Suddenly no one was any longer willing to put up with vanity, and besides, the opportunities to indulge themselves had grown thin. Hard times called for muscle, and a renewed appreciation thereof has shaped men's fashion and lifestyle, from 2009 to the present day. Chivalrous, practical, much better suited to save and protect, done up in a wife-beater and Gap cargo pants, the machosexual had risen to replace him – and predictably enough, despite his honourable goals, was instantly sexualized. We've seen him ever since, draped across our cities, often holding on to a damsel in distress, his manly clothes discarded on billboards and underwear or cologne campaigns: sex sells, and this we know, but would it not be fair to say that over the years, we've grown somewhat desensitized towards it?

Disillusioned once more by the unfulfilled promises of the macho, a still thriving trend has seen various women reacting to his failure by taking matters into their own hands. If gender is indeed, as Judith Butler suggests, not something one is but something one does, they don't have any more time to spare on

yesteryear's pantomime. Ambiguous sexualities, as per tradition, find in music and performance the most fertile grounds, and the web sings the praises of genderless icons such as Syd tha Kyd or boychild. And female artists themselves are not above ridiculing at every turn the histrionics of the alpha-male who fell prey to the lure of popular culture – as for one does Eisa Jocson in her *Macho Dancer* piece. More demure, but no less on point, on the streets that matter feminine styles have vanished. Unisex athleisure, a winning combo of a no-fuss attitude, health kick and forgiving fits, is all the rage. And luxury shoppers in London can now order their Rad Hourani custom-made couture suits from Selfridges' newly launched three-floor [Agender](#) department.

But the misfortune of the machosexual appears to have prompted in some young men a response somewhat at odds with that of their female counterparts, and indeed, the occasional mockery of machismo by the latter and rekindled feminist independence might be playing no little part in it. A curious longing seem to have spread in very recent times, unfamiliar especially to them. A desire for tenderness, and a platonic will to embrace the sensitivity of our age are making themselves known, in particular among those young enough not to be already too irreversibly conditioned or concerned by societal expectations. Hug therapy grows popular in the Netherlands and at cuddle parties in New York City you're not allowed to kiss. Even [American Apparel](#) seems finally amenable to dispose of its notorious explicit ads – true, this would be due to the sexual controversy that culminated with the layoff of their founder and CEO a short while ago, but at the same time meets the updated interests, such as LGBT rights and anti-bullying, of a Millennial target that's not as responsive to them as it used to be. Sex might no longer be at the forefront of our every thought. We might almost be ready to drop the *-sexual* suffix.

In Japan, they call themselves *sōshoku danshi*, herbivore men: men not after meat, and it has nothing to do with their eating habits. At 36% of teenagers aged between 16 and 19 according to a [2010 poll](#), *grasseaters* were already worrisome enough for the government to view them as a leading cause in the country's declining birth rate, which led to various incentives to promote family planning amid the remaining few still so inclined. Though this may be an extreme example, and likely related to their Japanese cultural background, one wonders if perpetual exposure to double entendres may not finally have tired even the lustful West.

This is not to say that sex will stop selling of course. Appealing to man's basic instincts obviously always will. But to Gen Yers at least, who grew up in sexual freedom, it lost its edge. A suggestive image that would have caused earlier generations to blush doesn't easily impress them. If progressive is what you're going for, you might want to be looking elsewhere. All is not lost though: fortunately there still is something suitably daring for today's young men, where least you would expect it. A yet unsung bravery is to be found in sentiment, in poignancy and emotions previously eschewed. Seldom in recent history were introspection

and disclosure encouraged in lad culture, and even more rarely were they publically acknowledged as increasingly often now they seem to be.

In fashion, the idea might even appear just uncomfortable enough to the conservative upper-class for it to find its way on some of those runways that we've come to admire for their penchant to challenge it. Supple, and not yet linked to any specific clothing styles, it lends itself to be adopted by diverse designers and brands. Take Hood By Air, for example, which is nothing if not progressive. Their spring collection was conceived, style.com reports, not only as a "*commentary on the breakdown of machismo*", but "*an interrogation of what it means to be a man*", no less. Matthew Miller's was labelled *Introversion*, whereas Craig Green's fall roundup featured knits with a circular hole cut just above the models' sternum, drawing attention to "*the most vulnerable part of the body*". While women shape up, boys are wearing their hearts on their sleeves in a most literal way they wouldn't have risked not long ago. And if Rick Owens' much discussed [fall 2015](#) show was anything to go by, male nudity in itself, furthest from any sexual implication, can now look decidedly unthreatening. Even when thus exposed, almost gentle.

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