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SEX IN FASHION USED TO BE SCANDALOUS, BUT TODAY IT IS USUALLY NO MORE THAN A STYLISTIC DEVICE. TABOOS ARE NOW FOUND ELSEWHERE, SAYS VALERIE STEELE, DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR OF THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (FIT) MUSEUM IN NEW YORK.



PHOTO ASSISTANT: DIMITRY LEVDANSKI

The woman, who almost always dresses in black and has a penchant for cat-eye frames, grew up in Washington, dropped out of high school and earned her doctorate later - at Yale. Since then, New Yorker by choice, Valerie Steele, shares her Chelsea loft furnished with Asian antiques with her husband and two stray cats. Over the past 25 years, the fashion historian has curated more than 25 exhibitions, with titles such as “The Corset,” “Goth: Dark Glamour,” and “Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color.” The starting point of her research is always the relationship between the body and fashion and she already devoted herself to the topic of sex in her book “Fetish: Fashion, Sex and

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Curator Valerie Steele in her exhibition “Reinvention and Restlessness: Fashion in the Nineties” at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York

Power” 25 years ago. Her days are tightly organized: For breakfast at 7:30 she has an obligatory coffee, half a grapefruit and reads three daily newspapers. Then she’s off to an hour of aqua cycling and afterwards she either heads for the New York Library to research, or to her rather austere office at FIT. This is where we zoom for our conversation.

FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE QUARTERLY: Ms. Steele, why is fashion rediscovering the topic of sex now?

VALERIE STEELE: In the 90s, one of my favorite headlines in the industry magazine “Women’s Wear Daily” was “From the convent to the whorehouse” Back then, fashion changed from extremely demure to absolutely raunchy. We see the same pendulum effect today: skirts are getting shorter because they were longer. Currently the pandemic is a driver to the trend: It’s forced most people into social isolation for two years and now they want to break out, socialize again, dress up and do the exact opposite of what they’ve been doing in their homes all this time.

FAQ: Some of the current fashion looks weirdly old-fashioned: Donatelle Versace, for example, shows low-cut and narrow-waisted designs for women, emphasizing the classic secondary sexual characteristics, breasts, waist and hips. This seems like a reference to the 80s, when women dressed to please men, quite heteronormative. Why are we seeing a revival of that?

VALERIE STEELE: Donatella Versace has always based her style on that of her brother Gianni (the brand’s founder, assassinated in 1997, ed.) in the ‘80s and ‘90s. In other words, the style of a gay man, but one that made a very precise distinction between the sexes, dressing women extremely feminine and men extremely masculine. This was really about putting the focus on the secondary sexual characteristics: deep cleavage for the women, shirt unbuttoned wide for the men, so that you could see the pectoral muscles. Exposure was and is an important stylistic device at Versace.

FAQ: Miuccia Prada is not exactly known for sexualized fashion, and yet, whether with Raf Simons for Prada or her second line Miu Miu, she too now shows miniskirts that could hardly be shorter.

VALERIE STEELE: Hemlines refer to sexuality but they are never going to mean sexual liberation in the way they did in the 20ies and 60ies. That moment has come and gone so it’s just a kind of reference to it which could be ironic and could be many other things as well. Undoubtedly Miss Prada is very smart and has an eye on what people may be wanting and is sensing that yes indeed people are gonna wanna show more of their body off. But she doesn’t sell to young customers but also to olders who also want to show off their body. The legs last longer than