

RETAIL

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DESIGN

Saturation in the City | NYC Mannequins looking for a make-over

Has the trend for using abstract mannequin forms in New York's store displays grown tired? Pauline Dwelley contemplates the virtues of these icons of visual merchandising, and wonders if there's a lack of innovation, or is it a case of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it"?

It's early December 2006, and I'm thrilled to be going to New York again for New York Visual Marketing Week. Over the past 20 years I've visited regularly, sometimes inspired, sometimes disappointed, but always filled with excitement at being in the Big Apple and hopeful of seeing some changes since my last trip.



Mannequins have been in and out of favour over the years, but at the moment they are totally key in fashion presentation. From the tailor's dummy to the realism of a waxwork, they offer brands the opportunity to stand apart through their choice of style, finish and poses. And the market is certainly flooded with options; so why is it that the major trend for mannequins in NY remains, without a doubt, the stylised, sleek, shiny, vintage-type mannequin?

Originally made by the Swiss manufacturer, Schlappi, these models possess an androgynous look - tall, thin and simplistic with very elegant, long limbs, stretched beyond reality. They are quite abstract in style, with just a hint of facial features, reminiscent of a surrealist sculpture. Often sprayed in sleek, glossy, bold colours, they do seem

to interfere less with the impact of the merchandise than some of the alternative mannequins, sporting bouffant hair and theatrical make-up.

On my exploration, I've noted that many of them truly are vintage, dating back decades and seemingly proof that today's manufacturers have yet to outdo their beauty and knock them off their top spot in New York.

From Bergdorf Goodman, Saks 5th Ave, Barneys, Macy's to Moschino, Marc Jacobs and Stella McCartney, many of the large stores produce fabulous, fantasy windows during the holiday season using dramatic, bespoke mannequins. Yet in-store, I still found an abundance of the sleek, vintage figures-in-question, usually grouped on the shop floor, in a wide assortment of extreme poses.

But with so many retailers using the same figures in pretty much the same way, surely the trend has to change soon? Their current success could be due to fashion's 1950's revival, or more likely, by being rather featureless, prospective customers find it easy to imagine themselves in the garments. It's safe way for a brand to not risk alienating any potential group. However, this over-saturation can only lead to change when an effective alternative is offered.

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With a multitude of other possibilities already available, like headless, illustrative or glamorously realistic, what next? New Yorkers are not shy of gimmicks; will it be a blinking, breathing, moving mannequin or a star-studded embodiment of our obsession with celebrities, in size zero? One thing's for certain, the mannequin is no longer a dummy - more of a strategic tool for clever marketing. I look forward to my next visit to NYC to see if the sleek aesthetic of Schlappi can be topped!

