

Tribal Gathering

Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek spent a decade documenting the world's fashion tribes. Now they've turned their gaze on London. Here, we unveil the first results

Words by **Peter York**



D'YOU KNOW about bear culture? It's wild. There are bear clubs and bear cubs and bear websites now. It's a big thing in a small way if you know where to look. Bears are chubby, hairy, gay men who like similar and get together on a regular basis. They're chubby chubby-chasers. If you're looking at a set of bear portraits, posed and shot in white-out studios as coolly as 19th-century African anthropology photographs, it's absolutely obvious. This is a precise type, a body type, a sartorial type and an attitude. If you re-rendered the pictures as silhouettes, they'd still be identifiable, the bear-shaped chest and stomach meaning the arms hang differently, the quietly defiant "I know what I like" attitude.

Bears are a "tribe" of people documented in central London by the Dutch photographer/stylist team of Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek for their upcoming exhibition at Selfridges. They call what they do "Exactitudes", meaning "exact" plus "attitudes"; put simply, the pair identify different social groups and photograph them. They've been doing it around the world since 1994, but never before in Britain.

They're not really anthropologists of course; they don't have any kind of social-science background, or method. They're a photographer (Ari) and a stylist (Ellie), and if they come from anywhere it's post-punk fashionland Rotterdam, the "street-style" movement of the late Seventies/early Eighties and the world of little magazines – the →

'Bears (London 2008)', left, and 'Pin-Ups (London 2008)', right, are published here for the first time









'Praise (Amsterdam 2006)'

British *i-D* in particular – that follow youth cultures around the world. They know where to look, they're fantastically good at pattern-recognition – these trainers, that haircut plus, vitally, that pose – and they know the fashion antecedents of everything from Hedi Slimane 2004 to Rio de Janeiro street market designer fakes. All of which means they can tell a great story with just a page of 12 pictures. These pictures show "ordinary" people making a bid for singularity and immortality through their bodies, their clothes and their stance, and just happening along the way to look astonishingly alike, whether they were being consciously tribal or not. They're displaying their take on the world and a whole set of concerns, from the environment to gender politics to God. And a coping strategy, too. All this from a set of snaps. Working from the outside in, from the intensely particular to the general, without benefit of an 'ology, a Grand Theory or a comprehensive taxonomy, Ari and Ellie often get it compellingly right.

"Like trousers, like brain", as The Clash – part of the origins of Ari and Ellie's inner world – used to say. And yet, as I'm working through the emerging London groupings, six possible types so far, I'm completely absorbed, comparing my first readings with their working titles, guessing at the subject's lives, jobs, their animating principle. It's hardly the English People in Pictures, of course. It reflects the cultural peculiarity of Big Central London, Selfridges in particular →





'Dreads (Rotterdam 1998)'

(of which more later). It couldn't be more unlike, say, Martin Parr and his photographs of seascides and church fêtes. The focus is on youth, and on people who are making an effort rather than going with the flow. And it's all that bit street-style and clubland-ish. But it's still a sharp reminder of that constant paradox, that people are never more similar, more boxable, than when they're trying to be different, and that in societies where people have choices, clothes are a fantastic "tell" about everything that's going on inside.

And if you want to get heavy, philosophical, it's "Excuse me but your soul just died" (Tom Wolfe, of course, in his essay on neuroscience). Ari and Ellie know what people are doing and where they're coming from because they've been around a bit, not just arty Europe and arty New York but China and South America. They know how media and immigration allow fashion to cross continents and cross-breed in surprising ways. Didn't we see that in Mexico City in 2005, or Taiwan in 2007, they ask? But without the scarf. Get that scarf, what's the scarf saying? And sometimes those little big things – scarves or hair-flicks or a bit of business with the right shoulder – do more than cross continents and cross-breed, they cross gender too. So you'll be looking at pages of "boys" or "girls" in their wonderfully word-free first book, *Exactitudes*, alighting on "Dreads: Rotterdam 1998" which is a page of skinny, bare-chested young people with dreadlocks, and you'll notice→



that some of them have breasts and some don't. Katharine Hepburn said that the first thing she noticed about someone was whether they were a man or a woman, but that isn't always the way Ari and Ellie think. Sex, sexual call-signs and what hippies called gender-fuck are particular interests of theirs. They do respectable African church-going women from Amsterdam and arty old ladies from provincial France, but they're obviously keen on people a lot nearer the sexual front-line. Like the silicon and bikini "Babes (Rotterdam 2005)" or the comical "Leathermen (Rotterdam 1998)" fetishists in their chaps and caps, clone moustaches, earrings and chains, enacting a 1970s New York sexual identity in late Nineties Rotterdam. Or there's the less calculated sexuality of the thunder-thighed, jeans-and-fancy-T-shirt "Jenny d'Enfer" teens they found at Bordeaux Lac in 2006.

And I recognise the other Brit types they're beginning to gather for their Selfridges show. City Girls, for instance, intermediate management types from the City and Canary Wharf in their black and dark-blue working suits and pulled-back hair. They're all wearing heels ("the female tie", says Ari). Their fitted jackets are cut just so, to suggest cleavage without revealing it. They're the girls who handle things, take you round the building. They're absolutely not secretaries and they're in some very OK sectors and businesses, but they're not the glass-ceiling busting Marjorie Scardinis or Val Goodings, either.

And what about the "Bunker Boys"? Well I know that Euro-poetical pea coat – short, black, double-breasted – they all wear. And the Euro-poetical big curly hair too. These are English students of 20 who'd like to have been Paris 68-ers. More particularly, as this look has a long Romantic movement provenance, they'd like to have been Jim Morrison. Or, at a pinch, Michael Hutchence.

Or the Pin-Ups – and don't you just know and love these girls – who are Betty Page Forties burlesque, 20-year-olds from Shoreditch art-land. "They all do the same pose," says Ari; it's a stylised period Vargas idea of sexiness. And they all like bright-red lips and waved hair, red waist-clinching belts above pencil skirts (try Ye Olde Axe in Hackney Road for sightings, they say helpfully).


Or how about "Boffins"? They're painfully thin, elaborately geeky boys with giant specs and skinny jeans. I think their reference is to Brains in *Thunderbirds* but for me it's obviously Jarvis Cocker. The point about this particular dress code is that it looks dumb and hopeless if you don't know the visual language, but chock-full of meaning and cleverness if you do. And very art-school. Boffins could fit into Hedi Slimane's expensive tight suits but they've chosen a buttoned-up shirt, no tie, cardigan or V-neck artful-artlessness look instead. And apparently they all type very fast. It figures.

There's a group of attractive, jaunty comfortable-in-their-own-skins young lesbians they call "Mis-shapers", although they're rather well-shaped. They tried to photograph some luscious-looking Arab women, beautifully made-up and dressed under their scarves, but were told no way. And they're working on some very clubby looks – Nu-Rave types with designer hoodies; boys in bowlers who look like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*.

It's all being shown off in Selfridges' dedicated art space, the Ultralounge. Selfridges always was a kind of public art gallery, ever since the master showman, Gordon Selfridge, opened it in 1912. But post-war, they lost the plot – until the Nineties when, under the banner of "The Theatre of Shopping", that marvellous Italian retailing impresario, Vittorio Radice, changed everything. And of course art belongs in department stores and in fashion photography – just think of what they did with Surrealism in Forties Manhattan. It was only Grace Brothers of Grantham who didn't get it. *



'Tribalising Fashion: The Art of Exactitudes at Selfridges' is at Ultralounge, Selfridges, London W1 (0800 123 4000, www.selfridges.com) from now to 20 April

 To see more pictures from the 'Exactitudes' exhibition see independent.co.uk/satmag

Detail from 'Babes (Rotterdam 2005)'

