

Functional lingerie, with style to spare



Karen von Hahn

Agent Provocateur on a mission to help women channel their inner vixen, one sensuous undergarment at a time

Given that the weather gods have determined that it's time to start getting all cosy indoors, the long-awaited arrival of London-based naughty knickers purveyors Agent Provocateur looks like fine timing indeed.

Intimate as a hotel suite, and kitted out like one's filmic fantasy of a Soho sex shop circa 1970, right down to the glossy black lacquered walls and dark lace carpet. With the shopgirls in pink lab coats by Vivienne Westwood and leather whips amidst the lace and satin on the chevron-mirrored shelves, the lingerie line's newly opened Bloor flagship (one of 89 AP boutiques around the globe) serves up sauciness, with style to spare.

In the words of Agent Provocateur's delightful creative director Sarah Shotton, with whom I chatted like a long lost girlfriend over the phone, the new Toronto flagship is "like the sexiest house ever: the kind of place where you want to flick your heels off and drink some champagne."

Despite its now global presence, the heart of the brand still lives, according to Shotton, on Broadwick St., in London's Soho, "which used to be the sex shop district, even if it's now all ad firms."

Shotton has been with Agent Provocateur since graduating from London's prestigious Central Saint Martins at the tender age of 24, when she snagged her first job as all-round girl Friday to AP founders Joe Corré and Serena Rees.

"It was an apprenticeship in the whole world of lingerie without my really knowing it," says Shotton, who never imagined herself becoming a lingerie designer. "Lingerie just wasn't on the radar."

While Shotton credits her unofficial apprenticeship as key to her current role as chief designer, "the main thing it taught me was the amazing effect lingerie can have on women — how empowering and transformative lingerie can be," says Shotton, adding, "it's possibly the most important thing you put on every day. More affordable than a new designer dress — it's the new lipstick."

Speaking from her own experience as a curvier type, Shotton says "every woman is a bit hung up



DAVID PIKE

Agent Provocateur's Toronto flagship store evokes the vibe of a sultry sex shop with its black lacquered walls and lace carpet.

about a different part of their body."

"When I started in the business, you couldn't even find a sexy F-cup (bra)," says Shotton.

"Because I knew all women's bodies were different, I just started doing what I was doing at fashion school, getting creative, wrapping things around the body, playing with cup shape."

The fashionable result is the avant-garde of underthings: a technically ambitious line in luxe fabrics such as jacquard and Chantilly lace.

Rather than looking at fashion trends, Shotton prefers to take her inspiration from film while mining her own experience as both a woman and a designer. Shotton has a 22-month-old son and is

currently expecting her second child. "As a mother myself, I know how your body changes, and how emotional it can be."

Four months into her second pregnancy, Shotton plans to wear her own AP underthings "for as long as possible."

"Women want a bit of escapism sometimes, so while they want their lingerie to be functional, they also want it to be sexy."

And that is why Shotton doesn't start her process with any particular feminine ideal in mind. Instead, she uses what she describes as "all sorts of characters and personalities."

"Our clientele are housewives, MPs, celebrities, businesswomen and mothers who come in to shop with their daugh-

ters," says Shotton. Men buying gifts, who make up some 30-40 per cent of the clientele, are encouraged to consider what kind of music their female partner likes, or what colours she tends to favour.

Perhaps what's most provocative about Agent Provocateur is that it's all about women.

"I imagine the AP woman, like all women, is strong and powerful and funny," says Shotton.

"Men want to be with her even if they are slightly afraid of her. She is soft, but with a spiky side. And lingerie is her little secret."

Karen von Hahn is a Toronto-based writer, trend observer and style commentator. Contact her at kvh@karenonhahn.com.