



The  
**Alessandro**  
Effect

Alessandro  
Michele

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**2**015 was the year for *Gucci*. In one of fashion's most surprising and talked about appointments last year, Alessandro Michele was picked out of obscurity and thrust into the limelight to head the storied fashion house as creative director along with Marco Bizzarri—the label's newest CEO and president. Michele, while no stranger to *Gucci* having dedicated almost 14 years to the brand, helming various roles from director of leather goods, design and head of accessories to finally assisting Frida Giannini, was all

but a quiet force working tirelessly behind the scenes. That the future of the company was placed in his anonymous hands after Giannini's untimely exit, just days before the fall 2015 menswear show, was a daring move for the brand. In a miracle turnaround, in just five short days, Michele changed every last detail of that show right down to model casting and seating. The result—a brigade of boys in girls' clothing and girls in boys' clothing, dressed in pussy bow blouses, slinky lace, skinny trousers, berets and



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nerdy spectacles, sashaying languidly down the runway, shocking the jaded front row right out of their horse-bit loafers, which by the way also got a major makeover. Anything we remembered of *Gucci's* sexed up, jet-set past was all but obliterated as were the gender roles; a sentiment that has followed through in his collections since. If Michele was looking to go boldly where no man has gone before, then he certainly vroomed into the unknown, marking his arrival into the future with a bright grosgrain bow.

'The idea that a man should be wearing something different and more eccentric is obviously the oldest idea on earth,' said Michele in conversation with JJ Martin of *Harper's Bazaar* last year, referring to fashion practices of the French aristocracy under Louis XIV, when high heels, bows, and wigs were regular elements of a man's wardrobe. 'Men nowadays really don't dress up anymore. But men wear bows for women.' And in the *Gucci* universe now, men and women do more than just wear bows for each other—

they walk seamlessly in and out of each other's wardrobes decked in hyper botanica, serpents, stars, sequins and glitter in equal measure for both. In his six presentations following his first, these new ideas of sex, beauty and gender roles become abundantly clear in their sharp diversion of the *Gucci* of yesteryears. A brand that was once driven by high-voltage sex appeal is now driven by gentler, more bohemian tenants of romanticism and beauty. 'My idea of masculinity is beauty. If you want to be



beauty you can be beauty how you want; it doesn't mean that you are not a man or woman. These are the clothes that give you freedom to choose who you are,' he told *Dazeddigital.com*. And this idea of freedom, Michele has shared with his men and women alike.

While Michele's new androgynous, gender neutral manifesto is a complete volte face from the past and a big statement to make for one of the world's biggest brands, it also echoes a very prescient moment in our own very dramatic landscape of gender politics. David

Bowie's demise late last year once again brought his impact on popular culture to the limelight [Michele's fall men's 2016 even paid homage to the icon with a black cardigan with 'Bowie' written across the back, accompanied by animal embroidery and a large red heart]. Known for his transgressive acts, Bowie's own work was the result of a society that didn't leave much room for ambiguity and freedom.

Popular culture, at large, has only worked to reinforce a restrictive view of beauty and sexuality. But an upheaval



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has begun. *The Danish Girl* is a moving biopic on one of the first people to undergo sex reassignment surgery. TV drama *Orange Is the New Black's* Emmy-nominated transgender actress Laverne Cox is the first transwoman to have a leading role on a mainstream television show. Then, there's Jill Soloway's poignant comedy *Transparent* following a fictional father's role into womanhood. The show incidentally shares with *Gucci* Hari Nef, the series' breakout star—a trans model-turned-actor who also happened to make her big Milan debut at

Michele's Fall 2015 menswear presentation in head-to-toe fire engine red.

Nef's appearance on Michele's Milanese catwalk hardly comes as surprise given the creative director's vision for the brand. 'This is what we see out there, not something I invented...the world is going down that way...I think all beautiful things are ambiguous,' explained the designer in an interview with *Vogue China*. To this he added, 'I am not judging anything. I love Tom Ford and his time, but that was the "contemporary" view on beauty in the 1990s.' Michele's words

couldn't be more honest. Gianni's *Gucci* didn't move the brand eons away from what Ford envisioned for it in the 90s. *Gucci* women were bold, hyper sexualised creatures. The new Gucci woman is more girl than a woman. There is a sense of fresh-faced youth to her. No more sex please, we're a band of poets and intellectuals, musicians and eccentric individuals—that's really the new war cry for the brand. *Vogue.com's* Tim Blanks perfectly sums up in his witty words—'that you're thinking with your head and not with your groin is enough of a shift



from the Gucci of yore, which was sexy and 70s, and seldom anything else.'

Look to Michele's women's wear lines. The new *Gucci* girl, in one fell swoop kissed glamazon goodbye and made way for a friendlier, eccentric ingénue who's probably been raiding estate sales, vintage markets and her boyfriend's closet. Stripped her off her usual vertiginous heels and instead placed her in fur-lined backless loafers, onto a set that mimicked a subway tunnel [taking *Gucci* to the streets] wearing all kinds of vintage silk dresses, floral chiffons, boy-cut pants and pussycat blouses, topped off with nerdy, horn-rimmed spectacles, berets and woolly caps. For his vision for

women for spring, the creative director put sensuality before sexiness and gave his geeky girls a giant acid trip if you must, of a kaleidoscope of glittery, flower-embroidered satin, chiffon, lurex knits, sorbet sheers, brocades, and trimmings. The same bright lace that made an appearance at the men's fall shows returned, this time with rich floral appliqués, boys and girls both donned head-to-toe pantsuits in dazzling brocades and florals, the bows got bigger, the blooms bigger only to be topped with a generous dose of serpents and birds. Prints made crossovers from the men's spring offering to the women's—where a bright red, floral sporty pant and jacket



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showed at the men's show, the same print came in the form of a trim mid-skirt and dress at the women's show. What's wonderful to see in Michele's women is their sense of confidence. Not that *Gucci* women lacked it in the past, but there is a renewal of confidence that is irreverent and cheeky. There is an intelligence to them that perhaps was a little lost on us previously.

In the front row too, sex bombs excused themselves for more weirdly luminous creatures of the likes of Dakota Johnson, Elle Fanning, Chloe Sevigny and Jared Leto. The brand's advertising campaign for fall 2015 too underwent a dramatic turnaround from the glossy

images of Mert and Marcus. Now shot through the eyes of Glen Luchford, who captured the likes of Kate Moss and Amber Valetta at the height of Britain's grunge movement, Michele's high-shine fabrics and lurid colours were modelled on an anonymous cast of young models lounging on the subway [we're not even sure *Gucci* women ever took public transport before!]

'Alessandro is a revolutionary, but I also like to think of him as a punk. He defies orthodoxy. And he's a fashion shaman too...he represents what he calls "a renewal of possibility". And it's alive with optimism, an inspiring lack of cynicism and a wide-eyed dreamer's sense of

wonder,' proclaimed Tim Blanks as Michele won the prestigious *British Fashion Council International Designer of the Year* award last year. In just 12 months Michele has resurrected a cooling brand and enthused it with an energy and bold vision it desperately needed. Rewriting the rules, he has given free reign to his cast of rebelliously ambiguous misfits to make up new rules as they go along. An excellent direction to steer a brand into, because that is where the world is heading to. Or, at least, we all should well be on our way to our own revival, rewriting our own histories and reimagining what it means to be a man, be a woman, be beautiful. ▀