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JAY WALKING

21st Century FoxesBy *Jacqui Zurcher*

Posted Wed, 07 May 2003

The dawn of the 21st century ushered in change in many spheres of modern life. We had to get used to dates containing lots of zeros instead of nines. Suddenly it was the noughties and not the nineties and there was all the canned food to be eaten after the stockpiling in case the Y2K bug imploded our technology-driven society.



Too many tins of baked beans later, I emerged from my custom-built subterranean bunker to find the world fragrant, but somehow changed. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but I knew life would never be the same again.

A few years on, I can confidently identify the cause of my initial post-millennial unease. The plastic people staring at me out of the shop windows have changed.

On the stroke of midnight 1999, a retailing magnate, having suddenly discovered her arty side, was holding vigil somewhere near New Bethesda when epiphany struck. The storefront mannequins are revolting. Change must come. Real people do not all look the same. What to do ...

There was a time when shop mannequins didn't resemble people at all. Sure, you could see they were supposed to be humanoid. They had all the plastic body parts in the right places and were pretty much life size. But the pinky-grey skin? The limp nylon wigs? And those shoes!

From Jozi to Frikkiesonderdondersfontein, the same clone mannequins would greet you, sporting invincible side-buttoning shoes straight out of the Siberian gulag.

The demise of forced labour camps in Siberia must have dried up the supply of standard issue mannequin footwear. These days, mannequins have to be content with having their plastic toes wedged into the tips of real retail shoes that generally don't look as snug as their erstwhile Siberian counterparts, but are a lot less disturbing to the casual onlooker.

JACQUI ZURCHER isn't a vegetarian, but occasionally enjoys Soya mince and lentils. She has an honours degree in Computer Science and a Postgraduate Diploma in African Studies, majoring in Postcolonial English Literature, from UCT. She likes olives, abhors cigarettes and admires pregnant woman. She lives in Cape Town and is really chuffed about that.

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from the editor



"If you like all the good things in life, you've come to the right place. So go on, live a little..."
Leigh Robertson,
Highlife Editor

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Retailers, having undergone life changing millennial experiences, realised their shop front clothes hangers had to take some brave new steps out of the fifties. Ice-blond or tar-black nylon-haired mannequins in seriously bad shoes weren't going to sell clothes in the 21st century. They had to be edgy. They needed to live the brand.

Like a rather confused Darwinian organism, the evolutionary potential of the mannequin has not yet been realised, but a few interesting mutations have appeared.

The most disturbing mannequin adaptation spotted must be the slowly rotating headless mannequin. As you ascend the escalators into the women's wear department of a prominent Cape Town store you are greeted by slowly rotating, headless models in semi reclined poses supported by industrial-looking suspension cabling.

Is this a warning to naughty children? If they misbehave in the store they will be decapitated and hoisted to the ceiling to spend the rest of their days surveying the shop floor in headless zombiehood?

As least there seems to be an attempt to represent the diversity of South Africa and we are finally seeing some black mannequins. About time! It has to be said that braids look ever so much cooler than the fright wigs in evidence on the paler models.

Most of the mannequins are still ridiculously skinny though and I am often overcome by the urge to wedge a doughnut onto their contoured noses. A mannequin, desperately devouring a doughnut, it would be so cosmically poetic. My shopping mates unfortunately wrench me away from the hard cold plastic faces before any real damage is done.

But is reality what we are after? I applaud the idea of fuller figure mannequins, but the ones I have seen look awful, as if a male model torso has been attached to female model head and lower body. The upper body just looks like a brick. Surely more realistically proportioned models generally, with curves instead of points would be better?

Wrestling with reality of form was obviously too much for a popular surf shop. There were a few too many tequilas, espressos or natal rugby supporters at their late night marketing think tank. Why not use a cartilaginous fish as a clothes hanger? Yes! Use the surfers' nemesis to display surf gear. Bob, you're a genius, give yourself a raise!

I like the sharks though. They are way less frightening than the suspended decapitatees.

Evolve, evolve I say. But to the marketing gurus constructing mannequin DNA – easy on the tequila.


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