

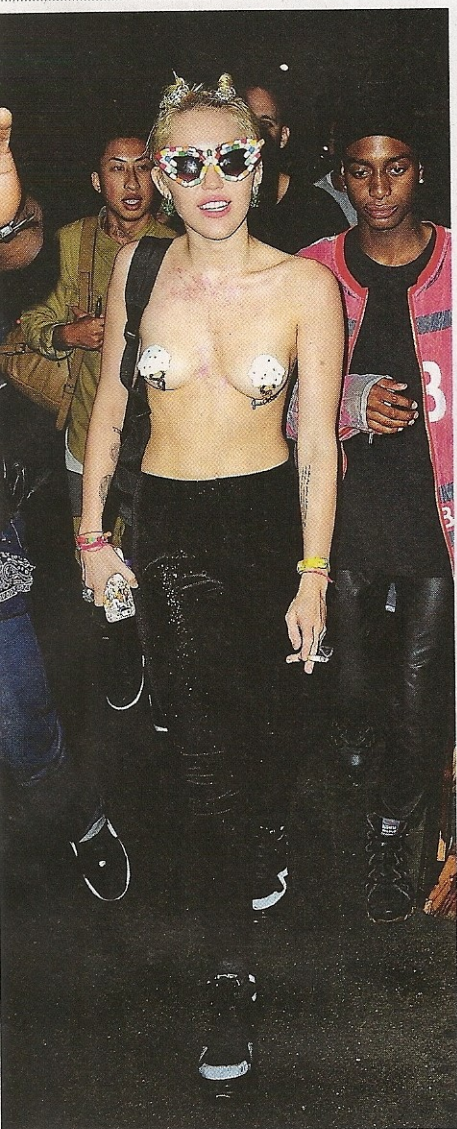
Barely there
Rihanna at the CFDA
awards in New York,
June 2014



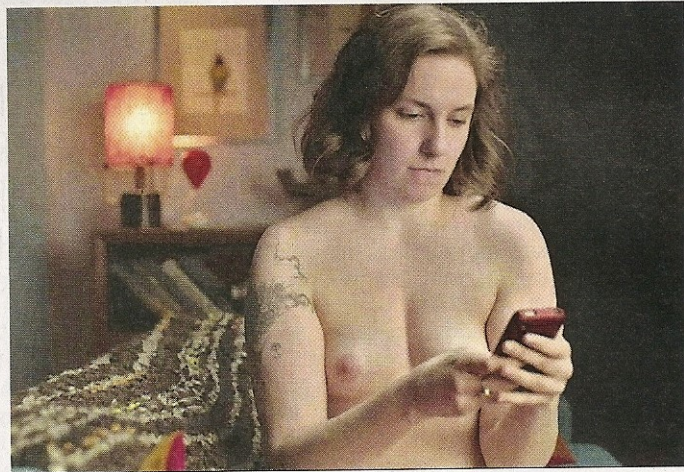
THE CULTURE ISSUE **FASHION**

BRAVE NUDE WORLD

Between starlets baring all to grab headlines and feminist activists determined to 'free the nipple', 2014 has turned into the year to live nakedly. But why are we suddenly so keen to let it all hang out, asks Alice-Azania Jarvis



Dare to bare
Clockwise from left:
Miley Cyrus at
Alexander Wang's
New York Fashion Week
party last month; a
Femen topless protest
in Westminster in July;
Lena Dunham in *Girls*,
season one, 2012.
Below: a catwalk model
in Tom Ford's show at
London Fashion Week
last month



Never mind the clothes. It was the lack of them that got the front row talking at London Fashion Week last month. At Burberry – in a collection aptly titled ‘The Birds and the Bees’ – Christopher Bailey sent models, including Jourdan Dunn and Suki Waterhouse, down the catwalk in dresses of sheerest turquoise, wine and yellow tulle, exposing nipples, thighs and black knickers. At Erdem, the ultra-feminine label beloved by the Duchess of Cambridge, lace and chiffon dresses left little to the imagination. When Christopher Kane presented a series of primly cut, high-necked and entirely transparent blouses, a trend began to emerge. And when Tom Ford preserved models’ modesty with nothing but tinsel-like nipple pasties, it was confirmed. Nudity – or near-nudity – is in vogue. The Ford show, wrote one critic, made ‘Ann Summers look like Anne of Green Gables’. No doubt Miley Cyrus – who, days earlier, had appeared at Alexander Wang’s New York Fashion Week party clad in shimmery black trousers and ice cream cone-shaped pasties – already has her orders in.

Perhaps we should have seen this



coming. Across art, popular culture and society, 2014 has been, in many ways, the year of the nude. Think back to June, when Rihanna arrived at the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) awards in New York. The singer appeared in an outfit that was part Josephine Baker, part Emperor’s new clothes. Created by Adam Selman, the boyfriend of her stylist Mel Ottenberg, her floor-length gown was entirely transparent, made of mesh adorned with more than 200,000 Swarovski crystals. ‘We definitely wanted to make it a little bit scandalous,’ said Selman at the time. Scandalous it may have been, but Rihanna’s state of (un)dress was far from unique.

In February, Cara Delevingne was photographed in London wearing a ‘Free the Nipple’ T-shirt, name-checking the feminist movement founded by the 29-year-old actress and film-maker Lina Esco to protest the disparity between laws governing male and female nudity in the US (it is illegal in 35 US states for women to appear topless; in the UK, the law is less clear-cut – nudity is not itself illegal, though where distress is caused it could lead to prosecution). Delevingne subsequently posted a photo of her breast on

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Instagram, the nipple obscured by a black X. Scout Willis took up the cause in May, having had her Instagram account suspended after she posted a photo of a jacket featuring a picture of two friends’ breasts, as well as another of herself in a sheer top. The 23-year-old daughter of Bruce Willis and Demi Moore tweeted a photograph of herself walking the streets of New York topless with the caption ‘What @instagram won’t let you see #freethenipple’. The campaign has also attracted the support of Rihanna and Cyrus.

And then there are the naked selfies – seemingly being taken by every Hollywood starlet (Jennifer Lawrence, Rihanna, Vanessa Hudgens and Kate Upton were among the 100-odd celebrities whose private photos were allegedly posted on the website 4chan last month). For a moment, it appeared the selfie might make the transition to high art. LA-based artist XVALA (real name Jeff Hamilton) claimed he would include leaked

images of Upton and Lawrence in a forthcoming exhibition at Florida's Cory Allen Contemporary Art gallery, but following public outcry he withdrew them.

In London this month the naked body will go on display – albeit in the rather more high-minded form of Egon Schiele's nude watercolours and sketches. The first major British museum exhibition dedicated to the Austrian artist for two decades, The Courtauld Gallery show will feature 38 works, created between 1910 and 1918. Although esteemed among his fellow artists, his work was controversial and he was convicted of public immorality for supposedly showing erotic drawings to children who posed for him, and spent a month in jail.

At the Drawing Room in Bermondsey, *The Naked* features nudes by the likes of Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Chris Ofili. The V&A's ongoing retrospective of the German-American fashion photographer Horst, meanwhile, includes a display dedicated to his sumptuous black and white nudes (these landed Horst in a spot of bother in 1939 when he photographed several in Condé Nast's commercial studios. Word got out and Mr Nast reportedly stepped in to prevent any future naked shoots).

Where, one wonders, has our current appetite for the nude come from? Of course, sex sells, but nudity isn't just about sex. Dr Barnaby Wright, curator of 20th-century art at The Courtauld, argues that social conversations surrounding it are cyclical: 'There is a perennial return... Culture has constantly had anxieties about the naked body, articulated in different ways.' Schiele's vividly rendered forms are frequently hairy, angular and imperfect. They rebel against the chaste, classical nudes of artistic tradition. Perhaps we're seeing something similar today – #freethenipple may be an easy way for celebrities to create headlines, but it also represents a legitimate challenge to contemporary sexual mores and gender standards. A similar ethos can be seen in the topless protest group Femen, who demonstrated outside the Palace of Westminster in July to raise awareness of female genital mutilation. Some have even equated Rihanna's 'naked dress' (as well as Cyrus' provocative appearance) with a kind of subversive, audacious feminism.

But there's something else at play, too. In March, the American artist Denise Jolly took to the pavements of Brooklyn in the buff. Jolly, who describes herself as 'six foot tall, and 300lbs', posed for photographs hailing a cab. The resulting pictures were celebrated as a triumph of body positivity. Perhaps this body-positive message explains why nudity isn't just being embraced by the stars of the catwalk, red carpet and Twitter-sphere, but by ordinary Londoners, too. The organisation Spirited Bodies runs workshops at which women (and sometimes men – there is a mix of single-sex and mixed-gender



#FREETHENIPPLE MAY BE AN EASY WAY FOR CELEBRITIES TO CREATE HEADLINES, BUT IT ALSO REPRESENTS A LEGITIMATE CHALLENGE TO CONTEMPORARY SEXUAL MORES

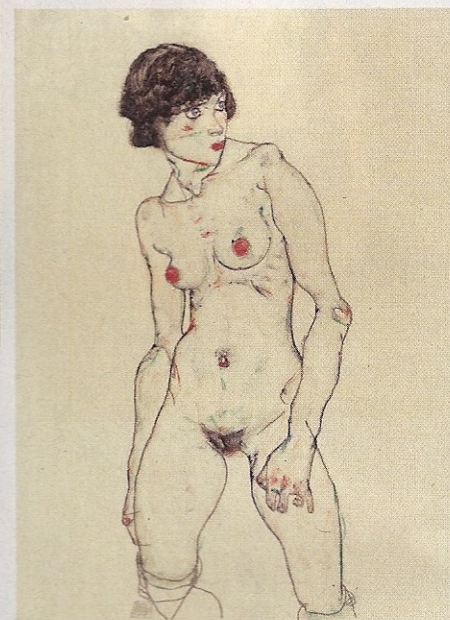
events) can pose nude for artists' groups. It was founded four years ago by professional life model Esther Bunting. Whereas, when she began, she struggled to find ten women to fill a workshop, each one now attracts a crowd of 20; demand for places outstrips supply. Held on an ad-hoc basis every few months, this year's events have occurred at venues as diverse as the Royal Festival Hall and The Plough & Harrow pub in Leytonstone. 'It attracts a real cross-section of ages and professions,' says Bunting, 39. 'Some have done it before, some are there for the first time. People come to feel better in themselves, to celebrate their bodies.'

Likewise naked yoga. The 1960s saw it embraced by Western hippies; lately, however, it has become *de rigueur* among yogis in London, New York and LA. Clapham-based Naked Yoga London has seen classes grow from groups of six three years ago to ones of 14 – a limit imposed to keep classes intimate. Courses (there are between two and four a month) run for four weeks, with one 105-minute lesson a week, and draw a broad range of ages and occupations, from students to professionals, aged 20 to 70. 'A lot of people are nervous when they first come, but usually once they start they are totally fine. One of the main intentions is acceptance. If you can accept yourself in a situation that is vulnerable and challenging, it can be a relief,' says its founder.



Life models

Left: Chris Ofili's *Untitled (Afronude)*, 2006. Below: Egon Schiele's *Standing Nude with Stockings*, 1914. Below left: a model at the Burberry Prorsum show at London Fashion Week last month



It may be a stretch to equate naked selfies with body positivity, though (depending on the context in which they're taken) the two aren't entirely at odds. In representing a kind of 'citizen porn' they may be a preferable alternative to the unrealistic, stylised images associated with professional pornography. Certainly, the nudity that provides such a talking point in HBO's hit series *Girls* appears a variant of this form; a celebration of the ordinary woman's body. In a recent interview, *Girls* creator Lena Dunham (who regularly appears naked on the show) joked that if pictures of her were leaked, 'It would be like, "Great – that's for those of you who couldn't afford HBO."'

As for the catwalk's embrace of the nude, that may simply be a matter of following the curve: 'Designers are tasked with tapping into the mood of the moment,' says fashion writer and brand consultant Bronwyn Cosgrave, who cites the grin-and-bare-it attitude of Cara Delevingne and Miley Cyrus as likely influences. Indeed, at Paris Fashion Week, Balmain's Olivier Rousteing claimed his revealing collection was inspired by the Free the Nipple campaign.

Of course, whatever lies behind it, the current vogue for nudity isn't for everyone. Cosgrave, for one, remains unconvinced by the onslaught of flesh at LFW: 'I don't get it. The pictures will sell... Is it feminine? Possibly. Would I wear it? No.' But for those who are prepared to embrace the new nudity, says Bunting, the experience can be liberating: 'It's about being without the mask of clothes and being accepted as you are. It's freeing.' ES