

VOGUE *beauty*



USA LYON (1982), BY ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE/COURTESY THE ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE FOUNDATION/ART & COMMERCE

Razor **LIGHT**

Body hair is back in vogue but, asks Christa D'Souza, would you go au naturel?

I'm sitting at one of the shows. Two seats down is an attractive brunette in a Christopher Kane frock, with long bare legs. Everything about her is right. The navy pedicure. The discreet cartilage piercing. The absence of any bag. The only "blot", if that is what you might call it, is that her legs are unshaved. Hairy. Not in a specialist sense, granted, but put it this way: that chiffon scarf that Gillette or Immac used in its

advertisements, the one that was supposed to glide from hairless thigh to fuzz-free ankle in one elegant swoop? On this super-cool woman's legs, it would not.

Female body hair. How do you feel when you see it on display? Curious? Sympathetic? Offended? What snap judgement do you make about the person it belongs to? Man-hater? Grubby girl? High-functioning nutter? It's funny – shaming, actually – the lack of neutrality so many of us have >

towards the subject, the knee-jerk reaction it provokes, the power that female hairiness (there, doesn't that feel like an oxymoron?) has to confuse, to wrong-foot, to, well, let's just go ahead and admit it, faintly repulse.

And yet just as it repulses, the sight of it feels neither entirely wrong nor unfamiliar. The downy shin. The sprouting armpit. The Seventies bush. Female body hair in general. Doesn't it chime with the hippy, homespun, fem-tastic, juice-centric vibe that prevails at the moment? Doesn't it become, in this hyperreal, genitally alopecic world of ours, inevitable semaphore for cool?

The natural look. When we get to the point in time where the average male tween doesn't even know that female pubes exist, and we're getting ourselves stripped of all hair down there in order to conform to the insidious "norm" Youporn has created, it kind of had to happen. And if you're in any doubt about this disturbing little trend, look at all the downy shins that cropped up on Instagram last summer and the way the hairy armpit is creeping on to the catwalk – a case in point being Meadham Kirchhoff's spring/summer '15 show, opened and closed by Arvida Byström, the Swedish blogger and photographer known not only for her fluoro-pink hair but also her refusal to shave under her arms. Note the unashamed abundance of body hair in the work of *Vogue* photographer Ryan McGinley, whose recent show opening in New York was so popular, an entire city block had to be closed. Look, too, at the mannequins those provocative American Apparel folk used in their Lower East Side boutique last summer, all sporting pubic hair. That's the same American Apparel that hired Petra Collins – the digi-feminist artist whose Instagram account was deleted after she posted a picture of her untrimmed bikini line – to design a T-shirt for it last year (a line drawing of a menstruating woman with plenty of pubic hair pleasuring herself, since you ask).

Who knows what tipped it? Gwyneth's "confession" that she rocked a Seventies vibe down there? Madonna's hairy-armpit selfie? Cameron Diaz's "In Praise of Pubes" chapter in *The Body Book*? Oh yes, and Caitlin Moran. Did you clock the promotional video on her latest book tour? The one where she's showing off her massive 3D TV, bought with the proceeds of "not having Brazilians every four weeks for the past 10 years". One could also argue that the full-body lasering we underwent five, 10 years ago has so denuded us of body

hair, we can afford to grow out what's left of it. Then again, perhaps it's the Cara effect: today a bushy eyebrow, tomorrow a bushy bush. Whatever the case, after almost two decades of living in such a militantly hair-free zone – remember Victoria Beckham's pronouncement in 2003 that it should be compulsory for every girl over 15 to have a bikini wax? Remember the flak poor Natalia Vodianova got four years ago when she wore that gold Balmain dress without shaving her legs? – it's probably time for those inner earth girls of ours to be unlocked.

Petra Collins (creator of *The Ardorous*, the female-only photographic collective) and Arvida Byström are part of a new digi-feminist vanguard challenging society's view of femininity and its approach to female body hair. When I ask Byström, 23, via email whether women can be simultaneously girly and hairy, she promptly replies, "Heck, yeah. A girl can be girly and hairy, a girl can be girly and shaved just like a straight man can be girly and sexy."

"I think that totally shaved look is actually quite brutalist"

"I think anyone who thinks otherwise is suffering from a severe dearth of imagination," agrees Amy Blakemore, 23, model, Oxford graduate and winner of the 2014 Melita Hume Poetry Prize. "I suppose I always thought of body hair as one of the most feminine things there is: soft, earth-mother-y. I think that sort of porn-y totally shaved thing is actually quite aesthetically brutalist, cold and unnatural."

"The fashion industry has been fascinated with androgyny for ages but has been somewhat afraid to explore the real-life implications," says Rina Sawayama, 23, the Cambridge-educated singer and model. "Until now it's been about girls wearing trousers and having bushy brows, and only recently has it moved beyond that. I think it's because of street casting that the world is seeing an array of cool, confident girls pushing the boundaries of what is considered beautiful. In return, brands are seeing that casting real women attracts a lot of press."

Like Blakemore and Byström, Sawayama is on the books of Anti-Agency, a modelling agency set up by Pandora Lennard and Lucy Greene in 2013 to represent, for want of a better way of putting it, an edgier, more

"east London" ideal. And a good 20 per cent of the women on their books choose not to depilate. "When we first started up you'd get girls going on go-sees saying they would shave if necessary but they'd rather not," explains Lennard, whose clients include Vivienne Westwood, Felder Felder and Giles. "Now, they don't even have to say that. For example, with Arvida, if you want her, then that is what you get. If you don't like it, then you can lump it."

Why the shift in perception? A perfect storm, Lennard believes, of fourth-wave feminism, the Kardashian backlash – and social media: "Now the girls have their own voice and people can find out what their favourite model is really like via Instagram, the whole notion of airbrushed perfection presented in advertising loses its power. There's a transparency that Instagram affords."

The old monoculture that offered one aesthetic presentation of women has been broken up by the internet. "If you think of a teenage girl growing up in the Sixties, Seventies, even Eighties, she'd only ever see women through media such as television or magazines, where that image was being filtered with some sort of hegemony behind it," suggests Blakemore. "Whereas now she sees girls on Tumblr, her friends on Instagram or Facebook – and it's self-mediated; just girls saying, 'Here I am, this is what I look like, and it's me who chooses to look like this.' Besides which," she adds, "that hyper-stylised perfection thing which has proliferated for so long has become boring."

Designer Edward Meadham of Meadham Kirchhoff is more strident: "The hairless craze has resulted in giving the world an unrealistic and frankly paedophilic view of women. The perpetuation of this myth that women do not menstruate, do not fart, do not have any hair below their eyelashes, I find quite gross." And it's not just women. Remember when the idea of men waxing was a novelty? Not any more. According to a Mintel report, over the past year, 29 per cent of British men have depilated their pubic hair, 13 per cent their chests, nine per cent their backs, six per cent their bottoms – and one in 50 shaved their feet.

"There is this whole generation of women, including Arvida Byström, who realise they don't have to perpetuate that myth," he says. "That doesn't mean every woman is going to stop waxing or shaving, obviously, but it would be nice if we got to a stage where a normal amount of hair wasn't such a shock."

But what is normal? And should the £2.3 billion-plus hair-removal industry >

really have cause to worry? What about those of us who come from hairy stock, and have, ahem, been waxing our legs since the age of 12? Who've been surreptitiously tweezing hairs out of our chins while sitting on emptyish aeroplanes (window seats have the best light), and who have to plan what we wear around our waxing schedules? Are we, too, supposed to grow it all out?

Not all female hairiness is equal. A downy shin or a little bit of hipster bum fluff under the arm is one thing. I love the sight of white-blonde hair on a tanned forearm, on a woman or a man. But when I think of, say, Gaby Hoffmann's naked bush (that's the Egon Schiele-esque actor who plays Adam's sister in the third season of *Girls* (not seen it? Rent episode three immediately), or a hairy leg under a sheer tight or, dare I mention it, a hairy nipple? That is quite another. (Let's not forget that it is the female hormone oestrogen that keeps our bodies hairless and fecund, its male equivalent testosterone that causes body hair and bald heads.) Perhaps there's a code of conduct required here, a protocol, a degree to which the new way of doing things can be taken. The body's various hairy parts have to be broken down, and each potentially hirsute region have its acceptability re-assessed.

Trickiest to achieve, yet most impressive when done well, is the armpit muff. I remember how marvellous and revolutionary it looked in the early Eighties on Patti Smith and Béatrice Dalle and, to a certain extent, Julia Roberts, despite the abuse that was hurled at her when she dared to raise her arm at that *Notting Hill* premiere back in 1999. I admire, too, the way women such as model Charlotte Free, with her Stabilo-pink hair and perfect dollish features, carry it off so stylishly. Could I, though, with my swarthy heritage? Not so sure. A Persian friend who has been waxing her forearms since the age of 11, and who freely admits the first thing she'd save in a fire is her Lumea Precision Plus, sits me down at the Fulham Broadway branch of Whole Foods and firmly counsels, no. Quite a few of my girlfriends have firmly counselled no, actually. (If only I hadn't gone on that cosy all-girl mini-break and stupidly thought that because no men would be around, it would be fine not to wax; ever since, my bush has had an embarrassing life of its own.) But I'm tempted. Perhaps the way to carry it off is to be groomed to within an inch of one's life everywhere else, at all times, even when you think no one is looking.

And yet of all the depilatory trends it's the Hollywood bikini wax that feels most dated. This is not to say that nobody does it any more; my Iraqi threader and waxer tells me that not one of her burquād clients will tolerate a single superfluous hair anywhere below the eyelash line, no exceptions. But among the male acquaintances I casually buttonholed for this piece, almost all of them said they preferred a bit of a bush. Only my 26-year-old straight male hairdresser sheepishly admitted he liked nothing there "because sex is better without".

No one is talking about reviving a *L'Origine du Monde* situation here. But do you remember that springiness, that hint of fullness under one's bikini bottoms we all used to rock before 1994 (that was the game-changing year the Padilha sisters offered the first Brazilian bikini wax in their Manhattan salon)? That may be the way forward. I'm thinking of the famous photograph Richard Avedon took of Stephanie Seymour's proper, womanly thatch in 1992. I'm thinking of the one Herb Ritts took of Cindy Crawford's

But could I carry it off? Quite a few girlfriends have counselled: no

in 1991 for *Playboy*. I'm thinking of plus-sized model Crystal Renn's luxuriant pelt in French *Vogue* four years ago (a little shocking then, definitely less so when I look at it now).

"I have to say that after 18 years of preening down below, my clients are going back to the basics," says Teresa Tarmey, laser expert and facialist to the likes of Tallulah Harlech and Suki Waterhouse. "Clients are realising that looking like a plucked chicken isn't so flattering and that they like the look of a preened but proper bush." Of course, if you want it both ways you can always plump for the "full bush Brazilian", which *New York Magazine* reported as being a "thing" in Brooklyn last summer – that's "hippy at the front, porn star underneath". And if it was all about the vajazzle a few years ago, might it not now be about the "downstairs dye", as Beauty & the Bleach – the hip Dalston salon favoured by Rihanna – calls its pubic-hair-colouring service? As for the hygiene argument, that keeping it hairless as a naked mole rat down there is cleaner, bah. Doctors have repeatedly told us pubic hair isn't there for decoration, it's there to protect from friction and bacteria.

Then comes the hairy leg, the last bastion of female body-hair propriety. The bush may have flourished in the Seventies, but did you know that in 1975 a judge in Connecticut upheld the firing of a waitress for not shaving her legs? Nothing threatens more, somehow, than a layer of "dog fur", as Tina Fey calls it, on one's legs. But it doesn't even need to be "dog fur". I'm thinking of a photograph I recently posted on Instagram, and the outraged reaction it provoked among my followers. It first appeared in *Vice* magazine in a piece entitled "Hair Everywhere". Shot by Arvida Byström, it depicts two pairs of girls' legs coltishly entwined, shod in pretty pink ballet pumps and frilly socks. All four legs are covered in fine dark hairs. Sounds innocent enough, but in fact it is an image thick with provocation.

And therein lies the challenge of the new natural. Hairiness is too deeply ingrained in our psyches as male and "other" (as Charles Darwin pointed out in *The Descent of Man*, the fact that females are less hairy than males can easily be put down to natural selection); the removal of it too normative, too embedded in history (there is evidence that women were "sugaring" in ancient Egypt) for it not to have tremendous shock value. Politics really has nothing to do with it. A card-carrying feminist friend of mine is ashamed to admit that she shaves her big toes before going for a pedicure – "like they haven't seen anything worse than a lightly haired toe..." – and then there's my mum, my human-rights-activist mum, whom I remember getting so cross when I answered the door to a male admirer of hers in the Seventies, telling him she'd be there once she'd finished taking the Immac off her legs.

Yet female body hair is having its moment – as everything does, eventually, in fashion. Perhaps the best that can be said is that because of social media, and the gradual merging of alternative and mainstream cultures, there is more plurality of opinion, and society has to be more accepting of its existence? Or maybe not.

"I would never define being hairy as fashionable or unfashionable," dismisses London College of Fashion graduate and Uniqlo model Ayesha Tan Jones, 21. "I don't think you can put natural growth into a category like that. Some women may be led by the media and other social norms into thinking that men don't find hair sexually attractive, but what kind of man would say no to a beautiful naked lady he's about to bed, because of a bit of fluff?"

Hear, hear! But maybe you go first. ■