

Columnist
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Body Beautiful



For far too long the fact that disabled people were almost invisible in the fashion and advertising media has played a major role in the public perception that we could not be attractive or beautiful. The only time a disabled model did pop up in a fashion feature or promotional campaign was when the company or publication was trying to be "edgy" or "challenging". Once the headline grabbing publicity that accompanied these "cutting edge" features died down the disabled models disappeared and the so called beautiful people won out once again. I was part of a few of these campaigns way back in the 90's, including catwalk modelling and appearing in The Times fashion pages and in The Face magazine, yet the situation did not change for good. It was just too much for these industries to take on board. Disabled people just weren't beautiful it seemed.

But all this might finally be about to change. As well as the Paralympics giving disabled people the chance to prove we can excel in physical pursuits, there is a growing movement to prove that we are attractive. Disabled people are finally taking charge of how they are portrayed too.

The fantastic photographer Rei Bennett, whose project Beauty Through Damage has been featured in previous issues of PosAbility, is fast carving out a niche as the photographer who can capture the

true beauty of disability. Her imagery not only challenges the public perception that disabled people aren't sexy, it proves that we can be utterly gorgeous. She even made me look great!

The charity Enhance The UK, that is run entirely by disabled people so they are truly "by us and not for us", is about to launch a new campaign called Undressing Disability that will also focus on the way disabled people are portrayed. Using a well known industry photographer Ben Pruchnie, the campaign features disabled people looking very sexy posing in their underwear. The campaign aims to make people question their views about disability, help disabled people with sexual issues and challenges the advertising and media industries to feature more disabled faces. I know the media will jump on this campaign as it is the perfect mix of sex and confrontation that they will love, and all the publicity will blow the doors off the way the public sees disability.

Then for those of us who are into fashion a new online resource Style Ramp offers

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fashion and style advice aimed directly at disabled people. Run by fashion and marketing student Tiffany Dhani, the daughter of well known disabled sportsman and campaigner Jaspal Dhani, the site features loads of content from disabled people like fashionista Lara Masters and fashion designer Catriona Stewart, who designs under the name Kitty Crème, as well as myself and it will only feature disabled models. They also hope to prove to the fashion industry that there is a hidden market out there as well as loads of untapped disabled talent.

The great thing about the current trend and what makes it so different from past moves to make a change is that disabled people are behind it all. With our own hands at the wheel of this drive to use sexy and positive imagery, and all the passion that brings, there is no way we will stop until we reach the destination of inclusive portrayal. So who knows, in the near future disabled people might finally be regularly featured in advertising and on the pages of glossy magazines. Sadly I'm too old to be one of those models but I'll be rooting for you young bucks. ■

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