

When Provocations Become Stale

ALICE BONVICINI (January 23, 2011)



The latest work by Oliviero Toscani stirs unnecessary controversy - again.

Counter-current, irreverent, creative, provocative. These are some of the adjectives you can find associated with [Oliviero Toscani](#) [2], the Italian award-winning photographer and creative director whose name seems to cyclically resurface in the Italian media due to some infamous ad campaign. "He pushes the border of what is licit," "he subverts stereotypes", "he always creates controversy." The plethora of uncritical commentary goes on more or less like that. And although some of his earlier work could have fallen within the category of biting, his creative accomplishments are becoming repetitive to say the least. Toscani's ability to grab attention goes unquestioned but there must be a point at which the production of shocking images in order to grab some newspaper headlines becomes tiring.

The latest Toscani effort at this is a calendar for the [Consorzio Vera Pelle Conciata al Vegetale](#) [3] (Consortium for Genuine Vegetable Tanned Leather), a consortium of leather tanners, which features



twelve female au naturel (as in unshaven) pubes, one per month. The clever almanac was presented at [Pitti Uomo](#) [4] in Florence and it is distributed together with this month's issue of Rolling Stone Magazine (Italia). As expected, the flock of crucifiers and admirers is long and annoyingly loud.

In a country where the media representation of the female body is stuck in the stone age, Toscani's objectification of it, which he claims to be using in a political way, seems to be very conformist rather than critical. He defines his work as social commentary, and while one can't challenge the intent one can certainly question the result. Is it really thought provoking to show female genitalia or is it just a way of galvanizing media attention? And honestly, can a close up of female pubes really be associated with some liberating concept? A cultural study freshman could conclude that it does exactly the opposite: perpetrate the commodification of femininity, in this specific case equating female sexual organs to the skin of animals.

Florence's [Equal Opportunity Commission](#) [5] defined the ad offensive for women's dignity. And Italy's [Equal Opportunity Minister, Mara Carfagna](#) [6], responded to the outcry from women's organizations calling for a code violation review by the advertising industry's self-sanctioning body [Istituto dell'Autodisciplina Pubblicitaria \(IAP\)](#) [7]. While the director of the Italian edition of Rolling Stone Magazine, Carlo Antonelli, hinting at the show business background of the Minister and ultimately alluding to a calendar she released before her political induction, responded that "in Italy, a double standard reigns."

Oliviero Toscani built a name thanks to his 1980s ads for Benetton, where he flaunted his uncritical notion of multiculturalism (an African-American, a Caucasian and an Asian kid standing next to one another, for example; could racial harmony be more blandly depicted pillaged of its complexities?). Starting 1991, the ad campaigns were stripped of the clothing and reduced to provoking shots: unwrapped colorful condoms; a nun and a priest kissing; a newborn baby girl covered in blood with an uncut umbilical cord. Then came the reconciliation of political and commercial: the green logo pasted on photo-journalistic images of a dying AIDS patient, the blood soaked uniform of a dead Serbian soldier, a Mafia killing in Palermo. And the list of questionably tasteful works culminates with the last social commentary, which preceded the 2011 calendar, the 2007 Nolita ad campaign, which featured a naked and emaciated anorexic model, who recently died. It really seems more about shock, outrage and buzz, rather than ideas. Moreover, it is very hard to separate the shock value of these works from the imperatives of profit and commercialization that fostered them in the first place.

And while the superstar Italian photographer dismisses the latest charges of objectification of the female body, the difference between the tanners consortium calendar and the sexist and humiliating depictions of femininity on mainstream Italian media stands out for its imperceptibility. Personally, the feeling that dominates is not outrage but boredom, boredom before Mr. Toscani's never ending thirst for attention.

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