



Spaced out . . . an image of fashion as seen in *The Face*

PHOTOGRAPH: CORINNE DAY

# Heroin chic? Just say no

Yes, fashion does peddle money, sex and power. But, says **Laura Craik**, President Clinton is wrong to blame it for persuading people to turn on to hard drugs

**P**RESIDENT Clinton has criticised the fashion industry for promoting what he refers to as "heroin chic" — a snappy yet meaningless little moniker commonly used within the frock world as an umbrella expression to describe anyone, in real life or in the pages of a fashion magazine, who looks too thin, too tired or too ill. Heroin is *not* chic, yet certainly within the last few years the fashion industry has had a long and languid flirtation with wasted-looking, blank-eyed models, who have been used to sell everything from the prettiest floral tea-dress to the latest designer scent.

"You do not need to glamourise addiction to sell clothes," says the President. Fashion is not Clinton's business: it is understandable that he should perhaps be baffled by the selling clout of an undernourished 16-year-old who looks like she needs a good sleep. But the kids seem to lap it all up, and the kids and their moral welfare are what Clinton must concern himself with. No doubt the recent tragic heroin-related death of Davide Sorrenti, son of prominent American fashion photographer Francesca,

has played some part in prompting his remarks. The death of a member of fashion's inner circle has certainly been the catalyst for a lot of guilty soul-searching.

But who exactly is guilty, and of what? For Clinton to have singled out the fashion industry is surely a facile exercise in finger-pointing that ignores the glamorous status heroin enjoys in the music and film worlds as well. Fashion is an easy target. The stick-thin models that lope through its domain are highly

visible signs of possible malady and possible drug abuse.

Myths abound that models shoot smack between their toes to avoid track-marks in their arms. If a top model was a known drug addict, would her agency dare to intervene, so long as she turned up for her jobs and kept making them money?

The fashion world might be shady, but it is also a multi-million-pound industry America needs and values. Yes, it's a powerful medium: wordlessly, beautifully, no-

body would deny it has the ability silently to seduce. Fashion peddles money, sex and power. It preys on the inadequate. It fools you into thinking you want things you don't need and need things you don't want. Fashion is often foolish, sometimes shady. But it isn't evil. It doesn't peddle drugs. The bloke on the street corner does that.

The Face has often been accused of perpetrating the myth that heroin is "cool". Yesterday, there weren't

**Fashion is often foolish, sometimes shady. But it isn't evil. It doesn't peddle drugs. The bloke on the street corner does that.**

enough Face staff to cope with the international demand for TV appearances and off-the-cuff quotes requested by tabloids ("oh, it's so disgusting that they've used a pin-thin, grey-skinned model in that fashion story. Let's reprint the picture on our front page"). Flattering — yet kind of daunting, in this context — to be held up as the most influential international fash-

ion magazine amongst style-conscious young people today. People want to find us guilty; are keen to apportion blame.

At *The Face*, we like to believe our readers are far too intelligent to be nudged into the twilight world of drug abuse by a mere picture of a wasted-looking model. This is not to deny that art and life sometimes cross over: only that when they do, we trust that they can tell the difference between the myth of a glassy, glossy illusion and the reality behind it.

Beneath the swathes of rhetoric and shock-wave soundbites, the question we need to ask is simple: only its answer is tricky. How powerful are the images all around us? Do the pictures we see have implicit bearing on the people we are? On the way that we live? On whether we decide to shoot poison into our veins?

To acknowledge that the answer might be "yes" is to admit to a fear endemic to life at the end of the 20th century: that man-made things are threatening to overwhelm

man. Are we ineffectual husks, blown hither and thither by the bombardment of seductive words and images blaring from our radios, stereos, monitors, TVs, cinemas, books and magazines? We create and nurture our own desire to be satiated. We cannot detach it from us. It isn't separate.

President Clinton, the fashion industry is only as culpable as the people who buy into it whole-heartedly, without discretion. And it is far easier to blame the fashion industry than to look at the cultural and sociological reasons for drug abuse. People take heroin because they hate life and quite possibly hate themselves as well. Or because they have no money and no hope. Or because they have everything but it still isn't enough. Or because they are genetically predisposed to addiction. Or because they hate it but can't stop. Or because they like it and don't want to. Not solely because they saw a model in a magazine who they thought looked "cool".

The fashion for "heroin chic" will come and go. The problem of heroin addiction won't. Doesn't this say it all?

Laura Craik is fashion features editor of *The Face* magazine