Fashion industry has forced unrealistic image on women, says leading designer

Giles Deacon, one of Britain's leading designers, has criticised the fashion industry's continued obsession with skinny models.



British Fashion Designer, Giles Deacon, in his Brick Lane workshop Photo: GEOFF PUGH

**By Kate Finnigan and Patrick Sawer**

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The debate over the size of catwalk models is one that continues to divide the world of fashion.

Now one of Britain's leading designers has criticised the industry's continued obsession with skinny models, accusing it of being both ageist and sexist in its attitudes to women.

Giles Deacon, the creative director of Emanuel Ungaro, the Parisian fashion house, said women were being asked to aspire to a completely unrealistic ideal of beauty.

In an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* Mr Deacon said: "I've seen it in certain studios I've worked in and I've never liked it as a way of working or being with people. At a certain period in time, the fashion industry was portraying this image of a totally unrealistic woman, women who are not allowed to be themselves. It's just all a bit wrong."

He pins the blame for this on the cowardice of many of his fellow designers.

"I think [designers] were probably scared, if truth be out, that if they put someone who wasn't 'right' on the runway or in an ad campaign, that it would be a failure, that women wouldn't want it. Which clearly isn't the case," he said.

The 'size zero' controversy erupted in 2006 when a Uruguayan model, Luisel Ramos, 22, died of heart failure after starving herself in preparation for a show. In November that year another model, 21-year-old Brazilian Ana Carolina Reston, died from anorexia.

As a result of the backlash Madrid Fashion Week banned underweight models. Milan followed suit with a code of conduct to stop anorexic-looking models being used in shows.

*The Sunday Telegraph* has previously revealed that fashion magazines have manipulated images of skinny models to make them look fuller-figured, in order to deflect criticism of promoting unhealthily-thin images.

Only last year Jane Druker, the editor of Healthy magazine – which promotes "health and wellbeing" – admitted that one of its cover models, Kamilla Wladyka, was so thin in real life that her image was radically retouched before appearing on the cover.

Public reaction against the use of ultra-thin models has led to designers and fashion houses adopting a more eclectic look in recent years, with models in their 30s, 40s and 50s appearing alongside younger women with more noticeable curves.

Mr Deacon went one better, hiring the 71-year-old American former model, Verushka, alongside Peter Crouch's fiancée Abigail Clancy and former glamour model Kelly Brook, to close his last Giles show.

Speaking ahead of the opening of London Fashion Week on Friday, Mr Deacon said: "There are some great skinny girls, but it's about characters, isn't it? That's what I find attractive. People who've had interesting lives and tell you something that you don't know or are really good fun."

Perhaps that explains his appointment as Ungaro's creative director in May last year. The house has long had a reputation for eschewing austere minimalism and encouraging the more sensual side of fashion.

Mr Deacon, 40, said: "Mr Ungaro always used to claim that rather than dressing wives, he was dressing mistresses, which was a very French way of looking at it. But there is an element of that. It's quite showy ... It's one of the least intellectual brands in the world."

His first full-scale catwalk show for Ungaro last September proved to be one of the highlights of Paris Fashion Week.

Mr Deacon's own womenswear label, Giles, which he launched seven-years-ago, is said to present a 'playful' but challenging aesthetic, with dresses – which can fetch upwards of £4,000 – made out of car-wash brushes and smashed mirrors.

"People should just get over themselves," says Mr Deacon, who likes to present his work as a "good laugh" – though no one in the industry doubts his credentials as a serious operator.

He even went so far as to invite Kerry Katona, the former Atomic Kitten singer who has been pilloried for parading her troubled life on reality TV shows, to sit in the front row.

"I think people are really hard on people – unnecessarily so," said Mr Deacon. "Nobody's perfect and I think everybody would like the chance to show another side. I mean, Kerry's gorgeous. I've never met her and she's had her troubles along the way, but there's something quite great about her."

Never one to shy away from controversy Mr Deacon even has something to say about the current debate over the Government's hike in student fees. He fears talented youngsters will be put off going to college and Britain risks losing a generation of talented designers.

He said: "Students are up to their eyeballs in loans, and it's going to get even worse. It's going to be hideous, actually. Students are going to be saddled for life. It's going to put a lot of people off going to college, which is a shame.

"Regardless of what you do, the best thing about college is that it gives you time to understand what you want to do and how you can do it. And if you don't have that, it's a shame – for everyone."

Mr Deacon himself studied at St Martin's in the late Eighties, where he was a contemporary of the late Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan. Instead of setting up on his own, as they did, he worked for Jean-Charles de Castelbajac.

"I just wanted to spend someone else's money, get paid and get rid of the student loan" he said.

He subsequently revived the Italian luxury house Bottega Veneta, along with the stylist, Katie Grand, before it was bought by Gucci and they were promptly sacked in 2001.

As a boy growing up in Cumbria he claims he spent much of his time "staring into rock pools" and only happened to go to art school because he failed all his science exams. Named designer of the year in 2006, his celebrity fans include Thandie Newton, Kristin Scott Thomas and Princess Beatrice.

Mr Deacon, who divides his time between his home in Islington, north London, and his apartments in Paris and Italy, said of his own style: "It's impromptu, vivacious, gorgeous, sexy clothes.

"It's got that kind of Parisian-ness that people look for around the world. You don't need to intellectualise it."