

## Madonna for Versace: 2005 Ad Campaign

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

A preface of defense: I am a huge Madonna fan. Normally the woman can do no wrong in my eyes. People hated her *American Life* album ~ I loved it. People scoffed at her efforts at children's literature ~ I rather enjoyed the books. People poked fun at her British accent ~ I listened with rapt fascination. Part of what made me love her was the hell-bent determination she displayed in never repeating herself. Particularly in her music, she showed evolution and growth, refusing to get stuck in a specific musical rut, trying out new ideas and sounds, and always remaining one step ahead of the game. She may have been most adept at this "re-invention" in the world of fashion. No one has had such a long-lasting effect on trends and style as Madonna. All of this is why her current re-re-incarnation as Versace ad star is such a disappointing letdown.

When the news was announced that Madonna was to be the star of Versace's 2005 campaign, it was greeted with wild enthusiasm by many who expected the same magic they produced in their first two collaborations (March and November 1995). Shot by Steven Meisel and Mario Testino respectively, those projects were original and innovative, and a perfect melding of art and commerce. Meisel's smoky black-and-white style showcased the elegant simplicity of the evening dresses, while Testino's stark, spare signature lent the mostly-white collection an air of refined minimalism. Thrilling and inventive, they showed a new side to Madonna ~ a softer, more sensual side not seen in the *Sex* book or racier videos of the time. Far from selling out, Madonna retained her untouchable stardom, and the photos added another layer of complex mystique to an already jam-packed persona.

The current ad campaign doesn't come close to approaching the brilliance of those shoots (though it is a much better fit than those horrendous Gap ads). Testino is back at the helm, and this time around we see Madonna in a futuristic office environment donning a platinum blonde wig and showing off Donatella Versace's latest duds. Upon repeated viewings the wig may grow on one ~ but the first thing that registers is how wrong it looks. By now we should be accustomed to Madonna as a blonde, and it's apparent that the creative folks behind these images were going for the blatant look of a bad wig, but it just doesn't work. In fact, many people (including myself) originally thought that the leaked scans of the ads were fake. Her head looks like it doesn't quite belong on her body in some of the shots, and in today's age of computer enhancement and wizardry it seems strange that they would go with such puzzling images.

Many reviews of the current campaign have been oddly and unfathomably glowing regarding the "sexy secretary chic" motif, but the design is sterile and stale. Why is she licking a blank envelope? Who on earth has a chaise lounge in an office? And why would you wear those outfits to work in the first place? If you're going for the glamorous over-the-top impossibility of high fashion, go for it all the way ~ don't trip it up with lame office concepts.

Here we see Madonna posing with a phone to her ear. Here she is reclining with a pen in her hand. Here she is kneeling on the floor licking the aforementioned envelope. Here she is typing away half-heartedly on a bright white Apple computer, languidly moving a mouse as

she's perched ever-so-elegantly on the edge of a desk. I've seen more inspired scenes in my own office, and it is a mind-numbingly bland place.

Perhaps we're meant to giggle and smirk at these photos ~ she is, after all, CEO of her own corporation (Madonna is a corporation unto herself.) And maybe it's just a whimsical look into what a fantastical working world is like on some surreal plane. Madonna wears the clothes well, and looks inarguably good for a forty-something mother of two, but the unmistakable breeze of some major airbrushing mars the overall effect, as do her series of lifeless facial expressions.

Though the Star is undoubtedly the focus of these photos, the main point of advertising is to sell the Product. Here we have a few of Donatella's current offerings, and while there are flickers of greatness, it falls short of what she's had a hand at presenting in the past. The clothes are pretty much the same stuff Versace has been putting out for the last ten years, if slightly more subdued and grown up. The busy, baroque shirt patterns in bold color combinations, the chunky gold jewelry with the overdone Versace crest, the 70's style hip-hugger bell bottoms ~ classic Versace it is; daring and original it's not. Donatella does show some restraint with the softer hues, however, perhaps proving her ability to maintain the Versace style while moving slightly forward in style.

The accessories steal the show ~ over-the-top, shiny gold-plated buckles on the handbags, gold chain belts and striking stilettos combine to remind us that this secretary is making a little bit more than your average office gopher (even if the ridiculously incongruous red kabbalah string spoils some of the effect).

There are also a few glimmers of inspiration in the second wave of ads. There is a shot of Madonna in a burnt umber sheer and beaded gown that is splendid ~ all relaxed glamour and playful eyes, her gaze straight into the camera as she aims a remote control at the viewer, at the ready to turn us all on or off at her wish and whim. The pink skirt and white V-neck sweater combination is an inspired, modern look, pretty and practical and befitting the office setting. And it must be said that Madonna looks twenty years younger in a retro pink shirt emblazoned with fire red coral and a pair of impeccably-fitted jeans.

She has always found salvation in fashion. The initial Versace ads of the 90's were her way of begging forgiveness for the *Sex* and *Erotica* debacles. These days it may be atonement for anyone maxed out with all the kabbalah talk and red-string hoo-ha. Still, it has the empty feel of a bone thrown to those of us missing the glamour diva of the past. Madonna has always been known for flash and pizzazz; hers was a triumph of style over substance. In previous years she managed to turn her style into her substance, eking out just enough art to remain relevant (and some of us think her work is quite substantial at that). Yet for all of the pre-release hype and the estimated \$10-12 million paycheck, this project ends up falling flat. Like the blank paper and envelopes that appear in the background, there's something shockingly empty to the whole affair ~ a charge that has always dogged Madonna, but one that I never felt was deserved until now. Though it's far too soon, and completely unfair, to label her passé and played out, the current ads do seem a pale imitation of former glory. But given Madonna's history, I have a feeling that it's just a minor glitch on her road to the next big thing.