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Beardo cover boys: hip and sexy or borderline creepy?

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It's high summer and the model on the cover of *Driven* magazine's "heat issue" is boasting a bushy beard.

But this is no indie-type style statement - as in the bearded boys of bands like Broken Social Scene and the Fleet Foxes. It's part of a decidedly upscale fashion spread, as if the Geico caveman has been given the royal treatment by Stacy London and Clinton Kelly of *What Not to Wear*.

The all-white sartorial theme is presented as a range of personae, from hustler to sailor to groom, with a trio of babes in white bikinis as props. Still, the Canali suits, Zegna sweaters and Boss shoes are upstaged by Toronto model Daniel Mazzucco's dark beard.

Meanwhile, in a print ad for Belvedere vodka shot by well-known American photographer Terry Richardson, a bearded model channels a Russian gangster slouching on a banquet, shirt undone, flanked by flirty fillies. The model is Tony Ward, a former Calvin Klein underwear poster boy and Madonna flame turned risqué photographer.

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Both are evidence that beardos are having a moment. Whether this look is hot or hideous has the potential to remain as unanswerable as debating chocolate over vanilla. But it has people talking. And the question they're asking is "What were they thinking?"

Beardo is a term that sounds more pejorative than it is. This portmanteau of beard plus weirdo generally refers to guys who look borderline creepy because of their facial hair. But like "gallerina," which describes pretty young things who staff art galleries, beardo has come to describe an urban hipster archetype.

The fashion industry first experienced this follicular facial fullness in 2006 when designers such as John Bartlett and Ralph Lauren sent models down the runway with beards that Abe Lincoln would envy.

A year later, model Patrick Petitjohn got tongues wagging when he appeared as the face of Gianfranco Ferré resembling a wolfish James Dean.

Driven editor-in-chief Gary Butler says that Mazzucco was cast in part because he channeled the Petitjohn vibe. The beard offered "a dark anchor" or contrast to all the white clothing, and is also a good fit with the a publication that caters to a more mature and moneyed male reader.

"The idea of having a guy who is no more than 18 or 20 offset by three young women just wasn't striking the right balance so we needed a man with more maturity, and a beard gives a strong presence," he says.

Comedian Jon Friedman organized the New York City Beard and Moustache Championship in 2006 and has plans to make it a biannual event. In his bearded opinion, facial hair can be a slacker way to offer a point of distinction. "[Men] can play with the way they look just by not shaving," he says from Brooklyn.

And, because not every man is able to grow a beard, it is often sported as a badge of honour. "Every guy wants to grow a beard at some point because on the one hand, we want to prove to ourselves that we can," says James Bassil, the Montreal-based editor of *Askmen.com*, a leading men's portal. "In many ways, it's a declaration of manliness and a do-your-own thing mentality."

But does this translate into a sex symbol that is able to sell magazines or clothes? Bob Makinson is unconvinced. "We're not doing it," says the creative director of *Sir* magazine, who says that in the indie hotbed of Brooklyn, beardos are often viewed as pretentious.

Agent Cynthia Cully, however, thinks there is growing demand for this "real guy look."

Having shopped Mazzucco's portfolio around, she says that upscale clients "get it instantly." The agency director for Stylus Canada does admit that the local market isn't ready for a deluge of beardos.

"It's a specific look," she says. "In Toronto I don't think we can have more than one or two."

Petitjohn, meanwhile, is now the face of Prada. And an unshaven face at that. As Friedman says, "He got attention for his beard by having it and now he can get attention for not having it." Perhaps there simply comes a time when a beardo becomes a beardon't.

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