

# Big Smalls

Ever since Christian Grey showered his lover with gifts in E.L. James' BDSM bestseller 'Fifty Shades of Grey', Agent Provocateur has become a household name. But behind the brand there is a man with much bigger things on his mind.



**You can be knocked down, but it doesn't mean you're out.**  
Alessia slip by Agent Provocateur, 350 USD  
Skin coloured Europa hold-ups by Agent Provocateur, 40 USD

**A**head of interviewing Garry Hogarth, I visit the year-old flagship store on Mayfair's elegant Grosvenor Street, to preview Agent Provocateur's erotic autumn-winter 2013 collection. The shop assistant greets me, dressed in trademark, too tight, baby pink housecoat, spilling over - quite literally. A remainder from the brand's old Westwood days, the uniform is definitely a little more 'oh, matron' than the empowering feminist image the brand now seeks to portray.

But I'm soon seduced by the dimly lit boutique, which oozes Parisian boudoir. Black and gold fixtures are draped with braziers crafted in frou-frou Chantilly lace and 'bodycon' contraptions with bondage straps that shout 'girls on top'.

We pause at the couture Soirée collection to admire a nearly non-existent playsuit, which covers your modesty with a sparkle of Swarovski-sewn tassels. Add that to the kinky kimonos, saucy suspenders and heady perfumes and it soon becomes clear that Hogarth and his team are right on-brand with their sexualised statement.

A laid back family man with a clear dislike of corporate bureaucracy, he might seem an unlikely candidate to be at the helm of a company as risqué as Agent Provocateur but Hogarth is CEO because he knows how to do business. You might say that he's a man on a mission to bring big ideas to smalls.

When Hogarth took a phone call in 2006 from Vivienne Westwood's son and AP co-founder Joe Corré, asking for help, the lingerie company's path was set to change forever. He stepped in as CEO in 2007 when Corré and ex-wife Serena Rees sold the portfolio to the private equity firm, 3i. "Quite a conservative company," says Hogarth. At the time there were 14 AP stores. Now there are over 70 worldwide.

"I've always lived by the philosophy that you can achieve anything you set your mind to and my business motto is that it's important to make decisions quickly and decisively."

Hogarth's unconventional entrepreneurialism first rocketed him to success after he spotted a gap in what was then still the USSR's neckwear market. A single order by the country for 2 million scarves set him on his way and before long, his scarf company was selling to Saks and Bloomingdales and by 1988 he was supplying Marks and Spencer with 75 per cent of their accessories.

Years after selling off his business he is applying this eye for growth to undies. "I've always loved Agent Provocateur and thought it had enormous potential to become a globally dominant brand. Luxury lingerie is really niche," he explains. "We work really hard to keep the integrity of the brand by delivering high quality products to our customers. We take great pride in our boutiques and always try to ensure that the store experience is the best it can be. Attention to detail is really key and this can be seen, right down to our beautiful packaging."

The brand's buxom dose of naughtiness comes from creative director, Sarah Shotton, a former Corré apprentice and graduate from London's Central Saint Martins College design school. Her philosophy is to flatter and empower women. I haven't seen any voluptuous bodies in the glossy look-books that I'm handed but Hogarth assures me that the brand is all about 'girl power'. "Men and women can go into the boutiques and have a wonderful experience buying lingerie. Currently about 70 per cent of our customers are women and they continue to buy our products because they always make them feel confident, beautiful and sexy."

Hogarth is proud of the hands-on design process he established, from drawing board to factory floor, as well as ►



**To love beauty is to see light.**

Annoushka Slip by Agent Provocateur, 1,190 USD  
Love Thong by Agent Provocateur, 110 USD



**Strap in, it's going to be a rough ride**  
Charlie Playsuit by Agent Provocateur, POA  
Fishnet Pasties by Agent Provocateur, 70 USD  
Diabolo Stockings by Agent Provocateur, 50 USD  
Long satin gloves, 190 USD

**Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear**  
 Indigoe Corsette by Agent Provocateur, 650 USD  
 Indigoe thong, 130 USD  
 Indigoe bra, 190 USD  
 Indigoe suspenders, 170 USD  
 Indigoe briefs, 170 USD  
 Polkadot stockings, 50 USD

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the technical planning behind each piece. I'm shown a delicate underwired bra decorated with a spray painting technique in French lace which has taken two years to master. "We believe it's not only important to have beautiful lingerie, it's also imperative our garments fit well," Hogarth continues, a statement with which I, as a potential customer, can wholeheartedly agree. "We have a really strong technical team that focus on producing the best fit and sourcing the most beautiful fabrics."

"I believe the production and company has grown in recent years as we have always kept our design team in-house which has enabled them to always source the best possible materials. Rather than using one central factory, we only use production companies that specialise in specific techniques."

Indeed, under Hogarth, the company has ridden out the global recession well, with increased sales of 21 per cent last year. "In a crisis, customers are particularly selective about what they choose to buy," he explains. "They come to us because they know that we always produce quality."

These days, the buzz around AP might be all about 'Fifty Shades: the movie' but not even that can overshadow the company's infamous cinema advert. Released back in 2001, it featured singer/sextress Kylie Minogue cavorting on a velveteen bronco dressed in skimpy black AP undies before turning to camera. "Would all the men in the audience," she pouted breathily, "stand up?" It's still Britain's number one cinema advert of all time. Hogarth admits that the Kylie campaign was a great turning point for the brand but maybe for the wrong reasons. "It

grabbed so much attention but we weren't aiming at men. Kylie was portrayed as a woman who always had complete control of a situation and our intention was and is to present this sort of empowering image of women."

In the latest campaign, 'Control Yourself', actress Melissa George and models Chloe Hayward and Elettra Wiedemann play catwalk models being tortured and teased into their outfits by sadistic hairdressers, make-up artists and an egomaniacal designer. Humiliated and treated with contempt, they revolt. George rips off her dress in an act of defiance, revealing, of course, her brand new Electra underwear, fashioned from French lace, black tulle and crisscross rouleaux elastic. Encouraged, the two other models – and several members of the designer's team – similarly unblouse. The women push the cringing designer to the floor, before strutting out to writhe their way along the catwalk to flashing cameras and general applause. All pouting lips, heaving breasts and girly, it's mildly homoerotic (well, in a heterosexual male way), a little bit Pussy Riot and of course, very sexy.

"Not all of our campaigns are fronted by celebrities and this isn't always something we are aiming for when we choose our campaign star," Hogarth says, insisting that AP's attraction runs much deeper than famous faces. "We're looking for someone we feel really represents the brand. We want a real fan, someone with an Agent Provocateur personality. They must be irreverent and sexy and they must have a great sense of humour." Rather like us typical AP customers then. The rest, as they say, is up to you. ■

