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EXCLUSIVE

An Intimate
Afternoon With

Cindy Crawford

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The Art of Seduction

FRENCH SHOE DESIGNER OF THE MOMENT
CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN TAKES HONG
KONG'S ADORING FEMALE CONSUMERS
BY STORM ON A RECENT VISIT.

STEPHEN SHORT REPORTS

SUCCESSFUL DESIGNERS WHO grab the spotlight are said to be having a moment. Christian Louboutin, 44-year-old French designer of high-heeled and highly desirable shoes, has been in that moment for the last five years and if fan-crazed consumer reaction to his recent Southeast Asian trip was a barometer of hip, his moment's got legs aplenty.

Fever pitch excitement was evident in Central, Hong Kong at accessory haven On Pedder, the group that stocks his shoes and bags and plans to launch a Louboutin free-standing store in September or October at On Lan Street. The oohs, aaahs and girly squeals he incites during a shoe-signing session with his adoring legions are more redolent of fans at a Leo DiCaprio premiere. It's celebrity circus time and the

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fashionistas, the frou-frous and the fantastical freaks all want a piece of him and his product. "I thought only Americans could be so over the top, as you would never see such a thing in Europe and this is the first time I've seen it here, in Jakarta, Singapore and Hong Kong," he says.

To fashion Neanderthals, Louboutin may be just a shoe designer, but try telling that to grown women who become adolescents in his presence. Straight after the On Pedder giddy-fest he's being girlied during dinner at Cipriani private members' club. A beautiful bird of paradise plumes up to him, all but places her talons in his lap and coos: "You must have heard this a million times, Christian, but there are two loves in my life, my husband and your shoes. If you'll sign these shoes I'm wearing, yours of course, I'm thinking that order's about to be reversed." It's not an indecent proposal and Louboutin greets it with consummate decency over his plate of half-eaten quail. He asks how many pairs of his shoes she has bought. She giggles like a six-year-old and tells him she's ... like ... lost count. Whatever the arithmetic, the sum of the parts is clear: Louboutin came to dinner alone but could have left with a tribal female group: his posse galore.

For Louboutin, the chorus of approval is a give-and-take relationship. "It's very funny to see a perfectly elegant woman and then she loses control, takes off her shoes and asks you to sign them, but now with a certain control, and then to watch her lose control all over again. That's the part I actually like, it's almost a child-like response in a nice way." Louboutin had told me earlier in the day that certain themes keep coming back in his conversations with frenzied clientele around the world. "There's always a woman who will come up and say, 'I've been buying your shoes for 25 years.' I never have the heart to say my

business has only been open for 15 years. So then they ask how long my father's been in the business. Of course he never was."

Louboutin not only plays up the mutual appreciation game, he encourages it. "I had a mother who was lying all the time, so I'm lying a little bit too. When women say they've been buying my shoes for 25 years, it just has to be nice. So I do not dislike this attitude even if it's funny or not true. There's no big deal about lying if it makes you feel great. Also, women adore when you say to them they look great, even if they are in their worst physical moment. They love it. It's a classic lie, everybody does it and we all love it."

Louboutin's shoes don't lie. They tower with truth and beauty. If Roger Vivier shoes make women weak-kneed, Louboutin's red-soled toe-totems fuel their desires, let them dare, then seduce, induce derision and drop them dead. Aesthetic delirium, architectural wonder, steeples of worship, his shoes are anything and everything: black roses on stalks, lingerie on heels, scarlet letters on stilts, art for tarts, tarts for smart, vertiginous dildos, art deco trocaderos, from '20s Corbusier's chaises to '40s Zazou's decadent zanies, mini beds of curvaceous conjugation, legs akimbo, straps in limbo, ecstasy's arch, climax's flow. The woman who wears Louboutin is superabundantly female.

Louboutin thinks a woman who tries on his creations buys first on her silhouette, then the shoes. "If a woman buys a pair of shoes she looks at herself first, her silhouette in the mirror. If she likes what she sees, then maybe she looks at the shoes more carefully after that. After all, a woman doesn't buy shoes for her husband, as he doesn't even see the difference, it's just for herself. A woman came to me and said she had a husband who was looking at her when they went out and would often say don't wear this outfit or that outfit, but said that had never happened when she'd been wearing my shoes. I like that because it's a men's perspective too. I thought that was a wonderful compliment."

Despite the high standing of Louboutin shoes, he's no vertical dictator. "I'm not a fascist. I do not think that every woman should wear high heels, but I do think they're very sexy. You should look great on heels, but if they're not comfortable, a woman shouldn't wear them. You shouldn't feel victimised by wearing heels. Ultimately, every woman should wear what she loves. You're at your best when you look at yourself and love yourself." Turns out he's as comfortable at ground level as on high: "I love flat shoes. One of my favourite flat shoes are the Indian style low, low, low, a beautiful sort of ballerina style with a low toe cleavage. I love them. But I don't like flats that mould to the foot and show toes through material. I do not like stretch fabrics. I don't like sandals either. They show everything, the foot and toes, and that is not sexy. I never lose the idea that the shoe has to be flattering to the foot."

Louboutin's shoe-and-foot flattering fetish began when he was 13 in Paris, his place of birth. "I discovered it at



Man of the moment Christian Louboutin takes respite from the consumer frenzy. Opposite, top left: His sketch for Prestige Hong Kong



the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens through a sketch of a high heel from the 1950s. I had never seen this type of heel before and was obsessed by it. I reproduced it frenetically in all colours." Some time later, he saw a woman wearing an almost identical pair on the streets of Paris and was so obsessed he followed her to the point of stalking. Two years later he quit school, pitched up at the Folies Bergère and tried to sell his designs to showgirls, with varying degrees of success.

Along the way, he was getting a very female education. "I have four sisters, but no brothers," he says. "So I know the problems of women. I was a little boy who saw the problems of four different girls growing up and becoming women. When I was small my youngest sister was already much older and taller than me. I was always looking up to her and them. I saw how they were with boyfriends, their moods etc... that was my feminine education."

But the boy-becoming-man was turning technical in the music halls, learning, observing and crafting designs that were an equal mix of glam and practicality for dancers, drawings that became his own-label shoes later on. From there he went to Charles Jourdan in 1981, did freelance stints with Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent and buried himself in the archives at shoe legend Roger Vivier. According to current Vivier ambassador Inès de la



“ I have a lot of tarts who like to wear my shoes to look chic, and a lot of elegant women who buy them to look a bit like tarts ”

Fressange, "Christian used to make our coffee, but we could see he had an awful lot of talent." Louboutin transformed a long apprenticeship into his own-label business when he opened his first boutique in 1992 at 19 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Paris. Success didn't follow overnight, but like many a Paris-based fashion cult-cum-best-kept secret, he developed a loyal and chic customer base and word slowly spread beyond the City of Love.

Despite the subsequent *ooh la* Louboutin the brand has become, the man has stayed true to his roots, still works from the same store and is adamant the hero worship hasn't changed him, but merely increased the shoe numbers he must now produce. "Yesterday I was in a restaurant and I looked at a girl's feet and I liked her shoes very much. And then she left, I looked at the red sole, it was my shoe, but I couldn't even recognise it. I was wishing that it was mine and it was. This is a big difference in my life. I see more of my shoes in different places."

"But there was no one moment for me and in terms of 'buzz,' I do not really see it or feel it. I do the same thing I've always done. I collect samples, I sleep in the factory. Nothing has changed for me in that way. I'm free in my company, I don't answer to anybody, my office is a little bigger, but there

is no difference. I haven't changed any of my habits. If you change habits you may have a new perception of yourself as a person, but I don't. Fifteen years ago Café Epoch was next to my place, and I still go there. I know there must be a difference but I cannot say what it is."

For a man whose product is so unabashedly sexy and inspired by the dance halls and dance girls of Toulouse Lautrec's art and the prostitutes of Pigalle, Louboutin is no louche. Au contraire. In person he looks and feels genteel, neat and cerebral. Dapper and dandy-crisp, he's got the studied air of David Suchet's Hercule Poirot, minus spats of course, for he's French and he pitter-patters sockless in a pair of red espadrilles, and looks like he wouldn't say boo to a goose. He looks particular, can even sound prissy and at times smacks of old-world fop. And, like many who take such calculated pride in immaculate presentation, there is much he finds vulgar.

"For a long, long time as an adolescent, a friend of mine was a music critic in the '70s. He had this Iggy Pop thing going on, tight, tight jeans, boots, sort of mod Chelsea boots, in white, a bit like Serge Gainsbourg, and I could see his feet through the shoes and I would always consider that. I was disgusted by that. I absolutely couldn't normally speak to him for that. That's one of my most... I was always disgusted by things you see. I guess





I have a problem with that. Things like that oppress me. It's like a bad-fitting glove and it bothers me."

This pristine-fit designer – his wardrobe comes from Charvet, Place Vendôme, right down to his silk-knit flat ties – also sports a starchy tea, scones and linen mentality, like he's a Merchant Ivory period movie in miniature, a little Briton, and he's on to the English reference like a shot. "My favourite bar in Paris is the Normand. It's fake English with big rugs. It's next to The Ritz and I always say, why bother, let's go to the Normand, it's so much better. It's totally French, super exotic, but nothing is more exotic than English for the French people. You know, you have that India/England combination, very exotic." Over dinner at Cipriani, sporting an Indian waistcoat, Louboutin had told me of his close friendship with the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland and his visits to Alnwick Castle, their home in the north of England, the second largest inhabited castle in the country with its sumptuous 42 million gardens.

Such loftiness, or that repressed-cum-aristocratic British stereotype, would seem contrary to the outright sex of his shoes but Louboutin says he has been surprised by consumer attitudes in England. "I did a version of a dominatrix shoe and the most popular place was England. I said, 'who bought all these shoes, Russians or what?' But it was the most conservative English ladies buying these boots. It's very strange. That's not at all what I would have guessed. There is one thing I've started to realise: I have a lot of tarts who like to wear my shoes to look chic, and a lot of elegant women who buy them to look a bit like tarts, it goes both ways."

Talk of domination and ballet shoes sets Louboutin alight and he's desperate to show me his latest project. "Wait, I have some pictures I must show you. It's a series of shoes to do with fetishism. Director David Lynch photographed them last week and I've only just received them." For a man whose design sensibility is acute, his technical

pro prowess on a MacBook is woeful. All effort and little reward, like a hippopotamus picking up a pea, Louboutin is all fingers and thumbs trying to find the right options. It's his only moment of inelegance. "Usually I never have a computer with me," he says, "but I brought it so I could see these pictures Lynch took."

The Louboutin-Lynch combination sprouts from a surprising passion: gardening. Ten years ago Louboutin was doing a series of interviews for a French fashion magazine whereby he met celebrities in their gardens. "The idea was that the garden should reflect the personality of someone, and that's how I met Lynch. It's incredible. The way he talked about plants was so animated."

Louboutin got in touch with Lynch about a project that could push shoe fetishism to the limit. "I wanted to work around fetishism and shoes. For fetishistic people, there are a lot of things to notice. For instance, the back of the sole is normally hidden, so I made shoes to reveal it which he could shoot." Lynch and Louboutin collaborated over two days, and the works will be shown from September at Pierre Passebon's La Galerie du Passage in Paris.

Locking down Lynch for a fashion shoot was no shoe-in for Louboutin. In fact, it was a first. The film auteur had never stooped to fashion. "He's not interested in fashion at all, he hates it," says Louboutin. "I remember once in Paris he made a visit that coincided with a fashion show. When journalists asked him why he had come to the fashion show, Lynch said: 'I didn't even know there was a fashion show. The only thing I know about fashion is Christian Louboutin.'" In fact, Louboutin had thought Lynch would decline. "I thought he would say 'no' to me, but then he agreed. He had conditions too. He said, 'Christian, I want no skinny girls and no bones on these models.'"

To give the director a suitable muse, Louboutin enlisted two curvaceous babes from the Crazy Horse ballet in Paris, both with outstanding arches on the feet and dancer's



Louboutin enlisted film director David Lynch to photograph shoes that pushed fetishism to the limit

ABOVE: EVERETT COLLECTION; ANSUS IMAGE

musculature, and had Lynch shoot them naked wearing only his shoes. Louboutin found Lynch's style sharp as a stiletto. "We shot in a studio. He has lunch and then at six he meditates, and that's it. The rest of the time, he's super concentrated and super precise." While Louboutin watched, Lynch made magic. "The result," says Louboutin, "is exactly what I wanted. I was at this shoot, but what he sees and what I see is incredibly different. I just could not see any of this when he was shooting. It's so rich, it's fantastic. Look at this, ballet shoes with a steel stiletto heel, I looove this one!"

The series of pictures he opens is mesmerising. Elongated, stretched naked bodies shot against purple fabrics in bondage-cum-dominatrix shoes. It's freak show meets fine art. "Look at this one," he enthuses, pointing to one of the dancers teetering in a pair of roughly eight-inch stilettos joined at the heels. "I had to hold her, that's my hand you can see supporting her, she couldn't stand and she's a dancer. And this one," he says, showing a girl prone, naked, with legs slightly open and ribboned ballet shoes tied around her ankles. "So David says to the girl, 'baby, can you spread your legs' and she's a bit shy, so he clicks his teeth and slowly with each click she opens her legs." Louboutin looks so full of pride and awe he could burst. "These photographs are so beyond my expectations, incredible, fantastic."

The words incredible and fantastic were still ringing in my ears in Halo, a nightclub on Stanley Street where Louboutin found time and rhythm to display his terpsichorean prowess. Like moths to a light, still the girls fluttered and agitated around him – though none danced so instinctively as he. And then the moment grew up. French interior design icon 81-year-old André Putman walked

into the room in a white suit, a stiletto of light piercing the dark, and drank a glass of champagne. Louboutin, knight in shining *amour*, gently led her to the dancefloor and so moved her, delighted her and danced the years off her that I'd swear her eyes sang with approval. "Wonderful," says a sparkling Putman afterwards. Two poignant, panache-full Parisians in Hong Kong sharing the love from their own city in ours. It was a priceless moment and now a precious memory, more magic courtesy of Monsieur Louboutin.

Ultimately, Louboutin's passion and his insatiable desire to please course like blood inside him and make for an irresistible cocktail. From doxies to Eliza Doolittles, Holly Golightlys and Holly Gohighlys, to ballerinas, duchesses and back to doxies, when it comes to satisfying and gratifying female sensibility, Louboutin's got it all, he's got it all and then he's got some more. And for a man who's had a million compliments and counting, I ask him which has meant the most.

"I was in my shop a long time ago and there was this Spanish woman, not specifically attractive, just okay. And she put on a pair of shoes, high heels, adjusted herself and she grew, she loved herself and turned to me and said: 'that's much better than a facelift!' Actually that's a reality. I thought that was a real compliment and she looked, well, I can understand her. The body language was different. Breasts out, back straight, she looked great. After all, what is a facelift apart from trying to look younger? That's one of my favourite ever compliments." For Louboutin, life's one long gushing and deserving moment of them. ■

