

Selling the woman-child

Kate Moss is in the news again, this time for getting tied up and shot to death in a music video. Actually, the murder isn't shown on the video. She is seen beautifully dressed, dead and bound to a chair while Johnny Cash warbles his recording of "Delia's Gone."

Moss is the emaciated supermodel whose vacant stare, unsmiling lips and frequently nude 105-pound body are on endless public display these days, mostly in Calvin Klein ads. Her wan "New Waif" look irritates many women, mostly because it seems to glorify anorexia. Her ads have been targeted by a Boston-based group called Boycott Anorexic Marketing. In some cities, antistarvation graffiti often appear on Kate Moss outdoor ads, usually "feed me" or "give me a cheeseburger." Sometimes the skull of a skeleton is drawn over her face.

"To many people, she represents a skeleton and death anyway," says Barbara Lippert, a columnist for *Adweek*. Lippert thinks that getting tied up and gunned down by Johnny Cash can be viewed as a logical extension of the ghostly victim theme pushed so hard in some of Moss's work. In many ads, the naked Moss looks like she has been abused, or is about to be.

Moss is a very troubling figure and a prime indicator of our degraded popular culture. She is the modern female as blank, fragile stick figure. Her pictures are full of strange allusions, many of them perverse. In a report last month on the new glamorizing of heroin use, the *New York Times* mentioned that "some social critics see an allusion to hard drugs" in Moss's dead-eyed, hollow-checked look.

Here and there, her photos flirt with themes of masturbation (fingering her breasts under her bra), bestiality (posing nude with a large dog), incest (under a towel, apparently nude, being hugged by her brother) and violence (bare-breasted, with blackened or bruised eyes, holding her hand over her mouth and looking upset).

20, going on 12. None of this is unusual in the fashion world. What makes these themes explosive is her very young look. She has just turned 20, but as she said a year or so ago, "I look 12." This propels many of her photos into the category of child sex.

In her ads, Moss often looks like a vulnerable and compliant child, stripped for sexual use. "The message of these pictures is that she is very young and very available," says Linnea Smith, a North Carolina psychiatrist and anti-porn crusader. Other commentators have noted the theme of Moss as a slightly soiled and exploitable street urchin. *Harper's Bazaar* says she looks "like a kid from a latter-day Fagin's gang."

The naked child, staring vacantly and helplessly at the

camera, is a staple of child pornography. One of Moss's photos shows her cringing nude in the corner of a huge sofa, with legs locked and arms pressed to her breasts, as if bracing for an impending sexual assault.

A more familiar shot of Moss shows her lying nude on her stomach on a sofa, legs parted, looking up pliantly at the camera as if to say, "Is this what you want me to do?" In the picture, she appears to be about 10 or 12 years old, slightly fearful and unusually androgynous, thus appealing to pedophiles of all persuasions. A cropped version of this photo appears in outdoor Calvin Klein ads, on buses and phone booths.

With little resistance, Calvin Klein has placed images that sexualize children onto the streets, where they register with adults and children alike. "You can't turn the dial to escape it," says Smith. "What are we supposed to do, run for a bus with our eyes covered?" Well, no. A good rule is that those who want soft-core should be able to get it, but those who don't should be able to avoid it. In the current circumstances, they can't.

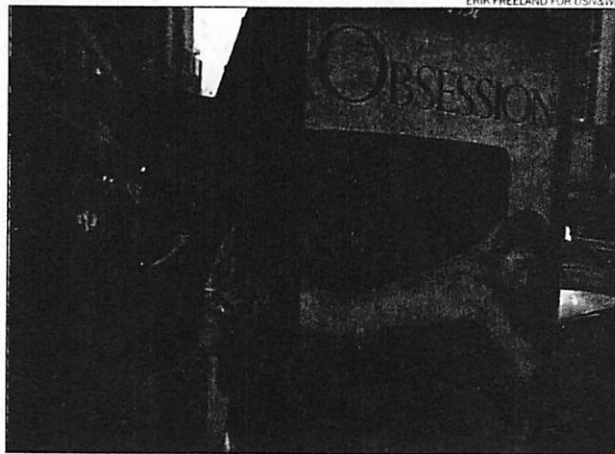
The usual interpretation of no-frills nymphets like Kate Moss is that they represent a reaction to the busy Amazonian models of the 1980s and express the

bleak, antiglamour, antistatus spirit of the 1990s. Calvin Klein says they represent a return to more sensitive, more fragile beauty.

Could be. But they also represent the old game of taboo breaking. Six years ago, Klein was quoted in *Vogue* as saying that in his ads, "I've done everything I could do in a provocative sense without being arrested." But scrounging around for taboos to break in the age of Oprah is a hard business. Sexualizing children may be the final frontier.

Then, too, there is the personal input of Calvin Klein to consider. In *Obsession*, the new unauthorized biography of the designer by Steven Gaines and Sharon Churcher, he is portrayed as sexually ambivalent. Klein eroticizes both sexes in his ads, but the males are portrayed in a straightforward way—lots of writhing and crotch grabbing but no death masks, bruised eyes, anorexia or child exploitation hovering around the edges. That seems to show up only in his women.

His clothes are nice, but in advertising he's a perverse force. The child-sexuality theme alone is enough to make magazines and billboard companies think twice about the stuff they are pumping into the culture. Consumers should consider letting a boycott come between them and their Calvins. ■



Eroticized kiosks. The ubiquitous superwaif Kate Moss