

## **Fur's flying**

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Shiny, shiny, shiny boots of leather  
Whiplash girlchild in the dark  
Clubs and bells, your servant, don't forsake me  
Strike, dear mistress, and cure his heart

Downy sins of streetlight fancies  
Chase the costumes she shall wear  
Ermine furs adorn the imperious  
Severin, Severin awaits you there

Severin, Severin, speak so slightly  
Severin, down on your bended knee  
Taste the whip, in love not given lightly  
Taste the whip, now plead for me<sup>1</sup>.

Venus in Furs was right...the sensual pelt-touch of purest foxy fur on bare bold flesh is electric, it's velvet and it's underground. It's so sexy it's rushy, a breathy mouth-feel of the slink of it, as it glides over a bare haughty shoulder, slips down a curved back, creates an oil-slick of animal sex to frame the feet of a dominating goddess. Severin's "dear mistress" strikes fear in his heart and sparks fire in his belly. Fur equals sex, no question of that.

And it's more than one kind of sex. If it's not the sign of the controlled pleasure of the spike-heeled, sheath-skinned, skin-sheathed dominatrix, it's J-Lo's blinged-up, sexy, sharp, street 'ho', or Beyoncé's hypnotising ass-shakin' ghetto-queen wanting her soldier ('whe'he at?'). It's Elizabeth Hurley's sophisticated quintessentially English classic-fur charm, or Lizzie Jagger's hot red foxy femme fatale. Or it's kitten-heeled, kitten-soft, Monroe-kittenish kitten-kitsch....

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<sup>1</sup> Reed, L. *Venus in Furs*. The Velvet Underground and Nico. Verve Records: 1967.

Look, we're textile people, we appreciate this fabric of fabrics. It's gorgeous, hot, powerful, super-charged, cool, tender, baby-bunny sweetie, ticklish, and tender. Its feminine appeal is that it frames a woman however she wants to be framed, it needs no accessories (like Chanel No.5), it creates a soft muff (literally) around her, becomes a fuzzy-zone in which she can strut, stride, simper, side-saddle, sizzle or sneer as she wishes. It's a fantastic, fantasy fabric. Imagine lying naked in a cold space, while a thick and heavy blanket of finest fur is slowly drawn up over each inch of your charged, enlivened body. Imagine being anally electrocuted.

Imagine being peeled. My grandmother wore four peeled minks to her church. Their glass-eyes and their tiny claws unnerved me, but I loved the smooth sweep of their long and lustrous bodies and their perfect tails. She hit a man once for hitting a dog. That dog was furry too, and I became a puzzled eight-year old...

Swiss Animals Protection East / International sent *their* man to China. He watched a peeled male racoon, cast onto a heap of carcasses, just about raise his bloody dying head and stare into his camera. That racoon still had eyelashes, but his poor bleeding heart was exposed, and his precious pelt had been flayed off over his head like a jumper. I peeled a bit off my thumb recently with a Stanley knife, my eyes watered, I swore and I suffered. I swear that racoon will have suffered to death by now...

Imagine suffering to death. Imagine your poor bleeding heart being exposed.

But, look, that racoon was in China, and we're here in the regulated and humane Western world. We don't believe in cruelty, we feel fur can be ethical, and we want to 'have our cake and eat it'. Jenny White, whose company Eco-Boudoir utilises only recycled fur to create what she calls "sustainable luxury interior home furnishings", states that "it is a shame that fur is becoming fashionable again and animals are dying in cruel conditions for the sake of fashion". Jenny is located in liberal London, the capital of Great Britain, known throughout the world for fair play, fair game, the love of dogs, cats and foxes, and the Parliamentary home of the British Fur Farming Prohibition Bill of 2003. Jenny's website presents the problem: culling animals purely for their skins is "wasteful". But she is also there with a 'solution': by using fur from farms "where animals are brought up in decent living conditions" or by recycling that which is already dead, she can offer "beautiful home accessories without adding to the cycle of cruelty". Jenny White insists that the human use of fur since time began isn't justification for its use now - we aren't cave people, we don't *need* those skins for warmth. Her conclusion is telling: "we like to; we choose to". Perfect! Recycling and fairytale fur farming. That poor old racoon in pesky China will be the last of a dying breed...

Well, there's a problem here. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals report that half of the finished fur garments imported for sale in the United States are

supplied by China, and even where a fur garment states that it was made in the European Union, the pelts from which it is constructed are highly likely to have been raised and slaughtered elsewhere. The globalisation of the fur trade makes it impossible to know whether your fur is ripped off a racoon's shrieking frame in Hebei Province, excised from the cooling body of Finnish fox whose pacing up and down in a fur farm cage beats out a slow rhythm of despair, or sliced off some gibbering abject creature whose last meal was part of its own leg as it tries to slice its flesh and bone from the steel jaws of a leg-trap in deepest Omaha. You really won't be able to tell if you've been a naughty fur consumer or if you've joined the noble self-less fight against over-population by 'pest species' such as kangaroo in Australia and brush-tailed possum in New Zealand. And as for those darned proliferating baby harp seals on the ice floes of Newfoundland...damn their selfish fish-eating ways.

Imagine being a fish-eating fashion victim. Imagine wearing pure white baby fur. Mmmm, lovely...

Imagine, having a fur coat and no knickers. Stand up, Sean 'Puffy' Coombes. And, speaking of coats, imagine being a turn-coat. Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford infamously posed in the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animal's '*I'd rather go naked than wear fur*' campaign, then popped on the second-hand coats of dead animals...Claudia Schiffer and Melissa Etheridge similarly 'changed their spots'. While fur becomes increasingly ubiquitous and versatile as seared, plucked, knitted and trimmed fabric as much as in large swathes of the stuff, Vivien Westwood, Todd Oldham, Stella McCartney wear their hearts on their sleeves and shun it. Stella McCartney recently earned a curled-lip quip, with little meaningful substance, from Karl Lagerfeld who proposed that an anti-fur stance was easy for the daughter of a rich man. This is interesting given the traditional association of fur with wealth, but there seems to be a school of romantic thought that locates an impoverished background philosophically close to the ethical, honest, even 'humanitarian' use of fur.

Basil Kardasis, Design Director of Saga Furs of Scandinavia, sought to contextualise his "great love of fur" by describing to me the poverty of his refugee parents, and their simple nearness to the land, to animals, to nature – here, a raw artisanal mythic power is invoked to legitimise and sustain a notion of the nobleness of the animal and human in mutually beneficial coexistence. From this background, he both operates within but is detached from the savagery of the killing fields of the fur-farms. Here, although it "isn't ideal" since a cage is "not for a bird, nor for a man", Basil described for me the life of a fur-farmed fox or mink. In sturdy cages, raised off the ground, with ventilation, shelter and access to food and water, animals, he claims, will thrive. Basil acknowledges some distress on the part of a wild mink, born to move between water and land, but he maintains that for those animals who are captive bred, there is no loss of any perceived freedom. When the time comes, and this will be an "entirely natural" event, the animals will be dispatched without pain. Their

exquisite fur testifies, he maintains, to the care with which they are farmed. They will generally be gassed, and they will fall asleep. Other “ghastly” methods are used – electrocution at head or rectum – but that is ‘elsewhere’. Basil can justify “intelligent interference” that comes with fur-farming because he believes “it doesn’t make this right, it just makes it the best we can do”. Fur is, he asserts, “the first coverlet of your life” (personal telephone conversation, 2005).

And speaking of fantasy fur, there’s Basil’s so-called “fur without pain”. For this, the moulted hair which falls under the cages of farmed fur-bearing animals is cleaned of the blood, sweat, tears and faeces it fell with, spun with cashmere and woven as fabric. Basil maintains that by farming fur, hunting will be diminished and that this is better. If there is no farmed fur, people will resort to hunting, he asserts, so captivity with the best conditions possible are advocated. In this sanitisation process there is a significant erasure. That mess of substance, subsequently washed, combed and spun, is the fall-out of incarceration and intolerable distress. Basil texts me to that “by my making the ‘fur without pain’ fabric I was able to at the same time honour the animal and thank it for all it has given us”. Honoured to death.

Stella McCartney has also visited fur farms, this time in the United States. I watched secretly filmed video of footage of what she saw. Cage-mad, stress-crazy foxes paced, ducked and twitched, while excrement and filth built up in layers below them. Stella called it “revolting”. Racoons existed in cages without cover or heating, but with the cannibalised carcasses of their cage mates who succumbed to infection and disease. A vixen with the bone exposed in an ulcerated leg and deeply infected eyes waits for death. She will provide accessories fur rather than a full pelt. These animals prove that market-acceptable hair will still grow in the short life of a traumatised, undernourished, dehydrated, infected creature and puts paid to the argument that if caged fur animals weren’t treated well, the fur would be poor. Finally, I watched as a dog fox involuntarily bit into a metal pole as an electrically charged steel rod was pushed into his rectum causing his death by internal frying. His fur, unmarked by cause of death, will provide a full pelt. This is what Stella McCartney describes as “immeasurable suffering”.

Imagine suffering immeasurably.

Other species are honoured by being beaten to death, stamped on or strangled to avoid marking their coat. For the unborn lambs whose unformed fur makes astrakhan and karakul as modelled by Madonna, a gentle but firm pressure on the ewe’s stomach after her throat has been cut is sufficient to abort them without any marking of the resultant foetal-soft and terror-tender skin...

Harvey Nichols, Marks and Spencer, Mango, Morgan, Monsoon, Liberty and most recently Selfridges have banned fur from their ranges. Consumers determine what the market supplies. Fur is so beautiful, so wonderful, so divine, but the

price – peeling, flaying, bludgeoning, choking, electrocuting, gassing – is so high.  
Too high surely. Fur is dead.

[www.peta.org](http://www.peta.org)

[www.furisdead.com](http://www.furisdead.com)

[www.respectforanimals.org](http://www.respectforanimals.org)