

Terrible twins from Outer Underwearland



Above: Helena Christiansen drew gasps in Milan in this Dolce & Gabbana creation. Left: Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana - setting up shop in Sloane Street



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SETTING up an interview with fashion designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana is a nightmare. Until the last minute, the appointment time is changed and the venue is undecided. Then they offer half an interview — Stefano will talk, Domenico won't. Then they relent. Next they refuse to have their photographs taken. I arrive in Milan to discover the couple don't speak English. But, of course, I did forget to ask.

In the event, Stefano turns up and Domenico appears half an hour late. Stefano, 33, is impossibly good looking and charming and Domenico, 36, is all in black. Carla Buzzi, their PR lady with raven hair, black leggings and coal Dolce & Gabbana tent top, translates. This hinders spontaneity.

"Are you lovers as well as business partners?" I ask. Solo blah blah amore blah blah. "Ha ha ha," shrieks Carla. Natter, natter, natter in Italian. "Yes," comes the cursory reply.

They dress Madonna ("a friend"), Sting, David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Isabella Rossellini ("a very good friend"), Julia Roberts, Kate Moss ("not a good friend" — but they discovered her), Kim Basinger and Brooke Shields. In 1991 Dolce & Gabbana — as they are known in labelspeak — were



dubbed Italy's hottest fashion property. "After four years nothing can be hot any more unless you use microwave," says Stefano.

Their 1994 worldwide turnover was £66 million, an increase of 81 per cent over

the previous year. "British sales, *buonissima*," says Stefano. (They love British fashion. What the young do here gets taken up in New York and Milan, they say.) Now, 13 years after starting, they're manufacturing accessories, perfume and furnishings too. Where do they stand beside Armani, Versace and Valentino? "We're just chickens," says Domenico.

"Like their nephews," adds Stefano.

Today they open their first British store, in Sloane Street. Armed with high heels, wielding long patent boots and brandishing studded belts, Stefano and Domenico will fight in the front line of the Bond Street versus Sloane Street battle — a fight highlighted by fashion oracle Suzy Menkes in the International Herald Tribune this week.

Army headquarters is three floors of decorated sandstone, opaquely stuccoed *terra rossa* and pastel ochre walls, and launch party soldiers from George Michael, Naomi Campbell and the Le Bons to Amanda de Cadenet.

IT COMES as no surprise that the maverick duo has chosen to open in Sloane Street, just a few red patent heeled steps from Prada, natch. "Bond Street is too status for us," explains Domenico. It's what this month's Vogue dubs the New Snobbery. Old Snobs cling to their vulgar chain link handbags; New Snobs, identified only by the *cognoscenti*, swing plastic Prada ones discreetly. The point is that New Snobs spurn obvious displays of status.

We meet in their private clients' showroom, the day after Gucci scion Maurizio was shot on the streets of Milan. "*Mamma mia*," says Stefano. "All the fashion world is really shocked. We didn't know him personally. He was not a social person, he was very intimate."

On the wall is an imposing antique gilt frame containing a bra. The bra, Stefano has said, is like a jewellery box, protecting the most precious part of a woman. "We love the most feminine attributes of the women, like their breasts. The symbol of maternity and eroticism. Maybe because in our dreams we would like to be like them," he says now.

Dolce & Gabbana have changed the look of (biscuit-sulted) Italian fashion with their ironic clothes, which draw inspiration from

bordellos and pornography. Domenico says they're not preoccupied with sex. "It's an important part of life and has to be evaluated seriously."

Stefano denies they peddle chic pornography. "I never show anything. You will never see a woman without a bra or slip. I want to show but not see."

Their autumn collection has women in men's tailoring and men who have plundered the wardrobes of Garcia Lorca and Salvador Dali. ("In this moment being trendy is not trendy. We have gone outside fashion" — Stefano, Milan, 1995.) But their trademark is underwear as outerwear.

For autumn they've also shown bustiers and corsets underneath erotic little black see-through dresses worn by riding-crop wielding models in long black boots. "We're talking about rich women who have very little to do and have an attitude that is a bit sodomising," explains Carla, for Stefano. Sodomising? "No, *sodistic*, but in a very chic way."

This brings us to Madonna. She rejected Jean-Paul Gaultier, designer of the famous conical bra, in favour of Dolce & Gabbana to design the costumes for her *Girlie* tour. Shortly after they were reported as saying they had not seen her show and had not been paid.

"The Washington Post said we were angry Madonna didn't pay her invoices," says Stefano. "But the clothes were a present we gave her. We never asked for money."

What about the material girl? What stories do they have to tell? Dramatic pause. "She likes cinnamon sticks and liquorice," replies Stefano. It's hard to tell if he's being ironic.

And what of Brooke Shields? Isabella Rossellini? Kate Moss? "The funniest thing is that these women all fit into the same dress," confides Domenico. "It's a miracle."

They complained memorably once that some people take fashion so seriously, as seriously as people whose cats have just died. So how important is fashion? "It's our life, not our work," replies Domenico. Is anything more important than fashion? "The number one is healthiness, then fashion."

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