

The Status Experiment

O asked six NYC women to test-drive unsnobbish labels at parties around town. Did anyone suspect? From left: Fund-raiser **Jacl Wilson Reid** (at the Kids in Candyland benefit in Dylan's Candy Bar) said her Realities by Liz Claiborne jacket was a hit: "The cut is excellent." **Mary Alice Stephenson** (with boyfriend Michiel van der Wal) scored with an Isaac Mizrahi for Target shirt and trench at decorator Todd Romano's party at Swifty's restaurant. PR whiz **Susan Magrino** (with Romano) glowed in Ann Taylor: "People wondered who I was wearing."



"Socialite types said, 'Dahling, you look divine! Genius!' Then I confessed it was Isaac Mizrahi for Target."

—Mary Alice Stephenson, style commentator

WHAT PRICE STYLE? A RECOVERING LABEL SNOB TELLS ALL

A big-name huntress (Prada! Gucci! Louis Vuitton!) discovers that good looks don't have to cost a fortune...and a secure ego can survive without status symbols. **KATHERINE B. WEISSMAN** makes the case for fashion democracy.

I'M WHAT YOU'D CALL A RECOVERING label snob. Although I love shopping—cruising the aisles is curiously soothing to me, a cross between meditation and anticipation—the closest I come to “it” bags or “in” shoes is watching *Sex and the*

City reruns. So it was risky business when, a couple of weeks ago, I went to a mammoth discount store known for its designer goods. I kept lunging toward the famous-name displays, dry-mouthed and charged with lust. As I fingered some

plum silk palazzo pants, my companion pointed out that they weren't remotely like anything I usually wear; it was the fantasy of the label—me, swishing grandly into dinner at an exclusive resort!—not the reality. I managed to escape without



"I was awestruck by my Cole Haan bag—so chic. People just presumed it was Marc Jacobs or Chloé." —Celerie Kemble, interior designer

From left: Celerie Kemble dressed for cocktails in Express, with a Cole Haan bag. Sally Albemarle, spokesperson for the skincare line Darphin, attended the Free Arts Event at auction house Phillips, de Pury & Company: "Everyone was surprised that my suit was Banana Republic." Nicole Bernard (at the Romano party) associated Jones New York Signature with "college interview suits" until this outfit changed her mind. For details see Shop Guide.

"When I first saw this Jones New York jacket, I asked if it was Donna Karan! What a pleasant surprise." —Nicole A. Bernard, entertainment lawyer

buying anything except sheets—designer, of course. I'm recovering, not cured.

Every wardrobe has its unworn and unwanted. My own cache of shopping gaffes (those palazzos would have fit right in), uncovered last year while I was excavating my closet and drawers, provided the first clue to my label problem. Over and over, I went for image rather than substance: the designer dress that evoked English gardens (and made my hips look wider than the Chanel); the status scarf whose brownish tones sent my skin into a depression. And then it hit me: Women are oddly vulnerable when they shop. With our faces and bodies and choices on the line, we need reassurance; the association with a big name, like an upscale teddy bear, fits the bill. So instead of following our instincts for comfort, beauty, and pleasure, we try to purchase

confidence and chic through a label.

It doesn't work. Okay, you're not going to look *bad* wearing head-to-toe Prada, but it isn't a very imaginative way to dress. It's the sartorial equivalent of a paint-by-numbers kit: While you're guaranteed to end up with a picture, or an outfit, it will have no real distinction. Besides, only a few of us can afford to shop that way. A label habit gets as expensive as any other addiction, though you do prison time only in extreme cases.

Most important, it's rotten for us psychologically—a sort of snobbism is,

because it involves looking down on someone else. Elitists always claim to be promoting lofty standards; more often (I should know), they're shoring up their feeble egos. Okay, there's a nasty, electric thrill to outdressing other women. But when we feel superior because we're wearing a garment with somebody else's name on the label, that's just silly. To prove the point, I'm thinking of organizing a blind taste test, cutting any identifying marks out of a bunch of T-shirts or pantsuits or dresses and asking a panel to choose. I bet they couldn't tell the high-status goods from the more modest ones—especially now, with the emergence of middle-of-the-road labels that didn't even register on the fashion

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK McMULLAN

policies and products. My favorite aspect of selling was that people bought items that I literally couldn't give away. Three different friends had refused my Coach lilac demi, and suddenly four women from Maine to Texas were involved in a bidding war over it. I was hooked on profit; I spent my evenings compulsively checking my auctions. I'd stare at the screen and repeatedly click the refresh button until I found a new bid, glowing in green type. In those moments, I experienced a sensation I can only describe as an internal *ka-ching*.

I wasn't alone in my obsession with eBay, I discovered as I wandered the cyberemporium. There were others like me—more than 100 million of them. The market is open to anyone with a camera and something they want to get rid of. Somewhere in Idaho, a craft-loving pet enthusiast ironed a picture of a Chihuahua onto a T-shirt, and three days later, a Chihuahua breeder in Singapore rejoiced when she won the auction. People sold Ford

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Explorers, George Foreman grills, and couture feather hats. A jokester posted a half-eaten burger (it went for \$50); others offered up somebody's conscience, a role in an erotic cable TV movie, Metallica's integrity. An Olympic-hopeful bobsleigh team from Grenada unsuccessfully tried to sell itself for \$3.6 million.

As I surfed the site, I stumbled on a place where the most eBay-addled bide their time: a cluster of discussion threads, bulletin boards, and clubs aptly called Community. For people who share their thoughts in this section, the marketplace ceases to be primarily about profit and becomes instead a means of communication. EBay's newsletter ran a story about a couple who met on a discussion board. People post the most intimate comments everywhere—on the beauty boards, in the antique doll sellers group. "Pepto-Bismol makes me throw up," one offered. "Having my gallbladder removed," was a thread. A group of tech-savvy seniors post photographs of their grandchildren for others to fawn over. I spent an hour scrolling through a forum for eBay-ers suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder. You could read about a man's crippling need to nimbly hop over a crack in the sidewalk 47 times, then click on his screen name and see the "gently used" Tecumseh lawn mower engine he was selling.

As I became increasingly entrenched, I realized that it wasn't solely my greed that kept me glued to the site but rather the mystery and vastness of this gigantic consumer jungle, its 105 million members all hawking their own weird wares, connected by capitalism. Before eBay, if you couldn't find anyone in your county to buy your collection of Kewpie dolls, you had to admit defeat and leave the bald creatures stuffed in a box in your garage. But in the modern universe, armed only with a zeal for profit and a modicum of technical literacy, you can reach a global community in which there is an endless demand for almost anything you might supply.

"It's like you've switched addictions," my boyfriend said glumly as he lay in bed alone while I basked in the fluorescent glow of the computer screen. I had to agree; when I pictured the future of my eBay business, I saw women in all corners of the earth, lovingly flaunting my mint-

condition purses, glamorously trotting around in my never-worn stilettos. And then I envisioned myself, the insatiable minimogul, barefoot and gleefully stuffing \$18 hundred in cash into a paper sack. I would have told my boyfriend my plans, but I was busy e-mailing a potential buyer the dimensions of my authentic Hogan double-strap medium hobo in lemon yellow with heavy silver hardware. ●

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world's radar until recently.

Style-watchers normally give their imprimatur only to a select circle of cutting-edge, aspirational designers. Although really inexpensive places like the Gap or Target might achieve reverse snob appeal, more classic sources—like Liz Claiborne, Jones New York, Ann Taylor, Banana Republic, Coach—used to be largely invisible. The perception was that these lines do big business but the clothes—conventional equipment for working women—are so bland that it's hard to get excited about them.

Times have changed. Those old labels have been retooled, and they're coming up with sharp, quality stuff that actually looks...cool. So much for the snobs who were too la-di-da to give such humble collections the time of day. This refreshing development strikes a blow for fashion democracy.

Maybe in an ideal world we'd be entirely free of the tyranny of labels. Women would wear a splendid assortment of no-name clothes whose colors and shapes simply make them happy. I'm not that evolved yet; neither, by and large, is the culture. But the new lines can at least fuzzi the haughty distinction between labels-that-matter and labels-that-don't. This is useful if you, like me, are learning to home in on how something feels and looks and fits rather than be seduced by the messages a label is supposed to send (*I'm worthy; I'm happening; I'm rich!*).

Now when I go shopping, instead of morphing into a gullible waif in search of an identity, I try to stay grounded in my stronger, more skeptical self. Repeat after me: Labels can't confer status or style or selfhood. Clothes don't make the woman—that particular job is reserved for you. ●