

Ugly Models, an agency of extraordinary 'characters'

Long necks, large chins, flapping ears, crooked noses: welcome to Ugly Models, a London modeling agency of a different stripe, where imperfections are celebrated. Fashion Week opens in the British capital Friday, and among the legions of models strutting down the catwalk, several will come from Ugly. They make eye-catching additions to the perfectly honed or androgynous models that typically feature at fashion's annual showcase in London.



Model Chris Manns poses during a casting at the UGLY model agency in London. — AFP photos

day, Ugly was organizing a casting to complete its catalogue and those in attendance were atypical models. Among them were some tough-looking guys. Chris, for example, a former soldier with arms as thick as logs, posed shirtless with a 50-year-old brunette in a two-piece suit.

Kris Chesney, an ex-rugby player with Toulon and Saracens, is a man mountain at nearly two meters tall and weighing 135 kilograms. With his shaved head, tattooed arms, rugged face, and body bearing the marks of countless scrums, he is perhaps an unlikely male model. "It's a new journey, something interesting, like a challenge," he said. Others are on more of a personal mission.

Sheerah Ravindren, a petite 22-year-old model just 1.61 meters tall, comes from Sri



Model Chloe Akan



Chairman of Ugly/Rage Models, Marc French interviews a potential model.

Model Laura Poole

“From fat, thin, to large to small

“It's celebrating diversity really and it's bringing a bit more light to fashion instead of just using the bog-standard models,” agency owner Marc French said. He describes it as a “character” model agency—“from fat, thin, to large to small: you name it, we've got it”. He cited the example of French actor Gerard Depardieu. “I mean look at him: he's so full of character and charisma. “He becomes sexy because he's so cool and he's so different.”

Imperfection is beauty
Founded a half century ago, Ugly occupies trendy open-plan space in west London featuring a baroque sofa, brushed aluminum computers and walls studded with photos of models. A portrait of late rock superstar David Bowie adorns the wall, alongside the quote “Imperfection is beauty, madness is genius,” which reads like a company motto.

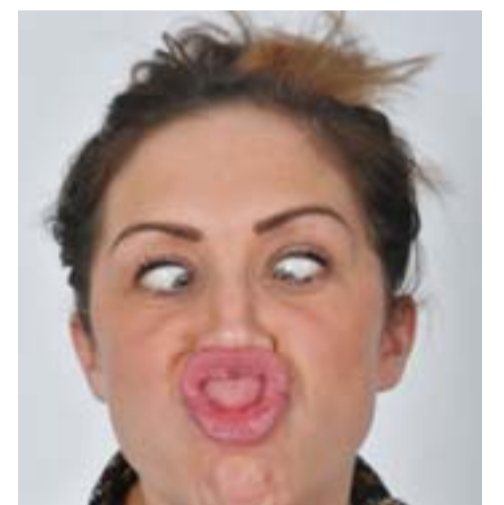
Like any such agency, it manages the careers of its models, putting them in touch with employers of all stripes, from Burberry to Mercedes to Jack Daniel's. On a recent week-



Model Mathieu Blanc



Model Claire Spedding



Model Thomas Kerbie

Lanka and proclaims herself a “militant immigrant model”. Sporting a bare belly between baggy jeans and black top, she has a right nostril piercing and plenty of positive attitude. “I'm a woman of color. Growing up, I've never seen people that look like me in media, in fashion.” Frances, a disabled model who gets around using a pair of eye-catching futuristic crutches, revealed proudly that her disability “didn't stop me from doing what I want”.

‘Not here to exploit’
For French, “what makes a good ugly model is someone who is comfortable in his own skin”. “We don't want retouching, we don't want people to change the way they look. “If someone comes to us a certain way, we'd never say it'd

be better if he was smaller. “It's really important. There's so much pressure on young kids,” he said. The agency is also eager to counter any perception that it cynically exploits its models for their peculiarities.

“Sometimes we've had companies ring up and said: we want a small person that will kick themselves in the head. Woo... like no—that's wrong,” said Lulu Palmer, a booker who is head of new faces. “We're not here to exploit people, to take the mickey out of people.”

Always on the lookout for new talent, the team admitted the company name can elicit less than enthusiastic responses from would-be models. But, said French, “the minute they understand what Ugly is all about then they want to be a model.”—AFP

Fashion photographer Demarchelier accused of harassment

The Boston Globe published a bombshell expose on Friday accusing more than two dozen professionals in the fashion industry, among them legendary photographer Patrick Demarchelier, of sexual misconduct. The paper's Spotlight team, which in 2002 unveiled widespread sexual abuse by Catholic priests in Boston, said more than 50 models had detailed alleged misconduct they had experienced, from touching to assault.

Collectively, they made credible claims against at least 25 photographers, agents, stylists, casting directors and other industry professionals, the Globe reported. They include Demarchelier, fellow photographer Greg Kadel, who has worked for Victoria's Secret and Vogue, and stylist Karl Templer, who has worked with Coach, Zara, and Tommy Hilffiger. The Globe said all of those accused had denied the allegations against them.

Nevertheless, glossy magazine empire Conde Nast, whose company includes Vogue, had said it has stopped working for now with Demarchelier and Kadel. The Globe said one of Demarchelier's former assistants complained about relentless sexual demands, to which she eventually submitted, fearing that she would otherwise endanger her position.

Six other women accused the now 74-year-old Frenchman of unwanted advances, including thrusting a model's hands onto her genitals and grabbing another model's breasts, the Globe said. Demarchelier did not immediately respond to an AFP request to comment. He was quoted by the Globe as saying the



Photographer Patrick Demarchelier attends the 'Patrick Demarchelier' special exhibition preview to celebrate NYFW: The Shows for Spring 2016 at Christie's in New York City. — AFP

complaints against him were untrue. “People lie and they tell stories,” he said.

The sexual harassment watershed engulfing the United States has already rocked the fashion industry, with allegations of misconduct seeing photographers Terry Richardson, Mario Testino and Bruce Weber barred from collaborating with Conde Nast.

The magazine empire has issued a new “Code of Conduct” to include bans on alcohol on sets and the use of models under the age of 18 without a chaperone present. Nudity or “sexually suggestive” poses are to be agreed on beforehand. The Globe said some models wanted to expose serial predators while others wanted new legal protections and radical reform in an industry they say left them feeling exploited.—AFP

CHRISTOPHER BAILEY BIDS FAREWELL TO BURBERRY IN LONDON

Christopher Bailey unveils his final collection for Burberry at London Fashion Week starting on Friday—a turning point for the British luxury brand which gained a global reputation under the designer's tenure. Burberry's star-studded show on Saturday will be one of the most high-profile events at Fashion Week, which runs from Friday to Tuesday. After 17 years, Bailey will say farewell with a final overhaul of the fashion house's signature beige, black and red check pattern. Drawing inspiration from the internationally recognized gay pride flag, a new rainbow check will feature heavily in London as the 46-year-old Bailey dedicates Saturday's show to gay rights campaigns and models.

“There has never been a more important time to say that in our diversity lies our strength, and our creativity,” said Bailey, who was the first openly gay head of a company on London's benchmark FTSE 100 index when he was named chief executive in 2014. The appointment saw him replace Angela Ahrendts, who moved to Apple, and came a decade after Bailey joined Burberry as creative director.

He has since propelled Burberry into the 21st century, incorporating new technologies such as social media into his shows. Twice named Designer of the Year at the British Fashion Awards, he has also combined men's and women's collections and adopted the “see now, buy now” model becoming popular among high-end fashion brands. He has also attracted some of the world's most famous models, including Kate Moss, Emma Watson and Cara Delevingne.

An ‘incredible’ designer

His last catwalk for Burberry will be a testament to years spent experimenting with different color palettes and materials, during which he reinvented Burberry's signature trench coat with a touch of lace.

“Under his watch, a company formerly known as little more than an unexciting British producer of raincoats and checked scarves has exploded into the vast empire it is today,” said British Vogue.

The designer, who trained at London's prestigious Royal College of Art, was described as “incredible” and “super smart” by Caroline Rush, chief executive of the British Fashion Council. “Christopher has played a significant role in the British fashion industry, putting innovation at the heart of Burberry and ensuring that it is an exciting, relevant, forward-thinking global fashion brand,” she said in a statement to AFP.

But Bailey's appointment as chief executive at age 42 raised some eyebrows because of his lack of experience running a company of such stature. He held on to the dual role for just three years, until Marco Gobetti, former chief executive of French luxury brand Celine, was brought in to take over the business side. Bailey will formally step down from his two roles on March 31 but will work with Burberry on the transition until the end of this year.

A replacement to fill the creative post held by Bailey, who previously worked for Donna Karan and Gucci, is yet to be announced. Rumors on the fashion circuit put British designer Phoebe Philo, who recently left Celine, in pole position.



Young British talent

The broader London Fashion Week, organized by the British Fashion Council, will see some 80 shows across the city as designers parade their 2018/19 autumn-winter women's wear collections. Saturday's Burberry show will undoubtedly be closely watched, while the same day sees British heavyweight Jonathan Anderson showcase his latest collection.

Also artistic director of luxury leather brand Loewe, the designer will be unveiling pieces from his own J. W. Anderson label. He will also be reducing the number of shows from four to two, which J. W. Anderson said will help “reduce the traditional gap between the catwalk shows and the pieces being available for sale”. Such an approach is being followed in the wider fashion world, as brands adjust their business models to fit new consumer trends.

Other highlights of the London Fashion bonanza include the Sunday show of Delpozo, a Spanish brand which has transferred from New York Fashion Week with the promise of refined elegance. Post-modern champion Christopher Kane is one of a number of young British talents whose designs will hit the catwalk, as well as David Koma, known for his geometric pieces, and provocateur Gareth Pugh.—AFP