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I. WE LADIES GO SHOPPING

Toys in Babeland is awash in color. Its store in New York City's Soho consists of an invitingly wide space with orange walls and display cases in a juicy pomegranate red. Lying in beds of plastic grass are all kinds of vibrators and attachments, daisies winking out between them. Store co-founder Claire Cavanah hands me one that resembles a 1950s-era curling iron: a wide handle with a tennis-ball-shaped attachment. "This is the Hitachi Magic Wand," she says in a tone that suggests a minor legend. "This is an example of long-term endurance [in] toy design. Pretty simple: It has two settings, high and low, but it's actually meant for large-muscle back massage. It's made by Hitachi; they're not in the sex toy industry," she laughs. "They make satellites and earth-moving equipment and televisions. Here's an example of recontextualizing an appliance, basically. In here—and privately in homes all around the world—it's a sex toy."

The Magic Wand is a classic for many reasons—a pivoting-point between past and future sex toy design. It's only the latest example of vibrators veiled as massagers, a trend that began in 1869, where doctors went on house calls to relieve women's "hysteria," using medical massagers to stimulate them to climax. The Magic Wand's enduring popularity also points to sex toy design's new focus: sleek, discreet, more female-centered designs.

Cavanah is 39, a sturdy woman in comfortable clothes with the fresh-air feeling of someone who works outdoors. When I ask how first-time shoppers choose a toy, she smiles gently. "Buying the pretty thing, buying the thing you know is a sex toy, buying the thing that looks like your boyfriend's penis. There are all sorts of windows of purchase that people use to get a toehold on this. I say go to what you're attracted to aesthetically, and then we'll talk about what that does. You have a feeling for how things look—sex is a visual thing."

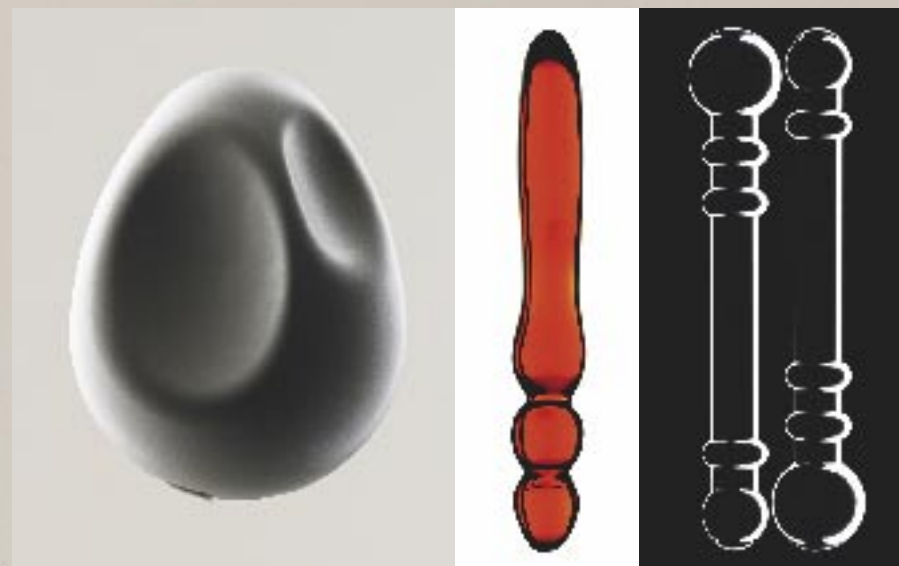
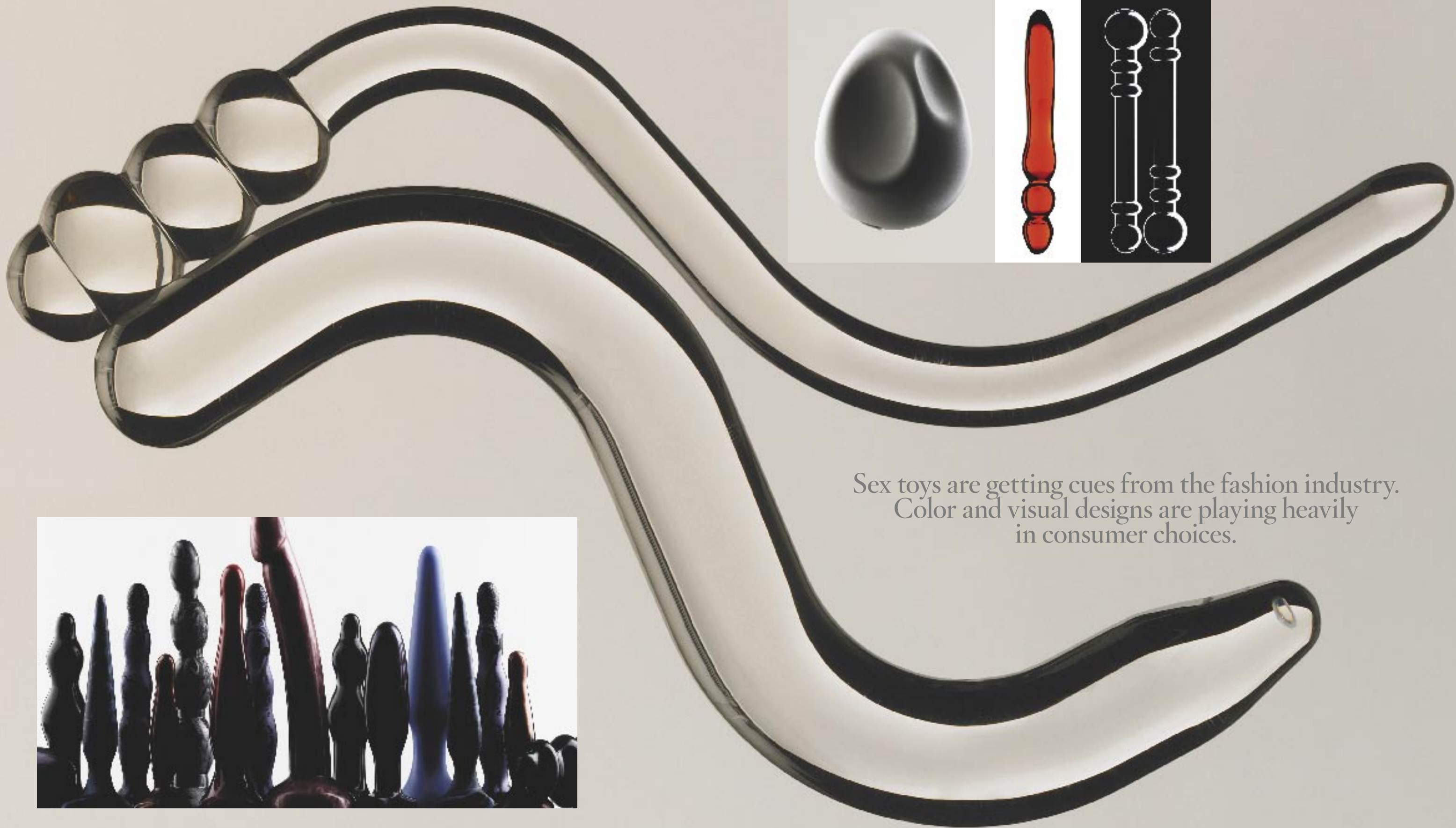
We approach a shelf bearing a leggy rainbow of vibrators in a row. "Some just want to buy something that doesn't remind them of sex at all. Spark-pluggy, lipstick things," Cavanah remarks, handing me a gold vibrator in a slender bullet shape. "This is another enduring design—just a straight up, plastic, vibrating, phallic thing." On a lower shelf lie some i-Vibes, a new series of

pocket-sized, candy-colored vibrators for external stimulation. "Wearable and remote-control vibes are big developments that have happened in the last five years," she continues. "The motors are getting smaller and smaller, and microchips are coming into play." She hands me an Audi-oh!, a truly inventive concept: A tiny vibrator, worn in the underpants and attached to a Walkman-like sensor, moves in time to bass vibrations in music at a club.

Cherry-picking this or that toy from the shelves feeds my zeal like a kid in, yes, a toy store. One crucial difference is that all these toys are out of their wrappers, ready to play. Cavanah makes a face when I mention it: "If you saw the packaging, you'd know why [we remove it]. It's just crappy porn—nude women, giant breasts, vapid looks on their faces. So we take the toys out of their packaging not only to cleanse the visual palette, but also to make them more available to the touch.

"I always want better quality in the materials, and in the mechanical function," she continues, picking up a plastic dildo and shaking it. "This is softened PVC, plastic. It's like mystery rubber—we don't know what's in it. There are probably phthalates in here. Europe has banned phthalates in teething toys and dog toys, but in sex toys it's almost unstudied. I would love it if manufacturers would take quality more seriously. So we tell people to put condoms on them. We want people to be able to buy a good vibrator for \$25, but we don't want them to be exposed to things that just aren't studied," she says. The store is sprinkled with take-ones explaining safe use. "Toys could even be more expensive—people would still buy them," Cavanah adds.

Roving through the store brings further delights to the eye: luminous, hand-blown glass dildos; a wall of tantalizing lubes and lotions with perky, illustrated packaging, just like a Sephora counter; supersoft sleeves for male masturbation; silicone anal plugs in a riotous alphabet of shapes, patterns, and energetic colors, like bright building blocks. Some toys boggle the imagination with their forethought. It's clear that Grandma Magic Wand sparked a revolution of sexual ideas. Cavanah sums it up as we move on: "Desire is the mother of all invention. And imaginary sexual pleasure is *definitively* the mother of this invention."



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Toys make kids feel magical and unusual and gorgeous. Increasingly, grownups are starting to realize sex toys are no different.

2. SAFETY FIRST

Safety, longevity, and advances in materials are growing watchwords among toy designers. “Men don’t buy their own socks or underwear. Women are the real consumers out there, and they demand better quality and aesthetics from their products,” says Metis Black, president and founder of Tantus Silicone, a Los Angeles-based manufacturer of silicone plugs, dildos, and accessories. “It’s only recently that sex toys have been made to last at all. Planned obsolescence has been a key factor for male consumers—another thing I think female buyers have changed for the better.” Black knows strong women: She is named for the goddess of wisdom, whom Zeus swallowed when he discovered she was pregnant, fearing she would give birth to a son stronger than him. The curse came true, but with a twist—their daughter Athena sprang fully armed for battle from Zeus’ head, and Metis remained trapped inside, whispering her counsel to Zeus for the rest of his life.

Black lays out the materials debate like this: “Silicone is hypoallergenic and non-porous. You can boil it or chill it [for sensation or sterilizing] or bleach it [for cleaning]. Cyberskin is oil-based, so some lubes break it down. You have to powder it when you’re finished—with cornstarch, not talcum. Talcum powder has been linked to cervical cancers. Vinyl isn’t bad—although you can’t boil or bleach it. PVC is a wonderful material as long as it’s rock-hard. Softened PVC tends to break down chemically and can cause irritation—that’s why we recommend [using] condoms.”

Recalling the hand-blown glass dildos in Toys in Babeland, I wonder aloud if glass can actually be used during sex. “Glass is a wonderful material: very sensual to trace on the body, and it needs very little lubrication,” Black notes. “You can play with heat or cold with it, and because it’s rigid, you can do amazing things with it.” She suggests thick-walled Pyrex to resist breakage, and a gentle pace for beginners.

Beyond refining materials and shapes, toy designers have to keep pace with consumer tastes—and their expanding toy collections. “Sex toys are getting cues from the fashion industry,” Black

says. “Color and visual designs are playing heavily in consumer choices. Since there are so many [manufacturing] players, and we all keep coming up with new ideas each season, we need to expand our ideas of what a sex toy is or has the possibility of being.”

3. DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Mainstreaming doesn’t just mean mass-market. Increasingly product designers and fine artists are turning their gaze to sex toys, creating very intimate objets d’art. Sculptor Mari-Ruth Oda took a commission from Myla, a high-end UK retailer of lingerie and sex toys, game for something new: “Myla asked me to design an object that was beautiful to hold and to look at, rather than something that obviously resembled a male sexual organ,” she says of her vibrator, Pebble, a resin-cast vibrator in organic shades of putty and slate. “The New Hite Report by sex researcher Shere Hite ... said the majority of women do not have penetrative masturbation. Having read the report myself, I realized that different women need different stimulation. So the Pebble is shaped with wider areas—gentle curves in the form—and thinner areas which one could explore with.” Several other artists have followed suit with zeal: Tom Dixon’s Bone dildo and Ring vibrator; Marc Newson’s Mojo vibrator; and Andy Cohen’s snarky designer collection at www.babes-n-horny.com, to name just a few.

What kind of praise—or flack—does a designer get for such a project? “Well, I haven’t told my parents!” laughs Oda. “I did think about it a lot before deciding to take it on. My sculptural work can often be interpreted as being sexual, and I worried about how people would perceive my sculptures [afterwards].” In the end, though, a project like this offers everything a creative might crave: beauty, sensuality, and a sense of alluring risk. “It was a chance to do something different, product design, rather than making one-offs,” Oda notes. “Besides, the brief wasn’t that different from my usual aims: to make things that are beautiful to look at and to touch.” ■