

A Long, Lusty Walk on a Short Pier

By Mike Albo

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THERE are so many beautiful people now. Long ago, there was just one or two of them, like Cleopatra or John F. Kennedy Jr. They were worshiped, commemorated on coins and plates, but always far away, untouchable.

But here, in the shadowy, mazelike, extremely loud interior of the new Hollister store on Broadway, beautiful people are everywhere and even talk to you. Many of them are half-naked with bodies as hard as credit cards.

In this four-floor space, gorgeous youth are in every room, behind every doorway, on every stairway landing, saying hello to you, gazing at you, confusing your grasp of reality.

At the gateway of SoHo, on the corner of Broadway and Houston Street, Hollister is hard to miss. The clubby facade kind of looks like that scary Deutsche Bank building at ground zero. Two shirtless men stand like louche versions of the Queen's guard at the entrance, dressed like lifeguards with zinc oxide on their noses.

These guys may nod their heads and say "hey" to you, if they are not busy being ogled by the throngs of tourists in front of the store. Simply cross the threshold and more lovely people—a winsome girl in a Daisy Dukes, bikini top and loosely tied shirt, another shirtless guy—energetically greet you.

It's just the beginning. "Hey, what's up?" says a tall boy who looks like a clone of Josh Hartnett. "Can I help you find a size?" says a perfectly symmetrical girl. "Have a good day," says a jockey guy who would have ignored me in the eighth grade.

Step into the aggressively alluring world of Hollister and it's as if you are finally the popular person you always wished you were in high school, or Justin Timberlake and everyone wants you. Except they don't, because these people are hired to flirt with you.

Unfortunately you tend to forget this fact when you are in the store.

It's confusing here. The interior is designed to resemble the Huntington Beach Pier, but it's more like a store that is a club that is a pier. Bluish projections of waves appear along the first floor, and breezy pop music is blasted throughout the store at mind-peeling decibels. The management does not want photographers in the store in order to preserve the customer's experience. I can see why. The rooms are so dark that flash photography would ruin the phantasmagoric quality, and the models would screech and run into the corners like bat people.

From what I remember, the main floor, or "pier," has casual basics, arrayed along each side of a murky corridor. The upper floors have jeans, a fragrance room and dressier options; downstairs has bathing suits. But it was all in a dizzying series of interconnected rooms and stairwells, and I could be wrong. More than once I became lost in a room full of folded sweatshirts and casual tops that looked like the previous room of folded sweatshirts and casual tops, with another sylphlike beauty standing there, saying hello.

For perspective, I brought my friend David, a theater professional who describes himself as being "of the baby boomer era." He is a confident, seasoned man, and I thought he would be able to help me through this strange labyrinth of desire, but I lost him somewhere between the first and second floors.

A lot of clothes are only on display and not for sale. They drip and dangle from the walls, on shelves and on balconies above your head. I tugged at a plaid shirt hanging on a rack and discovered that it had been attached at the center to the shirt next to it, as were the others, forming a kind of plaid fabric intestine along the wall.

Hollister, as you probably know, is a division of Abercrombie & Fitch. It's supposed to be a beachy and laid-back SoCal lifestyle brand. The cultural power of A & F and its offshoots can be credited to its chairman, Michael Jeffries, who rescued the 100-year-old label from bankruptcy in the mid-'90s and transformed it into the jock-focused lust-brand we know today.

Say what you will about his empire, but this man is a mastermind. If Mr. Jeffries was appointed as White House P.R. director, not only would people all support the Obama health care plan, they would proudly carry it around in a bag covered with homoerotic frat-boy imagery.

But even a seduction factory isn't impervious to the recession. The company has reported \$26.7 million in sales declines over the last quarter, and it is in the process of closing Ruehl, its urban-lifestyle brand. For the first time in its modern history, it plans to lower prices at both A & F and Hollister, adding a tinge of tawdriness to the atmosphere.

The thing is, if you were to strip away all the striptease, the clothes end up being kind of good. A \$89.50 pullover hoodie in sunset stripes fit close to the body, perfecting that Venice Beach poncho you may crave. A \$89.90 down vest didn't look boxy when worn over a T-shirt. The shirting, in particular, comes in an impressive array of plaids and checks that are muted but bright. I saw a blue plaid flannel shirt on the first floor that I liked for \$49.50.

"What size do you think I am?" I asked a demigod clerk nearby. "Medium," he said with his long-lashed cat eyes. I fell into his gaze, and next thing I knew I was in the dressing room trying the shirt on. It fit well, but the sleeves were long. I walked out of the dressing room and realized I was on the third floor. I would have to traipse all the way downstairs for another size.

On the way down I stopped in the fragrance room and sampled the Laguna Beach body mist. It smelled like Jolly Ranchers being breathed on my face by Hayden Panettiere. Here the store also sells its California fragrance, which is spritzed on the mannequins every hour; it's a noxious concoction that, I assume, is distilled from mink sex glands and the tears of broken-hearted teenage girls.

On the stairway I was greeted again by male and female models in bathing suits. The music was so loud I could only hear the guy say "agency ... modeling ... weird," his rump peeking out from the top of his board shorts like two freshly baked bread rolls. People passed by them, staring with slackened mouths. The only people who didn't seem to succumb to the infernal desire machine were the sprinkling of mothers who sat peacefully on the leather chairs scattered throughout the store, reading magazines.

ROOM upon room I wandered, unable to fully love someone or find an exit. I don't know how much time had passed, minutes, moments, 300 years, but David showed up in a room of sweaters, raving, telling me that the young Josh Harnett clone on the first floor brushed by him three times. "I'm sure of it!"

We were losing it. We needed to get out of there before we were trapped in this psychic brothel forever. I clutched onto him, and we battled our way past all the beautiful faces. Like sirens they beckoned for us to stop and transfer our lust into \$600 worth of distressed denims and "casual luxury" tees. Stop being so pretty around me, I wanted to scream.

Somehow we made it out into the daylight, and we returned to our normal, mundane, slightly uglier lives. Or perhaps we are still there, wandering aimlessly through Hollister, and this is just another room?

HOLLISTER

600 Broadway (near Houston Street); (212) 334-1922.

NEW DIGS This huge new flagship an ominously dark, discombobulating ghost world of unobtainable beauty and unreachable aspiration also sells surf-inspired clothing.

HOT DUDES The employees are super nice and scarily good-looking. The hard-bodied dudes who stand outside the entrance complete SoHo's transformation from a cultural center into a tourist town.

SOME NICE DUDS Some clothing is actually kind of good. Stay focused, don't lose yourself in the come-ons, and be sure to take a range of sizes with you to the dressing room.