

BIGGER THAN BARBIE, STRONGER THAN KEN
Continued from Page 21

the rest of me, I mean, I like to wear skirts and pretty slips and perfume, too. I've just always been like that."

Her girlfriend, a more dykey kind of gal, likes her that way. "I get a kick out of watching guys who are attracted to her, knowing I'm the one she goes home with," she explains without modesty.

"All I have to do to change my image is walk down the street holding hands with my honey," Krista says, giving her a wide-open kiss.

The body politic

Other choices we might make that contribute to our image include piercings and tattoos.

For Irene, a 29-year-old computer programmer from a family of three queer siblings, adorning her body with hidden designs is a way to feel gay underneath a fairly conservative exterior.

"My younger brother and I chose to pierce our nipples as a sort of bonding ritual before coming out to our parents," she confides. "The nipple ring gave me a secret boost of confidence, in part because I felt people would never guess from looking at me that I would have an exotic body pierce. I took it out only two years after getting it, because it never really healed, but it was great while it lasted."

PHOTO BY BETH CASEY



Massage therapist Mary Ann Stoddard at work

Her longtime girlfriend, Rosa, adds: "Piercing doesn't turn me on, but I do think the nipple pierce gave Irene a sense of empowerment at the time. She had just come out to herself and the pierce seemed to be a physical representation of her feeling outside the mainstream."

Julia, a 25-year-old tradeswoman, is a fan of tongue piercing.

"It's good for going down and fooling around and stuff," she says. "But sometimes it's obtrusive—sometimes you just want to kiss naturally, without it being there. I got mine caught one time when I was going down on someone."

As a masseuse whose clients are predominantly female, Mary Ann Stoddard looks at a lot of naked women. She has seen an increase in tattoos and sports two beauties herself, including a glyph of a hand that she got when she became a massage therapist.

"I see it as a way of reclaiming a rite of passage," she says, proudly baring her shoulder to show it off.

Noting that her clients are about half gay and half straight, Stoddard theorizes that "lesbians are more apt to get tattooed in visible places, to be confrontational." She adds that "straight women tend to get them in more sexually charged locations, to seem more alluring. Dykes do it for more political, social or spiritual reasons and see no reason to hide that."

Along those same lines, Stoddard sees more lesbians getting piercings in visible places, such as the face, and notes that "straight women tend to go for bellybutton rings."

She also offers a story from her own life: "I was totally wounded because my partner didn't think I looked gay," she says, still in disbelief. "My body and my image have always been political. ... I was wearing combat boots at 14 to force people to confront my image!"

The long and the short of it

Once the choice has been made about makeup, the next great frontier is hair.

For the most part, if a woman wants to pass for straight, she has to shave her legs and armpits—unless she's part of an alternative subculture in which straight women also spurn the time-consuming activity. And sure, there are some hairy femmes out there who shave their legs in the summer so they can feel comfortable in a swimsuit, but I think most garden-variety out dykes find better things to do with their time.

Stacy, a 48-year-old house painter, likes her women furry.

"I love all body hair—it's totally erotic, I love hot, hairy women with dark hair," she says enthusiastically, then adds, "I would never go out with a woman who shaves her underarms."

Another conspicuous badge of lesbian courage is facial hair. While many women have varying amounts of it, many also choose to remove it.

Ironically, while Stacy loves body hair on her partners, she draws the line at her own facial hair.

"I'm very self-conscious about my beard," she says shyly. "I tend to it a lot... I pluck hairs every few days, and it grows in heavier when I ovulate."

Angela, 56, has had a full beard all her adult life, and while she's comfortable having her longtime partner see it in its early stages, she says, "I have to shave it every other day... I couldn't keep my job if I didn't."



PHOTO BY TAMARA LISCHINA

Barbara, a 30-year-old government worker, is wild about her girlfriend's mustache.

"It kind of comes over her lip, and when we kiss I can definitely feel it... It's really just peach fuzz, but I think it's cute," she says with a wink.

"I don't know many women who try to grow facial hair, but I guess it goes along with the whole butch dyke thing. There are a lot of punk dykes that draw on facial hair for shows," she adds, amused by the idea.

For certain dykes there's just nothing so satisfying as growing your own goatee.

"Once I cut my hair short, it became apparent to the world I was a lesbian. With short hair I was referred to more frequently as a man. Even in bathrooms women would look at me like I was in the wrong place."

—Zoe, 46

Jan, 52, owns her own business and doesn't have to answer to anyone, and she's proud of her look.

"Even with this beard I'm still not taken for a guy, not with these babies," she laughs heartily as she takes her ample bust in her firm grasp and thrusts it forward.

But the grandmother of all hair issues is length. I've always felt that most out lesbians feel pressured to wear their hair short—the

shorter the better.

Some dykes have it both ways by wearing their hair in a mullet—also known as a "none-ton," because there's almost no hair in the front and a ton of it in the back.

The hair issue also splits along butch-femme lines for those women who identify that way.

Zoe is an exception. She is 46 and works for the city of Portland on a mostly male crew.

"Once I cut my hair short, it became apparent to the world I was a lesbian," she says, recalling her younger years. "With short hair I was referred to more frequently as a man. Even in bathrooms women would look at me like I was in the wrong place."

So for the last 20 years she has grown her hair quite long. "Some of it has to do with camouflaging my dykeness. It's easier for me to pass out in the world as a hippie than as a dyke. Besides, when I let it down it can be very sexual," she says with a twinkle in her eyes.

"It's a veil, it's seductive and mysterious, and above all, it's feminine," she coos, clearly an expert at hair-tossing and other

womanly hair tricks.

Then there's the subset of lesbians who see themselves as fairly androgynous and wear their hair in a kind of standard-issue dyke cut—short enough to be practical and set off the gaydar, yet not so extreme as to draw attention. Many of them came of age during the '70s, when the feminist party line insisted lesbians should reject the butch-femme dynamic as a vestige of heterosexuality and instead adopt a homogeneous appearance.

Elaine, 46, is a classic case—a social worker who hasn't changed anything about her appearance in 20 years.

"It's a comfortable way to live," she says. "I'm not threatening to my straight co-workers, yet I also fit in at any lesbian potluck. I've had the same haircut forever—wash and wear—and I don't even think about it, except to notice I get a little grayer each year."

And then she laughs, because she's OK with that too.

Coded dress

Elaine also hasn't changed anything about her clothes in many years. Again, it's almost as if she wears a lesbian uniform: sensible shoes, pants (cords in the winter, tailored cotton in the summer, jeans after work) and men's shirts. She lets out a hearty laugh when asked if she owns a dress.

"It's been 25 years since the last time I wore a dress... I was a bridesmaid. In fact, I've only worn three dresses since college, all as a bridesmaid for my sisters," she recalls with delight.

Turning more serious, Elaine adds: "I felt like I was in drag when I wore a dress... even as a little girl. I even wore shorts under my school dresses to make myself feel better about it."

Continued on Page 25