

CORE VALUES

When they go low-rise, can you still go high? Danielle Friedman considers spring's midriff-baring silhouettes, and our ever-evolving relationship with our abs.

I ARRIVED ON THE CAMPUS of my private Southern university at what felt like the exact moment Britney Spears began shaping the minds and bodies of an entire generation. When my friends and I got dressed to “go out,” typically to a fraternity party, we didn’t assess our closets and, after much consideration, choose to wear a slightly cropped top with a pair of low-rise jeans. These were the only clothes we owned.

I don’t remember questioning why I flashed my lower abs and belly button for so many years, but I do remember feeling hyperaware of how my stomach—that anatomically amorphous word for our mid-sections—compared to those of the women around me. It’s no wonder few mourned the belly-baring silhouette when it eventually gave way to high-rise denim, shirts that could be tucked in, and other garments that were more conducive to, say, eating, moving, and breathing.

So you can imagine my shock when designs that brazenly exposed the swath of skin from pelvic bone to sternum appeared on the spring runways. Cutouts and navel-grazing necklines dominated at Saint Laurent, while nothing more than oversized chain links separated models’ torsos from their thong straps at Balmain. Bare abs were treated to another early-aughts hallmark in the form of holographic body glitter at Blumarine, before receiving a less tributary and more DIY treatment at Miu Miu, where crisp Oxford shirts were sliced along the upper rib cage, leaving a raw hem dangling toward hip-hugging micro miniskirts.

Midriff 2.0 is, of course, part of a larger embrace of the Y2K aesthetic, fueled by predictable laws of fashion nostalgia: What was old is new again, especially to a crop of designers who came of age when Britney and Christina and Lindsay and Mischa sold the fantasy of washboard abs and a singular, candy-colored vision of the world. Still, a flood of mixed emotions—denial, skepticism, hostility—met this specific revival. “This was not a good era for me,” the feminist writer Jessica Bennett posted on her Instagram Stories last fall along with a triggering headline declaring the rise of low-rise. “I started having flashbacks,” she continued, sharing images of her own abs-baring past from 20 years ago.

Few sartorial concepts are as fraught as the exposed midriff, which—despite the supposed liberation that showing more flesh can represent—has a long history of sexual disenfranchisement and oppression. From the 1930s through the mid-1960s, women showed a hint of upper torso only when wearing “playclothes” designated for sport or recreation—a picnic with friends, or a day at the

beach—explains Emma McClendon, an adjunct associate professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City who has studied the way fashion shapes our perception of the body. But they always covered their belly buttons, which cultural arbiters considered flagrantly sexual, she continues. Even NBC executives insisted on belly-button modesty from *I Dream of Jeannie* star Barbara Eden, who played a kind of domestic servant to her master. It would take a disco-era Cher (who else?) to defy these censors: In 1975, the multitalented performer made history as the first actress to show her belly button on television. It was a revelation—and a harbinger of the women’s fitness movement that would arrive a few years later with a message for the idle and indolent: It was no longer enough to have a small, flat tummy. Now, abs needed to be

“rock hard” too. “There was a supposed freedom in exposing this part of our bodies, but a new kind of body domination and discipline was being imposed at the same time,” McClendon explains.

“Discipline is liberation,” the original “fitfluencer,” Jane Fonda, told her legions of followers as an endless supply of home videos promising “abs of steel” confirmed the idea that chiseled was the only acceptable form the female body could take, layering on “another set of expectations,” says Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, Ph.D., a historian of fitness culture at the New School in Manhattan. “Women had to be really careful about diet *and* build muscle,” says Petrzela, adding that in the ’90s, to acceptably bear your belly was to skip meals and to devote however many hours (or crunches) it took to have your work show.

Recognizing that this trade-off has been ingrained in the long-standing model of female strength is an important corrective exercise, argues Petrzela. “The midriff trend is back, but the way that people are interpreting it and understanding who has the right to participate in it feels more inclusive,” she says, acknowledging that the conversation around whose bodies deserve celebrating has finally begun to substantially change. Take a look at any college campus—or the models on Vaquera’s spring runway—and it is immediately apparent that ripped abs are no longer required to bare your belly, or your sartorial soul. “We like to present a very wide array of ideas for sexiness,” Vaquera’s founder, Patric DiCaprio, tells me. The New York label’s customers—a body- and gender-diverse sampling of fashion obsessives—gravitate toward the clothes DiCaprio designs with co-creative director Bryn Taubensee because they are seen as nonconformist. “They might think, This cropped look is cool for me because I look completely *different* than Paris Hilton,” adds DiCaprio. “I think that twist is really important.”

Because here’s the thing: Despite how much angst our abs can cause, they have the potential to be the source of incredible power, too. “It’s called the ‘core’ for a reason,” says Sarah Clampett, a physical therapist who is the head of clinical operations for Origin, a progressive Los Angeles-based health company that focuses on helping women and mothers develop strong pelvic-floor muscles. “It’s the body’s powerhouse,” continues Clampett, and yet when many people hear the word *core*, they just

CONTINUED ON PAGE 259

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ABS FAB

Kendall Jenner wears a Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello catsuit. Hair, Tamara McNaughton; makeup, Grace Ahn. Details, see in This Issue. Fashion Editor: Alex Harrington. Photographed by Larissa Hofmann.

think about the abs—the superficial rectus abdominis “six-pack” that Britney Spears famously achieved by doing upwards of a thousand crunches a day back in 2001. In fact, the core encompasses a vast network of muscles and tissues that wrap all the way around from the back and into the abdomen to support vital organs.

Contrary to what many purveyors of fitness culture want us to believe, having a six-pack doesn’t automatically signal core strength. “We can’t have something as ephemeral as beauty standards be a benchmark for health,” says Sneha Gazi, a New York City–based physical therapist. A strong core requires regularly “firing up” both visible and hidden muscles, Gazi explains—not only the “abs,” but the transverse abdominis, the deepest layer of abdominal muscle that holds zero cosmetic but immense functional purpose—as well as routinely stretching for flexibility. A strong core should make you feel vital, she suggests, and maybe even like wearing a pair of Vaquera’s baggy, low-slung jeans and a long-sleeve bra top.

“You have a choice now,” adds Katie Sturino, the author, body-acceptance influencer, and Megababe founder who is quick to point out that 20 years ago, when millennials were abs-out en masse, fashion was more monolithic. Not so today. “I don’t know about you, but I didn’t feel like I had a choice back then.”

If I’m being honest, neither did I. Acknowledging that I have that choice now sent me straight to the uppermost shelf of my closet in search of my favorite crop top from my college days—a neon orange built-in-bra halter purchased at Victoria’s Secret on a spring break trip to Miami, which I was sure I’d saved. I hoped slipping it over my head would bring on new feelings of agency. But as I rifled through the clothes that had outfitted my past lives—a trove of lace camisoles, too many pairs of stretchy black pants to count—I came up empty-handed. My neon crop top, it seemed, was as lost to history as the woman who felt she needed to look a certain way to wear it in order to be desirable, accepted, loved.

The truth is, my relationship with my belly has changed since I subsisted exclusively on Easy Mac. I no longer obsess over its flatness. I’ve seen it expand during pregnancy; I have seen it become soft on the outside and cultivate a certain strength on the inside—to nurture a child, and a marriage, and a multidimensional life. In one of our society’s cruelest double standards, women’s bodies have been expected

to experience all of this evolution and then look as though they haven’t. (What does a flat, firm stomach represent more than child- and responsibility-free youth?!)

But what if we could shift that narrative?

“It feels sacred, the belly,” says New York–based designer Maryam Nassir Zadeh, a mother of two young girls. The idea of deriving strength by relinquishing control over the appearance of our core was an idea that Zadeh played with at her spring show, which featured string bikini tops and relaxed button-downs worn open over bare torsos, by a cast that included size-diverse models—a first for the designer and a decision that, combined with becoming a mother, has given her a deeper appreciation for her own body. “It’s magical,” Zadeh says of how she now views her own midsection, offering something of an invitation to resist the urge to cover our bellies out of fear or judgment, and celebrate them instead—for all we have endured, and all we are capable of. □