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No Labels for the Twins but Their Own

By **GINIA BELLAFFANTE**

SKINNY girls with blank expressions and seemingly little inclination to speak have fascinated American culture for so long that their proliferation now, in magazines like Us Weekly and In Touch and shows like "The Hills," seems less a modern scourge than a historic inevitability. The mid-19th century witnessed the emergence of the aptly named fasting girls, women in their teens and early 20s whose silence and diminutive size stirred the interest of a public that believed they were spiritually extraordinary. Later they found analogues in figures like Edie Sedgwick, on whom so many fantasies — stylistic, sexual, psychological — were projected, and more recently in the phenomenon of the Olsen twins.

Who are the Olsens? What are the Olsens? Biographically speaking, they are the genetically fraternal but identical-looking sisters, Mary-Kate and Ashley, 22, who laid initial claim to our attention when they shared the role of Michelle Elizabeth Tanner in the 1980s and '90s on the family comedy "Full House."

Symbolically, they are harder to define because they defy the standard categories of American celebrity. They have acted, but acting is now just a peripheral part of their identity. They appear regularly in tabloids, yet they cannot fairly be included among the Parises and Nicoles, the Laurens and Heidis — the sisterhood of young women famous only for their professional apathy.

The Olsens, as it happens, do quite a bit: they oversee 18 employees as co-presidents of the multimillion-dollar company Dualstar Entertainment Group, which distributes the direct-to-video movies they made when they were younger and, through licensing arrangements, produces furniture, rugs, lighting and cosmetics for girls 8 to 12. Through a licensor, the Olsens also turn out a line of bohemian women's clothing called Elizabeth and James, and on their own they produce a more rarefied label, for women with the means to buy Chanel or Prada, called the Row. Most recently they have also written a book, "Influence" (Razorbill), that seeks to convey the essence of their creative vision, citing as sources of inspiration designers, fashion photographers and artists, among them Karl Lagerfeld, Terry Richardson and Richard Prince.

The biggest misperception about the Olsens "is that we don't work," Mary-Kate explained over tea one afternoon recently in a cafe where the waitress later confided to me that her little sister, growing up in Kosovo, had wallpapered her bedroom with pictures of the twins. Mary-Kate had just come back from Paris, where she and Ashley had been meeting with buyers to sell the next collection of the Row. On the way back, the women had stopped in London to promote Elizabeth and James to Selfridges. "This whole idea that we don't do anything seems crazy to us because we have been working since we were 9 months old," Mary-Kate said.

It is the Row — which takes its name from Savile Row — that has led to the Olsens' elevation by some of the

most exacting arbiters in fashion. The line, which first appeared in the spring of 2007, made its press debut in American Vogue, won fans at French Vogue and immediately attracted the attention of some of the most discriminating stores here and abroad: Maxfield in Los Angeles, Maria Luisa in Paris, Harvey Nichols in London, Barneys in New York.

Most designers begin by serving a monied clientele and then work their way to the mass market, but the Olsens have made the unusual and more difficult move of going in reverse, beginning in Wal-Mart and finding their way to Madison Avenue. The idea for the line began with Ashley's wish to engineer the perfect T-shirt. It has since grown to a full wardrobe. The clothes are in some sense like the Olsens themselves, outwardly ethereal but fundamentally practical — skirts, jackets, sweaters, from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand, that no urbane 40-year-old woman would look foolish or desperate wearing. The two initially hired a designer to produce the line, but now they design it themselves.

As Ashley explained to me after I spoke to her sister (the Olsens prefer not to be interviewed together): "There was a lot to learn, obviously. You have to learn about fabrics, mills, pricing, what your margins need to be, merchandising and marketing. I was fortunate to know a lot of people from my personal life who were really able to teach me a lot."

Mary-Kate's contribution to the enterprise is a collector's knowledge. She has been buying vintage Lanvin and Givenchy, among other classic labels of the mid-20th century, for a number of years. (Unlike Ashley, Mary-Kate continues to act, having played, with a perfect semblance of haze and obfuscation, a born-again Christian drug dealer on the third season of "Weeds." This year she appeared opposite [Ben Kingsley](#) in the film "The Wackness.") Ashley is the more entrepreneurial, the one who will tell you how much she admires [Steve Jobs](#) and [Bill Gates](#).

"I'm focused on building a true American brand," she said, explaining why it was important to her that the line be manufactured in New York. "For me it was the control. I needed to make sure I could see the product being made. Things like this are successful when you really care, when you are paying attention to every single detail."

The Olsens are known for keeping a tight grip on their image, but their general reluctance to talk to the press has left them ceding ground to tabloids eager to construct the narrative. The sisters began appearing regularly in the pages of the supermarket weeklies when they moved to Manhattan to study at [New York University](#) a few years ago. The magazines followed Mary-Kate's struggle with anorexia in 2004 and then became fixated on how the twins dressed, running picture after picture of the two in big, round glasses and loose, layered knits, implying something deranged and effortful in a look that suggested [Janis Joplin](#).

"I was from L.A., and layering made sense to me," Mary-Kate explained. "I was cold. I put on whatever was on the floor when I woke up." The look seemed constructed to make her disappear, but it rendered an entirely different effect.

The pursuit by paparazzi has not ebbed, and it remains a persistent source of anxiety for the Olsens. "Honestly, I'm a wreck," Ashley said. "Every time I see a camera, I'm a wreck." The sisters had just been surrounded by photographers in London a few days earlier. "I don't tend to react as though 'I have to do this, it's my job,'" Ashley continued. "I am reacting as a woman who is 5-foot-1 whose space is being

invaded by a bunch of men whose aggression I can literally feel. In L.A. it is even worse because they are running red lights behind you, and I worry all the time about something terrible happening, someone getting hurt because of me, how I could ever possibly live with that. I can't imagine what it would be like to have kids in the back seat and have to go through this and pretend for their sake that you are not scared."

"Influence" is the Olsens' effort at self-revelation, at wresting the story back, but even as an unconventional stab at autobiography, the book is hesitant and receding, comprised almost entirely of interviews with other people. Over a few months, Mary-Kate and Ashley talked to people they admired to discover how they work, what inspires them, and "Influences" is merely a catalog of their affinities and received fashion wisdom. In the book each sister briefly answers the Proust questionnaire, and here we learn that Mary-Kate's favorite poets are Whitman and Blake and that Ashley loves "Great Expectations," peonies and [Christopher Guest](#).

Although it is nearly impossible to imagine [Paris Hilton](#) citing Dickens, what most distinguishes the Olsens from their peers in the tabloids is a resistance to certain kinds of recklessness on the one hand and a decidedly less egomaniacal approach to branding on the other.

Ms. Hilton commodifies the image of a sexually untamed heiress — herself. But the Olsens sell a wide variety of products that have nothing to do with their lifestyle, a concept they have purposefully left vague.

A visit to their Web site, [Mary-KateandAshley.com](#), provides the opportunity to view the modernist bracelets the Olsens produce with the well-regarded jeweler Robert Lee Morris and also to buy "Our Lips Are Sealed," an eight-year-old movie in which they star, about two girls forced into a witness-protection program on the beaches of Australia.

The Olsens seem to regard themselves above all as artist-moguls, and the challenges they describe are the challenges of businesspeople. They have to figure out how to deal with expanding the Row while still letting it feel like a quiet discovery for whoever is buying it. As Ashley sees it, her career is brand building, in fashion and beyond. "It is what I love. There are so many voids in the market, and I want to find those opportunities and make the most of them."

It isn't the cover of Vogue they seem to seek as much as the cover of Fortune.

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