



Subscribe

FASHION

BEAUTY

PEOPLE

PARTIES

CULTURE

Zahia Dahar's Lacy, Racy World

Less than four years ago, she was at the center of a French prostitution scandal. Now she's a lingerie designer who counts Karl Lagerfeld among her fans.



- August 27, 2013 10:00 AM | by [Alexandra Marshall](#)
- Photography by [Dylan Don](#)

“If I’m sad, it’s impossible to think about pretty things,” says the eveningwear and lingerie designer [Zahia Dehar](#). “If I’m not feeling good, my job takes longer.” So, in the interest of productivity, Dehar, who is 21, has transformed her atelier on Paris’s Rue François 1er, just down the street from Christian Dior, into a resolutely cheerful place. The parlor, where she receives couture clients and displays pieces from the four collections she has thus far produced, is outfitted with heart-shaped pillows and chairs, and carpets meant to look like puffy clouds—all of them Dehar’s designs. The walls are trimmed with giant bows. It’s less a buzzing hive of garments than a Barbie Dream House. “I live the dreams now that I had when I was a little girl,” she tells me in a breathy coo.

On the surface, Dehar’s life looks very “pretty princess”: She spends three hours each morning getting ready for work, her big blonde hair and dramatic makeup professionally done. Her eyes are so enormous and doe-like that the temptation to frame them with extravagant false lashes is impossible to resist. Business casual for her is a circulation-threatening pencil dress from [Prada](#), [Victoria Beckham](#), or [Dolce & Gabbana](#), paired with stilettos. Her two dogs—Enzo, a German spitz, and Miyuki, a shih tzu—accompany her everywhere she goes. At her spring 2013 show, she traveled down the runway for her bow in a horse-drawn carriage framed by a heart-shaped garland of flowers while petting a newborn lamb. “Sometimes I still think I am 6,” she says, laughing. “Except my body has changed.” Her body did indeed change, and that’s when her troubles began. Dehar was born in a small town in Algeria and moved at age 10 to France with her younger brother and mother.

Obsessed with glamour, Dehar was out on the town as soon as she was able to fill out a micromini, snaring suitors with belly-dance moves she’d picked up from campy Egyptian films of the ’70s. By 16, she was a fixture at posh clubs around the 8th arrondissement and was charging wealthy men thousands of euros for her considerable charms. And then, in 2010, just after her 18th birthday, she was busted in an underage-prostitution sting that nabbed several high-level players from the French national soccer team. (Prostitution is legal in France, but only if both parties are over the age of 18.) Threatened by the police with deportation to Algeria (a country not known for its kind treatment of “fallen women”), Dehar became [known](#) across France as *la scandaleuse*.

It’s easy to understand how one might barricade oneself behind hearts and furry animals after such an ordeal. But Dehar did not get where she is now—set up in a 6,500-square-foot office; enlisting Karl Lagerfeld, Ellen von Unwerth, and Terry Richardson to shoot her look books; posing for [David LaChapelle](#) and Pierre et Gilles; [about to launch](#) a ready-to-wear lingerie line meant to compete with Agent Provocateur—by playing My Little Pony and wishing for a

brighter tomorrow. No, she has managed her situation quite ably. To begin with, after one painfully honest interview with *Paris Match* in April 2010—she spilled about being bought “as a gift” for the 26th birthday of her former client, the soccer star Franck Ribéry, and added that he was “neither particularly gallant nor well mannered nor even very nice”—she disappeared for more than a year. “I just hid out and cried all day and thought, What has become of my life?” she recalls.



Dehar in her showroom

Then, as many a scandal queen has done before her, Dehar hired a lawyer and began to plot her next move. “I couldn’t get a normal job, because what could I do? Take a meeting and have people say, ‘Oh, look, it’s you!’?” she says. So rather than fight her household-name status, Dehar used it to propel the fashion dreams she’d nurtured since childhood. Her pitch

was to combine risqué designs and a desire to “help women who want to have fun with their bodies” with the know-how of respected couture ateliers like Jean-Pierre Ollier and [Eric-Charles Donatien](#). Through her lawyer, she netted a Hong Kong backer, who wishes to remain anonymous. After a year of development and securing her artisans, she was ready to launch her first collection.

American readers should forget about how post-scandal rebirth is done in the United States. Dehar issued no empty “How did you get my sex tape?” denials, nor did she attempt to blanch the carnality from French minds. (This is a country, after all, with a centuries-old courtesan tradition.) A far, far cry from Monica Lewinsky’s [chaste little handbag line](#), Dehar’s debut collection included bra-and-underwear sets made to look like very revealing gift-wrapping. She’s also designed feather-trimmed G-strings, abbreviated see-through peasant tops, and rafia baby-doll dresses meant to suggest, she says, that “the woman was naked, rolling around in hay, and the hay stuck to her body.”

Dehar’s own body, meanwhile, has been front and center from day one. Thanks to a magazine spread in which she wore skimpy Chanel looks, Karl Lagerfeld came calling. He was so struck by her story, and her figure—which is astonishing, with a habitually arched back and a [J. Lo-worthy derriere](#)—that he agreed to [shoot her first look book](#). Though he is careful to mention that he has nothing to do with her designs, he has said that he finds her “extraordinary,” in the spirit of a Coco Chanel or courtesans like Liane de Pougy or Belle Otéro. “Only a doll comes close to the shape of her body,” says [Ellen von Unwerth](#), who photographed Dehar’s fall 2012 look book. “She is very clever and knows very much what she wants.”

After her first couture show, Dehar was the subject of an in-depth documentary, [Zahia de Z à A](#). In it, she models pieces for some highly revealing photo shoots—just as she does at the end of her shows, when she comes out as the bride. Dehar creates each look for herself first, then adapts it for fit models. “I can judge best what I think is pretty on myself,” she says.



The set for her fall 2012 show

Though Dehar will not reveal her client list, actresses like Emmanuelle Béart and Béatrice Dalle have turned up for her shows. Vintage-fashion king [Cameron Silver](#) is so taken with her work that, this fall, he's carrying her pieces at his Los Angeles emporium Decades, where members of Dehar's team will be on hand for fittings. "We're so Puritan in America, but it's not like she murdered anyone," Silver notes. "And this is not a vanity project; there's far too much investment and work involved."

Indeed, Dehar's attention to detail is impressive. Many of her designs—like a bustier dress made to resemble a stack of pleated cupcake wrappers, with "frosting" covering the breasts—are as clever as they are over-the-top. A pastry-themed group from fall 2012 gave rise to a capsule ready-to-wear lingerie collection, which launched this summer at the Parisian boutique L'Eclaireur in a space designed to look like a pastry shop. Cake-shaped minaudières, latex "whipped cream" pasties, and other wearable confections were sold alongside their edible inspirations. "It's fun to have women ordering cake and lingerie from the same place," Dehar says.

Fun indeed, but running an honest-to-goodness business is not a piece of gâteau, especially with Dehar's preening needs making her chronically late. "I don't go out much anymore," she confesses. She has no boyfriend, and "on the weekends, I prefer to stay at home with my dogs." But in spite of this comparatively low-key setup, Dehar is happy—a very important factor, after all, in the bottom line. "I may be more restrained now in my personal life, but doing this work really makes me feel free."

- Sitting Editor: Rogelio F. Burgos; Hair by Rita Dell'orco; Makeup By Jean-Michel Daquin; Photography Assistant: Queinnec Nominome. Dehar Wears Jimmy Choo Pumps; Set photo: CNP Montrose

<http://www.wmagazine.com/fashion/2013/08/zahia-dehar-french-lingerie-designer/>