

What Packaging?

The opening of the first Kiehl's store in Canada, on Queen West in Toronto, prompts another grapple with the magic of that brand. It was one of those store openings that set local tongues wagging. Since early summer, people have been heard talking about how they had passed by or dropped by and how busy the shop seemed.

In many ways, the draw of Kiehl's is apparent. It's as old as the hills, the full name of the company being Kiehl's Since 1851, lest anyone forget that it goes back to the year when a druggist of that name hung his shingle on an apothecary in New York. Even since L'Oréal, the corporate giant, bought the business in 2000, this slice of Americana has stayed intact. Secured by image-sensitive, control-conscious American-style marketing, the legend is embodied in the wide range of personal care products that over the years have attracted fans as diverse as Jackie Kennedy and Alexander McQueen.

It's the look of those products that is fascinating. Familiar in a way that is difficult to decipher, their design is perceived as no-frills, no-nonsense, no design at all. That would make it an accident, and it's not that either.

The creative director Victoria Maddocks, with Kiehl's Since 1851 for not quite three years, says, "The packaging is merely intended to be informa-

tive to the customer. The design rationale is service to the customer. It sounds sort of trite, but it drives everything we do."

A line of sun care products introduced last spring features bright blue and orange; plain black and white could not express the importance Kiehl's places on sun protection. Ordinarily there may be occasional colour – green, for example, when a product entails cucumber, a typical Kiehl's ingredient that itself suggests a tone, quirky but wholesome. The same goes for typography, nostalgic with an indefinable edge. Labels are boldly packed with words, often in a soothingly traditional Times New Roman typeface, sometimes underlined, the way you would draw attention to a words on a typewriter.

It's all as simple as a dimple. But it survives all the megatrends. It's good for those nostalgic, back-to-basics moments when modesty is becoming; the style hangs in when the culture swings to the cool and the industrial. Kiehl's packaging is a remarkable paradox. It's as blunt and erratic as a kidnapper's note or a punk rock album cover. And yet it's like some kind of *arte povera* that doesn't want to cost you anything extra, that pitches for the underdog, letting you know it's there for you. **D.L.**



See Stocklist for details.