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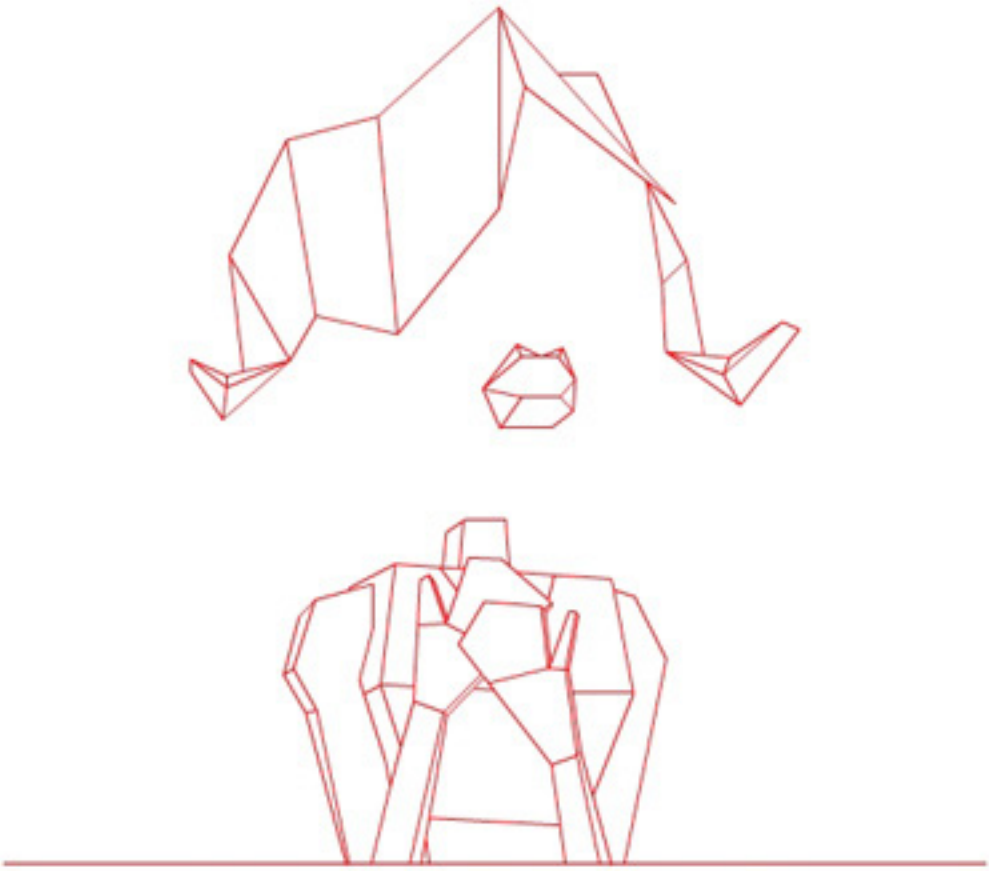

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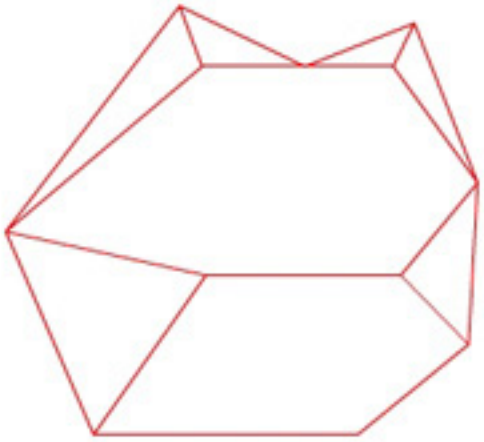

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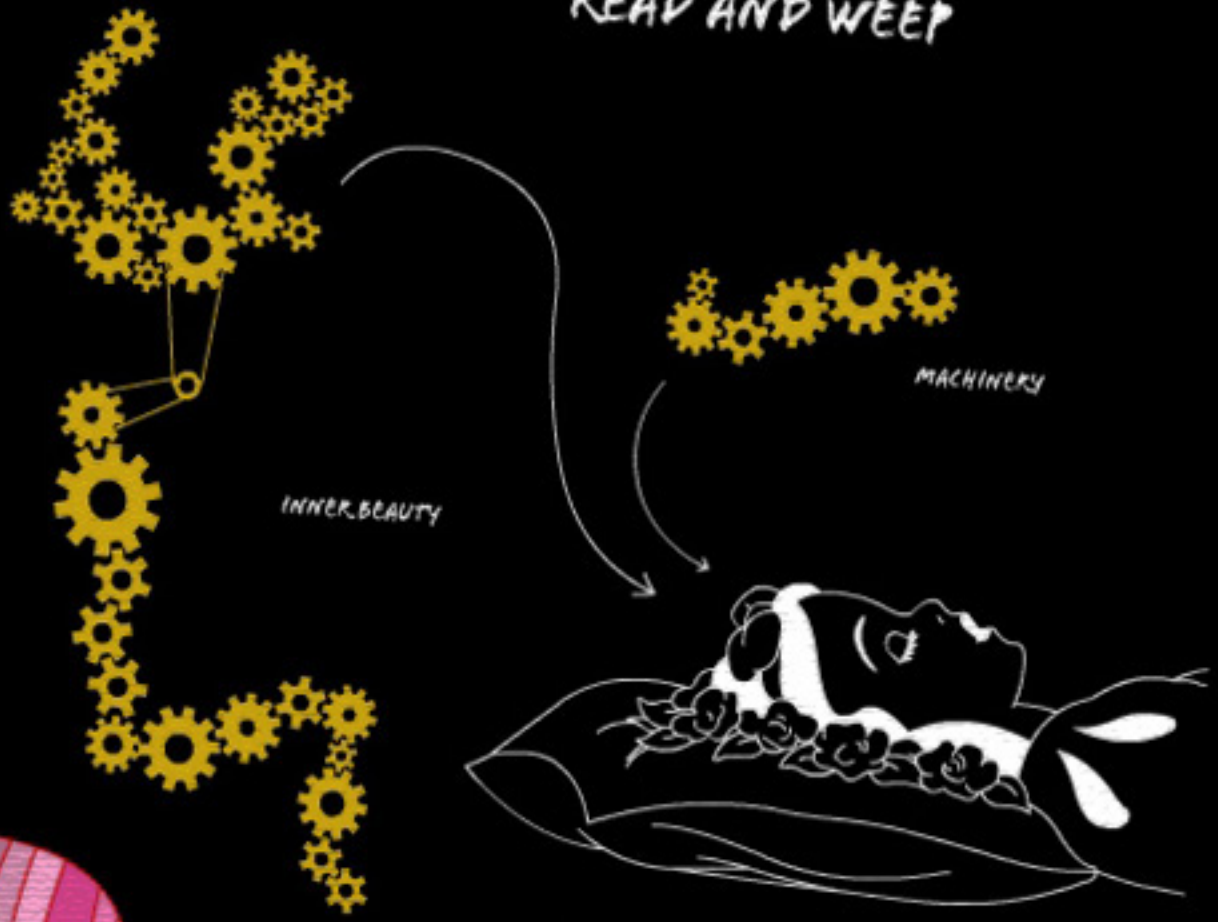
MAY, 2012

PROFESSOR MALCOLM HARRIS

WORKING BEAUTY

READ AND WEEP



SNOW-WHITE & SLEEPING BEAUTY ARE ON A BOAT

THE CISTERN CONTAINS
THE FOUNTAIN OVERFLOWS
WILLIAM BLAKE

Working Beauty

by

MALCOLM HARRIS

Labor under current conditions of capitalism may have shifted from physical to immaterial and affective forms, but in Julia Leigh's recent film, *Sleeping Beauty*, bodies still matter

---

In the opening scene of Julia Leigh's debut film *Sleeping Beauty*, Lucy (Emily Browning), our beautiful college-student protagonist, serves as a medical test subject. She leans her head back as the doctor slowly threads a tube down her throat, then fills a balloon in her chest with air while she holds the tube in place. Lucy cooperates excellently and leaves with an envelope of money and a smile.

Her still, submissive choking and gagging lend the scene a heavy erotic charge, an allusion to the sex work the viewer may already know is to come from reviews and trailers. In this first scene, Lucy

is already selling her body; the distinction between this and prostitution is a symbolic technicality.

What's most off-putting in this scene is Lucy's ability to hold a smile on her face throughout the ordeal. If Lucy's remaining still while holding the tube down her airway as her body jerks around isn't work, then I don't know what is.

Though she usually wears the uniform of an Anthropologie model and often seems to be doing not much at all — there are a few scenes of her cleaning up a coffee shop after working a closing shift and others of her biding her time in the copy room of the office where she's an assistant — almost all of what we see Lucy do in the film is work. We know she's working, but she hardly looks like a worker.

But what does a worker look like? Even the most traditional economic models, as well as revolutionary counter-currents, had to deal with changes over time in the character of what they called labor. In the Introduction to *The Critique of Political Economy*, Marx comments on Smith's use of the term:

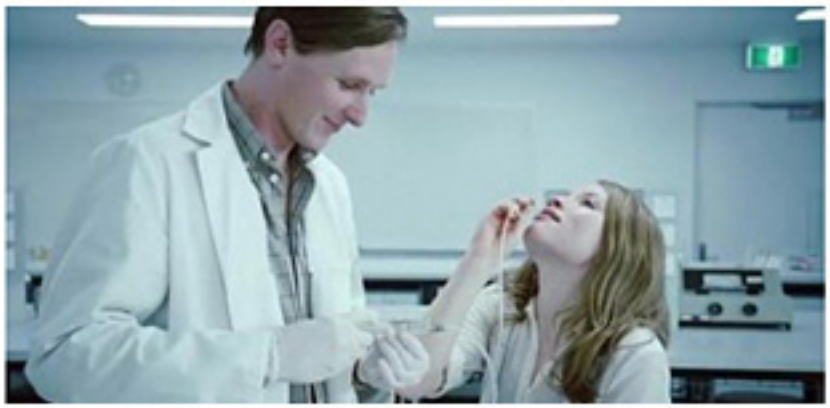
> The indifference as to the particular kind of labor implies the existence of a highly developed aggregate of different species of concrete labor, none of which is any longer the predominant one. So do the most general abstractions commonly arise only where there is the highest

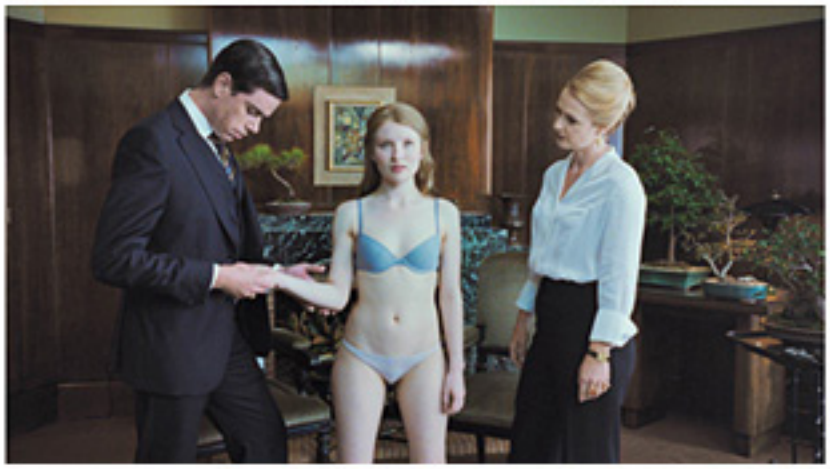
> concrete development, where one feature appears to be jointly possessed by many, and to be common to all. Then it cannot be thought of any longer in one particular form.

An undifferentiated worker isn't just a farmer or a bricklayer or a Slurpee-machine mechanic, labor is a composite picture of different forms of human activity that we group under the term. But this aggregate isn't stable; it exists in thought and appearance. What we come to understand as a general laborer is based on this "concrete development" of bodies in motion, but also on what Marx called the "preexisting abstraction": the way we talk about labor in the first place. In this proudly contradictory formula, we tell the story of labor twice: first with our bodies, and then only after we use our words. *Sleeping Beauty* is a film most of all about labor, what it means to work. The categories destabilize as the viewer begins to recognize what Lucy does with her time as work.

Despite her three paid jobs, Lucy still can't make rent. This is what prompts her to answer an ad in the school paper for a sort of catering gig: waiting on private parties while dressed in lingerie. She brings the same perfect submission to the interview that she showed in the first scene with the doctor. She lies about her drug use and submits to being poked and prodded by the madam Clara (Rachael Blake)

STILLS FROM
SLEEPING BEAUTY





and her assistant. It is her full body that is to be put to work, her full body that must be examined.

When Clara calls to tell Lucy that she's been hired for some jobs, for which she'll be paid exorbitantly, she cautions Lucy not to treat the income as stable. "Think of it as a windfall," Clara says. "Pay off some student loans."

There's a remarkably open acknowledgment here that Lucy is in debt to a third party. The modern labor relation is not supposed to include employees' consumer debt; whether they have credit cards is not the boss's concern. A worker's indebtedness is supposed to come up as a source of employer leverage only in shady criminal dealings when it's owed to the boss: drugs and immigrant smuggling, or in the sharecropping fields and company towns we learn about in history class. But with student debt so prevalent, young workers are assumed (known) to have loans they're compelled to pay, making them even more vulnerable on the market.

Unlike mortgage or credit-card debt, student debt is premised specifically on the value of the debtor's body. The exorbitant size of U.S. college debt is justified by the students' imagined future productivity; if you take out tens of thousands of dollars in loans for school, it's because the debt will enable you to command enough on the labor market to pay it back. But when lots of workers need jobs,

employers need any particular worker much less. In a sick twist, the known size of the general debt keeps wages down and young workers desperate, making their personal debt even harder to pay back, making them even more desperate, and so on until the wage goes literally negative in the form of unpaid internships. *Sleeping Beauty* dramatizes this debtor relationship: The old men who sleep with her may as well be the banks holding Lucy's loans, taking payment in time with her flesh.

Lucy's new boss tells her to maintain another dependable job, but what job could be dependable in the way Clara imagines? The cobbling together of part-time contracts leaves the precarious worker without any one thing to fall back on. Under earlier capitalist labor relations, workers' ability to get another job gave them leverage on bosses to extract benefits. But under conditions of precarity, workers need more than one job to survive and to be constantly interviewing for new ones. Employers feel no responsibility to provide the means for workers to get what they need in order to live. With high unemployment and so much of job training moved to colleges, they're easily replaceable.

This change affects workers' ability to organize their lives around their jobs. The elements of the social democratic good-life fantasy — job security, health and retirement benefits, steady hours, a living wage,

vacation, weekly nonwork time, among others — are available to fewer and fewer workers even as a realistic aspiration. These features are no longer even "common" (known) to all; many young workers now would have no idea how retirement or health benefits work, having never been offered them.

Not that we'll need to learn. The precarious retort to the classic pro-union bumper sticker "The people who brought you the weekend" is "What the fuck is a weekend?" This insecurity is no longer an exceptional condition; it is a developed set of practices with features of its own. We still use the concept of undifferentiated labor, but precarious conditions come with different rules and different assumptions of what a generic worker can be expected to do. It's more important that a worker know how not to ask for a raise, more desirable that she be adaptable than cutthroat. An employee without an office is always at work. The possibility that a worker might leave at some point due to pregnancy isn't a drawback; it's a good reason not to offer benefits or a path for advancement.

When we look at Lucy, we have a picture of the precarious subject: indebted, insecure, vulnerable. After a few successful nights as a server at parties for the rich, old, and distinguished, Clara asks Lucy to do a different kind of work. She'll be put to sleep with a nontoxic drug, stripped naked, and left in a

bed where men will pay to use her. Lucy will wake up with no memory of what happened, but the no-penetration rule will apply. She agrees.

These are the hardest scenes in the movie to stand. Watching the old men strip naked alone in a room with a beautiful, young unconscious woman is disturbing enough. We peer beneath the tailored suits to their frames, either frail or bloated, but their dicks always recede into the shadows of impotence. These scenes lack the intersubjectivity of rape. One client just wants to snuggle with Lucy as he would with a giant doll. Another violently slaps her around in a sickening display. During this scene, viewers are acutely aware they are watching a beautiful young actress going through the exact experience depicted, except while conscious and on film. The physicality of these scenes breaks the movie's narrative and exposes Browning's acting as intensive labor. The flexibility that characterizes precarious work becomes literal, passing into limp. Lucy must be as flexible as a rag doll when a client throws her body around the room.

Clara's firm assertion to Lucy that she won't be vaginally penetrated plays with the viewer's preconceived positions on prostitution, but also has a ring of truth to it. The combination of Craigslist personals, high debt, and the comparatively light stigma on paraphilic sex work has created a supply of mostly young

women willing to freelance in the fetish business as long as it's sufficiently distinguished symbolically from traditional prostitution. It's certainly better paid than the medical testing, and less invasive.

It's impossible to write about precarity without writing about gender because undifferentiated labor is reforming along these lines. Lucy's passivity and her eagerness to please, her vulnerability and blank demeanor, would look incredibly strange on a young man. Her willingness to keep treading water without the promise of anything better to come, her ability to communicate nonthreateningly and stay quiet at the right times are parts of what Nina Power describes in the chapter "The Feminization of Labor" in *One Dimensional Woman*:

> All work has become women's work, even that of men. No wonder the young professional woman beams down at us from real estate billboards as the paradigmatic image of achievement … At this point in economic time, those character traits [of precarious professionality] are remarkably feminine, which is why the pragmatic, enthusiastic professional woman is the symbol of the world or work as a whole.

Sometimes Lucy looks like she could be on one of those billboards, or at least the ones for community colleges, but the film is about the other times as well. It turns out the models in the pictures only own one set of clothing. Lucy persists and survives using what

Lauren Berlant describes in her book on precarity, *Cruel Optimism,* as "durable norms of adaptation," repeating the play of control and submission that characterizes precarity but under circumstances of her choosing. Whether Lucy is fucking guys at the bar based on the fall of a coin, taking drugs from strangers, or repeating ironic formalities ("And how are you miss?" "Oh very well, very well. And you sir?") over glasses of vodka with a terminally self-destructive friend, she finds ways to make her being in the world sting less. Or the right amount. This is a nonrevolutionary enduring, a body's holding together in a sea of dismembering tugs.

Lucy shows she can endure, at least for now, but can she do more? Can the flexible resist?

If our conception of what it means to be a worker relies on having a bargaining place at the table with the boss — that is, with certain classical notion of workers' power — then Lucy isn't a worker. She isn't a worker even though all she ever does is work, as in the four stills from the film above. She's not going to unionize her coffee shop, nor her fellow sex workers, nor the assistants at her office (from which she's fired), nor the other medical subjects, and certainly not the students. If she tried, she'd be terminated or worse: Clara threatens her with vague but menacing consequences if she misbehaves. And what does the doctor care if she goes on strike?

He'll pay someone else and stick a tube down her throat. A strategy of resistance against precarious wage labor can't be "unionize your Starbucks," as valiantly as the Wobblies have tried.

I don't know exactly what a successful strategy looks like, but I think it has something to do with the penultimate shot in *Sleeping Beauty*. Lucy wakes prematurely after a dangerous drug interaction to find an old man's naked corpse in bed with her — a client who paid to die there. She opens her eyes with a kiss of CPR breathing from Clara, and sits up like the princess from whom the film draws its name.

She opens her eyes and she screams and she doesn't stop. ■

Interview with

DANIELLA MARCANTONI

Mortician, Chino Hills, CA

Interview with

Daniella Marcantoni

Mortician, Chino Hills, California

Originally published at The Beheld by Autumn Whitefield-Madrano

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Daniella Marcantoni is a licensed funeral director and embalmer, and a spokeswoman with Funeral Divas, a social group for women in the funeral industry.

On Postmortem Makeup

You start decomposing immediately, so the skin on an unembalmed body is very soft. It can be a little difficult to cosmetize — from a cosmetizing aspect we'd prefer that the person is embalmed because it just looks better. Whenever I'm done embalming I put massage cream on — my personal favorite is this stuff called Kalon, which is like a white massage cream, and I like to mix in a formula called Restoratone. It's a liquid that kind of looks like pink slime, and you mix it with Kalon to prevent the skin from dehydrating.

We have this thing called Glow Tint, which kind of looks like dark orange juice. I'd always use that as my base. And from there you can use any kind of makeup. Cadaver makeup is very thick; it's comparable to theater makeup. Some people's skin can be very ashy, or maybe they have wounds or bruises — obviously the cases that need restorative work are going to require lengthier and more intricate processing to conceal, and that requires thicker makeup. So in those cases cadaver makeup is very effective, but in general I don't like it. Some embalmers want to use wax all over the mouth, but I usually don't like to use it because it takes away the natural lines of the lips and makes their lips look really smooth. But everyone is different. Embalmers tend to have egos; they all think that their way is the best way.

On "Natural Appearance"

Rouge, mascara, and lipstick is pretty much my cocktail for every person, unless the family has specific requests. Like, "You know, my mother always wore blue eyeshadow." I love to get requests because I want to do what they want. A lot of times people will bring in pictures, and sometimes they're pictures from the '60s and I'm like … I can only do so much! But sometimes people won't bring in pictures, so we just go for what in mortuary school we called a "natural appearance."

It can be difficult sometimes. If you have an elderly lady who fell, you have to work very hard at covering the bruises on her face, but maybe Grandma never wore makeup. So it's kind of a struggle between what the family wants and trying to make the person look good so the family doesn't freak out when they see them in the casket. In terms of age, I know the clues that tell me what the person might have done on their own. I had an older woman come in with short hair and no ear piercings and her nails were short with no polish, and I knew that person probably didn't wear a lot of makeup. But if I see a woman the same age come in with a perm and ear piercings and acrylic nails, I could tell that she probably wore makeup.

I can't speak for anybody else, but I do kind of pick up on what a person might have been like. But you

have to communicate; you have to trust that the funeral arranger will be realistic with the family. Every case is completely different — sometimes the person looks amazing and the family gets mad! And sometimes you don't think the person looks that great and you're upset because you've been working so hard on the person and aren't happy with it, and the family is like, *Thank you so much, my mom looks amazing*.

I always look at people and am like, *I wonder how they'll embalm*. I pay attention to people's features because when you're embalming you're paying constant attention to features. Features don't necessarily change postmortem, but sometimes if the person passed away in an awkward position, the features can be compromised or not in their natural form, and you'll have to reset them and make sure everything looks natural. The face is aesthetically the most important part of the body. So being a makeup artist gives me an advantage because I'm used to studying faces.

On Helping Those Who Can't Help Themselves

In 2007 I lost my aunt to breast cancer. We were extremely close, and at her funeral I was really disappointed. It looked as though they didn't put any

effort or anything into her makeup. And I was like, *I* know *I'm in the right industry now. Because I don't want someone to sit there and stare at the casket and see the most important person in their life and feel what I'm feeling right now.* I'm being fairly compensated, but when I was doing freelance makeup work it was like, *Cool, this is great, give me money!* It's more selfless doing this sort of preparation. A girl going to senior prom can do her own makeup. But a grandma who couldn't help herself for six months — her eyebrows are grown out, her moustache is showing. I feel like it's my responsibility to make her look her best, so when her family sees her they'll be like, *Oh, I'm so glad my mom doesn't look like she's had cancer for the past six months.* I think that's the kind of goal to have.

There are some families who will be with their mother until her dying day, and those bodies tend to be in amazing shape, and it just touches you. I've seen terrible things from some convalescent homes, seeing how their bodies are when they come here. There's cysts because they haven't been washed in months. When you see abuse or neglect, you take even more personal responsibility to really just take care of that person. Because it's like, *Well, no one else cared for them for the past year. They're going to be in my care for four hours — I might as well do the best that I can with the limits I have and the time that I've been given with them.* Once they're dead they can't do anything. You're helping someone who can't help themselves. ■

THE PRESUMPTION OF MALE NEUTRALITY

MAN

WOMAN

Belles Lettres

by

AUTUMN WHITEFIELD-MADRANO

The extent to which the looks of women writers figures in appraisals of their skill indicates how thoroughly gendered the notion of "genius" remains

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The day after I read Jonathan Franzen's *New Yorker* essay on Edith Wharton, which painted her lack of beauty as the one thing that made her sympathetic, I was told I was too pretty to write. Specifically, I was too provocative, too thin, and too adherent to western beauty norms to write effectively on anything involving them: "It is not an accident that all women who write for Salon are either hot, or formerly hot," wrote a commenter on a piece I penned there that touched on the beauty imperative. "We need a fat and ugly woman to break through and write about these things. Certainly everyone will say that she

is an ugly harridan and dismiss her, but at least we would have a believable witness."

That believable witness, as Franzen would have it, is Edith Wharton. In his essay examining the role of sympathy in literature appreciation ("Without sympathy … a work of fiction has a very hard time mattering"), he wheedles us with his litany of reasons Wharton herself was unsympathetic. She reveled in born privilege, tossing pages of her writing on her bedroom floor for her secretary to collate; she breezily ignored most women around her, largely preferring the company of men. Yet she had "one potentially redeeming disadvantage: she wasn't pretty."

According to our critic, this colored the way she depicted her characters' attitudes toward their own beauty. "At the center of each of her three finest novels is a female character of exceptional beauty, chosen deliberately to complicate the problem of sympathy," which, depending on your reading of Wharton, could indeed be a fair description of *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence* — three novels that also deal with questions of class, privilege, and women's assigned roles in early-20th-century society. But never mind that, for what matters to Franzen is that "nobody was more conscious of [the] capacity

of beauty to override our resentment of privilege than Wharton herself."

As an author who has claimed to welcome feminist criticism of his work, Franzen should know better than to use Wharton's looks as a portal to her words. But he did, so let's get a few basics out of the way: Franzen's remarks reflect the reality that female creators of all sorts continue to be judged largely on their looks. The only possible way to escape is by hitting the sweet spot in which one is neither beautiful enough to provoke criticism that she's "getting by" on her looks nor homely enough to collect assumptions like Franzen's. That sweet spot doesn't actually exist, of course; for every commenter I've had claim I'm too "hot" to convincingly write on the beauty standard, I've had another take aim at my "mango-shaped face" that makes my forehead look "horrifying." (But that's another essay.)

The presumption is that women have no choice but to derive their interpretation of their characters' looks from their own hall of mirrors. Under this reading, writerly imagination is beside the point, as is the author's ability to read character through a lens better than that of female beauty. Men, being neutral observers of human experience, can make shit up left and right; women, forever serving as Other, are forced to draw solely from the well of their own experience.

Franzen claims that Wharton's presumed relationship with her looks illuminates the privileges she's missing out on, better allowing her to bestow those gifts and curses upon Lily Bart, the tragic heroine of *The House of Mirth*: "The novel can be read as a sustained effort by Wharton to imagine beauty from the inside and achieve sympathy for it, or, conversely, as a sadistically slow and thorough punishment of the pretty girl she couldn't be." When Lily refuses to trade in her accrued beauty capital for financial security, instead participating in her own social downfall, her suffering is believable and sympathetic, Franzen claims, because a non-beautiful person made her both sympathetic and somehow deserving of punishment for her beauty.

The novel can also be read in a way that doesn't rely on whether Wharton was genetically blessed. Lily's fall from grace was precipitated by her unwillingness to use beauty according to the social mores of the day. Wharton's concern was with the cruelties of a system in which it was understood that women ultimately could do little to autonomously improve their lot. She would have been keenly aware of beauty's benefits and drawbacks for women — as a sensitive novelist and as a woman, she was attuned to the fact that beauty was the coin of the feminine realm. What Franzen is willfully ignoring — and what any woman

writer of Wharton's era couldn't — is that self-objectification as a route to security is a basic condition of patriarchy and that, simultaneously, beauty privilege is a masquerade of actual power. As Victoria Patterson at the Los Angeles Review of Books put it, Lily's downfall "forces readers to confront the fact that her story cannot have a happy ending because, in this society, she has no other power."

Once we understand that beauty is a mere stand-in for real power, we see that it's impossible to view Wharton's relationship with her looks as being about what she saw in the mirror; instead, it was about the ways a woman as privileged as Wharton navigated her world, and her nuanced understanding of beauty's true position within that framework. Franzen willfully fails to recognize that position and mistakenly conflates scant beauty privilege with forms of true power — forms Wharton enjoyed to a degree but could never fully embody because of her sex — revealing the very problem at the heart of women's social condition in Wharton's era. It wasn't about looks, even when it was; it was about power. The misunderstanding of the relationship between the two shows that women cannot write about beauty without writing about power, and in attempting to assert the importance of Wharton's

lack of beauty, Franzen creates his own best refutation to the argument he's striving to make.

The presumption of male neutrality lies at the heart of Franzen's review of Wharton's work. Certainly we're not meant to extend his critique to his own work: We are not to see the tendency of Denise in *The Corrections* to be shrewd and occasionally cruel, or the dithering, punishing attitude of her mother, to be indicative of anything of Franzen's self-concept or the women in his life. They are to be understood as the intentional manipulations of a great overseer of human existence ready to reveal the foibles of American family life. Wharton, on the other hand, is capable of no such distance between her persona and her stories. For her, neutral observance becomes impossible.

Franzen's inability to conceive of women writers as neutral observers to the human condition goes beyond Wharton: In running down a list of characters he finds sympathetic, if not likable, Franzen neglects to mention a single female character besides Wharton's that was penned by a woman. Under his construction, women may be sympathetic characters (Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*), and women may write sympathetic creations (Harper Lee's Atticus

Finch), but ne'er the twain shall meet — unless, of course, the authoress has a bone to pick with beauty.

Franzen never tries to say that this makes Wharton a lesser author; indeed, the piece exhorts us to read her. Yet his critique comes to mind when reading Shulamith Firestone's appraisal of the male cultural establishment and its attitude toward female creators: "Even where it must be (grudgingly) admitted she is 'good,' it is fashionable — a cheap way to indicate one's own 'seriousness' and refinement of taste — to insinuate that she is good but irrelevant." Franzen similarly admits quality while managing to make Wharton unserious; the cheapness in his assessment lies in insinuating that she's good because her supposed lack of beauty has made her sympathetic. It's an old dichtomy — men can work from intellect, women only from personal experience.

The mistake here is that it's her absent beauty, not simply her sex, that gives her this insight. For she, of course, writes from a perspective, and she is a woman. Women have been cast as the Other for so long that neutrality as we know it *isn't* as much of an option for female creators. We might properly define "neutral" here as the blind privilege of the male author. The larger question is how to adjust culture to include women in its definition of neutrality, or indeed reconceiving the possibility of neutrality for anyone regardless of gender. In the meantime,

though, the question of objectivity and subjectivity comes into sharper focus. We have been primed to interpret sympathetic women as objects, not subjects. Wharton is not a creative subject but rather an object of aesthetic opinion. Or take the case of Francesca Woodman, a gifted photographer whose recent retrospective at the Guggenheim would likely not have happened had she not committed suicide at age 22. Her work is compelling without being foregrounded by her story, but it was only in her becoming an object — the tragic, troubled talent we can cluck over and murmur words like "taken too soon" — that it received widespread notice.

The assumption of woman-as-object is so built into popular ideas about women and creation that it's circled past the obvious feminist critique and has returned as a recurrent theme of many a successful female artist. If women are going to be seen as objects anyway, the thinking goes, why not turn it into material? Cindy Sherman, Laurel Nakadate, Marina Abramović — their work couldn't resonate as soundly as it does without female surveillance being accepted as a norm.

A secret weapon may emerge from this longstanding history: Where "objective" male writers find the muse in the act of surveillance, female writers can serve as both surveyed and surveyor. That is, women can become our own muses. The muse in

literature stems from the concept of the muse as being the "true speaker," the author merely being the conduit through which she — and the muse is always a *she* — speaks. Wharton, by dint of womanhood, circumvents the third-party muse: Lily Bart, as Franzen would have it, is the embodiment of not just Wharton's muse but of Wharton herself, albeit one with a different relationship to her own erotic capital. By assuming Wharton's writing is derivative of her own experience instead of being filtered through the concept of the muse, Franzen denies her — and all women writers — the opportunity to play with subjectivity and objectivity, instead of recognizing that the true speaker of the embodied muse amply provides both. More important, the assertion denies women writers' creativity.

Whether the presumed lack of muse makes Wharton's work greater or lesser wasn't necessarily Franzen's point, but given the historic relationship between genius and the muse, it's a question worth exploring. Take Wharton's friend Henry James. *Genius* isn't a word we've been shy to use about him, whether in biographies (*Henry James: The Imagination of a Genius* by Fred Kaplan), or the headline of Michiko Kakutani's piece about an entirely different biography of his ("Rummaging in the Mind of a Genius Growing Up"), or a collection of his stories ("The Genius of Henry James," containing two of his minor stories), or admiration from contempo-

raries such as T.S. Eliot. Edith Wharton has been described as a genius by the *Telegraph*, a number of blogs, and in the name of a seminar conducted on her historic Berkshires estate, "Edith Wharton: A Genius for Gardens."

I bring this up not to question whether Wharton was a genius or whether James wasn't; their actual merits are beside the point, for we apply *genius* only to creators whose works transcend them, something that is impossible for women unless neutrality is redefined.

James, in his cousin Minny Temple, had a muse. Her combination of sibling-like familiarity and the "glamour of female mystery" as described by Kaplan influenced James throughout his career, giving him a penchant for assertive female characters who rebelled against the social confines thrust upon them. Temple served as muse for the creation of Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. Certainly James was insightful enough to have seen the character potential for rebellious young women on his own, but it was his devotion to Temple that spurred his longstanding exploration of the type.

The symbiotic relationship between (male) genius and the muse lies in part in the creator's ability to properly select and assimilate their muse. They see qualities that, in the eye of the genius, cry to be

teased out and spun into their own being — in clay, in oil, in words.

The concept of the muse allows writers to go beyond that dictate from Writing 101: Write what you know. With the portal of a muse, writers are not only able to write what they know but what the *muse* knows, channeling her experience as the "true speaker." As Simone de Beauvoir writes in her analysis of five male writers and what their work says about the female condition, "Woman … as the other still plays a role to the extent that, if only to transcend himself, each man still needs to learn more fully what he is."

By defining women writers as tethered to their own experience, as Franzen does for Wharton, we remove a wide road to what's seen as a prerequisite to genius. If anyone recognizes that their muse is the mirror, instead of being treated as genius they're seen as egomaniacally tending to a fractured self — or seen as unable to break free of the narrow lens of the reflecting glass. Women serving as their own muse is part of why "female genius" is still conceived as an oxymoron: The literary establishment is still subtly eager to recognize that behind every good man lies a woman.

Not every male writer dubbed a genius must have a muse. But we unquestioningly allow for the existence of the muse and intuitively understand the support the muse offers: the harbor of inspiration,

the unharvested creative complexity that dwells within every human mind. Wharton may have had a room of her own. But her own experience was the only muse she could have.

Were Wharton writing today, she wouldn't be unusual in having that room of her own, given the development of the female workforce since the publication of *The House of Mirth*. By embroidering his critique of Wharton's work with strands of her physical presence, Franzen proves the essence of the beauty myth: that in direct proportion to women getting rooms of their own, our looks become an open target.

In Wharton's time, her detractors referred to her as having "defeminized" herself, the idea being that her knowledge and articulation removed her from the feminine sphere. Franzen wouldn't claim such a thing; he's a modern fellow, right? More important, he doesn't have to. To be unbeautiful — or even to be called such, regardless of its "truth" — is defeminizing and therefore simultaneously legitimizing (she's more masculine, ergo neutral, that way) and denigrating (no matter her talent, she's still not pretty, poor thing). All he has to do is look at the photo on the jacket of a hardcover edition of *Ethan Frome* and his case is made for him.

But let's give Wharton, not Franzen, the last word on the matter. In *The Touchstone,* Wharton introduces

us to Mrs. Aubyn, a successful older novelist who was known less for her beauty and more for her genius. "One felt that if she had been prettier she would have had emotions instead of ideas," Wharton writes. "A genius capable of the acutest generalizations, but curiously undiscerning where her personal susceptibilities were concerned." As we get to know Mrs. Aubyn, it's hard not to imagine how Wharton may have been projecting the dual force of her own experience onto the character — the nonbeauty with undeniable gifts — while giving a prescient foil to critics like Franzen. Yet in the end, perhaps even she was buying into the myth of female beauty and the trap it presents — or perhaps in one line Wharton winds up fingering the very problem at the heart of beauty's role as embodied cultural capital in a society where women had little other capital to trade upon. For Mrs. Aubyn's gifts, it turns out, become irrelevant in the end: "Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair." ■

Interview with

CHARLOTTE SHANE

Prostitute, East Coast

Interview with

Charlotte Shane

Prostitute, Eastern U.S.

Originally published at The Beheld by
Autumn Whitefield-Madrano

Charlotte Shane is the pen name of a prostitute and writer living on the East Coast.

On Looking Closely

The way someone usually becomes dear to you is not because of how they look, and that's true for me and my clients as well. My clients love imperfections — they pore over them. I have a huge scar, and they're always like, "Oh, I love your scar." They'll kiss it. They love it because it's human. You know those articles that are always so hysterical about men watching porn who don't want real women now? Do you *know* any men like that? The men I've spent time with usually genuinely love women. There are some neurotic guys with strict preferences or whatever, but usually they seem delighted to be around a female. They like the way bodies naturally arrange themselves, they like finding out about how our bodies are different from one another. The idea that a man is going to get between your legs and see your labia and be like, *Eww, I'm outta here* — who does that? I'm sure that if I had particularly large labia that I'd have men poring over that.

If you're in a situation like I often am, where I'm the only person they're looking at, by virtue of asking for money in that situation, you're kind of asserting your appeal. Sometimes that's a self-fulfilling prophecy: Most of these men are not coming in thinking, *I can't believe I spent so much, she's obviously not worth that, I'm going to be disappointed.* They're excited; they're happy to be there. Part of

that is context: If I were wearing dirty jeans and had a messy ponytail, those guys are not going to be walking by me on the street going, *Oooh!*

Kelly was my stage name when I was working on Web cam, and when I'd see myself on camera I'd be like, *Kelly looks really hot!* She was another person. I'd have massive amounts of makeup on, because under the lights and on a camera, you have to wear a lot. I'd be wearing a wig. My most astonishing moment was going to the bathroom in the middle of the night and taking off the wig. I looked like a transvestite: massive amounts of melted makeup, hair all flattened out. That was instructive in terms of understanding that whatever the dominant aesthetic is at the time, you can approximate that. Lots of people are going to respond positively, whether or not it's a look being performed by someone I would say is actually beautiful or actually sexy.

On How She Looks

I wanted to say that how I look is irrelevant. But obviously that's not true. If I were considered conventionally ugly that would not be irrelevant. It's more like there's a base level of attractiveness, and if you satisfy that, what you bring beyond that becomes irrelevant. I don't think what I bring to the

table is my looks. Maybe if I were better looking, it would be; I'm attractive enough for my looks not to be a disappointment, but I don't think that anyone would see me for how I looked alone. One of my friends — who has been doing this much longer than I have — is a firm believer that no matter who you are, what you look like, and what your asking price is, there's somebody in the world who will pay it. There's somebody who will find you irresistible.

This will sound terrible, but sometimes when I've met other women who do this work I'm surprised they're not better looking. That sounds like this really judgmental thing — but really it's that in my mind, everyone who would do this is basically a supermodel, and that I'm a visitor to this world. I always feel like a woman who's in this line of work is not *me*: I have stretch marks, I have scars, I could rattle off all the things that are wrong with my face. But when I meet other women who do this type of work I'm always anticipating to be blown out of the water, even though that's not really what this work is about.

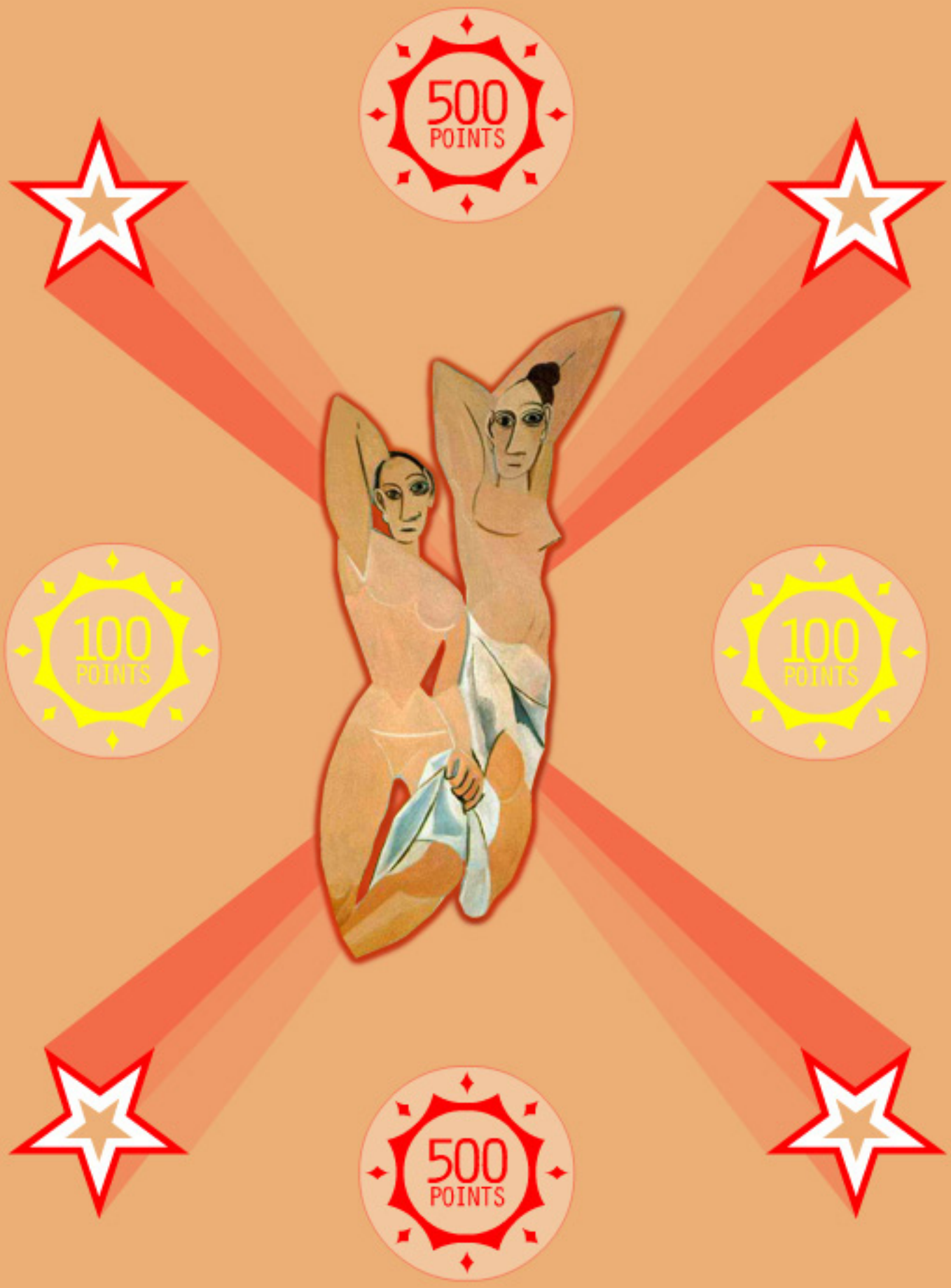
On Quantifying Appeal

In our culture, the majority of messages directed at women say: You're valuable for how you look.

So of course you want to feel like you have value in the world. I think it's natural for most women to say, "I want to know how much I'm worth in this world" — and that means, "I want to know how much my looks are worth." There aren't as many messages that are like, "We need you right now to be curing our diseases and protecting our environment. We need you for defense." I think a lot of men join the military not just for money for college but because they feel like they need to contribute something, and that's where they've been told their value might be. So for women, we're told we contribute by being attractive. How attractive am I? Am I attractive enough? Should I be more? *Could* I be more? There's a desire to quantify your appeal.

I don't like to talk about money because I worry about glamorizing this work — but I charge a lot. It's ridiculous, given that I'm basically a normal person. The pricing isn't particularly logical, and it's not like I did a rigorous calculation of my value. I mean, I've made a list of where I think I'm strong and where I think I'm weak, in terms of giving somebody what they want. Even then looks aren't a part of it — I might say, "I'm too careless with my makeup," but usually it's more like, "I'm not as punctual as I want to be." But I always charged more than the average — not a whole lot more, just a little. You can tell from your

volume of business if you're undercharging; some women don't mind undercharging because they want to have a lot of options, but if I find myself really busy I'm like, "I'm undercharging." That's why I kept jacking up the price — and curiosity, too. Like, would somebody actually pay this for me? Seeing what you can get away with, I think that's really what it is. ■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Model Behavior

by

LAURIE PENNY

Canons of feminine beauty have undergone a neoliberal makeover

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Gender determines the shape of our fantasies. Good little boys are supposed to dream about changing the world, but good little girls are supposed to dream about changing ourselves. From the first time we open a book of fairy tales, we learn that beauty is destiny, and when we grow up, we're told that this destiny is ours to command. If we can consume wisely enough to be beautiful and fashionable, we can transform everything about ourselves.

When beauty becomes mandatory, it ceases to be about fun, about play. Dressing up, playing with gender roles, doing your braids badly in the mirror, and eating half your mother's lipstick in an attempt to get it on your face: Do you remember when that used

to be fun? And do you remember when it stopped? Like any game, the woman game stops being fun when you start playing to win, especially if you've got no choice: Win or be ridiculed, win or become invisible, dismissed — disturbed.

When I was a teenager, for various reasons unimportant to this essay I spent time in an eating-disorders ward. I turned up looking like a 12-year-old-boy, with a shaved head, wearing ties, and the draggest drag I could manage with a waist too small for the children's section, and the first assumption of nearly everyone on the ward was that I must be gay, and that my gayness was clearly the root of all my problems. There was only one thing for it: I would have to be taught to accept my womanhood. And that meant dressing up straight, acting straight, being a proper girl, getting rid of everything about me that was queer and contentious and questioning. If I did this, I would be allowed to go home.

The markers of psychological health among young women at that time were long hair, pretty dresses, shopping, and makeup. The middle-aged, ponderously paunched male psychiatrists who ran the ward were absolutely in agreement on this point. The latest right-on theories about eating disorders posit the diseases as a method that young women use to escape the stresses of modern femininity. Anorexia nervosa, the logic goes, suspends the traumatic

process of becoming a woman, because when you stop eating, when you cut down from 600 to 400 to 200 calories per day, your periods stop, your tits and hips and wobbly bits disappear, and you return to an artificial prepubescent state, complete with mood swings, weird musical obsessions, and the overpowering impulse to shoplift scrunchies from Woolworth's. The reason young women and increasing numbers of young men behave like this, the logic goes, is because they're scared and angry about the gender roles that they are being forced into. The notion that they might have a damn good reason for being scared and angry has not yet occurred to the psychiatric profession.

I needed to get out of that place, and if you wanted to go out the front door and not in a box, you had to play by their rules. You had to smile and eat your meals. You had to be a good girl. That meant no more trousers, no more going out with short hair and no makeup, a boyfriend as soon as possible, and learning to style your hair and do your eyeliner. It meant buying different dresses for different occasions, fitting yourself out to have men look at you with lust, learning manners, learning to dip your head and say "Please" and "Thank you" and "Gosh, I don't know what to think about the war" and "No, one piece of chocolate cake will be more than enough for me."

That was proper femininity, straight femininity, femininity as control, as a great unqueering. It was the makeover to end all makeovers, and my fellow patients helped, lending me clothes and makeup, dressing me up like a cracked-out barbie doll. We all played the game with one another, especially when one of us was allowed to leave the ward, dressing and painting and polishing her nails and doing her hair, sending her off into the world a healthy, normal woman, not the damaged, fragile person who had walked or been wheeled in months before with her heart unskinned.

For modern women in this anxious age of small and hidden gods, the makeover is a ritual of health and devotion and social conformity. It's the central transfigurative myth of modern femininity under capitalism, and it's lucrative. Playing the woman game, the game of artifice and self-annihilation, is serious business. A recent survey by shopping channel QVC claimed that the average British woman spends £2,055 per year, or 11% of the median full-time female salary, on maintaining and updating the way she looks. Men, by contrast, spend just 4% of their salary on their appearance, most of which goes on shaving and the gym. Glossy women's magazines are manuals of self-transformation: Change your body

for summer, change your wardrobe for winter, learn to look at the world through smoky eyes, sparkly eyes, or natural eyes, which require as many paints as the rest. Cosmetic-surgery companies plaster public transport with promises to deliver not just physical changes, but emotional ones like "confidence." Fashion editorials advise us to spend money we don't have on skirt-suits and handbags as "investment pieces"; you're not supposed to dress and style your body simply to please yourself but with one eye on your financial future. That skirt-suit really is an "investment" in a one-woman business whose product is you, only glossier. This is what power means to the modern, emancipated woman: terminal exhaustion and a wardrobe full of expensive disguises.

The paeans to disguise and self-reinvention are everywhere, from reality television shows like *The Swan, How to Look Good Naked,* and the global *Top Model* megafranchise to the world of high art. Even recent films that have dealt with the few iconic instances of female political power in the recent history of Anglo-American government — *Game Change,* the story of Sarah Palin's 2008 vice presidential bid, and *Iron Lady,* the biopic of Margaret Thatcher — have sold themselves as double-makeover stories. The viewer is invited first to boggle at how well-known actresses (Julianne Moore, Meryl Streep) were transformed to fit the title roles, and then at how the women portrayed physically transformed

themselves for power — how they manipulated their audiences with cleverly chosen accessories that were, if we are to believe the screenwriters, more important than their policies. *The Iron Lady*'s vision of Thatcher's lady deals with the legacy of the former prime minister's epochal battle with mining unions in one throwaway sentence, but it does feature a 20-minute makeover sequence which could come straight off a reality show as scripted by Milton Friedman. It is no accident that *The Iron Lady* won the Oscar for Best Makeup.

Before they could change the world, we are told, these conservative women had to change themselves. Thatcher, Palin, lipstick and handbags and welfare cuts and warmongering: This is neoliberal feminism lined in shocking pink. This is what power looks like. You go, girl.

The fantasy is atomizing and addictive. You can be anyone you want to be, it whispers, as long as you know how to play the game. *America's Next Top Model,* now in its 19th series with spin-off shows in many other nations, outfits itself in a horror-frock ensemble of neoliberal feminist cliches. The rules of the game are gruelling: The best contestants are pliant and directable, silently submitting to such

gymnastic humiliations as being photographed topless on a horse or writhing in a giant bowl of Greek salad. You're meant to show some character, but never enough to overwhelm "the product" in the eyes of industry "insiders" with an array of frightening hairstyles. Host Tyra Banks is a constant, terrifying presence, offering various bits of grim advice for young women who want to "be on top" — and what more could a modern girl possibly want? Part fairy godmother, part corporate dominatrix, Banks shows the contestants and the rest of us how pliant female bodies and personalities can best be contorted to please the judges. They learn to "smize" — to smile with the eyes, not the mouth, which is almost impossible to do without looking like they're trying to hold in a fart in a quiet room.

This modern Cindarella story, this identity-quest that is really a quest for many identities, is phrased as spiritual in the most uninspiring manner. Clumsy ritual is broken down into bite-size chunks, reality conforming to the dictats of television, spliced by advertising, replete with incantations, psalmlike call-and-response catchphrases, managed stages of emotional dissolution and reconstruction, and directed at every point by the host — Tyra Banks, Gok Wan, even the effervescent RuPaul of LogoTV's *Drag Race* — who functions in every way as a spiritual guide, as priest, master, teacher. Do you have

what it takes? Can you look good naked? Do you want to be on top?

But the spiritual work of female beauty is also economic work. In a world where most women work, formally or informally, in customer service and public relations — appease your clients, bend and smile for the diners, look good for the office, wear the uniform on the shop floor — manipulation of femininity is a part of every woman's job, from American Apparel sales agents, with rigorous dress codes that extend to the proper degree of eyebrow plucking, to City financiers with their endless "women in business" meetings about how to 'dress for success."

Crucially, the sort of artifice it takes to "be on top" is about more than just seduction. In the neoliberal Cinderella story, the prince is decidedly optional. Rather than attracting a man to rescue her from her life, a woman is supposed to transform herself in order to attract an employer or secure a sponsor. The pre-eminent skill is to learn how best to "represent the brand."

On and off the catwalk, women's sexuality is relevant only where it can be used to encourage consumption. Women are expected to be able to put their sexuality on and off as easily as a size-zero skirt; it skims lightly over the surface of the body but has nothing to do with desire. *Top Model* contestants

who get it wrong are regularly disqualified for acting too sexual — *hoochy* is the favored term. But women who are not models also know just how this goes: You dress for the office, you mold your online and offline persona to reflect well on the company, and even out of office hours, your "performance" is judged as part of the branding of whoever's dollar pays your rent and sends your kids to school.

In the world of women's work, how one looks is as important, if not more important, than what one does: The existential anxiety of identity creation is also economic and social anxiety, because the penalties for nonconformity are so high. Feminine mystique becomes identity itself. The woman who does not possess it, the ugly woman, the overweight woman, the older woman, the woman of color who will not straighten her hair or bleach her skin, is assumed, in a very real sense, to be invisible. She is overlooked on the street, at parties, on dating websites, at job interviews. She is dogged by a feeling of unreality; she does not exist, and if she dares to "be herself," she is stunned to find that, since her social legitimacy is contingent on artifice, that self is not a legitimate social construct. As Shulamith Firestone writes in *The Dialectic of Sex*:

> Women everywhere rush to squeeze into the glass slipper … thus women become more and more look-alike. But at the same time they are expected to express their individuality through

> their physical appearance. Thus they are kept coming and going, at one and the same time trying to express their similarity and their uniqueness … this conflict itself has an important political function. When women begin to look more and more alike, distinguished only by the degree to which they differ from a paper ideal, they can be more easily stereotyped as a class: they look alike, they think alike, and even worse, they are so stupid they believe they are not alike.

This is the intimate edge of neoliberal feminism, the meritocratic fantasy that, in this freest of all possible worlds, any woman can be anything she wants to be, as long as she slices her face and dresses her body to look exactly the same as everyone else.

Female artifice as power is fascinating, and those who play with it in public are rewarded in the highest spheres of cultural life. American photographer Cindy Sherman, whose career retrospective is currently at New York's Museum of Modern Art, has spent more than 30 years taking self-portraits in costumes and prosthetics as every flavor of woman and a fair few men, from society belles to circus clowns to screen starlets. Walking through the galleries, where 10-foot-tall self-portraits of the artist as Joan of Arc and Mother Goose plaster the

walls, one is overwhelmed with the question that has engaged generations of fans and critics: Who is the real Cindy Sherman? Under all that makeup, is she really there? Standing in front of a mirror with a wet-wipe late at night, it's a question that a lot of women have asked ourselves.

Sherman is not just an artist of disguise. A small but significant tranche of her photographs are counter-revelatory attempts to describe what might be underneath all those costumes. The answer is: something horrible. Blown up in bright soft focus are straining, oozing plastic cunts, headless torsos sprouting random genitals, smeared with blood and dirt and semen. They recall the grotesque, hypersexualized doll art of Hans Bellmer, who built, dismembered, reassembled, and photographed life-size plastic pubescents in the 1930s, because everyone needs a hobby.

Sherman's dolls, like Bellmer's, are alien mounds of cleft and heaving faceless flesh, but these are grown: In Sherman's stills, disembodied vulvas covered in wiry hair gobble down oozing sausages; the mask of a cartoon crone sits grinning atop a vulva split like a hotdog; ass cheeks are covered in boils; faces crawl with shit and maggots. This, Sherman tells us, is what's under all those disguises. Did you really want to see?

Of course, the feast of blood and shit is as much a lie as the clown mask and the clogs: Cindy Sherman

is fooling us yet again. It's all made of plastic, glitter, and glue. In reality, we know perfectly well what's under all that makeup. What else would it be but a slender, wealthy Caucasian woman, the base code of contemporary female identity?

Cindy Sherman only appears to be every woman: She has not yet, for example, dressed as a low-paid, overweight woman of color from the Bronx. In fact, the less you look like a young, slim, rich white woman, the less the art of disguise is likely to work for you. The importance of female-identity-as-commodity is that underneath all these disguises, underneath endless palettes of makeup and shades of lip gloss, women should all be as close as possible to exactly the same, with only the appearance of difference. The most successful models, on and off the *Top Model* franchise, are also the most generic: In order to be every woman, you must first learn to be any woman, go be nobody, to be homogeneous. The perfect woman is a blank slate: What could be more beautiful?

If a woman is to be the mistress of disguise, and she surely needs to be to thrive in a world where artifice is key to female power, there should really be nothing at all under the mask — and certainly nothing that deviates from the accepted stereotype. To play the woman game and win, you have to erase everything about yourself that doesn't fit the shop model. Straighten your hair, bleach your skin, starve

away those love handles. You can buy a Barbie with red, black, or blonde hair, but not thick body hair. Perfect dolls come in standard sizes and colors, and best thing about a perfect doll is that you can put her in back in her box and forget about her whenever you choose.

Barbies are all cast in the same plastic mold, the gentle quirks of fashion or temporary occupation merely talking points encouraging you to buy whatever it she's selling. That's how flesh-and-blood women should behave, too. To play the woman game well and win, you must be able to exchange identities as easily as you might cast off last winter's peacoat and slip into a see-through tank top. Underneath it all, women are all the same — aren't we, girls?

A woman's genitals, crucially, are invisible unless you point your camera directly in between her legs — ideally she should have nothing but a neat, tight pink slot, in the fashion first popularized by adult films. Nothing should get in the way of a decent shot of a dick going into a hole. Just as in order to be a successful woman, she must first erase her history, personality and class, in order to perform female sexuality properly, she must first become a symbolic castrate, as smooth and tight as a little girl. If she has hidden depths, nobody really wants to know about them.

The most successful female artists of our time have perfected the work of chameleon femininity. They are Cinderellas with a new dress for every ball, exchanging personae like lesser mortals change clothes. Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, Dita Von Teese, and — almost definitively — Lady Gaga, the great fierce fashion ship that launched a thousand faces, whose music has become almost secondary to her wardrobe of identities: the matinee idol, the robot, the bubblegum Harajuku pop princess, the speeded-out Italian-American boyfriend, Joe Calderone, who performed "instead" of Gaga at the 2011 MTV awards, incidentally and mercifully disturbing Justin Bieber for life. Sarah Nicole Prickett wrote recently in the *Globe and Mail* that:

> So much of what is deemed "women's art" is really about "women's work," which involves not only the work we do, but the work we do to get the work...In art, in pop music, in Hollywood, to men belong the fixed image; to women belong images based on our fixations. Now the images change faster. Identities multiply. If women are winning the charts and the Christie's auctions, not enough but increasingly, it's perhaps because they have always been more things at once, worn more faces, survived like chameleons. The winning has been so far from easy, but then, they were prepared. For every screen they had a mask, and under that mask, another mask."

Minaj-Beyoncé-VonTeese-Madonna-Gaga. None of these women artists, significantly, work under the names they were born with. Writing that down tugs a little at the hot, private place under the ribs because, of course, neither do I; last week, I had coffee with three highly successful women, an artist, a journalist, and an author and fashion blogger, and we all looked at each other askance when we realized that all of us had changed our names for work. And we love our work. It is a part of who we are, and if we have changed ourselves to achieve the freedom to create, that does not make our work somehow less true, less our own.

It seems oddly Protestant to argue, as some feminists do, that somewhere under all that artifice are "real women," that one can peel away the layers of clothing and makeup and weave and hair and skin and silicone and dig out a "genuine" person, untouched by culture and context. Smart girls know that "real beauty" is just a tag line to sell moisturizer. Walk in high heels for long enough and the bones in your feet really do change shape. Spend enough time living as an efficient office worker, an obedient wife, a high-street fashion knockout and eventually the contours of your personality do change.

The idea of the self as something permanent, immutable, seems rather old-fashioned when anyone with an Internet connection can create a personal brand that works differently across multiple platforms, with different backdrops, favorite quotes and family snapshots, just as you might prepare one face to meet your friends and another to meet your father-in-law.

Online or offline, this Prufrockian trick is one to which women are more accustomed than men, having been raised to the task since the very first time an adult caught us in ribbons, in feathers, in our mother's lipstick and said, "Smile for the camera." The 14-year-old schoolgirls who are ordered to dress in uniform knee skirts and bobby socks in the daytime know perfectly well what they are doing when they post pictures of themselves in underwear taken from above, pulling that face that works so well at a 45-degree angle.

We can't perfectly control our online selves any more than we can control the contours of our flesh: bodies, like data, are leaky. Out of the mess of bodies and blood and bones and pixels and dreams and books and hopes we create this mess of reality we call a self, we make it and remake it. Each human being is a palimpsest of possible faces, of personas, and none of us were "born this way."

What makes the difference between servitude and self-actualization? For women, the ultimate signal of wealth and status is total self-annihilation. The power of embodiment is not ours; we can be any woman, and we are rewarded for being every woman, but we must never be ourselves. For a man, the richer and more respected he becomes, the more he can indulge his particular tastes, can let his mask slip, can run to fat, can turn up at the office in casual clothes.

That's not quite true, though, is it? There are male-bodied people for whom lipstick and heels have power, although the power arrives slantwise, through the cracks in conformity. Yes, I'm talking about drag. Really, I've been talking about drag since we began, but there's drag that erases identity and then there's drag that celebrates it, enhances it, makes it monstrous and marvelous all at once. Femininity does not just have to be a disguise — in a culture that still loathes and fears women and queers, it can also be a weapon. Reality television might just have the solution.

"May the best woman win." That's the tag line of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* now in its fourth and most successful season — a manic send-up of everything stern and joyless about makeover-ritual television. It is self-consciously modelled on *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model,* and features RuPaul doing Tyra Banks drag better than Tyra Banks does

Tyra Banks in drag. The contestants come from the drag underground in all its rich, subversive history: They are all ages, all races, many of them people of color, many from inner-city backgrounds, some of them former felons. They are uninterested in escaping their class backgrounds; the emphasis is on creativity, pantomimery and fun. Participating, not winning, is the point. The show has become the super bowl for a queer America reminding itself that there was once a gay-rights movement that was not just about middle-class white soldiers and their middle-class white weddings, but about color and defiance and danger.

In an interview for *Curve* magazine, RuPaul tells us that drag is "dangerous because it, throughout the ages, has reminded our culture that we are not who we think we are … This is just a temporary package that you've put together on this planet and it's not to be taken seriously. You're supposed to have fun with it." In a world where the makeover is a collective ritual and Tyra Banks and Gok Wan are its priests, RuPaul is the heretic preacher, reading culture back to itself in a funny voice.

All performed femininity — like all performed masculinity — is a drag race. Cinderella was a drag queen. Margaret Thatcher was a drag queen. Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj and most especially Lady Gaga are drag queens, and doing drag well and self-consciously is

always an exercise in queering, no matter what you've got between your legs. That kind of drag is what the beauty-industrial complex of advertising, magazines, makeover shows, and music videos are terrified by, and yes, it is queer, and yes, it is feminist.

Drag queens of all genders know that performing femininity is always contingent, always within the context of a world where beauty means disguise, means conformity and misogyny and racism and self-erasure — but that one can always take those tropes and remake them joyfully, with choreography and courage and a handful of glitter. The woman game doesn't have to be played by the rules. It doesn't have to be played to win or to please your partner or to keep your job. It doesn't have to be played at all, but if you play with a wink in your eye and some sequins up your sleeve, you can still spoil the game a little for the bigots. And that's my idea of a good time. ■

Interview with

KELLI DUNHAM

Comic, New York City

Interview with

Kelli Dunham

Comic, New York City

Originally published at The Beheld by
Autumn Whitefield-Madrano

Kelli Dunham is a comic, author, and queer organizer

On Desirability and Handsomeness

After my mom saw me perform for the first time in a long while, she said, "So, Kelli, I have a question. In your subculture, are you considered … desirable?" I didn't know she knew what a subculture was! She was genuinely confused. But I think she'd noticed the kind of [feminine-presenting] girlfriends I'd had over the years, and I think it had never occurred to her that how I look actually has some social currency in "my subculture." So I said, "Yeah, Mom, actually I am considered desirable in my subculture." And she said, "Oh! Oh. *Oh*."

People have an assumption that since femininity must be the default of beauty, that to not be what's considered feminine must be ugly. So when she was presented with new information by seeing me interact with people, perhaps by observing sexual agency, she realized, "Wow, it seems like my daughter is desirable in some way." I think when she heard me say that, yes, I actually am attractive to others of my species, then all the things she'd been observing kind of clicked.

I don't really identify with the term *beauty*. But Kate Bornstein was the first person to call me *handsome*. I had a very short buzz cut at that time, and she rubbed my head and said, "Oh, you're just such a handsome boi." And I remember being shocked — in addition to it being Kate Bornstein saying it, it just made me feel like … Wow, I'm *handsome*. That was

very life-affirming. I had a lot of good experiences growing up focused on what I could do, but as far as, *Hmm, I'm really enjoying looking at you* — that hadn't really been the kind of experience I'd had. So I felt like, Okay, if Kate Bornstein finds me handsome, I bet there are other people who do. As it turns out, I *am* desirable in my subculture.

As I've become comfortable in my gender identity, I've become okay with the word *beauty*, but it was challenging to me before — in part because it was always used as a measuring stick, as in, "You could be really pretty if you _____." I was a fat kid, and growing up as a fat kid people would compliment your face, the whole "Oh, you have such a pretty face" thing. But as a fat kid, you don't want to hear anything about your face, because it's a backhanded compliment. It's possible now that there are all sorts of ways that people interact with me because I've got these sort of delicate features. If I was wearing what I'm wearing now — a sweatshirt that's seven years old, completely inappropriate shorts, old tennis shoes — but had irregular or asymmetrical features, maybe people would be interacting with me differently. I wouldn't really know, though. That's what privilege is, when you have something you don't recognize.

On Barbershops

A new haircut is a butch accessory. I have to go to a barbershop to get my hair cut, and trying to get it short enough is always an ordeal. I usually go for a 1 or a 2 on the clippers, but I used to say I'd like a 0 when I was in suburban areas, because *then* they'd actually use a 1 or a 2. They're scared that they're going to cut off your hair and you're going to be like, "Ahhh! It's too short!" They think that a woman wouldn't really know the barbershop vocabulary, even though I'd memorized it.

Going with another butch to the barbershop is definitely less intimidating than going by yourself. And it's always a different experience if you pass, if the person thinks you're a guy or a kid. I look for something that doesn't say "Barbershop for men" or something like that — some places will actually have that. If I see both young and old guys in there, that's a clue, and if I see a mixture of straight and gay guys working there, that's another. Once I found that I could navigate that stuff myself and develop the skills to judge a barbershop from the outside, and once people could see that I know the vocabulary, that was satisfying. It feels like a rite of passage, and it's such a simple thing. Your boyfriend probably doesn't come home and tell you, "Wow, I finally went to the barber, and it was awesome!"

On Butch Privilege

A friend of mine who transitioned said, "Wow, being a fat man is so much easier than being a fat woman." There are ways in which there's a protective space formed around masculinity. I can't even remember the last time someone tried to engage me in diet talk. Like in that split second of someone being, "Hey, let's talk about Atkins!" they look at me and are like, "Well, maybe she'd rather talk about baseball …" Which is a toss-up. I don't really like to talk about baseball either. Butch women have some masculine privilege. I mean, we're also liable to get beat up or knifed on the street, but there is some masculine privilege.

With comedy, I might have run into more appearance-related issues if I'd stayed in mainstream comedy. When I get onstage in mainstream clubs, people don't know what gender I am. I almost always have to address it up-front; they laugh throughout the gender stuff, but I think that's because I'm so deliberately addressing it. If I just got up and said, "Hey, I'm gonna tell some jokes about my cat! Men and women are so different! Say, what's up with hats?" perhaps there would be more resistance to it. I do think there's pressure on female comics to talk in a self-deprecating way about their bodies, but because I look the way I look it's different for me. I'm addressing it directly, and some people will say, "Oh, that's a great shtick you have." I'm thinking, *This is a shtick*? ■

Laurel Nakadate, *Lucky Tiger,* 2009

You Know You're the Prettiest Girl

by

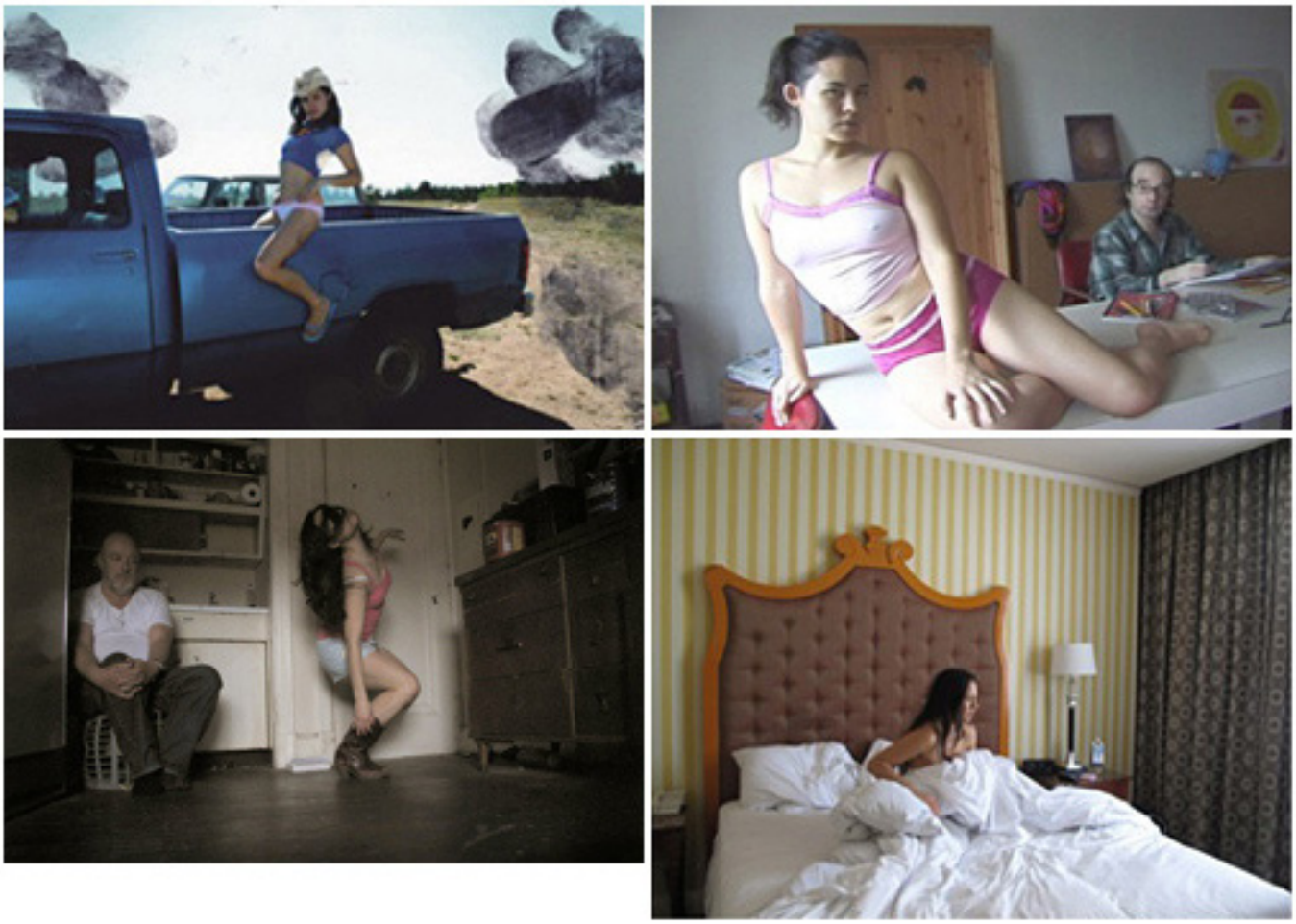
ROB HORNING

Laurel Nakadate's work makes viewers uncomfortably aware of what attention costs. Is it art or emotional terrorism?

The temptation to dismiss multimedia artist Laurel Nakadate as a wallowing narcissist, a sub-*Jackass*-level prankster, or an emotional terrorist is strong. She appears as all those things in the retrospective of her work at P.S. 1, inviting the audience's contempt as well as their lascivious stares. Many of the pieces hinge on her offering her lithe, nubile body for visual consumption: There she is, doing an ersatz pole dance on the front porch of the *American Gothic* house; there she is, naked and crying in a series of photographs in which she pretended to be sad everyday for a year; there she is alone, bucking and gyrating with an imaginary partner in a Japanese love hotel.

But the point of all this self-exploitation may be to make us sick of looking at her. In a 2006 interview with *The Believer*, Nakadate claimed her work, in part, was about "the ridiculousness of showing up anywhere and thinking anyone will give you attention." It's ridiculous because attention, in the world she delineates, always costs something. The retrospective suggests what her cumulative strategy has been for translating this idea into visceral feeling: She seems to want to exhaust us with a series of conniving demands for attention that, to be aesthetically effective, must exceed what we're already willing to devote when we go to see art. Only then will we be pushed into acknowledging the place Nakadate seems to want to reach, where the integrity of how you feel about yourself, the possibility of recognizing the sincerity of your own emotions, is sacrificed to the need to be looked at — and not even necessarily with approval. It comes slowly into focus that one is never more lonely than when bathed in attention and that to escape loneliness would require not more attention but a willful annihilation. Her search for this place, for the identity-dissolving end point of attention seeking, is what makes her work so disturbing.

Nakadate is known mainly for her videos that have her cavorting on camera with dumpy male co-stars, quintessential lonely schlumps, typical and eternal strangers who agree to let her film them in their



Laurel Nakadate

Lucky Tiger, 2009

Exorcism, 2009

Lessons 1-10, 2001

365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears, 2011

houses. These are men who appear to have made peace with obscurity, whose appetite for social recognition has dwindled to the vanishing point — the sort of men so ubiquitous yet so rarely represented in media that their appearances in these videos seem uncanny. Nakadate fosters a fragile, potentially volatile connection with them, trusting that resignation, passivity, and impenetrable solitude constitute the natural horizons of their existence, no matter how sexually confrontational she becomes with them. In the videos, she often seems blatantly patronizing, projecting the notion that she's graciously agreed to bring some beauty and creativity into these men's cramped little existences.

Oops!, one of the earliest pieces in the show, establishes many of Nakadate's recurring ideas. In three separate videos that run concurrently, Nakadate performs the music-video choreography from Britney Spears's "Oops! I Did It Again" — a faux-coy song about "accidental" seduction ("Oops, I played with your heart") that turns on the phrase "I'm not that innocent" — in the kitchen or living room of a middle-aged sad sack while the song plays on a boom box (a Hello Kitty boom box, she takes care to stipulate on the wall card). In each video, the man is onscreen with her: One of them stands grimly still and stares ahead; the other two try to improvise and join in with her dancing while she performs her scripted moves undeterred. As the song drones on,

she is present but wholly inaccessible, smiling at the camera and ensconced in the ritual, while the men are gulled by the seductive, improbable promise of someone young and beautiful descending into the muted squalor of their presumably lonely and long-since-sexless lives.

We are confronted with evidence of a certain kind of youthful femininity's power, and the particular sort of man it tends to have power over. Using the sort of ruse that brought Britney fame necessarily calls forth objects suitable to its dominion, transforming men into the sort of sketchy, leering creeps it requires to be effective. Another of Nakadate's video pieces, *I Want to Be the One Who Walks in the Sun*, pushes this logic further, juxtaposing scenes of her flirting with men who fit this stereotype with one in which a dog repeatedly humps her leg as she dances around in French-maid lingerie.

Capitalizing on that power to make men into sexually frustrated beasts ultimately means trapping oneself in a world that includes only their sort — a realm of existential abandonment that Nakadate repeatedly evokes in her work with images of canopies at open-all-night gas stations, of efficiently bland motel rooms, deserted city streets, tractor-trailer parking lots, the haunted glow of strings of streetlights at night. Viewed from outside, these locales are poignantly evocative, even seductive; like all the

networks that infiltrate and structure our everyday life, they promise to administer to our solipsism and cater to our convenience. But at the same time, they make up a vast infrastructure of loneliness and disconnection. When you are in such environments, these feelings are inescapable, and trying to reach out to others can only seem absurdly out of character, if not ominously disruptive.

By putting herself in these environments, by selecting this type of man as her muse, Nakadate posits an equivalence between herself and them that seems cruel because it is so unlikely, so obviously belied by the testimony before our eyes. The stark emotional reality of their lives seems self-evident, and Nakadate is pushing to uncover their secret, how they've managed to live with anonymity, in a truce with loneliness. Her beauty and vivacity seem to disqualify her from real feelings of loneliness and reconciliation with them, no matter how much time she spends in the netherworld of male mediocrity, or no matter how hard she feigns sadness for her photographs.

The most recent work in the show, the photo series *365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears*, is a tableaux of sexualized sadness staged to document her effort to "deliberately take part in sadness each day." The possibility of spontaneous feeling is banished from the scene in advance, a concession to the inescapable truth about pointing a camera at yourself. Instead

Nakadate presents a reliquary of sadness in stylized, traditional poses borrowed from art history and redeployed in bathrooms, motel rooms, and Gregory Crewdson-ish setups. Her confidence that this contrived, commodified emotion will find its patrons provides the genuine sadness that underlies the fake.

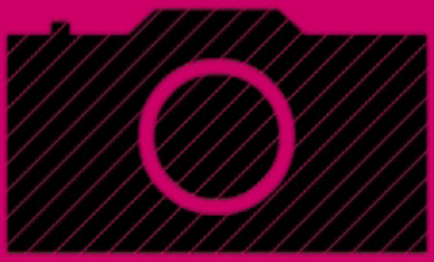
In Nakadate's work, art ceases to be an alibi for looking. Instead, it's a pretense for unleashing voyeurism and exhibitionism, for opening negotiations over the more primal matter of who's paying attention to whom and what it should cost. This is most obvious in a video piece called *Lessons 1-10,* which purports to be a montage of scenes from a series of Sundays Nakadate spent posing for a slovenly balding man who advertised for an artist's model on Craigslist. As Patsy Cline sings "You Belong to Me" (ironic deployment of melodramatic schmaltz is another of her hallmarks), Nakadate stares back at us through the camera while the artist tries to capture her on his sketch pad. Her deadpan expression as she sprawls topless on a table or dons kitsch Geisha gear conveys a knowing scorn; as we watch, we partake in the artist's rationalization. There's no way to look without mirroring his prurient gaze. This doubling recruits the audience as unwilling co-conspirators. In Nakadate's world, increasingly our world, there are only exhibitionists and voyeurs. No other points of contact exist.

Laurel Nakadate, *Beg For Your Life,* 2006

Given such a world, both the desperate attention seeker and the lonely attention giver are consigned to read from the same dismal script that emerges from their symbiosis. *Beautiful Places to Hide a Body or Make Art (Romance)* dramatizes this explicitly. In this piece, Nakadate feeds lurid lines about herself to a croaking old man, who dutifully repeats them over footage of Hollywood alleys and apartment complexes. It feels like an effort to assert mastery over an obscurely traumatic event through compulsive repetition. Most of the echoed lines are leering commands — "Let me look at you," "Show me your panties," etc. — but the most insistent and threatening of them is a question: "You know you're pretty, right?" The statement comes up again in *Good Morning Sunshine*, a sequence of three films in which Nakadate stages pervert home invasions, issuing similar orders to a silent and demurely obedient teenage girl in her bedroom. She directs each girl to take off items of clothing while zooming in on their flesh, simulating a stereotypical male gaze. "You know you're the prettiest girl, right?" But what she really seems to be asking is, What does it mean to agree to that when it no longer matters who is asking? Is that indiscriminateness how one comes to deserve attention? The girls offer no resistance, show no sign of wanting some other kind of recognition. They patiently abide their objectification as if it were utterly beside the point. Their bodies are present, but the attention has sent them elsewhere. ■

Interview with

SHERRY MILLS



Artist, New York City

Interview with

Sherry Mills

Artist, New York City

Originally published at The Beheld by
Autumn Whitefield-Madrano

Sherry Mills is an artist specializing in large-scale photography and miniature box art

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On Beauty Being Closer Than You Think

I remember being on the subway after 9/11, and the tone was severe depression and fear. And suddenly this popped through: We have this common ground in the very streets of New York. We share this ground; we have these beautiful, normally overlooked abstract images on our streets, in this shared public space. In a way it's kind of like beauty being in the eye of the beholder, but it's really more that we're surrounded by beauty if you're looking for it. A colleague of mine then said, "Beauty is closer than you think," and I was like — that's it! Beauty is constantly available to us — the experience of beauty can always be there, because it's just a matter of our perception.

Green Straw

the same time, I feel guided to work where there's grit or grim things that typically wouldn't be considered beautiful. You know how sometimes you see straws on the sidewalk, where there's a milkshake splatter? Of course you think, *Eww, that's gross, someone should clean that up*. But you can also see it as a cylinder of green with this spray of white, and it becomes this beautiful arrangement. The composition sets you free, not the content.

It might be more difficult to drive some sense of beauty toward that kind of thing, but that's what I like to photograph. I have a great appreciation of classical beauty — it definitely guides us to find beauty in other territories. And that's the beauty we need to find: Most of us are living with those other territories much more than we live with those classical forms of beauty. If you evaluate beauty differently, that way of seeing becomes more of a habit.

There's also this odd perspective when we look at ourselves. We really only see our bodies from this one perspective, when we're just looking down at ourselves so everything is out of proportion to how we actually appear. Even if we look in the mirror, we can't really be sure of what we're seeing. I'll look at my body sometimes and not know how to look at it. Like, am I overweight? Am I not? Am I small? Am I average? I really don't know.

On Hiding and Self-Expression

In seasons that require a coat, I feel more comfortable. It's almost like I don't want to be seen — I guess I'm like a bear! I want to be able to go out into the world and not really attract much attention. But then people say that's a contradiction because of the clothes I wear — tons of layers, lots of color, a lot of patterns worn together, flowing things. It *does* at-

Outfit With Apron

tract attention. So when the weather calls for a long coat, everything can go under cover. I can be totally self-expressive, yet no one really knows what's going on until I choose to show it. I don't want a lot of energy heading my way necessarily. Also, a coat contains me: I wear a lot of flowy weird things, and in the wind it's annoying, so I like to be able to pull it in. I don't want to be mentally distracted by my clothes. It's the same reason I can't wear heels: I can't be present when I'm focused on my physical self.

It's a similar thing with my glasses. I've tried many times to get rid of these frames. I felt like I needed to purge them, like I wanted my face to be forward to the world and not these distinctive glasses. I'm hiding behind these. I've gone out to try to find new frames, and at one point I did get these really crazy red frames with rhinestones. But I went back to my old black ones. Essentially it was like trading my face.

On Feminine Branding in the Art World

I don't necessarily think of myself as being in the art world; I'm finding my own way to navigate things, which I think everyone is doing now because a lot of the traditional systems aren't working. But it does still feel a little bit like a man's world. I don't feel like a victim, but I do want to be taken seri-

ously. I was happy to hear that people didn't just see my box work as fluffy and whimsical without depth — I get concerned that I come off that way in every way, because I'm a playful person. I think people might see me as light, playful, emotional, nonintellectual — kind of dancing around but not focused enough. All these things are probably true in a way, but they're also things that are associated with being a woman. It's easy to get scattered with doing too many projects in order to sort of prove my seriousness.

Still from *Mao over Mao*

It seems like women have a lot of hats going all the time. My partner is this competent, amazing, very focused man who I learn from and appreciate so much, and it's almost like I want that, but I operate from a different place. I think when I started dressing in my current style, I was looking to express something about myself — something more solid, even though the look I have might be seen as crazy sometimes! But I learned to be comfortable enough to break the rules and be okay with funny stares. It was like a strengthening technique, consciously or unconsciously. It was difficult to present myself like that with consistency in public, yet I felt it was true to myself. Over time it became easier, and the idea of self-expression stopped being so much of an effort — I was just being me, coming out of myself.

So now I have this look and people will say that they're inspired by it, and I realize that in some ways, my brand is my presentation. It becomes important. It's one of the elements of presenting myself — my photography, the video, a documentary, my blog, and the outfits. It's kind of like giving a snippet of what my work is about. It's all about alternate perspectives. ■

Visit www.SherryMills.com to learn more.

(HIS FACE OVER + OVER)

Haute Coiffure

by

ITORO UDOKO

As much as his art or his dress, Jean-Michel Basquiat's hair represents and inflection point for contemporary art

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Jean-Michel Basquiat had a professional career that lasted just nine years, but in that time he managed to make himself one of the most significant painters of the 20th century and an enduring cultural icon. Basquiat was a bundle of contradictions; he made art from the streets, yet his work appeared in galleries throughout the U.S. and Europe. He was among the first black artists to be internationally acclaimed but was completely unschooled and nontraditional in his methods.

The painter epitomized cool with his confident and nonchalant aura, his eccentric wardrobe, and of course, his hair. Basquiat's hair went through

BACK OF
THE
NECK

many different stages throughout his professional career, but aside from the time he spent as SAMO (immediately upon moving to New York, see above), all his hairstyles follow more or less the same silhouette: the faux dreadlock that somehow suspends itself straight up in the air.

Twenty-three years after his death, Basquiat remains culturally salient, not only for his art but for his persona and visual aesthetic. After all, he is the guy who painted in Armani suits. These days, his visual legacy may be as important as his contributions to fine art. So much of Basquiat's involvement with the art world is framed within the context of his public reception. He was their "noble savage" — the untrained, uncouth native artist, an urban black male who approached art intuitively, going against the Western canons and traditions. This relation appears in his rough-and-ready approach to painting, his juxtaposition of African bushmen art with text from *Gray's Anatomy*, and his graffiti-centric themes and painting style. But the image most readily available for dissection by the mainstream was his personal aesthetic. To the world, his art was prefaced by his style, a black man with the hair and wardrobe of a savage, engaging in the world of the artistic elite.

With this in mind, it makes sense that Basquiat's aesthetic seems to be shaping the grooming choices of the U.S.'s artsy, urban black males. Peer at the

PAY FOR SOUP
BUILD A FORT

domes of some of the most recognizable young men in today's street-style scene: Joshua Kissi of Street Etiquette. Jean Lebrun and Eaddy from the Jersey Stree Klan. Kadeem Johnson of KJohnlaSoul. That steezy model from Très Bien. And those are just the guys I know about. The cutting edge of contemporary black male style still plays with variations on what Basquiat sported for so many years.

All the aforementioned "new school" models, bloggers, and photographers occupy the ironic context of the refined black man, a careful juxtaposition of intellect with traditional "savage" themes of Africanism and urbanism. As both the first black artist welcomed into the fine-art world and the one who famously never had to sell out in order to do so, Basquiat appeals to a new generation looking to be acknowledged without having to be palatable. The fashion of the aughts has been very 1980s-reference heavy, and for black men there's one figure from the '80s art world who stands apart as worthy of aspiration and emulation.

With his influence on urban style, Afrocentric thought (black pride, racial consciousness, social awareness, etc), hip hop, and graffiti, Basquiat set the culture that the Native Tongues would inherit. He died in 1988, right as the Tongues' most prominent group, A Tribe Called Quest, debuted. They were the next in line of the same cultural

SET THAT ON FIRE.

lineage that Basquiat's work was born of, helping spread the appeal of Afrocentric imagery in both the mainstream and within the circles of the artists that would inherit their place in black culture. Black artists and intellectuals in contemporary high art and fashion are continuing the same conversation. But as Q-Tip says in his post-Tribe solo work: "Don't you ever forget who put the pep in your step / We made it cool to wear medallions and say hotep."

By now, the trope of the intelligent and cultured black man has recurred enough that today's black creatives can avoid a lot of the obstacles Basquiat faced. Creatively and intellectually driven in part by the African-American experience, today's black artists focus on forging a culture that won't allow their heritage to be burned off by the heat of growing mainstream acceptance. The result is dreadlocks and similar hair, coupled with symbols of intellectualism and cultural refinement. It's a spectacle the industry is embracing too. There's still an art-world awe surrounding anyone who is able to break the stereotypes concerning black intelligence and the merit of black art without losing too much of the stereotypical blackness that traditionally symbolized wildness and a lack of refinement. Dreadlocks, tribal prints, and tribal beads coupled with tailored chinos and loafers are the contemporary equivalent of African graffiti art lining the walls of an European art gallery. They're

Clockwise from top left:

1. Jean Lebrun and Kadeem Johnson (from The Aveder Outfit)
2. Michael dos Santos of An Educated Guess
3. Abdul Abasi of Nepenthes modeling for Partk & Bond
4. Très Bien's proprietor of steeze

both the brash play of traditionally irreconcilable worlds, increasingly common in modern culture, thanks to those who pushed barriers in the past.

Perhaps it's the continued tension and awe surrounding this unapologetic Afrocentrism that sustains its commercial viability. Some of the most avant-garde cultural conversations in fashion and art can only exist within the context of this juxtaposition. Maybe the moment all of this stops being so paradoxical or novel, much of the commercial and mainstream appeal will go with it. Basquiat's demise was due in part to the loss of his novelty within the high-art elite. It stands to reason that as cultural tones and societal values evolve over time, the manner in which blatant Afrocentric art and fashion is perceived will have to adapt with it. This productive tension will continue giving birth to new styles, new movements, and new cultural conversations. ■

Interview with

SISTER NANCY RUTH

Hudson Valley, New York

Interview with

Sister Nancy Ruth

Hudson Valley, New York

Originally published at The Beheld by
Autumn Whitefield-Madrano

Sister Nancy Ruth is a life-professed Anglican nun
with the Order of St. Andrew

On Femininity

I don't think being a nun requires you to be unfeminine. I feel very feminine in my habit. I generally don't dress for anyone but myself, so the idea of going out and trying to impress somebody else through what I wear just isn't going to happen. Me in a strapless evening gown was never going to happen, whether I was a nun or not. It's not because I don't ever feel girly or sexy, but that form of sexiness isn't going to be who I am.

I'm not sure if I've ever consciously tried to feel sexy. I've experimented a bit more now that I've lost some weight; I've experimented with showing a little skin. Like, I have a dress that shows more cleavage than I've ever shown. But I found the right undergarment for support, and I found the right necklace, one that sort of covers a lot of the area. The outfit isn't necessarily revealing, but the effect is more intentional than anything I've worn before. I've survived! People have liked the look. Makeup depends. Fingernail polish should be clear or very pale when you're in habit. Most of the sisters wear at least foundation. I normally wear eyeshadow, eyeliner, and mascara, but in habit I don't wear any makeup.

Still, I don't consider myself particularly feminine, at least not that classic Southern belle kind of feminine. But as a nun, the first thing people see is that I am a woman. Being a nun is a very traditional female role,

and it's an empowering role. People tend to think of nuns as being disempowered, but they're not, not in my church. About the only thing I can't do that a priest can is the actual mass, the different unctions. Women can be ordained in the Episcopal Church, but I was called to be a nun; I'm not called to be a priest. In college, a professor put the words "I am" on the board and had us finish that sentence three times as a way of defining ourselves. I don't remember what I put then, but the answer now would be: *I am a nun, I am a woman. I am an Anglican* would probably be the third one.

On Wearing the Habit

The first time I put on the habit, it was like stepping into my own skin. When I put on the habit, it's like putting on a hug. It almost feels like I'm physically being held by God at those times, more so than when I'm in my street clothes. I used to joke that I became a nun so I didn't have to make a choice about what to wear. And there are times when I'd really just rather live in the habit. One of the things I love when we get together as an order is that for four days, that's all I wear. It's wonderful because we know each other's personality more than we know each other's looks. There are some sisters I've never seen out of habit.

So you have to look beyond the looks; you have to know the person.

The habit has left me feeling not particularly self-conscious about my body. I've been comfortable with myself for a fairly long time, but I've lost 80 pounds since 2009, mostly for health reasons, and it's a nice feeling to look at old pictures of myself and see the difference. I tend to hide my body a lot, and you could say that maybe being in the habit does that as well, but it's also like being the only pink bead in a bowl full of black beads. You stand out. So I don't really think of it as hiding my body. When I started wearing the habit, I stopped being the fat lady. Instead I became the nun. It frees you up from a lot of society's expectations; you're exempt as a nun. You don't have to be a part of a couple; you don't have to be that certain societally defined form of sexually attractive. Even though I stand out, I also feel less conspicuous. As a nun it's not quite as uncomfortable to be alone.

On Modesty

Modesty is a Christian belief, in part because Christianity is about loving God and loving others as you love yourself. There might be some religious rules about not wearing makeup, keeping your head covered, not wearing jewelry — but that has more to do

with showing off and being proud. I cover my head because it's part of the habit, sure. But it also takes away from people looking at me as a sexual person. When I'm wearing my habit, I'm advertising that I'm a nun — I'm advertising that I'm not really supposed to be seen as a sexual person. I'm supposed to be seen as more of a religious person.

I consider myself married to God. I'm not wearing my wedding ring today; the ring has gotten too big, and my last ring guard fell off this morning and I can't find it. But I've never really thought about dressing for God, because God knows your heart. God knows me naked. He knows me naked physically and emotionally and spiritually. When people say to take pride in yourself, what I take from that is that God created you as you are, and he loves you as you are. Does that mean you shouldn't get better? God loved me when I was 265 pounds, and he doesn't love me better now that I weigh less. My love for God helped me say, "God made something really good and I'm screwing it up"; I wasn't treating my body well. But when you're talking about appearance, there's not really any changes I would make for God. I dress in habit, okay. But living as he would want me to live — showing love to others, being humble, treating others with love and acceptance and patience even when it's hard — I guess that's how I dress for God. ■

ENEMY TO REAR

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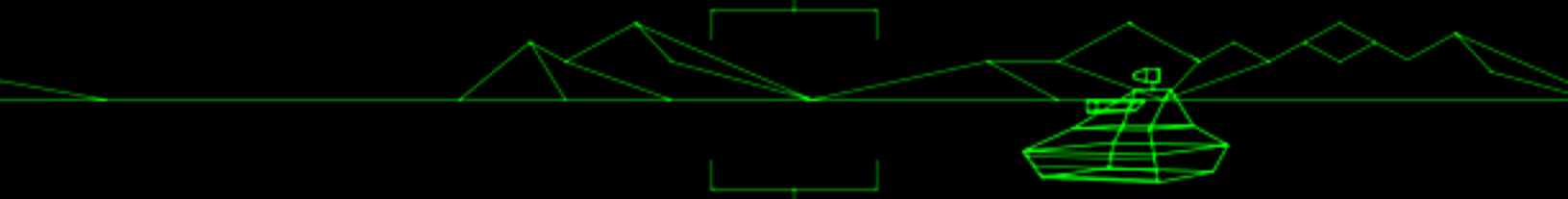

Desiring Machines

By

RAHEL AIMA

The various tendencies subsumed under the New Aesthetic label point to a future in which the objects of our affection develop affection for us

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Have you seen the New Aesthetic? Everyone in the Twittersphere was talking about it. Depending on whom you ask, it was a "shareable concept," (James Bridle) a "theory object," (Bruce Sterling) and a "weird, hot, movement" (Ian Bogost). Or simply "things James Bridle posts to his Tumblr," as Bogost quips — and to which we might add, "which got really popular really fast and I wish I knew what it actually *was*." Bridle's Tumblr became a SXSW talk in March 2012. And then a week later, Bruce Sterling wrote a 5,000-word opus on the New Aesthetic for *Wired*. As if to a younger sibling, praising and


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cautioning in equal measures, he contextualized the New Aesthetic as not just a Tumblred accumulation but the art movement 21st century creatives had desperately been waiting for. The essay was a flash point, prompting a flood of responses. What better empyrean spark than the convergence of SXSW and, as he describes himself on his Twitter bio, "one of the better known Bruce Sterlings"?

The New Aesthetic Tumblr was around for about a year. Its images, videos, and quotes were summarily collected, attributed, and uploaded with little by way of commentary. Drones, mapping, mirror worlds, machine vision, surveillance infrastructure, conspicuous augmentation, pixelation, fetishizing obsolescence, render ghosts, nostalgia for the glitch, 8-bit reveries, #botiliciousness, souvenir postcards from the robot-readable world, reality media, and the haptic revolution all featured prominently. The New Aesthetic cataloged visual by-products of the increasingly symbiotic relationships between humans, machines, and other possibly sentient objects. That's all the microblog could do for now; it didn't speak these other objects' languages — yet.

Bridle had tapped into an intergenerational zeitgeist, or whatever passes for it in the age of mechanical reblogging. At its base, the New Aesthetic was what he calls "eruptions of the digital into the physical," an accumulated and curated record of

a contemporary reality scanned, monitored, and slightly pixelated around the edges. It was object-oriented — Bridle describes it as a "mood-board for unknown products" — and represented a shifting of the ethnographic gaze from people to mechanical products with inscrutable inner lives, unearthing artifacts and readymades from our present moment. It was about othered *things* that are cautiously exotic to us, and our dubious relations with them. In a nutshell: robots laughing alone with salad.

Remember the earlier decades of the uncharted Internet, and the pioneering gusto with which certain browser software was named. First came Netscape Navigator, sailing the high seas, followed by Internet Explorer and Safari tentatively traipsing through the World Wide Wilderness. Now it's time to begin making contact with the natives — with the spambots, mail-order brides, and online apothecarists already appearing unsolicited in our inboxes, introducing themselves in their own languages. It's time to wonder about their interiority. *Are they listening? Are they looking back at us? Do they feel, or even care? Don't they just want to be loved, too?*

The New Aesthetic was undeniably about looking and is itself a thing to be looked at. Yet thus far, with few exceptions, it was a whole lot of men doing the looking, talking, and writing about the New Aesthetic. The *Wired* essay was followed by

several men responding to Sterling, a man, writing about a concept put forward by Bridle, another man. But there are exceptions, including Joanne McNeil of Rhizome.org, and Madeline Ashby, who invoked feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey with a post on the New Aesthetic of the male gaze. Ashby alludes to something seemingly basic but as yet unacknowledged: These new ways of watching are unavoidably gendered technologies of control and domination.

Apparently, it took the preponderance of closed-circuit television cameras for some men to feel the intensity of the gaze that women have almost always been under … It took Facebook. It took geo-location. That spirit of performativity you have about your citizenship now? That sense that someone's peering over your shoulder, watching everything you do and say and think and choose? That feeling of being observed? It's not a new facet of life in the 21st century. It's what it feels like for a girl.

The New Aesthetic is about being looked at by humans and by machines — by drones, surveillance cameras, people tagging you on Facebook — about being the object of the gaze. It's about looking through the eyes of a machine and seeing the machine turn its beady LEDs on you. It's about the dissolution of privacy and reproductive rights,

and the monitoring, mapping, and surveillance of the (re)gendered (re)racialised body, and building our own super-pervasive panopticon. The effects of these encroachments upon privacy, though, are not equal. The app Girls Around Me — which meshes geolocation and women's publicly available Facebook and Foursquare data to variously "avoid ugly girls" or, more menacingly, stalk women — proves the perfect example. As *Forbes* privacy blogger Kashmir Hill noted in responding to the furor around the app, " 'You're too public with your digital data, ladies,' may be the new 'your skirt was too short and you had it coming.' "

The attraction of the New Aesthetic for these men may then lie in the chance to briefly experience a traditionally feminized, objectified subjectivity. It allows you to build an identity predicated upon your reflection and image on the screen — on Photobooth, on your phone cameras, in the recent spate of preteen "Do you think I'm pretty?" videos uploaded to YouTube.

But sometimes being looked at becomes almost too much to bear, and you sheepishly put a post-it or some tape over the laptop's built-in camera. For fear of someone watching you in your sleep, for fear that the machine itself is the voyeur. *Are you there, Hal? It's me, Madonna*. Now do you know what it feels like for a girl?

The New Aesthetic reflected a broader turn from commentary (say, blogging) to curation (microblogging). And within microblogging, a turn from the purely textual (say, Twitter) to the visual blend (Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest). As suggested by writer Shaj Mathew at *The Millions*, Tumblr has more than a whiff of the commonplace book — the personal notebooks filled with references, phrases, and choice bon mots — favored by writers and orators of centuries past. Visual microblogging more broadly can, in turn, be seen as the spiritual heir of the cut, pasted, and glued zine that brings together text, images and quotes. Rather than simply creating as an artisan might, the microblogger-as-curator brings objects together, contextualizing and co-producing the space at hand — be it in a physical gallery or online — with the help of various network technologies.

Curation is a word long associated with the performance of traditionally feminized labor: A putting together, an assembling, a nurturing, a taking care of things and people. Curing hams and charcuterie and "putting up" produce for the winter. Chicken soup for the common cold; restoratives, remedies, and healing. It's unpaid labor that structures and enables paid, productive labor.

Curation has interesting ecclesiastic connotations too; a curator used to be the religious professional tasked with the care, cure, and guardianship of souls. In art or in publishing, a convenient value mark-up. And in law, a curator is tellingly "a guardian of a minor, lunatic, or other incompetent, especially with regard to his or her property."

Curation suggests Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge's concept of coded space, as Bridle discussed in a recent, brilliantly named talk "We Fell in Love in a Coded Space." Unlike "code/space," which ceases to function without software (think airline check-in desks), a coded space is co-created through use of software — a physical space that is at once also an embedded, networked node. The local bodega, for example, where you can pay for your purchases via credit or debit, or cash when the network is down.

Much of our waking lives are spent in coded spaces. And through curation, our bodies themselves are increasingly coded spaces, co-created with the help of social media, topical and invasive "medi-spa" procedures, lasers and LASIK, surgery, YouTube makeup tutorials, and so on. iProsthetic apps of the nutritional or Nike+ variety count calories burnt or consumed, and are integrated into our increasingly cyborg selves as seamlessly as artificial pacemakers or insulin implants. Virtual makeover technologies now even allow you to upload a photo and "try on" a new

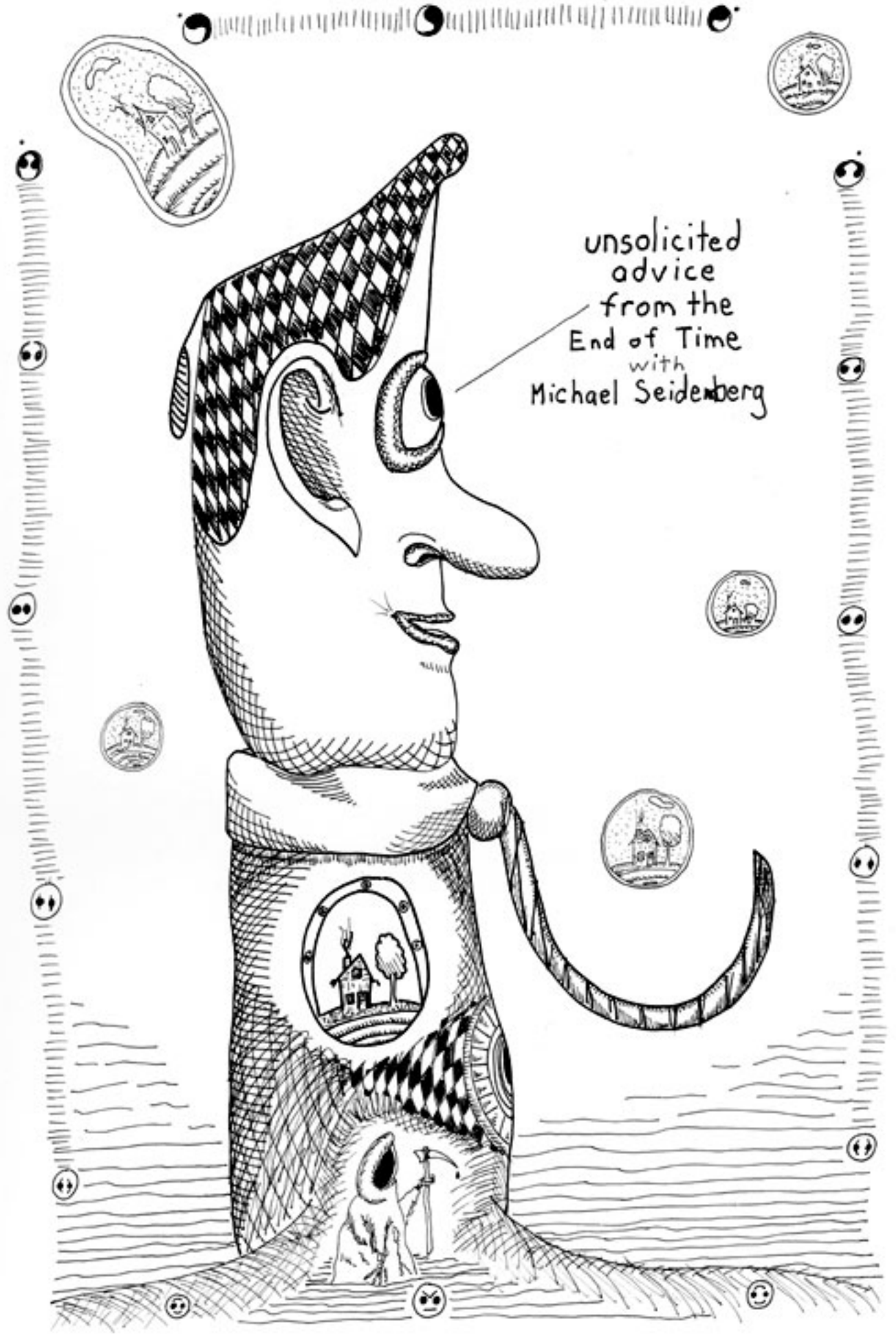
you — blunt bangs and scarlet lipstick, perhaps — while avoiding salon floor tears and expensive mistakes. For everything else, there's Photoshop.

Advances in longevity technologies have cemented mainstream beauty's synonymity with a quest for eternal youth. As the patriarchal male gaze becomes subsumed by the gaze and vision of machines, it's worth considering how our own self-curatorial practices might change. Will women swap silicon implants for silicon computer chips that regulate collagen production, for example? Rather than dress with other people in mind, will we begin to dress for machines, for the things that penetratingly scan and photograph us, inside and out? Every day a red-carpet day?

Consider Mulvey's much quoted statement, "the destruction of pleasure is a radical weapon," and remember the legendarily ugly bartender of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*: "In an age of affordable beauty, there was something heraldic about his lack of it." Even today, there is a similarly fetishized kind of antiglamour — chipped nails, mussed hair, unkempt eyebrows, visible body hair. Tomorrow, this anti-grooming just might translate to a new subculture of visual resistance: to a lack of conspicuous cyborgification, and a willingness to age disgracefully, wrinkles and all.

What does it then mean for the New Aestheticians to aggregate and curate the future-as-commonplace book? Are New Aestheticians healing a rupture, performing emotional or reproductive labour, guarding and rearing the bots pre-Singularity? Is archiving, in an increasingly ephemeral world, akin to preserving life? (With enough reblogs, we might even approach a kind of transhumanist immortality.)

As a final analogue, think of *Gossip Girl*. The popular TV show has done more to crypto-normalize the New Aesthetic than any explanatory article ever can. Through surveillance, identification, geo-located tracking on maps, SMSed tips and "blasts," and cunning social curation, she turns the Upper East Side into a dangerously coded space. The cast and their acolytes alike all plug in to the network to obsessively consume, collaborate, and disseminate information; to speculate and wonder about one another without getting confirmation. She knows everything about everyone, yet little is known about her inner life, save for the occasional catty or breezy voice-over. Where is she answering? Bot or not? Is the NSA involved? And who is she? That's a secret we may never know. ■


unsolicited
advice
from the
End of Time
with
Michael Seidenberg

I guess even fewer people read this column than I thought. Last month I explained the need for all of us to improve our walking habits, to straighten up and walk right. I've been out there among the masses, and it's still a sorry mess. We can do better, people. And when I say "we," I mean you. Even the screaming Tourette's guy in my neighborhood has a better sense of the need to walk with empathy; he wears a T-shirt that warns people to give wide berth.

This might be a case of nature versus nurture, but as I've noted in the past, the meter is running and we don't have time to sort out the cause of the problem, but rather we need to find a solution to it. It's not important to blame nature or nurture but to find the perfect cocktail of the two and drink away.

Even nature knows to give in to nurture and change its ways. When Japanese bees realized that their stingers could not penetrate the hard shell of their ancient enemy the hornet, they made some changes. They now form into a bee-ball, encapsulate their foe, and turn up the heat for 20 minutes to melt the sucker, Fukushima style.

The Japanese seem to get this end of times thing — they have just deregulated the cooking of poisonous blowfish. Maybe they wanted to bring down the price of this deadly delicacy or possibly they just wanted more parking spaces in downtown Tokyo. Either way, they know how to change and move with the times or, in this case, lack of time.

Let there be NO Laces

after the End of Time

The message here is we have to mix and match, it's one-from-Column-A, one-from-Column-B time. We need to decide when to follow the rules and when when to let our instincts drive this beautiful machine. Sure, keep taking your vitamins, but learn to embrace nitrates. Not even the greenest vegan treehugger wants to waste time being sickened by rotten food. The person who will enjoy the end of times is the person who will make the right choices.

A word of warning: Be very careful with any bucket list you might have. These things always need updating. That triple chili omelette you always thought you'd try, that crazy girl who wants to do mushrooms and watch *Shoah* with you, that secret desire to be part of a human microphone — I'm not saying these aren't all wonderful ways to while away the hours. Just think twice before you leap.

As we come to celebrate May Day and the workers of the world, let's not forget that May Day is also a distress signal and in Hawaii. On this day, they celebrate Lei Day … mix your own cocktail. ■

PRAISE

FOR THE NEW INQUIRY # 4: BEAUTY

"There's an entire generation of people that will never be loved or capable of loving, and this is their magazine." – Mark Zuckerberg

America's Next Top Fetishistic Biomechanical Arthropod – with judges H.R. Giger, Tyra Banks, and James Woods

"Damn, girl, you're like a hot Edith Wharton." – Jonathan Franzen

"More than their beauty, it is the fact of their being exploited that is erotic." – [redacted] on interns

"Shockwaves of desire rip across my flesh as it unfolds ever outward, an infinite expanse sick with pleasure, pulsating with sensation, cancer-ridden and scorched by the sun!" – New Gingrich at Burning Man

"I want to like the new inquiry, I really do, but these are _never_ funny" – @max_read, TMZ

"I don't read fat girls." – Harold Bloom