

Missoulian

Chasing beauty

BEN BLOCH for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, May 13, 2004 12:00 am

TV's extreme makeover shows are newest medium exploring transformation

If you haven't yet noticed, a hot trend in reality TV - the evolutionary edge of television - is the extreme makeover. Be it "Extreme Makeover," the home edition or the plastic surgery version, these shows are beginning to pop up in prime time like vigorous stalks in a brand new field of entertainment.

Now a new show, "The Swan," has taken the extreme makeover concept to a whole other level.

Each week on "The Swan," two women are transformed by a team that includes plastic surgeons, psychologists and personal trainers. For three months, they undergo dramatic surgeries and an intense rehabilitation/training in a private facility with no mirrors. At the end of the three months, they are filmed in a ritualized unveiling before a mirror, where each one suddenly meets her new appearance with cries of wonder and tears of joy.

Then the woman with the more impressive transformation is entered - along with 16 other winners - into a grand finale beauty contest where one ultimate winner will be selected as "The Swan," and receive the show's grand prize.

It's a curious phenomenon, and this type of entertainment has drawn obvious criticisms from those who see plastic surgery as unhealthy and/or shallow. But whatever disdain makeover TV generates pales before its immense viewership, largely gained by continually escalating makeover tactics.

The impact that it has had deserves deeper discussion.

It seems the ideas and actions behind "The Swan" are nothing less than a collaborative art. After all, the simple goal of plastic surgery is to transform the flesh - to literally re-shape it - into forms that are thought to be more aesthetic.

Though beauty is difficult to define exactly, most of us acknowledge the allure of youth's beauty, the mysterious signals and codes of bone structure and symmetry, the balances in relations among the body's features, be it lips, breasts, ears or teeth. Plastic surgeons and other cosmetic specialists study these templates of modern beauty, and work with the flesh the same way an artist transforms paint, clay, glass, metal, or any other material.

The power of art is largely based in the rule of transformation: a magical or miraculous effect, or something that looks an awful lot like it. Transformation contains some essential metaphor about the workings of the world and our condition of being. A notion of our own eventual disappearance lingers powerfully in the mind's vault, and drives us onward. We watch the world grow as it falls apart. As creatures, spirits, or even just raw material, we embody the truth of change, and something of the beauty in truth, and vice versa. Thus, we are awed at the sight of transformations, whatever kind.

It could even be said that we rely on these spectacles of change, like hungry dogs, to transform our thoughts and perspectives, to make us whole and more fulfilled.

Along these lines, there are a number of artists whose work consists of nothing less than the meaningfully manipulated transformations of their own faces or bodies. The most prominent of these is Orlan, an infamous French artist whose many plastic surgeries have all been ritualistically documented, and whose goal at one time was to possess the features of a Botticelli's face.

Another prominent figure is Stelarc, a United Kingdom-based artist whose work is based in the belief that the body has become obsolete and seriously needs to be re-engineered in order to adapt to a future existence that takes place not only on Earth, but in the space of the cosmos.

"Alter the architecture and you adjust the body's operation and awareness," says Stelarc.

"It's not so much about enhancing the body but rather constructing, experiencing and being able to articulate alternate, intimate and involuntary interfaces with technology - ultimately exploring alternate kinds of embodiment."

His latest project is a proposal to graft a human ear - initially grown on the back of a mouse - onto his arm. The ear will be packed with sensors that respond when spoken to or approached.

Many seem to want to blame a society that could bring its members to such extreme action, but perhaps it's better to refrain from this. Life often seems too complex for us to judge. It is as it is before us, and all of it is somehow wondrous.

For better or worse, desire for beauty is real and this may have an importance that transcends any rationale for denial.

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