

Missoulian

Here's metal in your eye

By **BEN BLOCH** for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, March 10, 2005 12:00 am

Body art. Just when you think you've seen it all - tongue and genital piercings, whole shaven heads tattooed - something proves you haven't. In this case it's in the eye itself.

Yes, indeed. Eyeball jewelry. A new trend originating in Holland, eyeball jewelry, called "Jewel Eye," involves inserting a thin, decoratively shaped piece of platinum into a shallow incision in the conjunctiva, which is the clear membrane that covers the white of the eye. The procedure takes about 15 minutes, costs around \$1,200, and uses a local anesthetic.

Issues over eye jewelry's acceptability - and even it's legality - are currently coming to the fore in the Illinois legislature, where last Thursday lawmakers approved legislation that would make it a felony to implant jewelry in someone's eye.

"I don't think anybody should be messing with the eyeball," Democratic Rep. Kevin Joyce said Friday.

Many doctors are wary of the practice too, citing the possibilities for infection and other complications. But Gerrit Melles, the Dutch creator of the procedure, says that because the platinum "jewel" is sealed off beneath a membrane and never exposed to bacteria, the risk of infection is lower than with ear piercing. He describes the result as being like "a charm placed beneath scotch tape."

"We have seen no complications," he says, "and no reason to expect them in the future."

If this is the case, than it would seem the objection to letting people choose to undergo the procedure has more to do with queasiness over the idea than with any pragmatic reason. In the past couple of decades, body piercing and tattooing have become commonplace. And as history easily demonstrates, there's always a certain number people who are ready to push the limits of what's acceptable.

"It's like you're not a freak anymore if you have a tattoo. To be a freak you've got to step up a little bit," observes Kevin Veara, the 43-year-old owner of an Illinois tattoo parlor.

I can only imagine what it must be like to suddenly realize you're talking to a person with decorative metal in the white of their eye. It's not something you'd notice from far away. Only when your close enough to be engaged with someone would you see it. But once you did, you wouldn't be able to take your eyes off its strangeness.

In this way I picture the effect of "jeweleye" is not unlike a minimalist work of art, subtle before you get close enough to realize its intensity. Tom Friedman is an artist who comes to mind in making comparisons. Once, using a straight pin, he poked as many holes as possible - without the paper falling apart - into a standard sheet of paper, then hung it on the wall with the pin that poked it. What at first looked like a discarded paper towel transformed entirely once the viewer really understood what they were looking at.

I don't think we should be all that surprised by this development. The body, we've proven, is a kind of canvas. We take much pleasure and devote much time to dressings and augmentations that are often as painful - or painful sounding - as they are eye-catching (no pun intended). In addition, we are eternally fascinated by the ritual practices of other cultures that do things in the name of beauty (scarrification, neck-stretching, skull-shaping) which most Westerners would sooner describe as mutilation. The idea that there exists a kind of beauty that can only be achieved through pain seems to make sense then, because it appears to be the common denominator in all of these practices. Pain, in its different visual manifestations, captivates us because its potential intensity is extreme. It is doubly intriguing when it appears to somehow act in cooperation with beauty.

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