

Rethinking What's Beautiful and Beastly

A review of *Unbecoming* at Soil Gallery, Seattle

In June 2001, *The Seattle Times* published Sheila Farr's review, "Rethinking What's Beautiful and Beastly," in connection with the exhibition *Unbecoming* at Soil Gallery in Seattle.

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Visual Arts

Rethinking what's beautiful and beastlyBy **Sheila Farr**

Seattle Times art critic

Those crisp white gloves Jackie Kennedy wore faithfully during the Camelot years were more than just a fashion statement. They also hid the fact that her fingernails were bitten to the nub. Most girls learn early in life that gnawed nails are not beautiful.

Yet, in a series of photographs at SOIL this month, Seattle artist Claire Cowie treats them with such respect that we're led to reconsider our training. Why, exactly, do we consider one thing attractive and another ugly? Where do our ideals of human beauty come from? Most people, if asked, can't come up with a good definition of beauty or of art, but we all know what we like. The group show "unbecoming" prods us to rethink such things. And that means the art is doing its job.

Nick D'Angelo's video, "I'm Sorry Britney Spears," reminded me of an early John Waters movie. It's a constant battle between "This is hilarious" and "That is totally gross." A big, crude, hairy gorilla of a guy wearing a blond wig starts dancing around in front of a wall that's plastered with pictures of Britney. He rubs his bare chest with baby oil and chortles along to Britney singing, "Hit me baby one more time." He turns his big, hairy back to us, wiggling and spanking himself ecstatically. What makes this so wonderfully disgusting? Men pay money to see some babe doing these same moves.

I go looking for clues. Samantha Scherer's lineup of pastel portraits of "The Beautiful People" have traits we of the early 21st century tend to admire: pouty lips, strong jaws, defined cheekbones, radiant skin - tawny or flushed pink - and a certain aloofness.

These people are all face. Their hair and clothing disappear into the tinted colors of the background paper. The colors Scherer chose are clear and sweet as a bouquet of wildflowers. The faces she delineates are model-perfect.

Hanging next to these lovely (if vacant) creatures is a group of abstract paintings modeled with wood putty that resemble close-ups of human flesh splitting with chancres and blisters, bruises and gangrene. The reaction: repulsion. This one is easy. Health is beautiful, and the appearance of disease is ugly.

Part of the beauty thing is pure instinct: Our desires are geared toward self-preservation and the preservation of the species. This theory plays out in Alex Yang's odd little video "Taco." He shows us a close-up of a lovely bare throat and underarm, which suddenly - to the accompaniment of icky, inexplicable sounds - starts sprouting, not hair, not odor, but a weird excrescence. Attractiveness turns instantly to ugliness.

Some rules of beauty we acquire growing up: We like what is familiar. We like what our role models like. We like the things our friends approve of. We like what we are trained to like (a basic premise of the advertising industry). And yet, taste evolves. The more we look and the more open we are to what lies beneath the obvious, the more adventurous we can be in discovering beauty, in people and in art. Artists head toward the frontiers of sensory experience, and the rest of us, when we are convinced it's safe, rush in to colonize and exploit it.

Cowie explores various sorts of female allure in "Excerpts from a book of Monotypes of Beautiful Women," but it's her fingernail portraits that shake me awake. Why is a bitten-to-the-quick fingernail less beautiful than one that is long and clawlike and painted red? It is, perhaps, an indicator of power. Bitten nails suggest nervousness. The long red-drenched claws imply a bold, successful predator, or at least a sexual wildcat.

But what's true in the jungle doesn't necessarily translate to contemporary human society, where cosmetics can imply things that just aren't true. The poet John Keats was on to something when he wrote, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

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A group show by Claire Cowie, Nick D'Angelo, David Momyer, Sonja Peterson, Samantha Scherer and Alex Yang. Noon-5 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays through July 1, SOIL Art Gallery, 1412 12th Ave., Seattle (206-264-8061).

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