

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Brendan S. Carroll, "Why Are We Obsessed With The Way We Look?" *Hyperallergic*, December 30, 2011

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART

### Why Are We Obsessed With The Way We Look?



Brendan S. Carroll December 30, 2011



Austrian Cultural Forum New York gallery installation view (photo by David Plakke)

The Austrian Cultural Forum invited me to participate in a gallery talk about their current show *Beauty Contest*. As I made my way to the engagement, I noticed a series of Uniqlo ads in the subway, which feature the young and the beautiful. Each mug shot reminded me of my expanding waistline, thinning hair and distressed complexion. As my self-worth dropped, I continued to look at one face after the other as if I were eating potato chips.

Who decides what is and what is not beautiful? To address these questions, Berthold Ecker, Claude Grunitzky and Andreas Stadler, the curators of *Beauty Contest* at the Austrian Cultural Forum and MUSA (Museum – Start Gallery – Artothek), selected 20 internationally acclaimed artists who grapple with society's obsession and fascination with physical appearance.

The result is a small but engaging exhibition, with the overall tenor of the show being defiant. Whereas beauty pageants see the body as a beautiful thing best celebrated in a bikini, this show views the body as a karate chop to the solar plexus of mainstream notions of attractiveness. Despite the

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unconventional work, the exhibition includes glamour queens in swimsuits, evening wear and talent performances.



Clarina Bezzola, "When I walk alone in the streets ..." (2011) (photo by David Plakke)

Clarina Bezzola's wearable sculpture sets the tone of the exhibition. The components include a red cocktail dress, a pair of swollen breasts (a set of teeth run the length of the cleavage), and a long, oversized hand that protrudes from the back of the dress. It's grotesque, and creepy, but I could not stop looking at it. I could easily imagine her feminine wiles shredding my manhood to pieces. The costume is worn as part of a performance (that I saw on video) in which the artist walks through the streets of Manhattan while singing Musetta's "Aria" from Puccini's *La Bohème*. The video I could take or leave. The dress, however, is seared in my unconscious.

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Katarina Schmid, "Ein schönes Stück Österreich / A beautiful piece of Austria" (2002) (Image courtesy MUSA, Vienna)

Katarina Schmid's sculpture, "Ein schönes Stück Österreich" (2002), is the most alluring work in the show, and its most cheeky — literally. The honeycomb-like object, which was constructed from red and white plastic drinking straws and rests on chest-high podium, resembles a classical torso. The installation showcases the figure's buttocks, which meets the viewer face to face. Like much of the artist's work from the early aughts, she used her own body as a starting point. The title of the work, which translates in English to Nice Piece of Austria, is a self-portrait.

More than any other work in the show, Schmid's sculpture invited the viewer to take pleasure in her physical assets. As a viewer, I felt like a judge in a beauty pageant appraising a contestant during the swimsuit competition. The work, however, offered more than titillation. I applaud her use of cheap materials, which can be found almost anywhere. Back in the day, the figure was immortalized in stone and marble, but now, it is canonized in strips of plastic.

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Birgit Jürgenssen, "Everybody has his own point of view"  
(nd) (Image courtesy MUSA, Vienna)

Birgit Jürgenssen also uses her body as a point of departure in her work. In 1975, Jürgenssen had the phrase *Jeder hat seine eigene Ansicht* ("Everyone has their own opinion) written on her back, and she photographed it. At the time the photograph was taken, Jürgenssen received a lot of flack from second wave feminists who condemned her beauty, love of fashion and use of cosmetics. As an individual work, it's not much to look at. But I appreciate the curators' decision to include the work in the show. Why? It's a beauty contest and we can't see the model's face. Like most of the artwork of view, the photograph has a "fuck you I'm going to do what I want whether you like it or not" attitude.

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Jakob Lena Knebl, Still from "Becoming" (2010), video projection, 7:37 min. (courtesy of artist)

Jakob Lena Knebl is not a beauty queen in the standard sense of the term. The artist is short, massive and transgender, with a smart pageboy haircut. No Romy Schneider, she bears a striking resemblance to Charles Durning in the 1975 film *Dog Day Afternoon*. Knebl's contribution to the show is a video-based gender-bending karaoke performance, which features two protagonists dancing to "Rebel Girl" by Bikini Kill and "Dead Souls" by Joy Division. (I love the choice of music — the two songs maintain top dog status on my playlists.)

I was not sure what to make of the work upon first view, and I am not sure what to make of it now. Like many people, I love to sing along to my favorite songs, but what does it have to do with beauty? My friend suggested it might be a desire to express our need to feel pretty and that may be the point. When I sing "Sunshine Superman" by Donovan I feel like a teenage heartthrob.

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Still from Maria Petschnig's "Coaching Session's" (2011), 4-channel HD video projection, 7 minutes  
(image courtesy the artist)

To picture Maria Petschnig's videos, think of obese men and women throwing a sex party inside the Salvation Army. What is shocking is not the subject matter but the lack of feeling the footage illicit. To be blunt, it's boring. Like most porn, the participants engage in repetitive, robotic movements and the camera's point of view is fixed. The only difference the videos offer is a cast of unattractive characters. The one video of hers that I did find captivating involved a group of senior residents exercising in an old folks home. There is something poignant about watching a group of men and women on the precipice of death trying to keep their muscles limber.

*Beauty Contest* is not pretty, and some of it is grotesque. However, the show is captivating and rewards repeated viewings. To the curators credit, the exhibition does not condemn our obsession and fascination with physical appearance, but rather, provides an opportunity for us to see how other people regard their own bodies. It is a subject I find fascinating. As I approach my thirty-eighth year, I am still getting used to my own appearance, which seems to change daily.

*Beauty Contest* is on view until January 3, 2012 at The Austrian Cultural Forum (11 East 52 Street, Midtown, Manhattan).