

How Beauty Matters

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How do we view, understand and appreciate a complex and challenging work of visual art such as Leon Mostovoy's *Transfigure* and how, in our encounter with it, does beauty matter? *Transfigure Project*—a 2013 book, film and photographic installation that is now also an interactive website —is “a project of corporal self-expression, presented as an experimental, visual feast” by which ‘transfigure’ means “to transform into something more beautiful or elevated” (<http://transfigureproject.com/>). Photographs of fifty nude trans-identified figures can be playfully arranged in numerous combinations; a woman's head can appear over a post-op torso over a pelvis with penis. The result, according to the artist, is “A celebration of bodies that transcend the gender binary” and shatter stereotypical notions of beauty, particularly in the way they are posed, “The models were photographed in a paper doll stance, with the images separated in three places to create the look of an old-time children's mix-and-match book.”

Focusing less on the medium and more on the message, let us look at the way the transgendered body serves for the artist as the focus of fluid visualization:

The imagery portrays the complexity of gender and bodies and the ways in which these combinations may be surprising. In representing gender variant people/bodies, my intent is to illustrate that gender, sex, sexuality, presentation, and attraction are separate and, though they may intermingle at times, society/people should not assume that we are constrained by predictable versions of these variables.

How does the meaning of *Transfigure* challenge and subvert traditional theories in aesthetics?

Beginning in the eighteenth century, philosophers responsible for the founding of modern aesthetics advocated viewing the beauty of the human body with the rarified stance of

disinterestedness: a capacity nurtured within a educated 'man of taste' but never within the supposedly inferior groups of women or 'noble savages'. Even early to mid-twentieth century aestheticians denigrated the importance of the artwork's social context by focusing exclusively on what was visibly observed in the artwork, whether it was deemed 'significant form' or aesthetic properties in isolation (see Brand essay in this volume). Summarily dismissed as irrelevant to the creative process were considerations of the artist, her gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and even artistic intentions. A revolution took place, however, in the period after World War II, beginning in the 1960s, with women artists creating innovative works that expressed feminist challenges to traditional, mainstream depictions of the female body. Such artworks also served to subvert narrow interpretive strategies of outdated aesthetic theories. Under-represented minorities within the artworld—blacks, women, Latinos, Asians, artists with disabilities, gays and lesbians—began to portray themselves in unique and creative ways that conveyed independence, power, and dignity. Familiar norms of beauty were upended.

The past fifty years has witnessed a veritable explosion of new art that has in turn inspired innovative ways of 'seeing' that drastically differed from the ways that 'men of taste' had, for centuries, appreciated beauty and experienced pleasure in viewing artworks by 'the old masters'. Beginning in the 1970s, for example, Laura Mulvey argued that standard art history had taught all of us to view a prototypical nude female-on-a-couch with a 'male gaze' that seeks to possess and exploit the passive body on display for the more active, powerful, and entitled male (or masculinist) viewer. Author bell hooks argued that race further intersects with gender by positing an 'oppositional gaze' that exposes white privilege. Susan Bordo suggested that we learn to read the bodies of gay men in provocative ads as "leaners" and more hetero-/masculine types as "rocks". Anita Silvers showed us that we can treat human physical anomalies as

beautiful—perceived in terms of novelty, disproportionateness, and even ‘crookedness’ and not abnormality or ugliness—by looking at and learning from works of art. Arthur Danto explained the tattoos of New Zealand natives as an Hegelian form of beautification while Whitney Davis exposed the queer beauty in nineteenth century statues of nubile young boys that was summarily overlooked by scholars J. J. Winkelmann and Immanuel Kant. Phoebe Farris retrained our eye on the indigenous beauty of Native American people. (Many of these viewpoints are discussed in *Beauty Matters* 2000 and *Beauty Unlimited* 2013, edited by Peg Brand.)

In all these cases and many more, modes of seeing/viewing/perceiving became central to theories from various disciplines such as psychology, cognitive science and philosophy that call attention to the ways we look. They sought to cast new light on underlying assumptions and norms of physical beauty (or beauties) that enable us to process and judge human bodies on display. Some of us became students again; we undertook the deliberate process of training ourselves to perceive things anew, in a fresh way— with an “inner eye” (African American writer Ralph Ellison’s term) that underlies and forms a cognitive framework for the actual act of seeing (see Paul Taylor’s discussion of Ellison in *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* 2016). Recent experimental data and theorizing about perception have only begun to contribute to a deeper study of the complex role beauty plays within acts of seeing and cognition. (Consider, for example, new ways that we might ‘see’ the lean body of an elite athlete such as record-breaking South African runner Caster Semenya who has ‘looked’ suspiciously masculine to judges of the International Olympic Committee; see Weiser and Weiser, “Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty: Perceptual Sexism in Elite Women’s Sports” in *Body Aesthetics*, edited by Sherri Irvin 2016.) Against this backdrop of how various thinkers have suggested we

might view, see and analyze the human body, let us return to our initial question of how we can best understand and appreciate the visual artwork entitled *Transfigure*.

We are not presented with the traditionally sexualized image of a reclining female nude nor a seductive male model leaning on a wall nor the eroticized genitals of a pornographic pose; in fact, our instinctive response to feel pleasure may be thwarted. Rather, we see interchangeable bodies, each segmented into three parts that can be juxtaposed in numerable ways. The display is frontal and graphic, yet strangely childlike in their “paper doll stance.” We are invited in; we are curious and devise a new way to read the images that grants these persons their deserved agency and autonomy and prevents us from assuming that they are merely passive sexual objects, on display for our voyeuristic pleasure. Mostovoy describes the complexity of these combinations as “surprising” thereby encouraging us to respond positively to the visualized possibilities of “gender variant people/bodies” by stating that his intent, as a transgender man, was “to illustrate that gender, sex, sexuality, presentation, and attraction are separate and, though they may intermingle at times, society/people should not assume that we are constrained by predictable versions of these variables.” Physicality is no barrier; rather, we are circumscribed by only our preconceived notions.

Beauty matters here because we view human bodies within a mental framework of who and what already counts as beautiful: normal, ideal, and therefore good. We inevitably come to all objects of perception with preconceived assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. Mostovoy asks us to re-educate our visual process to include less “predictable versions” of deeply held binaries like “man” and “woman”, “black” and “white”, “heterosexual” and “queer” by introducing us—playfully—to various possibilities of “ethnic background, body size and shape, age range, pre-op (pre sex reassignment operation), post-op, decisively no-op, on hormones and

not:” all mixed together in unnatural ways. Preconceived notions of beauty matter at the unconscious level of how we see and judge the differences inherent in bodies never seen before: bodies that will never be seen whole since we are viewing only fragments of bodies juxtaposed together, not actual persons.

As the *Transfigure* book is “inclusive of all people who self identify as transgender,” it is a primer for retraining our “inner eye” toward a more positive response to the diversity of beauty. Ultimately our beliefs about beauty bear on personal identity and one’s sense of self-worth, the ethics of moral and not just aesthetic aspects of a work of art, our sense of fairness and justice in how people are treated within mixed society, and the linguistic choices we invoke to talk about members of the LGBTQ community. Beauty matters and our responses to the spectrum of human appearance reflect back on us: who *we* are, how *we* see ourselves among others, how *we* talk about ourselves, how *we* expect and hope to be treated.

Beauty has been invoked in discussions of pleasure and porn, fashion and fitness, athleticism and activism. It rightly deserves a more prominent role within future aesthetic deliberations about the human body. *Transfigure* provides a transition to that elevated discourse.