

*"The beautiful is always strange."* – Charles Baudelaire

*"Beauty is the agency which causes visual pleasure in the beholder."* – Dave Hickey

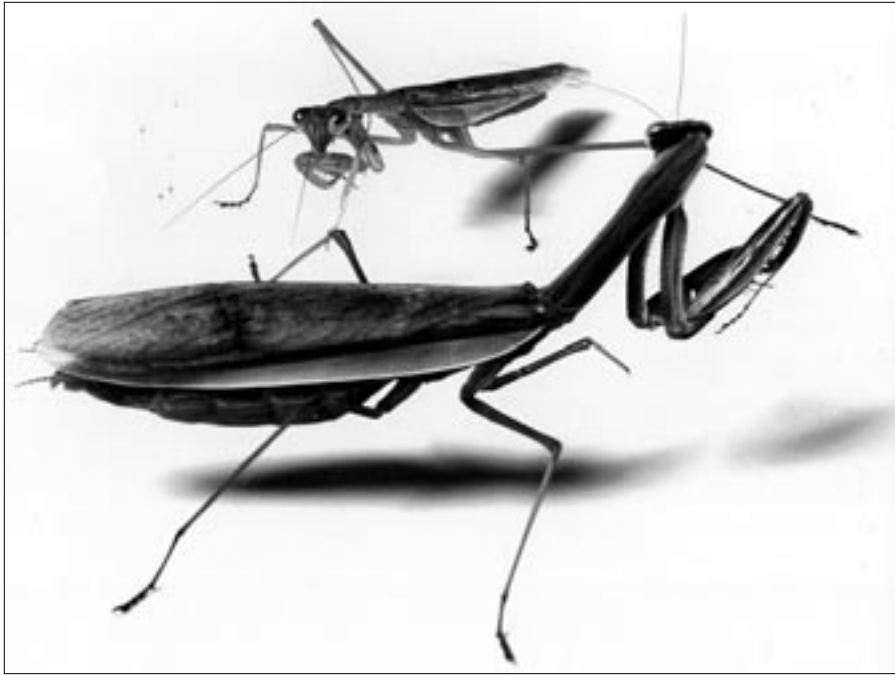
Beauty as defined by Webster is "the quality that gives pleasure to the senses or exalts the mind." The definition implies multi-faceted complexity, yet in contemporary culture, the word connotes superficiality. In the art world, beauty has been relegated to studies in art history and the commercial or advertising markets. Art institutions and cultural theorists have contempt for the term beauty; "its critical vocabulary seemed to evaporate overnight.<sup>i</sup> It strikes me as ironic that, in our culture, yearning for beauty through diets, cosmetics, and plastic surgery as well as sales of books on new age religions and spirituality, art that manifests this cultural phenomenon is dismissed as something frivolous or anti-intellectual.

As evidenced in the recent surge of exhibits, books and articles dedicated to the subject of beauty, I would say that beauty has definitely made a comeback. Charles Darwent describes the phenomena as "The Beauteous Bandwagon"<sup>ii</sup>. The curators of "La Beauté", the exhibition that enveloped Avignon France last fall decreed that beauty could be found everywhere. The streets, squares, churches, cafes and Papal Palace were brimming with works created by fashion designers, architects, composers and visual artists. In the Gothic Palais de Papes, an enormous exhibit entitled, "La Beauté in Fabula" (Fabulous Beauty) showcased contemporary art produced in the last thirty years.

In October 1999, the Hirshhorn presented an exhibit entitled, "Regarding Beauty". The show proposed that beauty had never really disappeared, but was manifesting itself in different ways. The goal of the exhibit was to engage an on-going dialogue about the changing nature and perception of beau-

ty. One cannot fail to mention the controversial show, "Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art" this past fall at London's Royal Academy which followed on the footsteps of "Sensation" at the Brooklyn Museum. Although "Le Beauté" and "Regarding Beauty" both presented works, which may challenge viewers' notions of traditional beauty, the Apocalypse show seems to equate horror with beauty. Which brings to mind the question of how beauty is defined and what is the relationship of beauty and horror.

After reading Dave Hickey's essays on beauty, I decided to conduct my own informal survey about beauty. I solicited responses from artists, educators, writers and curators. When I posed the question of how to define beauty in relationship to art, the answers all varied, but could be consolidated into the old cliché, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder". Independent curator Mary Ross Taylor stated that the notion of beauty is what comforts dominant culture at any given moment in time.<sup>iii</sup> Ohio artist Christa Donner concedes that beauty resides within the artist's mind, whether it materializes as an idea, transgressive action or traditional notion.<sup>iv</sup> California artist/activist Deborah Dague observes beauty as a transformative experience, which awakens the unconscious and leads us to one another. She purports that beauty doesn't reside within the object, but in the experience one has with it.<sup>v</sup> Delving into Baudelaire's quote that introduced this article, one wonders what is the relationship between the beautiful and the disturbing? Many contemporary artists encompass the duality of attraction and repulsion in their work. Why am I mesmerized by a work by Damien Hirst? Is it an obsession



From the series *Sex Before, During, After*

Catherine Chalmers



Hand, from the series *Genetic Self-portrait*

Gary Schneider



Detail from the installation *Room of the Host*, 1998-99

Lim Young-sun

with death or is it about the implied violence in nature? Dave Hickey describes this feeling as the evocation of pleasure through discomfort.<sup>vi</sup> David Miller has written at length about Baudelaire's quote saying, "That beauty should find a place in works designed to display to human beings their own moral and physical ugliness is something worthy of study."<sup>vii</sup> Mary Ross Taylor states that real horror cannot be aestheticized. Philosopher/writer Karmen MacKendrick believes that beauty shares with shock or horror the quality of disrupting the everyday. Conversely, repulsion makes us want to flee. Beauty changes our direction and momentarily suspends the ordinary and thoughtless rush of time. MacKendrick suggests the opposite of beauty is not the grotesque or horrific, but the boring or mundane. Beauty in art does not need to disturb or horrify, but to unsettle or disrupt.<sup>viii</sup>

It is this feeling of overwhelming, yet unsettling beauty which encompasses the exhibit "Unnatural Science" at Mass MOCA in North Adams, Massachusetts through April 2001. The show's predominant theme is the embodiment of science in art. "It is an exhibit in which fantasy reigns and science is made subservient to the constructs of art."<sup>ix</sup> In the Summer 1999 issue of *Fotophile*, I wrote about the trend/movement of photographic artists exploring the metaphysical and scientific realms through art. This movement continues to expand as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the completion of the human genome project and the progress in bioengineering and cloning. The artists' works in "Unnatural Science" reference social concerns revolving around scientific issues, as well as embracing irony and challenging the logic and rules surrounding scientific methods.

Upon entering the first gallery, I immediately encounter Thomas Grunfeld's taxidermal display of an animal enclosed in a glass case. It has the head of a sheep and the body of a dog. I am at once overtaken with the beauty of the animal, as well as horrified with its implications. The dog body has luxurious silky fur groomed to a fine sheen. The face's serene expression and body posture suggests regality. Grunfeld's "Misfit" is one in a series of "fantastic" and horrific animals. The seamless construction insinuates a mutant hybrid produced through genetic engineering. The glass case references "specimen" on display. I wonder about the temperament and actions of a hybrid animal. Would the animal have identity confusion? Would it bark or bleat? How would the sheep's instinctual nature of fearing dogs affect its disposition? "Culturally, the sheep/dog hybrid seems a sensible tool for social control."<sup>x</sup> Immediately behind the sheep/dog is a voluminous open gallery filled with Catherine Chalmers' large-scale color photographs from two series, "The Food Chain" and "Sex: Before, During and After". The series is comprised of 28 color prints (each five feet in width) depicting the food chain cycle of

worms, praying mantis and frogs. The sequence starts with a pulpy tomato being devoured by worms, which in turn are consumed by a praying mantis, which finally loses its life to a very satisfied frog. . The "Sex" series portrays two praying mantis mating, followed by the female dismembering and eating her mate. Chalmers has captured the expressive nature of her subjects.

The enormous scale of the insects in relationship to the viewer reminds me of old sci-fi movies, where the innocuous bug becomes the rampaging monster. The exquisite prints lure the viewer through the rich colors and minimalist white background. Chalmers is an amateur zoologist, who raises her subjects in her studio, specifically for photo shoots. She describes the carnage in her imagery as "nature taking its course". I question what kind of nature naturally occurs in a New York City apartment apart from cockroaches and rats, but I cannot deny the compelling subject matter. (As a side note, Chalmers' most current work features cockroaches painted or dressed up as more palatable insects such as ladybugs or bumblebees, followed by elaborately staged executions of the critters). One critic dubbed Chalmers "the insect snuff film director."<sup>xi</sup> I am interested in the larger issues the images address, such as the aestheticism of death, humanity's interference with nature, the reconstruction of nature in a human-made environment and the question of violence inherent in nature. While there is a slight undertone of humor in Chalmers' imagery, it is not whimsical; it is the nervous chuckle one emits, when uncomfortable and unsure whether this is high drama or comedy.

Korean artist Lim Young-Sun repeats the feeling of discomfort combined with lurid attraction in the installation, "Room of the Host". The darkened room is filled with 200 isomorphic creatures entrapped in glass jars. Reverberations are emanating from the jars. From a distance, it sounds as if the creatures are crying. Colored lights emit a haunting, carnival-like glow. The creatures appear to be moving inside their caged environments. As I approach one closely, it stops moving as if to "play dead". These morphed mutations seem to have innate defense mechanisms. When I put my ear close to the creature, I realize it is not a single voice, but many voices and sounds combined to radiate a collective voice. Some of the creatures resemble jellyfish and others aborted fetuses embedded with human hairs.

Lim Young Sun's background infiltrates his work. Although not specific to Korea, the work references captivity and control. Sun states that the work raises issues of "the plight of the individual in a restrictive society."<sup>xii</sup> I cannot help thinking how much this theme applies to a supposedly "unrestricted" society, where corporations are the apparatus of power and control. The installation also portrays the aftermath of bio-

engineering and cloning experiments gone awry. Gary Schneider's genetic self-portraits depict the beauty in science and, more specifically, the beauty in disease. His work delves into the encoding of identity that is normally invisible to the naked eye. The images also challenge the traditional notion of the "self" portrait in photography.<sup>xiii</sup> Schneider has photographed every chromosome in his body, his DNA, sperm, retinas, teeth, hands and ears—anything that constitutes the individuality of a human. During the process he uncovered a tumor suppressor gene, which may have malfunctioned, causing lung cancer in his mother. The organic abstractions are the visual equivalents of aerial land views or constellations. The aged quality of the prints points to the temporality of human life. The compelling photographs map the intricacies of the human body where even the malignant is beautiful.

Steina Vasulka's video installation entitled, "Borealis" alludes to beauty in nature. She avoids the thematic cliché by inverting the implied power structure between humankind and nature. The immense environment contains a double channel video and 4 channels of sound. Four large double-sided

screens project dark, swirling water (from Vasulka's native Iceland). The projectors are turned on their sides, splitting the image. The effect is to disorient the viewer. The scale of the imagery dwarfs viewers as the raging water envelops their reflections. Vasulka's work emphasizes aspects of the natural world, transforming them into dominant, powerful forces. The installation asks the viewer to question their role in the balance of natural order as well as the inherent power of relationships between humanity and nature.

Although the theme of science as subservient to art is predominant in "Unnatural Science," I was struck by the number of artists who use beauty as a means to draw attention to a concept and/or attract the viewer. The binary relationship between beauty and repulsion permeates many of the works. Baudelaire's idea that beauty reveals humanity's "moral and physical ugliness" seems inherent in contemporary art, which challenges the viewer to question difficult ideological issues. "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science." —Albert Einstein. 🌸

## Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> Hickey, Dave, *The Invisible Dragon: 4 Essays on Beauty*, Los Angeles: Art.Issues Press, 1994, p.13.

<sup>ii</sup> Darwent, Charles, "The Beauteous Bandwagon," *Modern Painter*, Autumn '00, v. 13, #3, p91.

<sup>iii</sup> E-mail from Mary Ross Taylor on 1/28/01

<sup>iv</sup> E-mail from Christa Donner on 1/23/01

<sup>v</sup> E-mail from Deborah Dague on 1/22/01

<sup>vi</sup> Viso, Olga, "Beauty and Its Dilemmas," *Regarding Beauty*, p. 97.

<sup>vii</sup> E-mail from David Miller 1/21/01

<sup>viii</sup> E-mail from Karmen MacKendrick on 1/20/01

<sup>ix</sup> Heon, Laura Steward, *Unnatural Science* Catalog, p.9

<sup>x</sup> *Unnatural Science* Catalog p.25.

<sup>xi</sup> *Unnatural Science* Catalog, p.39

<sup>xii</sup> *Unnatural Science* Catalog, p.63.

<sup>xiii</sup> Thomas, Ann, "The Portrait in the Age of Genetic Mapping," *Genetic Self-Portrait*, Vermont: Stinehour Press, 1999, p.5.

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