



Has Artificial Beauty Become the New Feminism?

By Jennifer Cognard-Black, Ms. Magazine

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This spring, *Sideways* star Virginia Madsen became a spokesperson for Allergan Inc., the maker of Botox." Quoted in *People* magazine, Madsen asserts that she's made "a lot of choices" to keep herself "youthful and strong": "I work out. I eat good foods. And I also get injectables."

In celebrity promos such as Madsen's, the current pop-cultural acceptance of cosmetic medicine is clear -- and is borne out by the rising numbers of customers. Since 2000, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) reports a 48 percent increase in all cosmetic (elective) procedures, both surgical, such as breast augmentations, and minimally invasive, such as the injectable wrinkle-filler Botox.

Once considered clandestine and risky, cosmetic procedures are currently treated across a variety of media as if they were as benign and mundane as whitening your teeth. Advertisers, TV producers, publishers, PR personnel and even physicians themselves are touting it as an effortless, egalitarian way for women of all backgrounds to "enhance" their looks and "stay young."

Not only have cosmetic procedures become more acceptable, but they're being promoted in less sensationalized ways to whole new markets. Increasingly, reality TV's Cinderella tale of surgical transformation is being replaced with a smart woman's narrative of enlightened self-maintenance. While *Extreme Makeover* and its imitators shame and blame ugly-duck patients in order for prince-surgeons to rescue them and magically unlock their inner swans through "drastic plastic" (multiple surgeries), other media sources now compliment potential customers as mature women who are "smart," "talented" and "wise." Such women are supposedly savvy enough to appreciate their own wisdom -- but, then again, they should want to soften the telltale marks of how many years it took them to acquire it. "I am not using these injectables to look 25," Madsen insists. "I don't want to be 25. I just want to look like me."

Alex Kuczynski, a *New York Times* reporter and author of *Beauty Junkies* (Doubleday, 2006) calls these latest appeals "the new feminism, an activism of aesthetics." That ignores the work of feminists from Susan Faludi to Susan Bordo, who have argued for years against the global beauty industry and its misogynistic practices. Yet the cosmetic-surgery industry is doing exactly what the beauty industry has done for years: It's co-opting, repackaging and reselling the feminist call to empower women into what may be dubbed "consumer feminism." Under the dual slogans of possibility and choice, producers, promoters and providers are selling elective surgery as self-determination.

Moreover, much of the media covering cosmetic surgery centers on the idea of *choice*. Parallel to Madsen's insistence that using Botox is just another lifestyle

choice with little difference from working out and eating well, *Cosmetic Surgery for Dummies* (For Dummies, 2005) promises that the reader will discover how to "decide whether surgery is right for you," "find a qualified surgeon," "set realistic expectations," "evaluate the cons," "make the surgical environment safe" and ultimately "make an informed choice." The word "choice" obviously plays on reproductive-rights connotations, so that consumers will trust that they are maintaining autonomy over their bodies. Yet one choice goes completely unmentioned: The choice not to consider cosmetic surgery at all.

These days, with consumers able to "choose" from among a dizzying array of procedures and providers, even the most minute areas of the female body are potential sites of worry and "intervention." Surgical procedures have been developed to reduce "bra fat," to make over belly-buttons, to "rejuvenate" vaginas after childbirth or to achieve the "*Sex and the City* effect" -- foot surgeries to shorten or even remove a toe in order for women to squeeze their feet into pointy shoes.

Few seem immune to the sell, no matter what their income. In fact, according to an ASPS-commissioned study, more than two-thirds of those who underwent cosmetic surgery in 2005 made \$60,000 or less. Easy access to credit and the declining cost of procedures has brought even the working class into the market.

The most graphic consequences of these trends are the stretched, alien, expressionless faces worn by certain celebrities and increasing numbers of "everyday" women. There are also the disfigurements and deaths that can result from surgeries gone wrong.

At the end of *Beauty Junkies*, Kuczynski asserts that "looks are the new feminism." Yet it's feminists who have led the fight against silicone breast implants when research suggested they were dangerous. It's feminists who have pointed out that a branch of medicine formed to fix or replace broken, burned and diseased body parts has since become an industry serving often-misogynistic interests. And it's feminists who have emphatically and persistently shown that cosmetic medicine exists because sexism is powerfully linked with capitalism -- keeping a woman worried about her looks in order to stay attractive, keep a job or retain self-worth. To say that a preoccupation with looks is "feminist" is a cynical misreading; feminists must instead insist that a furrowed, "wise" brow -- minus the fillers -- is the empowered feminist face, both old and new.

This article is excerpted from a longer piece in Ms. Magazine. To get the whole story, pick up Ms. magazine on newsstands now.

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