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Untitled

Plaster wrap, cardboard, nylon

Is beauty worth suffering for? Is it worth dying for? For centuries women have put themselves through pain and self-destruction to achieve the impossible standard of female perfection. Women have sacrificed their identity, sanity, and lives to be seen as beautiful, to be seen as valuable. It is a draining experience, to seek perfection and societal validation. I wanted to show just how draining it is to be beautiful, to seek perfection, how painful, consuming, destructive, and relentless it is. I was inspired by my own experience, my history with sacrifice and obsession when creating this piece. Since my formative years I have been cripplingly self-conscious, my insecurities overwhelming and slowly gnawing away at my sense of stability. I wanted to depict this internal struggle for perfection, feeling worthless, sacrificing both physical and emotional well being in the hopes of reaching an unobtainable standard of beauty, practically killing yourself to be deemed valuable. I thought deeply about the figures' body placement, wanting it to immerse the viewer in this feeling of exhaustion and struggle through body language and physical interaction. To create this figure, I used cardboard as a base, using my own body as a model.

Beauty and Pain:
A Dive into the Expectation of Feminine
Perfection



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Writer's Note: "Beauty is pain", a phrase embedded into girlhood, something your mother taught you as she curled your eyelashes. It was originally inspired by the French saying "Il faut souffrir pour être belle", meaning "one must suffer to be beautiful". These sayings are internalized, convincing young girls that suffering for beauty is reasonable. Why do women torture themselves to achieve "perfection" and "beauty"? How far is too far? What lengths will women go in an attempt to meet the impossible and dangerous beauty standards set for them? Women develop eating disorders, engage in self-harm, rely on risky cosmetic surgery, and enlist in other ridiculous beauty practices in response to these standards and in hope of gaining control over some aspect of their life

I am controlled by my appearance and other people's perceptions of me. I don't like my body, I have never liked my body. I refuse to see people when I'm having a 'bad face day' or a 'bad body day'. When I feel my body is the most presentable I'll wear revealing clothing in the hopes of validation, in the hopes that I'll be valued and seen as someone of worth. I've viewed myself the same way for the past five years, wanting to be tiny, gentle, elegant, soft, to be the perfect example of ideal femininity.

Since I was young I've struggled with body image issues, mental health issues, insecurities, recognizing my self worth. I've never really liked myself. A couple of years ago the contempt for my appearance overwhelmed me. I resorted to a brutal cycle of mistreating and abusing myself. I barely slept, starved myself, harmed myself, stuck in this pattern of self destruction and misery. It was during this time that people began to like me, take notice of me, when I was in pain, when I was hurting myself, I took their interest in me as encouragement and validation to continue. I

had been told beauty is pain when I was young, so I didn't mind making destructive sacrifices in order to be valued. I wanted to be wanted. I wanted to be beautiful, to be perfect.

Many women struggle with a lot of these issues. It's so normalized, which is why I think my parents didn't put me into therapy in fifth grade when I told them I hated myself. Women, teenage girls, little girls, are *expected* to dislike themselves, to want to change themselves. To be uncomfortable with womanhood and aspects of femininity. They can't wait until the day that they're beautiful, because beauty "fixes" everything, if you are beautiful by society's standards, you are worth something, you have a purpose, you matter. But becoming beautiful doesn't fix anything, because there will always be something she dislikes, something to change, something that she can improve and fix about herself.

I wanted to focus on this topic because it's something that I've personally felt the effects of, and still do. It is something that no one talks about, it's something that I've thought a lot about. I wanted to show that there are other people like this and I want this cycle to end, this guilt for living. Women shouldn't apologize for their existence, and they should not have to torture themselves for something as stupid as beauty, the way we look should not control how we treat people, or ourselves. We as a whole need to begin to unlearn these thought processes and stop leading young girls down such a draining, superficial, cold, path. Being attractive and being considered attractive, is social currency. Its power. (not only does it mentally affect you, it affects your actual life, for example if you're extremely attractive and work in customer service, you are most likely to be treated better and given more money or an opportunity.

The expectation of feminine perfection through consumer capitalism and societal pressures has inspired women to see their bodies as social currency. For centuries women have been manipulated to resent their bodies, a resentment upheld by the model of beauty. Cosmetic surgery,

beauty products, and harmful behavior have been embedded into the social culture, each woman affected by their presence regardless of identity or personal beliefs. Women have been and continue to be, “immersed in the culture of beauty” (Blum, 108). It is an inescapable pressure. Some argue that “cosmetic surgery cannot be separated from the cultural and societal practices that glorify beauty on the one hand and define the female body as deficient and in constant need of improvement on the other.” (Davis, 25). A woman's beauty will be objectified and sexualized, seen as the object of desire if it meets the correct standards, just as it is dissected, considered flawed and inadequate. Their beauty is seen as insufficient, in constant need of fixing and adapting. Cosmetic surgery both engages in the idealization of beauty practices and standards, along with subjecting them to harsh scrutiny that declares them lacking. This insufficiency is profitable, companies and cosmetic surgery entice and manipulate women who don't meet society's standards, projecting their product as the solution to these women's problems. Just as in Hans Andersen's story, ‘The Ugly Duckling’, a woman's “problems are only resolved when [she] becomes a beautiful swan” (Synnott, 57), if a woman is beautiful according to society she will feel the “halo effect of beauty and attractiveness”(Synnott, 72), she will be deemed valuable, a worthwhile contribution to society, and will additionally benefit, either socially, economically, or in relation to power and status. Due to capitalism's effect, femininity is commodified and idealized, its native defects picked apart for monetary gain. The model of perfection simultaneously enforces feelings of rivalry, homogeneity, and longing into women. Feelings that are furthered with mass marketing, as consumers are manipulated into purchasing products that promise perfection, self-satisfaction, and being the superior woman, insinuating that they can become the ideal if they buy this product, they can be the example of perfection for other women to envy. Virginia Blum implies that women should “rise above jealousy through emulation” (Blum, 108), if women buy the products marketed

towards them, and participate in beauty practices, emulating the example of beauty, they can “rise above [their] jealousy” (Blum, 108).

Throughout history women have engaged in beauty practices to adhere to cultural standards of feminine perfection, using themselves and their bodies as experimental trials, leading them to face the consequences of their self-destructive behavior. Women's bodies have been an object of cultural interest for centuries, the concept of perfection looming over them, as their bodies are objectified and compared. With the example of feminine perfection being instilled into society, women have reduced their own bodies into objects, just as society has done. Through beauty pageants, fashion magazines, make-up commercials, and other manipulative products of society, women have been oriented toward “an iteration of female embodiment that prioritize[s] their status as objects,” (Vandenberg, 169). The female body has been the center of attention for centuries, its appearance, its presence, its sex appeal, scrutinized until “the body [became] more of an object, a work of art, to be evaluated and discussed by everyone” (Mcdougall, 154). This scrutiny and objectification has led to women fattening, starving, corseting, and molding their bodies in order to fit this ideal. Some women and girls as young as eight are so plagued by this expectation that they develop eating disorders, in the effort to control and perfect their bodily appearance, risking their lives and well-being to be beautiful. This hostile relationship with eating and the body can include harmful behaviors such as “self-induced vomiting, use of laxatives or diuretics, strict dieting or fasting, or vigorous exercise”(Polinska, 571), and according to Wioleta Polinska, self-harm. Polinska states that “both anorexics and bulimics often practice self mutilation”(Polinska, 569). In fact, over “one-third of women who are engaged in eating disorders also practice direct mutilation of their bodies.” (Polinska, 580-581). Eating disorders and self-harm however, do not affect changes to the body alone. In recent years, cosmetic surgery has become mainstream and

highly accessible. It is estimated that the multimillion dollar industry performs over half a million operations annually to improve facial and bodily features in the United States alone. Despite cosmetic surgery's popularity, and current normality, it is an extreme beauty practice, one that often involves "pain, discomfort, humiliation, side effects" and in the worst case, produces an unsuccessful operation which leaves the patient in "worse shape than before the surgery" (Davis, 21).

There is this long standing belief that beauty is worth suffering for, that beauty is pain, and is worth sacrificing your well-being. The rudimentary assumption that "beauty is always worth spending time and money, enduring pain, and sometimes even sacrificing life itself."(570) has been fostered by the culture of beauty for centuries. So in order to satisfy the impossible and suffocating requirements upheld by the female beauty standard, women believe that this "self abuse of their bodies" (Polinska, 570) is justified. Many women have been victims of cosmetic companies, beauty products, cosmetic procedures, and the fashion industry, relating to danger and physical harm alone. Examples being, skin cancer from sun-tanning, dying from silicone injections, chemical burns from hairsprays and fragrances, poisonings, mostly of children, caused by a variety of beauty products, the possibility of genetic mutations, as well as the dangers of surgery. Additionally, the result of eating disorders hold a long list of harmful symptoms including, mental health issues, "infertility...esophageal irritation, dental erosion, and gingivitis" (Polinska,571), as well as death and higher mortality rates. For years womens have sacrificed their health, sense of identity and sanity to achieve societal value. This sacrifice is encouraged by society, people, and even seen in children's stories. For example, in Hans Christian Andersen's version of Little Mermaid, "[she] wanted legs instead of a tail, so that she could be properly loved by her Prince. She was given legs and by inference the gap where they join at the top and after that

every step she took was like stepping on knives” (Davis, 31). The story explains how the Little Mermaid was “paying with physical pain” (Davis, 31) in order to be seen as worthy of affection. She sacrificed her tail, comfort, and voice in the hopes of a happy ending, which she succeeds in having. This story allows and promotes women to justify and even expect pain and suffering for the price of beauty, or the possibility of a happy ending. However, happy endings are much more complicated, and rare in reality, regardless of whether or not a woman pays “with physical pain” (Davis, 31) to achieve beauty. Despite that reality, women continue to put themselves through physical and emotional torture, many defending their decisions by believing that “There are no ‘bodily’ rewards without risk, pain, and suffering” (Polinska, 570). Women who can no longer endure facing the cultural norms of feminine beauty are willing to “undergo the excruciating pain and staggering expense of cosmetic surgery to alter every part of her body” (Davis, 30) in the hopes of not only social acceptance but peace within herself.

The expectation of female perfection has not been perpetuated by Society alone, women too hold some responsibility in sustaining this irrational expectation. One that has been formed through envy, competition, and comparisons. It is not to be misunderstood that the fault of the beauty standards' existence lies on women. Women have a deeply rooted sense of inferiority, one planted by society. It is that subconscious feeling of inferiority that deceives them into supporting the demand of achieving societal perfection. In the social institutions of the world, to be beautiful is to be valued, to be seen as something of importance, desirable. Which in turn, creates a consuming fear of ugliness, of failing to meet an inconceivable standard, that her mere existence is repelable. This fear is reinforced as the model of beauty is redefined incessantly throughout generations, giving women a new objective to live up to, never allowing them to catch up. Requiring competition amongst other women who are also falling behind on the ladder of beauty.

Most women, as young girls, are exposed to the model of beauty and taught to compete with not only it but other girls as well the moment they “know and care about what it means to be pretty” (Blum, 110). As girls grow into women, examples of perfection are shoved into their faces, through cosmetic companies, fashion industries, or celebrity influence, brews and internalizes insecurity, envy, and competition. There’s a continuous cycle of comparison, which some believe is enforced by mothers. A mothers role is to “cultivate and enforce the very beauty with which she competes” (Blum, 119) meaning her daughter. She does this by teaching through her own experience of the “cultural rules of female appearance. “ (Blum, 119).

These behaviors are not done out of perfectionism alone, women are also trying to achieve control, power, and independence over themselves and their bodies, not just done in the hopes of achieving beauty or societal validation. Engaging in harmful behavior is not just a reaction to societal expectations, eating disorders and self harm are also used in an attempt to achieve control and stability over oneself. Women possess a “universal need for autonomy, self-control, and the freedom from others’ control” (Polinska, 575), one they can enact through eating disorders and self harm. This kind of self-inflicted behavior allows for people in unstable environments, those with anxiety, depression, or racing thoughts, to feel a sense of control and constancy one they cannot find in their environment. For many, self-harm gives them a “release from emotional pain. A form of security” (Polinska, 580). It allows their mind to be distracted from their lives, their worries. “Personal power, relationship satisfaction, and political position in the family and society at large” (Polinska, 576), all play a part in women's relationship with self-destruction. Their “scarred, mutilated, and self-injured bodies are visual reminders of the plea for women's self-determination and self-actualization” (Polinska, 584), one that should no longer be avoided. Despite the oppressive and negative nature of sensationalized beauty practices, women can gain

pleasure from participating in these practices as they are “quite frequently sources of enjoyment, sites of self-indulgence and relaxation, as well as means for self-expression”(171 Vandenberg). It is also important for beauty to not be defined into terms of “male domination and female oppression” (Davis, 26), since women undeniably gain a source of gratification and pleasure from beauty. They wear make-up to not only look “‘good', i.e. beautiful, but also to 'feel' good” (Synnott, 63).

Being considered beautiful was the closest I had to feeling good. I was an ugly child, according to my peers and most of the people around me. From fourth to fifth grade I was chubby, wore glasses, braces, and had a pixie cut after a comb incident. Even before this I was always very aware of the way I look, trying to glance at my reflection when I pass a reflective surface. My appearance is everything to me; it's the only thing I've ever heard people like about me. It's the only thing slightly under my control.

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