

A savage beauty

The artist Jonathan Yeo talks to Style about his haunting portraits of cosmetic-surgery patients

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Mammary Augmentation I (Diptych), Jonathan Yeo (Photo: Richard Valencia)

It was while walking through Los Angeles that the artist

Jonathan Yeo became interested in exploring the theme of plastic surgery. “A beautiful girl passed me, then moments later I was surprised when she passed me again. When this identical, perfectly beautiful girl passed me a third time, I realised how pervasive the artistry of plastic surgery had become,” says Yeo, whose subjects have included, variously, Tony Blair, Nicole Kidman and George Bush.

“As a portrait artist, plastic surgery’s the big story of the moment, because what I try to do is decode character, to understand the essence of someone by reading their face.” Yeo’s current show, *You’re Only Young Twice*, is an attempt to “freeze a transient moment, both personally for the patients, but also in the growth of surgery as a phenomenon, because it’s developing and changing so rapidly, and I think we’ll look back on this time as one of relative experimentation”.

The topic of plastic surgery inevitably comes loaded with a certain shock value, but Yeo insists he isn’t courting controversy: “If I’d wanted to do that, I’d have chosen something more graphic as a subject. I deliberately haven’t created gory images about the harsh realities of the operations.” The paintings themselves are beautiful, a world away from the stomach-churning before-and-after shots that certain magazines delight in. “Rather than shock tactics, I’m looking at the way we feel about subversive images of beauty, as the topic of plastic surgery is so subtle and nuanced, touching our ideals of beauty and body image as well as the complex psychology behind it.” *Once you would have commissioned Gainsborough to make you look beautiful. Now the surgeon does*

What is surprising and arresting about Yeo's paintings is the way he captures the fragility of women undergoing surgery: their vanity is completely absent and, instead, they look more like victims. As a woman, it's easy to feel a certain threat from someone who has had plastic surgery; we want our boyfriend to know that those perfect pneumatic breasts aren't "real", that surgery is "cheating". Yeo, however, has stepped back from that sense of morality, so instead of finger wagging, we feel compassion for these women. One particularly powerful painting is of a woman who has had a facelift, the bandage around her head making her look like a baby who needs comforting.

"I wanted this reaction of warmth from the viewer, rather than judgment. I'm not making a statement about the morality of surgery, nor am I encouraging it," Yeo says. "I'm interested in the way everyone has a view, even if they'd never do it, and I wanted to convey how it forces you to confront the idea of whether you can cheat death or, at least, rewind time."

Part of what is unsettling about the paintings is that they undermine the very thing that anyone undergoing surgery is chasing: physical perfection. One of the most shocking images is of a beautiful woman, unconscious, a tube in her mouth, her face marked for surgery. "I wanted to paint a beautiful image that was also uncomfortable, as there's definitely something poignant about a young, beautiful face going under the knife. The stakes seem higher."

While there's a certain pathos in his depiction of the patients' suffering, there's an unsettling, comic quality to some of the paintings, such as a pair of beautiful, enhanced breasts, marked with cartoon-like arrows to show where they will be altered again in the unending quest for physical perfection.

Yeo painted the pictures over the course of 2011, but the process began four years ago. Following a conversation with a doctor friend, Yeo realised this was an area ripe for exploration and he spent a lot of time forming relationships with surgeons. "Those

who got it saw I wanted to document it, to immortalise the moment in this growing phenomenon, rather than to make moral judgments.” He worked with three surgeons in Britain and one in America, scouring their archives before getting permission from the women he painted. He hasn’t met all of his subjects, as the majority of the paintings were taken from photographs, but he did attend a facelift. It was, he says, “like watching a master craftsman at work constructing a fantastically complicated musical instrument. It made my art look much less precise”.

Yeo is also interested in the speed with which the fashion for a certain body shape is changing: “That artificial, Wag look has been replaced by something more natural. Things no longer evolve organically over a generation but can be imposed immediately, so it’s an art form that’s changing fast.”

“Art form” might be an unusual way to describe surgery, but the paintings also explore Yeo’s relationships with the surgeons, many of whom are frustrated artists; one had even trained as a sculptor. “I’m documenting the artistry, as plastic surgeons really understand the structure of the human body,” Yeo says. “In the most fundamental way, they’re sculpting with bodies, and there’s an artistry, combined with a casual savagery, to the way they mark their patients before surgery.” Some of the paintings focus on this: the pendulous breasts tattooed with black pen to show where the nipple and skin will be lifted; or the pert, highly artificial breasts marked with a shocking number of changes, the result of a woman undergoing surgery to correct past operations that weren’t “right”. Yeo wanted to capture the “decorative effect” of each surgeon’s idiosyncratic pre-surgical marks: “I realised they created a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in one frozen moment, and that’s the real story.”

The cropped torsos certainly have a classical beauty, and some surgeons can identify their work: “The way they do a nose or reconstruct breasts, it is as though they have their own signature. Their patients — real women — are the portfolio of these artists.” As a result, Yeo sees his portraits as the work of two artists: himself and the surgeon. “I’m bringing together my painting and their surgery as two art forms. It’s interesting putting that in the context of a couple of hundred years ago,” Yeo says. “Then, you would commission Gainsborough to make you look beautiful, but now you don’t need the painter, the surgeon does that in real



life.”

Neo-Plane

Implant Exchange

Yeo's research also explored the psychology behind the addictive nature of plastic surgery. "The reasons people choose surgery are complex, although some patients aren't aware of that." He likens the experience of having a facelift to "doing drugs for the first time. It feels great and gives the individual a huge ego boost. But time marches on, the ego lift wears off, and people want to do it again. This is when the patient gets into dangerous territory. If you keep pulling the skin in one direction, the muscles stop working: skin doesn't age in one direction. Each time, it's less effective — people start looking weird. Winding back the clock is a powerful drug, and it's tough to realise you can only do it once: eventually, everyone will run up against themselves and have to confront that".

The jury is still out, of course, on whether surgery and "work" make women look younger, and Yeo laughs when I ask him whether he found the "before" or "after" shots more attractive. "I definitely prefer the more natural, less enhanced look," he says. "But then again, I've been viewing porn for the past two years [for his recent Porn in the USA collage work] and that is such an artificial look, so I think my view is probably a bit distorted. What I have learnt is that in the vast majority of cases, women are undergoing surgery for themselves, not because a man in their life has suggested they should. A woman can buy a new face or bigger breasts and the person she's almost certainly doing that for is herself."

Jonathan Yeo: You're Only Young Twice is at the Lazarides Gallery, London W1, from Friday until January 21; lazinc.com