

# Plastic surgeons: the 21st century's portrait artists

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Art Exhibitions

Tiffany O'Callaghan, CultureLab editor



*Lower Lid Blepharoplasty* by Jonathan Yeo, from the 2011 exhibition *You're Only Young Twice*

A woman's torso emerges in honeyed tones out of a bluish grid, her small breasts pointing forward. This is the before image. In the painting next to it, the same woman - but with far larger breasts - seems to be standing just a tad straighter, and her skin has an unmistakable brown hue and bikini tan line.

The paintings are part of *You're Only Young Twice*, a collection of new works by British portrait artist Jonathan Yeo, currently on display at Lazarides Gallery in London. The subtle story they tell is at the heart of Yeo's exploration of the way plastic surgeons are now blurring the distinction between portraiture and medical procedure.

Yeo, who has painted politicians and celebrities, including David Cameron, Nicole Kidman and Rupert Murdoch, says that there was a time when portrait artists were charged with portraying their subjects in the fashions and ideals of beauty of their era. "Now that's being replaced by surgeons," he says. "They're becoming artists themselves - sculpting with real bodies."

Our ambivalence is evident in the way it is depicted in the media - often with "judgmental, finger-wagging" emphasis, he adds. "But that overlooks the fact that the vast majority of what goes on we don't notice, because it goes well." According to a survey by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons [PDF], in 2010 more than 1.6 million plastic surgery procedures were performed in the US, and nearly as many in Brazil. In the UK, more than 118,000 people went under the knife for cosmetic surgeries in 2010. "The point, partly, in doing this [exhibition] is to get people to look from a slightly different point of view and accept that this is here to stay," Yeo says.

The collection of 17 works - including several diptychs showing patients before and after surgery - is based on photographs that Yeo was shown by the cosmetic surgeons Kirk Brandow, Miles Berry and Jan Stanek, with their patients' permission. Yeo chose to focus on face lifts and breast enhancements because those are the procedures people talk about most.



*Rhytidectomy III (with Surgeon's hands)* by Jonathan Yeo, from the 2011 exhibition *You're Only Young Twice*

In *Rhytidectomy III (with surgeon's hands)* a woman's face, dotted with black marker circles and lines, is pulled taut by the surgeon's fingertips, and pressed against her cheekbones. In *Mastopexy IV*, a woman's large, pendulous breasts - with a tanline across the top and branching blue veins just discernable under the surface of the skin - are marked with black ink. The crossed lines at the centre of a circle denote where her nipple will be moved to.

Each of these oil paintings seems like a work in progress, something that resonates with their contents. The women whose breasts and faces are featured in the centre of the canvas are framed by the exposed grids beneath. Yeo says revealing the grid reassures people that the proportions of what they are looking at are accurate. And anyway, painting to the edge of the canvas verges into photorealism, which isn't what he is aiming for. The images of plastic surgery are familiar enough now, he says; instead, like the surgeons themselves perhaps, he aims to "strike a balance between the artful and the scientific".

In the course of creating these paintings, Yeo not only sifted through countless images, but also sat in on some surgical procedures. As someone who has spent the past two decades painting the surfaces of faces, he says it was "utterly riveting" to get a glimpse of the musculature beneath, the muscles that enable us to grin and frown, grimace and smile. He has become so fascinated by the subject that he hopes to do more such work - perhaps in collaboration with a patient planning to undergo surgery.

Even so, while Yeo is deliberately striving to reserve judgment, after being exposed to the ins and outs of plastic surgery he does have some strong ideas. To begin with, he thinks that too often people underestimate how drastic these operations are. "People assume they can go and do it as if they're having their hair coloured," he says. One of his paintings depicts a woman just after surgery. Her face swaddled in white cloth, though Yeo explains she is middle-aged, the woman resembles a battered child. "She looks like someone who has come out the jungle in the middle of a war with a head wound," he says.

Apart from the physical severity of the procedures, Yeo wonders about the potential for homogeneity that trends in plastic surgery can promote. Just as portrait artists used to portray their subjects in the conventions of their time, so the surgeon is fast becoming a sort of modern portrait artist. But as Yeo says: "It's a slightly odd thing that we can change our bodies to look like whatever celebrity is popular at the moment."

And for someone who captures faces, whether in paint or collage form, Yeo says he worries that too much plastic surgery can take away some of the complexity that comes with age. "I prefer older faces," he says, "when you can see the narrative of their lives written in the lines of their face."

*You're Only Young Twice* by Jonathan Yeo is showing at the Lazarides Gallery in London until 21 January 2012.