

VIEW FROM THE BENCH

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Re-forming Identity

In our society there is a tacit understanding of what is and what is not appropriate body adornment and craft. Because of this those who make jewellery and functional objects are well positioned to create pieces that are beyond people's expectations, pieces that can surprise and throw audiences off balance, hopefully inducing a jolt of re-cognition that can lead to new and surprising insights.¹ I have been

noticing more and more work by contemporary jewellers and metalsmiths who use such de-centering strategies to drive home their concern with the oppressive characterizations of women that permeate our society. Successful work of this sort can be a potent vehicle for "social criticism and psychic change."²

Much of what goes into shaping us as men and women is learned from messages provided by the society in which we live. We begin to form our identities as we see ourselves through the eyes of our families, and we continue the process as our world expands to include other people and external forces. Among these influences are the ubiquitous mass media and advertising images that bombard us "with the multitude of representations of what we may become."³ These have a constant and powerful impact because they often become the ideals against which we compare ourselves.

It is important to understand that these images are constructed not to merely reflect or reproduce reality but to *actively* create particular beliefs about the world. Unfortunately the advertising world and the media continue to promote the long-held belief that a woman's worth is determined by her physical desirability and by the pre-eminence of her urge to be a devoted wife and mother. In so doing they perpetuate Western society's stereotypical and limited vision of what women are and what they are capable of being.

These persuasive characterizations are fueled by a consumer culture at its worst, one that deliberately plays on people's insecurities as a way of pressuring them to conform to cultural ideals that are fictitious and oppressive constructions. Consider the following advertisement promoting flavored bodywash that I came across while glancing through a mainstream women's magazine.

Over a background of rose petals evocative of female genitalia the ad intones: "What do women want? We want to be delicious." It would seem that in their quest to be attractive to men, women must not only smell good but they must taste good as well! The underlying message is a sinister one because it tells us that women must mask their natural odours in order to be enjoyed fully by men. Talk about playing on insecurities!

Distorted and unattainable images of female desirability and worth prevail because they make it seem *only natural* that women must work constantly to smell, look, and act "womanly" in order to attract and

hold onto a man. This labor in turn seems necessary because our society maintains that single women are incomplete and unfulfilled.

Advertisements, articles, movies, and television programs tell us over and over again that women should focus their energy on improving their appearances and caring for families rather than on developing their individual characters and talents. Comparing oneself to the thousands of impossibly tall, thin, blemish-free, and poreless computer-adjusted images of women is an exercise designed to work to women's insecurity. After all the aim is to encourage us to spend money. Many girls and women come to resent or feel ashamed of their all-too-real faces, bodies, and psychic needs, resulting in hours spent shopping and at the gym, conditions such as anorexia and bulimia, and/or multiple plastic surgeries to correct things that never needed correcting in the first place.

There is a growing number of metalsmiths who comment eloquently and provocatively on such issues in their work. Willy Scholten decries Western society's established standards of desirability by making a case for an inherent beauty, creating images of women that unabashedly refuse contemporary categorizations such as sexy. The works highlight women's *supposed* imperfections – their very real and unsymmetrical bodies that are under attack for being not normal and not desirable.

Sandra Bonazoli's *Measuring Cup*, 1995 demonstrates incisively that women are being ill-served not only by the media but also by the medical establishment who, through its promotion of cosmetic surgeries, would have us believe that our bodies can be reformed into *perfection*. Bonazoli addresses both the construction and consumption of images of women as sexual beings and of male appetites, often making her point with trenchant pieces whose metal parts serve as molds for home-baked female (or should that be male?) fantasy figures.

Erika Ayala Stefanutti's seductively beautiful, pierced-copper cake and candy dishes surprise us when we recognize that the source of the cutouts is pin-up silhouettes. These objects serve up the server in order to satisfy people's appetites. Julia Giannacopoulos expresses her concern with culturally imposed gender roles in a different way: the jewels in her *American* series make a mockery of our romantically idealized version of wedded bliss – they are fashioned from soap, lint, linens, and food with nary a diamond in sight.

Honest and effective works are unique expressions of their creators' interests and concerns, be they aesthetic, social, political, historical, psychological, philosophical, or other; they result from the maker's engagement with the world around her. Even though many in our society continue to insist that people who create jewellery and functional objects should shed their extra-aesthetic interests outside the studio door and focus on aesthetics in their work, there will continue to be those who make well-conceived jewellery and objects that have the ability to make us think.

¹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990, 201-2. Lippard writes: "In modern societies it is most often artists who . . . are expected to do the unexpected."

² Lippard, 202.

³ Victor Burgin in Sandy Nairne, *State of the Art: Ideas & Images in the 1980s*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1990, 154.