

How Long Has This Been Going On?

BY MATTI SEVINK

On July 2, 1989, Toni Sullivan, a Markham real estate agent, went in for what has seemingly become a "routine" form of surgery — liposuction. Two days later she was dead.

It is important to understand cosmetic surgery, the larger issue of "ideal" female body-imaging and the concept of feminine beauty itself, as violence against women. It is a form of violence against women that is dependent both on men's and women's complicity.

"How Long Has This Been Going On? is dedicated to those who have died in pursuit of the 'perfect' body." These are the words inscribed on a copper scroll that forms part of this installation.

How Long Has This Been Going On? starts with the business card of a plastic surgeon, for which he has appropriated Jean Leon Gerome's painting "Pygmalion and Galatea." In his bizarre self-portrayal, the surgeon masquerades as a sculptor of living flesh, an extreme manifestation of the beauty cult. (A lesser form of this phenomenon would be the young woman who tries to "sculpt" her body through diet and exercise regimes.) This installation reappropriates the painting to the realm of art.

The painting had been reproduced with some vaguely perceptible alterations. The cherub's arrow has been replaced by a bloodied scalpel and the two grotesques have been changed to reflect an aging face and a fat face, two natural states that are taboo in this thinness-, youth-obsessed society.

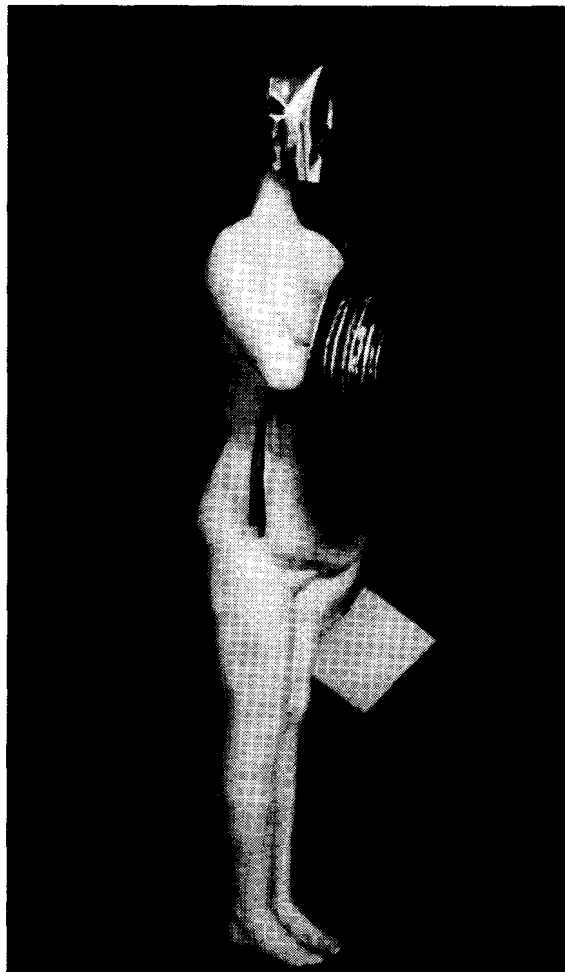
The painting is framed in an iconographic "church window," at once representing the perpetuation of misogyny through male-oriented religions and the "religious" nature of the modern-day quest for beauty.

The power of patriarchy depends on the existence of misogyny. Misogyny is perpetuated by patriarchal religions through their adoption of a monotheistic doctrine: one male god with no others allowed. This leaves no room for the female deity. By denying the female deity, we are denied the right to accept and revere a woman's body. Instead we are taught to loathe it.

The "religious" nature of the quest for beauty is apparent in its

requirement of payment for the right to worship (through highly-priced beauty products and weight-loss programs), and the imposition of guilt and punishment on the heretic who refuses to worship or who fails in her pursuit of beauty. Those who fail, either by being too fat or too old, are often denied employment or promotion on the economic front and in their personal lives may suffer the cruelest fate of all — denial of love.

Pygmalion's shield, a component of the original painting, has been replaced on the arm of "Ua," the sculpture.



"Ua" (pronounced oohaah) is approximately 24" high and is made of clay, copper and human hair. She is a spiral who is painfully thin at one point and grows fatter as you move around her. She makes evident the fact that we fit on a weight continuum, that we are naturally prone to a wide spectrum of natural weights. She is all of us. Our relative differences in weight which seem like a natural progression as you move around the sculpture, appear unnatural when we see the very fattest in juxtaposition with the very thinnest. Here is placed an internal "shield," both protective and confrontational, to represent the conflict between and within women, caused by natural variations in weight. When viewed from the back it is apparent that the fat may also be interpreted as a shield. The "fat" shield is echoed both by the internal shield and the external shield which she holds on her arm.

Ua's face is covered with a copper mask but has no eye opening. It is a "sightless visor," which reflects the contradiction of an unquestioning faith in the "beauty ideal" and

the inability to look at the archetypal representation of the acceptability of woman only as long as she fits that ideal, an ever-changing ideal dictated by patriarchy. It is painful to look at what is being presented to her. She is facing the painting which depicts love being given to the "perfect" woman who has been sculpted by the man who holds her. In her hand behind the shield, Ua holds the surgeon's business card. She can receive the love if she conforms to the thin ideal and cosmetic surgery is presented as one way to achieve that ideal.

"How Long Has This Been Going On?"

incorporates Matti Sevink's oil on canvas
reproduction (48" x 90") of Jean Leon

Gerome's 19th-century portrayal of
the Pygmalion and Galatea myth,
a 25" clay and copper

sculpture "Ua," and a
copper scroll dedicating

the work to those
who have lost

their lives in
pursuit of

the ideal
body

