

The New York Times

Artist's Life: Cut, Nip And Tuck

You may remember that the body, the return of beauty and fashion as art were big themes battled around in the 1990s. They all reconverge with a clinical vengeance in a group show called "I Am Art: An Expression of the Visual & Artistic Process of Plastic Surgery" at Apexart, a nonprofit space in TriBeCa.

The curator is a plastic surgeon, Anthony C. Berlet, who has training as an architect, experience as a medical illustrator and a busy practice in northern New Jersey. Along with his own work he has selected that of three col-

I Am Art
Apexart

leagues: Antonino Cassisi, an Italian specialist in pediatric plastic surgery; Michael Cohen, a partner in the Cosmetic Surgery Center of Maryland and a breast surgery specialist who also paints, sculptures and collects art; and Scott Spiro, another New Jerseyite, with a particular interest in body contouring, a sideline in painting and drawing, and a membership in the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

How is their art, which is also their surgery, best described? The human body is their medium, the operating room their studio. The tools of their craft include multifarious cutting, clamping, probing and sewing devices, as well as digital and laser technologies. Most of the work that results is a living art. It can be seen walking among us in the form of revamped and — this is, of course, the point — improved faces and figures.

For purposes of a gallery display, however, we get photographs and videos of those bodies, often seen before, during and

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after surgery, in the process of being patched and stitched, augmented or reduced, subtly adjusted or utterly transformed.

The idea of anatomical alteration as art is not new. Some non-Western cultures have long practiced scarring, binding, piercing and stretching parts of the anatomy in the interest of status or beauty. In the contemporary West there is a significant tradition of body art. The French feminist artist Orlan has been submitting herself to craniofacial reshapings for years in a blend of performance and sculpture meant to question dominant standards of beauty.

Dr. Berlet, no doubt sensitive to Western associations of cosmetic surgery with decadence, vanity and conspicuous consumption, is careful to distinguish, in an exhibition brochure,

"I Am Art: An Expression of the Visual & Artistic Process of Plastic Surgery" remains on view through May 9 at Apexart, 291 Church Street, TriBeCa; (212) 431-5270, apexart.org.

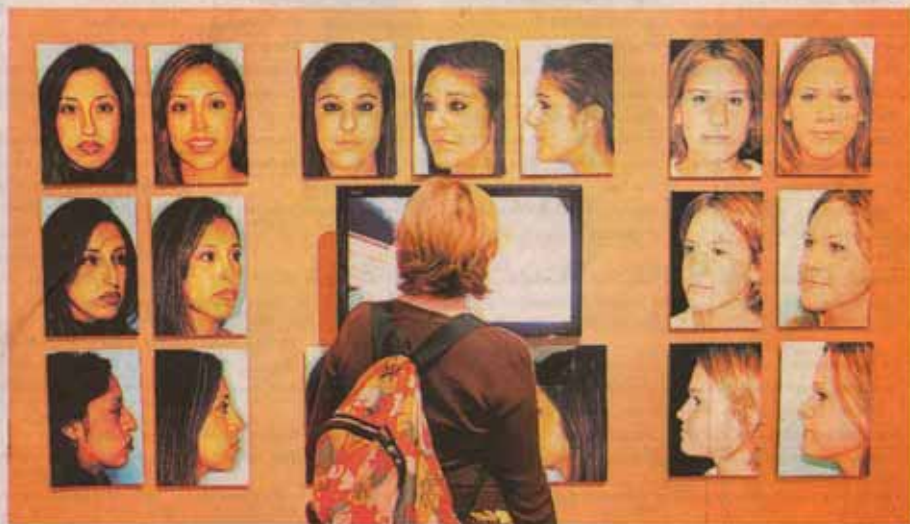
which kinds of procedures qualify as art and which do not.

The basic face-lift, for example, is a rote operation "that can be taught to almost anyone." Pull, lift, stitch; end of story. Not art. Creativity begins with other, more option-rich manipulations. With rhinoplasty — nose jobs — you are on aesthetic ground. Each nose is unique, so decisions about shaping it must be imaginative, though always guided by a fundamental form-follows-function principle: i.e., the patient should be able to breathe through the nose when the work is finished.

Other procedures involving different and larger parts of the anatomy, and requiring masses of skin and tissue to be moved from here to there and blood supplies to be rerouted, can be formally even more complex. And the ramifications of every move must be considered: as in all art, there is a fine line separating doing too little, just enough and too much. Ethical, philosophical and psychological inquiries are ever present.

Who defines the terms "too lit-

Nose jobs, before and after: images at "I Am Art: An Expression of the Visual & Artistic Process of Plastic Surgery."



SUZANNE DECHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

tle," "just enough" and "too much"? Who defines beauty, perfection, the ideal? To what degree is perfection another version of distortion? The examination of culturally based and gender-based valuations was central to certain artists of the 1990s, who would have noted as significant that all four artists in the Apexart show are male, while almost all the models or patients in the photographs are female.

And what about hierarchical

ranking within the aesthetics of plastic surgery? Are certain types of heroic, skill-intensive surgery — the repair of severe birth defects, say — high art? And are more fashion-oriented procedures like breast lifts, tummy tucks, mommy makeovers and liposuction low art, or possibly not-art?

Personally, I have no problem with accepting the work in "I Am Art" as art. A thing of beauty is a joy, whether forever or for a day,

and if a doctor-artist can turn you into one, that's art to me. And if he can rescue a body from serious ruin and a soul from despair, God bless him; he's as good as Michelangelo. Does he cater to the rich and charge too much? Check out all the drecky Picassos still selling for huge prices at auction. Do all those nose jobs look pretty much alike? Check out paintings in Chelsea galleries these days.

The big problem with the

Apexart show, at least for certain sensitive types, is looking at some of it. Dr. Cohen's pictures of breast enhancement are as agreeable as lingerie advertisements, but his colleagues deliver some pretty strong stuff. Many artists do their work in private and give you only a final, polished product, leaving the scraps, scrapings and splots on the studio floor. Here you get the whole schmeer — the blood, the guts, the slice, the equivalent of Counter-Reformation paintings of martyrdoms, but with real bodies.

The show gives you some warning as to what you're in for. The following words appear in tiny type far down on the back of the brochure: "This exhibition contains content that may not be suitable for all viewing audiences. Please use your discretion."

Heed that advice. And if your discretion says, "Go," then brace yourself, keep your mind open and respect what you see. After all, given the frailties of the flesh, the vanities of age and the possibilities of accident, you too may end up as art someday.