BARBARA ZUCKER: FOR BEAUTY'S SAKE

by Joachim Neugroschel

(From the catalog)

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark," a scientist concocts a potion to remove a facial blemish from his otherwise "perfect" wife. It kills her. Aside from typically making her death the husband's tragedy rather than the wife's, the author leaves us with, among other things, a succinct allegory of how female beauty is commodified as an aesthetic and ethical imperative in the patriarchy. Whatever physical vanity and invasive measures both sexes may indulge in—clothes, fitness, makeup, hair care, plastic surgery, wrinkle removal—women are still pressured to modify, invade, adulterate, corrupt, "improve" their heads, faces, and bodies for erotic, social, and moral acceptance. The ultimate goal of female beauty is eugenic, and we internalize these demands as part of mating and bearing.

In the sculptures making up Barbara Zucker's "For Beauty's Sake," the ramifications of this universal cultural pattern are explored with poker-faced irony, which reduces the images of such alterations to a caricatural shorthand. By condensing and isolating each ideogram in what Jonathan Swift called "The Progress of Beauty," Zucker parallels the physical and spiritual fragmentation that severs body and mind as well as fosters America's youth cult. While this separation can easily be blamed on the Platonic and Christian split between flesh and soul, it mayor may not be rooted in the biological emphasis on a woman's youth as her most favorable period of childbearing and on her physical drawing power—the ability to obtain a provider and also a father for her offspring.

Geometrically abbreviating each "beauty" maneuver to a few terse lines, curves, and shapes, Zucker evokes painful and embarrassing admissions of female "inadequacy." This also includes efforts at assimilating racial and ethnic traits into a monolithic society that inflicts a minute number of physical ideals on a great variety of people, classes, and subcultures.

In *Rib Removal: Waist,* two parallel verticals and two facing angles sum up the before and after of this operations, whose results can be lethal. Thus, the actress Anna Sten, who sacrificed several of her ribs to the icon of a femme fatale, died; she was literally squeezed to death(fatal, indeed). *Nose Job* offers a contrast between two forms that look alike only because they are seen from different angles—to highlight the cultural relativity of erotic aesthetics. This piece evokes a surgery often associated with Jews and Jewish stereotypes, while *Hair Straightening* cites a technique often linked to African Americans and other groups. However, such attempts may lead to self-estrangement rather than assimilation. "Humidity was my enemy," Zucker states when describing her adolescent hair-straightening as an attempt by a middle-class Jewish woman to model herself after "blue-blooded Philadelphia WASPs." This sculpture gracefully contrasts a spiral vertical with a straight vertical, thereby exemplifying an iconographic mise-en-page favored by Zucker; yet the opposition coexists with the overall identification, the survival of the self, to underscore a dialectical twinship between what are perceived as "defect" and "remedy." Unlike David Salle and other artists who thrive on juxtaposition—now an effete cliché—Zucker employs *contrast* precisely to create a self-rejecting *identity* of the individual, so that the harmony of each artwork becomes a comment on the individual's disharmony (like the "successful" dieter who still feels fat as opposed to the "overweight" person who claims that a thin person inside is striving to get out). Furthermore, in drawing on the obvious source of before-and-after ads, Zucker's "split screen" reminds us that advertising is a tool of patriarchal and commercial propaganda and that the chief function of "beauty aids," including surgery, is not only political but also economic: How much do Americans spend to make their faces and bodies more desirable in this most conspicuous of consumptions?

Kate Millet posits a very dry yet viable definition of “political”: It refers to a situation in which one person has power over another. In these terms, any subjugation to the beauty paragons of the dominant culture makes hair, noses, and even fingernails political as badges of aesthetic—i.e., cultural, i.e., political—conformity maintained by and strengthening the values and traditions of the monolith.

Pop Art cartoon paintings, says Lawrence Alloway, are “simpler” than the comic strips suggesting them. On the other hand, the work of some cartoon-inspired artists, especially if they began as comicbook illustrators—James Romberger, Joe Coleman, Art Spiegelman—is visually more intricate. This means that visual reduction and/or complexity have specific artistic functions and do not, per se, reveal aesthetic quality or its absence. Likewise, Zucker’s ideograms look simpler than, say, Chinese characters of Japanese images. In fact, they often approach the more stylized exideograms of the Hebrew alphabet, in which the letter *gimel* still means, and visually hints at, a “camel” or *beth* a “house.” However, the questions implied by Zucker’s sculptures and the issues raised are far more complicated, as are their artistic and intellectual insinuations.

Beyond conjuring up the (self-)fragrnentation and (self-)alienation in the cultural predicament of female beauty, Zucker’s reductionism challenges the blurry notion of abstraction, since her ideograms are abstract in denotation but figurative in connotation (with the sign/post of each title). Still, the recognizable concrete particular dissolves into the conceptual universal, and the ideal woman becomes a crazy quilt of artificial fraction-realities. In her simplicity, Zucker may be influenced by Japanese pottery and sculpture; but the struggle between abstraction and representation—for example, mind and body, shadow and substance, ideal and bathos—imbues all aspects of Western civilization, which contradictorily holds them apart yet tries to fuse them, never achieving any synthesis. In keeping with this negative dialectic, art, no matter how self-contained it may appear, is constantly embroiled in politics and economics. And, by the same token, few artists are as intent on describing and analyzing their achievement as the modernists: the more abstruse their works, the more they explicate (see the writings of Jean Arp, Asger Jorn, Piet Mondrian, Georg Baselitz, and Jean Dubuffet, or Thomas Mann’s endlessly self-congratulatory prefaces to the English translations of his novels).

Zucker’s oeuvre, assisted by her (sub)titles, is certainly self-explanatory, but this lucidity, quivering with countless overtones, is deceptive. For, as Ibsen said about his plays, these pieces are meant partly to ask rather than answer. What do people do to themselves to become more appealing? Who prompts, pressures, or forces them? How and why do we interiorize these conventions? What choices do we have as individuals, as groups? Is there truly such a thing as free choice—and to what extent is choice influenced or dictated by social and economic factors? In which ways are sex and love social constructs? Why does the West both condemn and promote the “natural” as a moral concern? In what degree does, or should, a body belong to the individual and in what degree to society, to the state? Is there—ought there to be—joint ownership? What is the difference between body and person? The bouillon cube of all these questions is: Who am I?

An overriding factor in dealing with art that is political is the viewer’s acceptance or rejection of its ideas: “I agree, therefore it’s good art”—which really means, “I think so too, therefore I am.” This feel-good conformity is deadly to both artistic creating and political thinking. Fortune-cookie ideas conveyed by facile aesthetics (Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer) merely preach to allies, while harmful ideas may, ironically, be conveyed by more interesting work. Thus, I feel that Germany’s better movie comedies were made during the Nazi era—as cover-ups, obviously. And I consider John Wayne one of America’s premier actors, despite the arch-conservatism of his films and his image, as partly expressed by his symbolic astronomical ignorance; in *The Green Berets,* the sun rises in the *west,* over America. By the same token, Hollywood’s Pollyannaism during the forties was actually a potent propaganda device, pushing Americans to believe that World War II would have a happy ending like any Hollywood film and that love and peace would conquer all. (Instead, we got Senator McCarthy and the Cold War.) Those movies were as forceful and artistic as Nazi Germany’s not-so-humorous *Durchhalte* (hold-out) cinema.

Artists who speak for marginal groups are consistently reproached for their parochialism—as if the dominant culture were universal rather than merely omnipotent. Hence, such artists have avoided dealing with their specific issues; Franz Kafka, a Prague Jew, never once mentions the words “Jew” or “Jewish” in his fiction, in which the characters are all Christian. But now, ignoring the alleged objectivism of the dominant culture, the new subjectivism illuminates the gamut of subcultures and lifestyles and their problems (the flip side of the “Me Generation” since the focus in the sixties was on the marginal individual and the marginal group). The existence of such art is subversive per se: The term “women’s art” is no longer (and never should have been) a derogatory classification any more than “working-class art” or “black art” —or even “elitist art.” Zucker’s humor stirs up a hornet’s nest, for she is also attacking the social approval of even the most invasive beauty “improvements.” Recall Orlan’s grisly filming of her plastic surgery and Hannah Wilke’s gruesome color photos of her mother’s losing battle with cancer; there is little chance that Wilke, who, meanwhile, has also succumbed to cancer, could have gotten away with a comical treatment of this medical horror. But Zucker can easily spoof beauty operations because of the subliminal demands that trigger them in the first place: Beauty is a must for women, who, however, are constantly ridiculed for struggling toward this very goal that patriarchy dictates (see Swift’s poem “The Progress of Beauty” or Heinrich von Kleist’s play *Das Kätchen von Heilbronn* [Kate of Heilbronn]). Akin to Orlan, Zucker also could have shocked us with the gory suffering that the patient-victim undergoes in beauty treatments. Instead, she chooses humor as a Brechtian alienation device to poke our intellect rather than our viscera. In this way, Barbara Zucker proves that abstractionism and reductionism, far from expelling human beings from art—in the sense of Ortega y Gasset’s “dehumanization”—can be used to delve into our lives and supply new methods and perspectives for examining our condition.