

What is Beauty?

By Judith Schaechter

The expressions “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” and “I know beauty when I see it” are bothersome to me—they seem to diminish beauty’s profundity and reduce it to a matter of opinion that is beneath discussion. That can seem like a massive abdication—a sort of shrugging it off with “it can’t be figured out, so let’s just forget about it.” At the same time, I don’t find beauty to be thought-provoking; on the contrary, I find beauty to be *thought-annihilating*. The real question isn’t “Is beauty in the eye of the beholder or a quality in the beheld?” anyway—the real question is: “Do we desire something because it’s beautiful or is it beautiful because we desire it?”

Because beauty is really not a particularly verbal or intellectual experience, critics, theorists and philosophers can argue forever that it is irrelevant, that we’re *over it* as a culture. We can all even *agree* on that point ... basically, you can deny it *all you want*, and still, the argument continues to rage, unfazed, unabated and entirely undiminished. So there’s your evidence of its importance. When the tide goes out on beauty, enough fools go rushing in to fill the vacuum, or we just switch to a safer word and call it something else, like “sublime” or even “thought-provoking.”

I want to be clear that, in discussing beauty, I am distinguishing between “beautiful nature” and “man-made beauty,” and between “beautiful ideas” and “beautiful objects.”

As an artist, I am interested in the esthetics of man-made objects. Nature is beautiful. No kidding—one hears this all the time; it’s hardly a burning debate, but it’s not really very interesting in a discussion of esthetics,¹ because we are not responsible for creating it. A flower, a tiger or a rainbow is ultimately utterly without abstract meaning unto itself. A sunset only indicates that the Earth is still in rotation. A flower can only be itself and follow its own independent destiny, which includes its inevitable demise. But art can address our desires, both directly and eternally; it has nothing better to do, in fact! Art can embody intentional metaphor and narrative. At the very least, art has the potential to address humans on their own terms.

Beauty is also not pretty. Pretty is nice and it is pleasant, but not a lot more. Pretty is *not* in the eye of the beholder and, as a quality residing in an object, it can be evaluated. These measurable qualities are the formal elements of design and include contrast, range, balance and radiance. Pretty is the thing that is only skin-deep. Beauty is much, much deeper—ask any ugly person.

¹ Unless you are talking about interventions like gardening, or our obsession with dog breeds, say. Human beauty, being of paramount fascination to us, is certainly to be included in any ideas of esthetics—especially a discussion centered on uniting mind and body.

Beautiful *ideas* are similarly uninteresting—world peace, caring for others are all beautiful ideas that are often easy to come by, since they tend to become clichés. Yet they *still* need esthetic help in selling them to humanity. Any fool can, and often does, have good ideas, but it's the person who writes the best song who gets the followers who are actually inspired to make changes.

The nature of beauty

We have these *peak, positive esthetic moments* and we need a word for them. The word we choose is beauty. We try to agree on what words mean so that effective communication can take place, but definitions shift, mutate and evolve, especially words describing emotionally loaded abstractions, such as beauty.

Beauty is the positive principle in esthetics. For beauty to mean anything else, or to call something that is plain, homely or ugly “beautiful,” is to corrupt the word and see its meaning shift. We would still need to provide a word for that peak esthetic experience. Before get up in arms about your undying appreciation for something hideous, let me qualify that by saying the relationship of “ugly” to “beautiful” is an interdependent one—beauty can contain ugliness and vice-versa. They provide a venue for each other by virtue of their seeming polarity, but it is a false dichotomy. They are much more like yin and yang—two complementary forces where each contains elements of its opposite and gives rise to the other.

One thing seems obvious: Beauty is entirely dependent on inspiration to give it relevance and vigor. Without inspiration, beauty would be so bereft and uninteresting that it would hardly be worthy of its own name and exalted status. While inspiration seems to be the key to understanding it all, it also defies description and tends to sound flaky or pseudo-mystical after a few words. Regardless, nothing seems closer to the deepest mysteries regarding our nature as enlightened and aware human beings.

Inspiration is intimately connected to the idea of life force, as one can see from its origins, meaning “to breathe life into.” This animation is itself a creative act, as it connects spirit to matter, ephemeral content to physical form. Thus, the artist is re-enacting the ultimate in creative acts and the greatest creative connection in the universe. One can see why transference of life force might be seen as sacred activity. Perhaps this is why religious people sometimes see artistic creation as being in competition with God-the-Creator. To actually, successfully turn the intellectual, the emotional and the inspirational into a *material object* is pretty miraculous. An artwork does this—and, when it does it well, we call it beautiful.

Maybe the simplest way to define “esthetic beauty” (two words that used to be synonyms but have diverged somewhat) is that it is the material analog to the experience of *love* and, thus, we find its appearance attractive. *A beautiful thing is love itself, manifest, in an object.*

Beauty is dangerous

Comment [RT1]: Is this a quote? If so, by whom?

The impact of beauty is nothing short of fierce. Nancy Etcoff points out that many of the words we use to qualify beauty are violent: bombshell, knockout, drop-dead gorgeous, rapturous.² This is how badly we want it; this is what we are willing to risk to get it. Beauty provokes a gut “Wow!” response, which is why I called it “thought-annihilating”—it doesn’t really appeal to the intellect; at least, not initially.

Comment [RT2]: Who is she?

Beauty, being so much about *response*, cannot truly be possessed even in an art object—although we imagine that possessing and corraling beauty will bring relief to our appetites once and for all. Because the experience is so glorious, so fleeting, mysterious, erotic, *traumatic*, even, it is always calling attention to its own possible or, perhaps, unavoidable loss. It takes courage to risk being involved with beauty, as it embodies a healthy measure of anxiety and fear. If beauty is to art what love is in life, then it is something without which you suffer; something you will go to great lengths to experience.

There are dark sides to beauty. Under its influence, one feels vulnerable, out of control. The desire for beauty defies rationality and common sense. It can cause one to abandon safety and self-interest in its pursuit. Anything that involves desire can bring out our bad qualities—materialism, fetishism, selfishness, jealousy, avarice, the urge to exploit and misuse that which we see as merely a *thing*. An objectification is always perilously close to becoming a false idol. Objectifications can tempt us to exploitation when the object we desire is a human body.

Beauty is dangerous because it can transform meaninglessness and atrocity into a union with the cosmic. There is a longstanding historical confusion between beauty and goodness—no doubt arising from its positivity—but just because it’s positive doesn’t make it *moral*. Because the thing we desire makes us feel so good, we hope that it is good *for* us—we struggle to find these desires noble and decent. But anything we desire can be deployed for nefarious purposes, and beauty can be and has been used to sell people just about everything. People, typically, cannot always (or don’t want to) put off intense desire, and there are plenty who will provide commodities they think that others need. Many will attempt to create this intense desire as well. Rampant materialism reminds us that we are greedy and using up our natural resources—and beautiful objects often lean perilously in that direction, causing us to feel guilty and to be suspicious of them and, in turn, our desire for them.

Finally, beauty may take one to some odd conclusions, not always in accordance with society’s rules. There’s a lot open to interpretation with beauty—who knows what the brain of the beholder is bringing to the experience. No wonder it’s so dangerous and threatening. No wonder it gets abolished from time to time.

Beauty is inspiring

Beauty is both inspired and inspiring—without it, objects devolve into something else entirely. Inspiration in an artwork is nothing more and nothing less than the animus, the

² “Survival of the Prettiest” **What is this? Needs full attribution.**

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life force, the soul or the spirit, whatever you want to call it, achieving a synaptic leap from inside the artist, into an object and then into the beholder. This completes a creative circuit of inception, conception and reception. Inspiration, in its most literal sense, means to inhale air, the opposite of which is expiration, a synonym for death. Without the animating spirit that inspiration provides, a creative act or an esthetic experience or object remains, at best, merely pretty and, at worst, a sort of empty housing—a zombie without a soul. We find beautiful things to be inspired and, in turn, they inspire us.

The positivity of beauty comes from its being “life-affirming.” The way it accomplishes this is through a positive feedback loop of inspiration and desire. When we are inspired, we feel good—exhilarated, even; and we feel motivated. In other words, we aspire ... and to aspire is to desire!

Although beauty appears to promise relief and release, it’s *not* about satisfaction or satiating at all. As long as we are filled with desire, we are absorbed, enthralled and invested; we are still alert, responsive and seeking and, thus, are *hope-ful*—and probably not looking to *end it all*. So, beauty does fulfill. But, rather than silencing need by delivering the object of desire, it fulfills through the type of desire associated with *unconditional* love as opposed to *self-interested* love.

The image of transferring life force with one’s breath is part of the original myth of Eros, originally a creator who begat the world by breathing life into a barren planet. It is easy to see beauty as the esthetic expression of this Eros. Inspiring it, in other words. Rollo May, the great existential psychologist, discusses Eros as “the power which drives men to God,”³ toward one’s highest expression; toward mature self-fulfillment and union with the divine (atheists, please understand that that’s metaphorical). Think of artificial respiration—the idea of a “kiss of life” is no joke. When it comes to inspiration and beauty, with their attendant passion, this is not “artificial” respiration but symbolic. In other words, the reward that beauty delivers is a feeling of being utterly alive and aware and whole. We desire it because it’s beautiful and it’s beautiful because we desire it.

Comment [RT3]: ? Eros did that?

I think we want a few big things in life. We yearn to be complete and we want to know there is a good reason for suffering and profound meaning in all that seems random and troublesome. Creativity, inspiration and beauty, like love or truth or God, belong to the category that address these issues because they imply resolution, catharsis and enlightenment rather than simple pleasure.

“Yearning to be complete” can mean desiring connection or disconnection, in that we need communion and expansion, as well as a sense of contraction and circumscription. This can occur on three levels. Within ourselves, we struggle to both unite our bodies with our minds and detach them. In the world, we seek to bond with another, while maintaining our uniqueness—at times, with a sense that this bond will bring two complementary yet incomplete people together to form a united whole—as in the myth of

³ Love and Will, Rollo May, p. 72 This needs full attribution.

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Aristophanes.⁴ And ultimately, we may strive to become “at one” with a larger, cosmic context or perhaps, at times, to imagine we *are* the power in charge.

These three levels of completion—the interior, exterior and “cosmic”—are some kind of metaphoric atomic structure of allegorical meaning: microcosmic and macrocosmic patterns that are reflected in the life cycle of birth, growth, decay; the creative cycle, conception, inception and ejection; and the cycle of inspiration, wonder, seeking and discovery. The power of beauty, inspiration and creativity is that together they forge all three of these connections we seek. To integrate body and mind, to be intimate and to feel a connection to the world, and perhaps to a higher power, are all acts that involve creativity and inspiration. We call these connections *beautiful* and, indeed, they are *attractive*. All unification is about attracting, and that we should find it esthetically so should not be a surprise.

So how does beauty address our need for resolution? By speaking to our united existence—engaging both our senses and our souls, putting them in sync. Think of the word esthetic. The origins of that word are in the senses—an esthetic experience is the opposite of an anesthetic one—you are engaged, alive, and aware and in the moment; not numb.⁵ And although the origin of the word deals with the senses, I think it really describes a synthesis of mind and body. An esthetic experience is one in which intellectual and emotional awareness is in accord with the physical. The art object has a physical, sensual body and, ideally, a sensibility as well. We bear witness to that and to seeing that as a reflection of our own self.

Because we have a nagging sensation that we are incomplete, we yearn for that long-lost missing thing. This is why we enjoy being *full*—because being full feels a lot like being whole. The hole becomes a whole, if you will. We like to let the outside in to prove we are not empty and not alone—as in breathing, eating or sexual union—but also symbolically, as in “full of inspiration” or “full of love.” When we are full, our boundaries become fuzzy—we become at-one, or a lot less hungry or lonely, if you will. But something happens to one’s sense of being a discrete person in these cases.

This brings me to the role of “self” in beauty and inspiration. They are not only thought-annihilating and language-annihilating, but also ego-annihilating. Both allow one to transcend the self, which is another reason why *they feel so good*. When people surrender their egos, they are—for the moment, anyway—*at-one*⁶ with something larger than the

⁴ <http://themeaningofmadness.wordpress.com/2010/09/25/platonic-myths-the-myth-of-aristophanes/> I thought Aristophanes was a real figure.

⁵ I have read one etymology of the word “esthetics” that relates it to breathing, and I wish that source was accurate, but alas, I think there’s no real connection.

⁶ Atonement, in the sense of “to set right with God,” was originally a contraction of “at one.”

self. The petty miseries of life seem far less bothersome. “Get over yourself” is more than a glib phrase—it’s a path to enlightenment.

To be at-one also implies that there’s no longer a rift between one’s physical being and one’s mind. To be at-one is to marry spirit to matter in the creative sense. It’s quite paradoxical—to become at-one, we must surrender ideas of attraction, unity and cohesion; we must allow our “selves” to become expanded, dissolved, dispersed. We like to define, refine and confirm our barriers to protect our sense of uniqueness and identity, and yet we also have a need to break down those confines.

For an artist to be inspired, then, is to unite, however briefly, with that long-lost *thing*, in the form of feeling its unearthly breath penetrate and inflate our selves and inform our artwork ... sometimes to the point where we feel we may explode into stardust and repopulate space with our particles. Which is exactly what happens when artwork is disseminated.

Beauty is transformative

I said earlier that we yearn to be complete but also that we wish for our lives and our suffering to have meaning as well. Beauty accomplishes that because it can transform the awful into the awesome. If beauty’s inspiration blasts us into the particles that fill up the universe, then beauty’s empathy validates our individuality. This explains why so much of what we call beautiful art must reference heartbreak and tragedy. There’s no transformation from joy to joy—obviously, there’s no need to change that particular situation! Nor is there any transformation from emptiness to emptiness or ugliness-to-ugliness; this is just a reaffirmation of our worst fears.

Perhaps beauty’s ultimate function is its ability to transform chaos and ugliness into something transcendent and meaningful; to transmute suffering into a beatific state (whence “beauty”); to transubstantiate our mortal flesh into something more eternal, more allegorical.

Beauty’s exquisite impact may tear us apart, but it can also confirm our coherence and individuality with its power of empathy. We look to art as a bat uses sonar—to navigate our space by bouncing signals off of other things. The validation and comfort one feels when looking at art owes, at least in part, to the idea that we may feel listened to, in the sense that artwork gives expression to our internal imaginings as well. We don’t look at pictures of saints just to gawk at them or to be judged or lectured—we learn from them how to handle our troubles with more grace and transcendence, because we literally behold ugly ideas transformed into beautiful forms and can imagine how we might do so in our own lives.

Beauty is sympathetic, empathic and empathetic, and embodies the notion of pathos in everyway possible, with the exception of apathy. Beauty makes it possible to face, even embrace, the unbearable and traumatic, which would otherwise be too painful to contemplate. Beauty’s power is transformative because it helps us feel our feelings in a

richer, deeper way. It is a full-spectrum emotional experience in which all is fair game to express. This certainly explains the appeal of tragedy. One can call “happiness” an absence of pain and sorrow, but true joy can really only exist in contrast to darkness.

Judith Schaechter has lived and worked in Philadelphia since graduating in 1983 with a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design Glass Program. She has exhibited widely, including in New York, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. She is the recipient of many grants, including the Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships in Crafts, The Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, The Joan Mitchell Award, two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts awards, The Pew Fellowship in the Arts and a Leeway Foundation grant. Her work is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Corning Museum of Glass, The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution and numerous other collections. Judith has taught at The Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle, The Penland School of Crafts, Toyama Institute of Glass (Toyama, Japan), Rhode Island School of Design, The Pennsylvania Academy, the New York Academy of Art and at The University of the Arts. Judith's work was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and she is a 2008 USA Artists Rockefeller Fellow.