

Time to lock horns on the beauty debate

NORTH NEWS

Despite being apparently only skin-deep, the notion of human beauty raises some profoundly disturbing issues. For the skin itself is deceiving, according to the French artist, Orlan, who appeared at the University of Northumbria last weekend.

"In life," she said, "we only have our own skin but there is always a catch: we are never quite what we have... I have an angel's skin but I am a jackal... I never have the skin of that which I am."

Orlan makes use of cosmetic surgery (during which she is linked up to observers around the world via video conferencing) to transform her face. Initially she mimicked an idealised renaissance image of beauty but more recently Orlan has given herself horns on her temples in a bizarre twist on the use of cosmetic implants.

Is this madness or a creative attempt to address fundamental questions of identity and being? This was just one of the philosophical puzzles facing 500 academics, artists and students attending "Beauty?", the annual conference of the Association of Art Historians at Northumbria.

The female species did not have a monopoly on beauty and in attempting to define the aesthetics of the body the gathering was careful not to neglect the masculine form.

For while male concepts of womanly beauty have been subject to intense criticism, the aesthetics of the male body itself are now also undergoing radical change.

According to John Lynch, an art historian at Derby University, the AIDS epidemic has accelerated this process by unleashing a grow-

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ing anxiety surrounding sexual desire, the male body and its visual representation.

Focusing on various media images such as the Health Education Authority's advertising campaign featuring bare male and female torsos and asking the reader to choose between them, Mr Lynch says desire has become confused with disease.

Other images reinforce the point. Under the heading "From screen idol to a wasted shadow in 18 months", two photographs of Rock Hudson are contrasted. Hudson has gone, says Mr Lynch, from healthy to ill, from beauty to beastly and from straight to gay in the flick of an eye.

"The overall ideological effect is to reinforce the message that the

erotic body has become the ugly body."

Jane Wheeler, artist and Northumbria postgraduate student, also explored the unreality of Hollywood in her discussion of painting and the beautiful female body. She said: "The beauty industry advertises and sells products which enhance that version of femininity current in our society — youthfulness, smooth hairless skin, large eyes, sensual mouth."

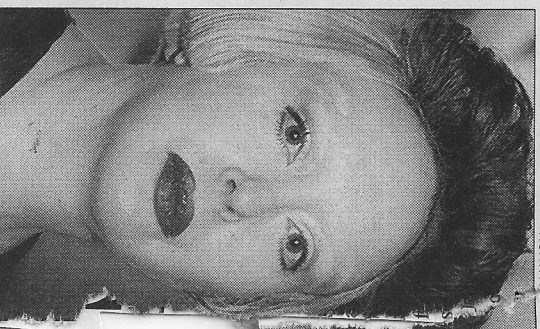
Ms Wheeler's own paintings are an attempt to disorganise the mythical beauty of the feminine. For she believes that beauty, as applied to women, draws a line excluding the excessive and the deviant.

The notion of female beauty as a male-created object is taken up by Gail-Nina Anderson, an art historian working with Nottingham University. Through an analysis of

cinema's horror genre, in particular the Frankenstein films, Ms Anderson uncovers the disturbing incarnation of the man-made woman. In a "warped echo" of Orlan's surgical transformation of herself, Ms Anderson examines Frankenstein's creation of the female mate for his monster.

Addressing one of the conference's central concerns—the relationship between women, beauty and power — Ms Anderson described her disappointment with the "bimbo-like" form of the female creature. "Throughout five films from the 1960s to the present day all the females had one similarity," she said.

"In playing God, Frankenstein created his male monster for the sheer joy of creation. He created the woman for sex. The female monster was always beautiful."



Orlan: proud to be horny