

ARTIST STATEMENT
Shelley Newman Stevens

IN QUEST OF THE GOLDEN APPLE
Visualizing the Beautiful and the Sublime

Webster's Dictionary defines the word *compete* as "to try to get what others also seek and which all cannot have". Competition is a part of our society, and willing or unwilling, we are all contestants. If one is not judged a winner, does that make one a loser? My images depict a feminine perspective in the portrayal of struggles that women (in particular) experience in their quest to fare well in these competitive arenas. Exploration of this natural inclination to judge and be judged is the thesis of my current work.

Humans' natural tendencies toward a system of hierarchy as well as the basic need for personal validation are forces behind these systems of judgment. We are all judges, and it is necessary that we make quick and accurate assessments each and every day for our very survival. There are arenas, however, in which competition and subsequent judgment routinely take place in which one's personal value is assessed using irrelevant criteria. What is more, judgments are often determined by those unqualified to make such value assessments. These pronouncements of winners/losers are often harsh and made in a swift glance with little other than superficial information. Women in particular are victims of this manner of judgment in the form of the male gaze, using socially constructed standards of idealized beauty. Intelligence and ability are incidental and have little relative merit in this initial filtering system.

In Greek mythology even the mightiest of goddesses fell victim to this particular test of value. In *The Judgment of Paris* the three most powerful goddesses in the Pantheon - Juno, Athena and Aphrodite - subjected themselves to the calculating eye of whom they believed to be a lowly shepherd boy, in hopes that he would choose her as the "fairest" and be awarded the golden apple. These mythological women had superhuman qualities; the shepherd had nothing but an apple. Yet it was up to the shepherd (a male) to make a determination as to their worth based solely upon their charm and beauty. And they willingly succumbed to the competition. Thus emerged the beginnings of the beauty pageant and the quest for the glittering tiara, a more contemporary version of the golden apple. My paintings explore the power of the golden apple in both the giver and the receiver.

The image of the golden apple as well as the glittering tiara found in my early paintings represents a multitude of female goals; among these might be professional success, respect of peers, the love and attention of a particular person, the approval of friends and family members, as well as confidence and self-esteem. Although some of these are personal inner struggles, others fall into competitive arenas in which women find themselves pitted against other women in a preliminary struggle to rise to the top of the heap in an effort for recognition by males (the keepers of the golden apple). Those who find themselves at the top of these female hierarchies have significantly enhanced chances of laying claim to their prize.

A female's struggle then is often two-fold: First she must survive the often silent, but fierce competition among her peers, and next she must prove her ultimate worthiness to whatever panel of official or self-proclaimed judges are involved. This form of weeding out of females by females occurs at a very early age beginning with the

underground wars of adolescent girls as researched by Keith Morrison in his report on Dateline NBC entitled “Fighting with Friendship – Understanding the Secret Warfare Girls Wage on Each Other” (4/9/02). Morrison described the virtually invisible female aggression and unspoken intimidation in which girls use relationships as weapons, and which years later some women described as so devastating as to call into question their whole notion of social relationships.

In the corporate workplace where much of the power lay in the hands of the males, the struggle can be vicious among female competitors seeking positions/promotions as well as credit for a job well done. Peggy Orenstein, author of *FLUX – Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids, & Life in a Half-Changed World*, states that women find it difficult to “vault up the corporate hierarchy” with a feminine personality. Orenstein reports that in her book *The Third Sex*, anthropologist Patricia McBroom found that high-achieving corporate women often expressed a conflict between “being feminine” and “being a woman”. Some women feel that there are two ways of being a woman in the business world: “big girls” take responsibility for themselves, “little girls” flirt their way to the top. As a result, many women view their female colleagues with utmost suspicion when one is granted a promotion. They resort to the behavior of adolescence described by Keith Morrison in the form of nasty gossip and backstabbing in an attempt to isolate (as a form of punishment) their peer who has successfully claimed the golden apple. Several of my paintings describe this kind of behavior including *The Trip* which shows a woman dressed in a man’s business suit in the midst of a sprawling fall after tripping on a jump rope being held by two bare-legged women whose stance indicates indifference and feigned innocence. The surroundings are ambiguous, but consist of skewed planes indicating an off-balance perspective.

In *Our Looks, Our Lives (Sex, Beauty, Power, and the Need to Be Seen)*, Nancy Friday addresses our culture's reverence for youthful beauty in women of all ages, creating the contemporary competitive arena of the younger woman/older woman, and in particular, mother/daughter competition. Although many women would deny this competition, Friday asserts that it is the "smoking gun that women refuse to acknowledge", which makes for powerful inner struggle. My work in its early stages explores notions of role reversal, rejection of the male gaze, and the effect that this process has on women of all ages.

Peggy Orenstein's research addresses this competitive arena. Orenstein reports that most of the women she spoke with expressed dismay over the excessive value placed on women's appearances, especially about its damaging impact on young girls. But that didn't mean that some of them hadn't profited by their beauty. As women age, however, they reported a kind of "cultural power" slipping away. "From puberty onward, they'd unconsciously learned to see themselves as others see them, to filter their own vision through the male gaze. If men no longer looked (or turned away), would one still be seen, or does one become invisible?"

One of America's foremost feminist philosophers Susan Bordo begins the introduction of her book *Unbearable Weight* with a poem entitled *The Heavy Bear* "the witness of the body":

*"The heavy bear who goes with me,
A manifold honey to smear his face,
Clumsy and lumbering here and there,
The central ton of every place..."*

In doing so, she sets the stage for the negative aspect of the body's physicality, the burden of weight, the weariness of a lofty spirit being dragged down by the flesh and

its demands. The dualism of the female mind and body is the central theme of this and other books by Bordo. In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo addresses our culture's fear of female power, and makes a connection between power and weight or mass. More specifically, she addresses how the female body is "read", why our contemporary culture idealizes the slender, seamless body in females, and to what extent women and girls will go to achieve this ideal. Bordo suggests that our current culture's rampant use of elective cosmetic surgery as well as rigid and obsessive diet and exercise programs is proof of women's seriousness to control their bodies' appearance. In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched or unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement. From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. And in this pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity, through the disciplines of diet, exercise and cosmetic alteration, we "continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough" (Bordo 166). In extreme cases, of course, as in serious eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa, women and girls are endangering their health. Some women die in an attempt to correct their "flawed" bodies. One must ask, however, if it is a matter of flawed bodies or flawed body metaphors. Bordo suggests that feminism "has inverted and converted the old metaphor of the Body Politic, found in Plato and many others, to a new metaphor—the politics of the body. In the old metaphor of the Body Politic, the state or society was imagined as a human body, with different organs and parts symbolizing different functions, needs, social constituents, forces, and so forth—the head or soul for the sovereign, the blood for the will of the people, and the nerves for the system of rewards and punishments. Now, feminism has imagined the human body as *itself* a

politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control” (Bordo 21).

We live in an increasingly image-dominated society. Jean Baudrillard has suggested that all we experience as meaningful these days are appearances. Our culture is bombarded with media images and it is through the use of these images, many of which are distorted and “fixed”, that we learn to distinguish not only what is culturally acceptable and “normative”, but also how we as individuals measure up. In the case of the media-projected ideal female body, it is nearly impossible to measure up because the standards have become so rigid and unnatural. First of all, media images have homogenized the female ideal, which means that they smooth out all racial, ethnic, and sexual differences; and secondly, these homogenized images serve to normalize—that is, they function as models against which we continually measure, judge, discipline and correct ourselves at most any cost. And although the physical body is first and foremost located on the nature side of a nature/culture divide, Bordo suggests that the contemporary female body is now seen more as nurture than nature, more culture than biological: “Bodies are not born, they are, in fact, made by culture” (Bordo 288). In the pages of fashion/beauty magazines, on billboards, in commercials and in movies, we see the ideal female body represented by extremely thin models. Despite their full-time obsession with keeping their bodies at a “marketable” weight through extreme diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery, even these models’ bodies don’t quite measure up (or down, as the case may be). To compensate for any perceivable lack, the images are then airbrushed to give the illusion of an attainable ideal that is anything but attainable through natural means. What this says is that to be slender is no longer enough. A female must now completely contain her flesh. She must be seamless. And in fact, her flesh must not actually resemble flesh. It must be taut and

flawless, much like that of a statue. To allude to any softness would allude to excess. And excess is the problem, for it might be construed as dangerous uncontainability.

In her book *Good Looking*, Barbara Stafford notes that plastic surgeons use computer modeling in which noses, lips, or eyes are so many recombinant spare parts. These biological fragments stock a seemingly infinite database of corporeal “readymades”. She suggests that this physiognomic application of electronic imagery thus confirms Marcel Duchamp’s prediction that the category of readymades would eventually embrace the entire universe of objects. Now that the body has become a constructed artifact, the client may select her ideal and ageless persona, frozen in youth, from a repository of reproducible items. Removal is also an option. Wrinkles, creases, and folds can be erased, thus further expunging any telltale signs of mortality or a personal past.

In one group of paintings I present images that address the now socially acceptable methods of remaining competitive in a world powered by youth and beauty. The new and highly advertised processes of cosmetic surgery enable women of the 21st century to alter, enhance and even re-invent their outer appearances to better suit the current standards of beauty. What is gained and what is lost in the process are the questions I pose. As the surgical scars fade, do the scars of inadequacy fade as well, or do they remain as ghostly reminders? As the pressure to conform to such standards increase and the standards of beauty become higher as a result, what are the effects on relationships between women who “do” and women who “don’t”? And finally, if beauty is only skin deep, how can it have such disproportionate power? In these paintings I employ the paper dress pattern to describe the attainment of idealized beauty through the process of cutting and stitching. In some paintings the actual canvas has been

sliced requiring stitches with heavy thread to suture the canvas back together. This area of the canvas will always remain flawed causing one to consider the notion that cutting into human flesh always leaves a scar as well. Needle and thread, scissors and tape measures all find their way into these images which may appear harmlessly diagrammatic and instructional, but for the fact that the fabric is human flesh and the process is elective.

In a more recent series of paintings the image of the fruit returns. I explore the similarities of the flesh of the fruit, the epidermis and the subcutaneous layers, with the layers of human flesh that are cut and stitched, pulled, extracted and otherwise violated in the course of cosmetic surgery. My figures are shown in metaphoric acts of compulsively paring and peeling the layers of fruit to expose the interior flesh, an attempt to gain control over the fruit (the body) by altering its natural appearance. In one painting the image of a figure which is seemingly falling from the sky and desperately seeking to regain control of her situation is seen with a knife in one hand and the remains of a gutted pomegranate in the other. The contents of the severed fruit are flying out upon the figure as she falls through space, and a look of terror crosses her face as she realizes what she's done. A storm of angry pomegranates pummels her as she makes her way through the dark descent. In these images the fruit no longer represents the coveted prize, as did Paris' golden apple in my earlier work. The fruit has now assumed another perspective; that of the physicality of the body; and the slicing, peeling, paring and extracting is the metaphorical means by which to improve one's chances in our contemporary competitive arena. My figures are swathed in surgical gauze and blankets and are placed in indeterminate surroundings to add a sense of ambiguity to the images.

In more recent work, the fruit has disappeared altogether, yet its presence is felt in its absence as my figures are now shown scrambling, twirling, leaping, twisting and turning, spinning out of control, upside down and inside out, as they frantically attempt to grasp at unpictured and unknown objects. Their faces and bodies remain wrapped in surgical gauze and sheets which obstruct their sight and movement as they perform this macabre ballet. In one painting the gauze-wrapped figure is shown in a dramatically foreshortened composition as she leaps across the bed desperately reaching out to grab the unpictured object. The darkened room swirls around her and menacing shadows threaten her, including that of an approaching tornado. This bizarre dance might be seen as a desperate attempt to remain vital and alive, with the idea that if one is no longer noticed then one becomes invisible and is virtually eliminated by the powers of a demanding society whose standards are ever-changing.

I initially structure my work with an underpainting which allows me to explore compositional issues and provides a basic underlying temperature; however, through the process of painting I allow for the beauty of the search—that is to say, while the final look of each painting may differ from what I may have originally imagined, there remain discernable traces of my early compositional lines, and in fact, some paintings have entire areas of underpainting which is left untouched and unresolved. This allows a kind of history of the process to develop, creating multiple layers and textures which add visual interest, and hints at decisions having been made throughout the painting process as the image evolves.

In my most recent work, the concept comes full circle returning to the mythical narrative. These surreal images, which complete the body of work, are psychological depictions of an imagined aftermath in a society in which individual value is based

upon a homogenized standard of idealized beauty. The image of the mask (the façade) is a dominant motif in these final paintings. Grotesque and carnival-like masks spring forth in one painting to mock and terrorize the figure much like the flurry of tribulations and worries that come to haunt the world in the myth of Pandora's Box. In the final painting, the figure, no longer wrapped in surgical bandages and hospital drapery, appears docile and doll-like. Positioned in a resigned heap like a marionette manipulated by powerful, but unseen forces, the figure has now donned the mask, a beautiful plastic countenance devoid of all expression. Peering through cut-out holes she returns the viewer's gaze, but because we cannot actually see her eyes or facial expression, it is impossible to ascribe an emotion to the moment, and the transformation is complete.

Are women weary victims of our competitive culture, or are they willing contestants? I imagine a time when as a rite of passage a woman will flip through a surgeon's catalog of female facades and choose one for herself. Perfection will come in half a dozen choices eliminating that competitive arena altogether. Will the ancient golden apple then take on new meaning and criteria, or will it rot as an outmoded, once highly sought after symbol of feminine perfection? The cultural tyranny of slenderness and feminine perfection will continue as long as females are convinced that flesh equates human weakness and fat is the visual representation of female uncontrollability. And as Stafford suggests, if it is true that anatomy is a woman's destiny, then surely women will discover new ways in which to re-shape both.

Although elective cosmetic surgery has provided me with a contemporary theme and rich visual analogy, my images depict a far greater universal idea—that is, the timeless notion that each of us, to a greater or lesser extent, has felt the inexorable pressure of

our culture to conform to society's standards and expectations, even to the extent that it may result in a painful and unnatural loss of self. I use the figure to depict the psychological battle that transpires within us as we struggle to maintain our individual authenticity in a society that prefers homogenization, and yet still remain vital and competitive in our quest for the elusive golden apple, however we may personally define it.

Shelley Newman Stevens

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