

About Beauty

Justification of my creations and their downsides

Haarlem, June 6, 2024

Ton de Zwart

Divine perfection

As a photographer of female beauty, I did not always have an answer ready to questions about the purity of my intentions. Beauty is an elastic concept and the female body is not always divine. When I photographed the dance group Chronos, at the premiere of the piece, 'The Three Graces', they told me that they transformed their bodies into images from old paintings, seductive like nymphs in a painting, after works by Raphael, Michelangelo, Botticelli, among others. and Rubens. The dancers felt at home in the beauty of sensual, elegant and often submissive postures. At the same time, there was the possibility of a one-sided image of the (female) body, as the dancers described the downside. The image of womanhood, then and now, makes women of today feel uncomfortable. "Sexy isn't always pleasant. Is it?" "As a spectator, your gaze may flow over all the lines, disappear into every wrinkle and linger on every detail. The longer you look, the more you see." In "The Three Graces", Chronos asked the audience the question: what is beauty and what is femininity to you? During the shoot I felt more in favor of theater costumes from the 17th century. Not the dancers. They wanted tight, light blue shirts and pants.

The question about beauty to a now older, white man with a camera can be answered with the cultural-philosophical essay by Stéphane Symons, published in 2023, about the classical ideal of beauty, described from different points of view. Starting with divine qualities of creatures (humans), music, artistic expressions, etc. Augustine became more concrete when he described the beauty of the human body as the harmony of the parts with a certain color. This led Thomas Aquinas to a clear, workable definition of beauty. Three conditions must be met. First of all, the perfection of the thing. What is imperfect is ugly. Secondly, the right proportion or harmony and thirdly, clarity. Things that have a glowing color are beautiful.

Modern authors explain that in the pleasure of the experience of beauty, desires and desires are absent. True beauty is not about satisfying desires. According to Kant, the experience of beauty is without purpose. If you analyze why something is beautiful, you remain blind to the beauty itself. Besides, we cannot know the beautiful outside world. Beauty is a personal experience that exists in your mind. "And then you know that she will trust you For you've touched her perfect body with your mind." sings Leonard Cohen. It is a matter of taste. Since every person has the same ability to find something beautiful, consensus can arise between people about what is beautiful. The downside of Apollonian beauty is decay. The writer-artist Aschenbach, in the novel "Death in Venice" by Thomas Mann, is struck by his beautiful appearance at the first sight of the boy Tadzio. Tadzio is "perfectly beautiful," a divine sculpture. However, Aschenbach detects imperfection: the beginning of decline. The boy is pale, perhaps sickly, frail. He has decayed teeth. Aschenbach is seduced. Although he longs for purity of spirit, Eros is stronger in Tadzio's case. Aschenbach finally dies in beautiful Venice during the plague epidemic.

Photography

As a portrait photographer, my aim has been to bring a number of elements into harmony with each other: light, color, clothing and the setting. I want to arrange the parts of the body with a certain color in the correct distribution over the plane. A glowing color palette is the most important. It should be noted that a grayscale image is also made up of as many as 256 possible tonal values. Boys and girls who look beautiful almost never necessarily produce a beautiful portrait. The few times a model I didn't like asked me to make a portrait, it turned out to be a failure. With an imperfect model it is difficult to get the right proportions. The photographer (the painter, draftsman) who knows how to harmonize the defining elements of people (even dolls) can take a good photo of them.

Make-up Artist, Trudy, working on a glossy shine and a smooth look	Color pallet: Ocher yellow and dull gold of a dead fish	Clothing (and chair in same colors)	Result: portrait of Vera with fish.
			

Sources

Chronos. 30 maart 2018. The Three Graces. The female body and beauty. About the female body and beauty

Labrie, Arnold. 2001. Purity and decadence. On the boundaries of bourgeois culture in Western Europe 1870-1914. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker Publishers Symons, Stéphane. 2023. Schoonheid. Tielt: Lannoo

Symons, Stephane. 2023. Beauty. Tielt: Lannoo