

Keeping Austin (Women) Beautiful

Beauty. The Beast?

Looking beyond the influences of pop culture, when it comes to beauty, experts ask us to remember we are more than just how we look.

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COULD BEAUTY ACTUALLY BE A BEAST? CONSIDER THESE ROARING headlines: “Lose Weight,” “Feel Confident,” “Naughty Nails,” “New Year, New Body!” Glossy magazines entice and coerce at the grocery check-out. After all, who doesn’t want to “Look Gorgeous?” Turn on the television and more often than not we see women in expensive clothes, or barely clothed, perfectly coiffed and certainly coy. The women we see in the media are not older or gray, a little too round or a little too crinkled.

“It’s become the air that we breathe,” says Dr. Christine Williams, professor of Sociology at The University of Texas. Those images are difficult to escape. “We live in a culture of beauty and attractiveness,” she says. Magazines, TV shows, the fashion industry, they all surround us, says Williams. “We need to try harder or buy more to meet our culture’s ideals of beauty.” Consider TV shows where older actresses, like Sally Field, represent maternal figures but rarely the love interest. There are few “images of aging women as beauti-

Dr. Christine Williams is a professor at The University of Texas in the Sociology Department, and a twice-published author. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality in the workplace.

ful,” Williams says. In your typical Disneyesque Cinderella story, youth is equated with beauty and virtue, ugliness and wickedness are associated with age. “Our country has a narrow band of what we see as beautiful,” says Williams.

So while they may tell us that “40 is the new 20,” how much truth is there in that glib statement? What if we do want to have the “Fab Hair” promised on the cover of *Glamour* or *InStyle*? I have grave doubts that my now all-natural gunmetal gray could be listed as one of the “Sexiest Colors.” As a 40-something friend once told this writer, “It’s all about feeling fabulous.” But does fabulous mean I have to try to make my four-decade old body look 20-something? With options like augmentation, elimination, a nip here and injection there, what is the price of beauty? Is it worth nearly \$100 a month to turn the gray to brown? Should we do something to keep our crow’s feet from looking like a flock of seagulls?

“One of the core questions is,” says author and career and life coach Renée Trudeau, “what is our motivation for making these changes?” When we ponder covering the gray, a new gym membership, or something like Botox, Trudeau says we need to ask, “Do I want to be the most beautiful woman I am at 35 or 45, or do I feel outside pressure...to look youthful or to compete?”

Author and coach Renée Trudeau with her four-year-old son.

Renée Trudeau’s book, *The Mother’s Guide to Self-Renewal*, will begin national distribution in April. She also offers monthly personal renewal groups for women working to create balance. www.reneetrudeau.com



Trudeau, president of Career Strategists, now in her 40’s and mother to four-year-old Jonah, says she “mysteriously put on five pounds...I exercise...but my metabolism is slowing down, my body is shifting.” Rather than beat herself up about the extra weight, she says she looked at her body from a position of “self love.” Try to “be more compassionate as your body goes through changes,” she says. We’ve all wondered who that person is, after catching a glimpse of our reflection in the mirror. “We don’t feel any different...we’re still 25 on the inside,” Trudeau says, echoing many a woman’s thoughts. However, she asks you to see the “character you are developing rather than five more wrinkles.”

Sounds great on paper, but how can you consider “self love” when you’re not so sure you even like the person in the mirror? Trudeau says we’ll have to take baby steps. “Slowly start to make a shift, so that your inner life, your emotional well being, is as important as your external appearance.” She says consider journaling, doing something creative, joining a group, all to make yourself feel more “whole” and thus more self-accepting. Or simply, when deciding what to eat, consider what would make your body feel good, not necessarily what you should eat to keep from getting fat. Chances are you’ll go for the spinach salad with salmon rather than the big burger and fries just because you know your body will say thanks. You’ll feel good.

While our nation may seem to have a narrow idea of what’s beautiful, UT sociologist Williams points out that we have, “come a long way, baby.” She compares our ideas about beauty over two decades. Start with the 1970s – think back to Golden Globe winning actress Marlo Thomas and her 1974 book *Free To Be You and Me*, or iconic Gloria Steinem and the feminist movement. The 1970s were about social change says Williams. The feminist movement of that time was about extremes – if you were a part of the movement, “buying-in” meant shunning all things feminine: bras, haircare, style, etc. By the 1990s, however, the movement became more political and less cultural. Whether you “shave your legs is not in the same ball park,” says Williams, as the fight for economic equality and reproductive rights. “Femininity itself,” says Williams, “was not the important issue.” In this new evolution, being female is seen as a source of strength. But, and it’s a big ‘but,’ that strong, successful woman is still expected to fit within “highly sexualized, highly perfected images of female beauty.”

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In decades ahead we face “a profound conundrum,” says Williams. She points to Dove’s advertising campaign as an example of helping women feel better about themselves within the reality of who they are. But the danger in the future is to our children. They have fewer glimpses of what it is to age gracefully. They’ll have no role models if we treat our bodies like modeling clay.

“I am more than just how I look” is Trudeau’s bottom line message. Is our ideal of what is beautiful internal, or coming from external forces? Go gray but with a great cut, or consider a new playful fashion look. And, if for some, it does mean a nip and a tuck, do it for the right reason. Remember the sage advice of an “old” friend: it is all about “feeling fabulous.” But, for each one of us, getting to fabulous may look a little different. ★

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Additional Resources

GENAustin. Their mission is to build healthy self-esteem in girls.

www.genAustin.org

