The Aesthetic of the Human Body: An Essay

Like any aesthetic, the aesthetic of the human body will find us differing on what we find beautiful. However, upon closer examination, we may find that — when it comes to beauty and the body— we agree more than we differ. I suggest that human emotion is the common ground upon which all people stand; that it is through the channel of the speaking body where we have our best opportunity to transcend separating barriers. We are able to “read” the emotions and experiences of another body by what we know of our own. We are pre-disposed to human connection and it is our nature to find beautiful those things which remind us of our own experiences. For some of us, beauty is attached to pleasurable experiences, but for others of us, pleasure does not matter. It only matters that we can somehow connect with the experience of another body. If we can, we can suggest that we are more apt to find it beautiful. Surely, we can say that in all we find beautiful, it is our connection to it. Since our individual bodies are how we experience and take in everything and since we have a natural need to connect to one other, it follows that our human body aesthetic starts from an individual place but eventually becomes about identifying ourselves and our experiences in the bodies of others.

It would seem that our perceptions about what we find beautiful in, on and about the human body starts with us as individuals and extends itself outwardly from us to eventually comprise a collective aesthetic “whole”. It is reasonable to suggest that there is a complex platform upon which our individual human body aesthetic stands; a platform which includes perceptions of our own bodies and those things we have come to conclude through them. It is on this platform that the human body — as form and metaphor — is initially defined aesthetically for us as individuals.

The stacking and mixing of many individual platforms create the construct of a communal aesthetic standard, the standard we come to know as accepted by the majority. In the process of coming to accept the collective standard, we abandon, manipulate or otherwise, re-invent our own individual platforms. The process includes altering the construct of our individual platforms to embrace the collective whole. In that collective aesthetic standard, we may find just traces of our individual platforms or we may find large chunks of them — but we do find them. Ideally, this process should reflect, to some extent, all who are a part of it. From this process comes what most of us agree upon as beautiful and, therefore, more similarity than difference.

How do our own bodies become so intrinsic to our established collective aesthetic? Because the body as individual form is basic and because we have a natural tendency to connect to one another through that form. The openings in our bodies are how we have taken in, interpreted, rejected, and come to know the world and our relationship to it. Our bodies are our dwelling place; our form’s adaptation for this environment. We transport through our bodies — express with them — survive and procreate through them. We have come to veneer our bodies, decorate them, enhance and sacrifice them. Our bodies contain us and connect us to the earth and, ultimately, to each other.

The human body, without interpretation, is not enough to establish a collective aesthetic standard; it is the human body form as metaphor for life that does. It isn’t just the human body form but what we feel from it that establishes what we come to know as beautiful. Our aesthetics about it have been shaped by and rely heavily upon what we have learned about; our own bodies as conduits in life and what we send out from ourselves to form an accepted collective aesthetic. Our collective aesthetic, with regard to the human body, is a compilation of that which most of us find beautiful.