



budding beauty

BEAUTY SPRING 2007
The actress Paula Patton



2007:
A FACE ODYSSEY

NOT SINCE THE HUMAN ANIMAL
MADE THE EVOLUTIONARY LEAP HAVE
STANDARDS OF BEAUTY
CHANGED SO DRAMATICALLY.
DAPHNE MERKIN ON CYBORG CHIC.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MILES ALDRIDGE

We have always been slightly uneasy — notwithstanding our growing cultural obsession with youth and physical perfection — about the enormous value we assign to female physiognomy,

based as it is on nothing more substantive than an undemocratic rolling of the genetic dice. Clearly, although we have all been bequeathed a more or less similar arrangement of facial features (eyes, nose, mouth, neck, skin), there are some women who emerge, either by way of felicitous lineage or a hazard of good fortune, with mugs to die for: Audrey Hepburn. Vivien Leigh. Grace Kelly. Julie Christie. Julia Roberts. Halle Berry. Penélope Cruz. The variations may range from the gamine to the sultry, the classic to the exotic — stopping along the way for the slightly more Nordic look that often goes with blond lovelies — but the theme is the same. They are undeniably beautiful; we, by and large, however attractive or striking, are not. This tragic and unearned differential (one that is becoming ever more tragic in a “looksist” society) has led us to devise ways of minimizing beauty’s importance with dispassionate abstractions or consoling, somewhat grandmotherly mantras. If you want to get high-minded about it, you can clutch for solace at the conjecture of the 18th-century philosopher David Hume that beauty “exists merely in the mind ... and each mind perceives a different beauty” and hope that no one will notice that this observation, if it ever held up, preceded the invention of photography. Closer at hand is the adage “Beauty is as beauty does,” which is the kind of snippy comment Mary Poppins might have made if she came upon one of her charges preening before his or her reflection. Then there is the old platitude “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” which attempts a similar leveling of the playing field.

I suspect these reassurances never fooled any woman anxiously eyeing herself in the mirror before going out for the evening, and as we get older, this lifelong negotiation with the looking glass becomes only more fraught. (Many of us, I imagine, will eventually feel in sympathy with Bette Davis, who, as Queen Elizabeth I in “The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex,” becomes apoplectic at the very thought of catching a glimpse of her ruined face, screaming, “Break every mirror in the palace! I never want to see one in Whitehall again!”) The really noteworthy fact, however, is not that these ploys

have never much worked but how singularly irrelevant they have become over the last decade — almost like maxims from another planet. For one thing, the promise and gradual destigmatization of cosmetic surgery has led less-than-stunning women to believe that a gorgeous countenance is there for the paying. Another, more significant reason is that the contemporary archetype of beauty, as seen on the runways and in fashion magazines, is no longer applicable or even familiar. For that matter, it’s barely recognizable.

The faces I’m referring to seem to have arrived here by spaceship from some silent lunar landscape, rather than by the bawling and bloody process by which ordinary mortals enter the world. The Platonic ideal of beauty is now as it never was: more humanoid than human, more the product of an art director’s digitalized pastiche of desirable features than a naturally occurring phenomenon. The reasons for this include our increasingly sophisticated techniques for airbrushing flaws or imperfections out of the picture; our fascination with self-invention and technosexuality (also referred to as robot fetishism); our ever more phobic attitude toward aging and dying; and our worship of young, blank, unlined-in faces that resemble the baby-faced characters in Japanese animation films. Thanks to these influences, our aesthetic standards have mutated into an eerie image of female attractiveness that, if not unprecedented, has been relatively uncommon until now.

I think of this new typology as Android Beauty: part intergalactic and part neonatal; part Angelina Jolie and part Tilda Swinton; part “2001: A Space Odyssey” and part Bratz dolls (the post-Barbie fashion doll with exaggerated eyes and lips that looks, as Margaret Talbot wrote in *The New Yorker*, “as if the doll had undergone successive rounds of plastic surgery”), with a little bit of Bambi and those kitschy Keane portraits of lollipop-eyed waifs thrown into the mix. You can, of course, coin any term you like, but I’m sure you know what I mean.

The identifying signs of this change — a radical reconception of what makes for feminine pulchritude — can be readily enumerated. They include a high, rounded

A little bubbly

Hussain Chalayan in collaboration with Swarovski plexiglass bubble dress. To order at Via Bus Stop, 172 Mercer Street. Pierre Hardy metalized-cell and patent-leather platform wedge shoe with ankle strap, \$965. At Neiman Marcus, Los Angeles.

Bionic sphere

Versace patent platform bootie, \$1,130. At select Versace stores. DeMask latex stockings.

Fashion associate:

Monique Bean. Set design by Thomas Thurnauer for SuperCube.net.

Body makeup by

Bartara Lamelza using

Juvena for Exclusive

Artists. Manicure by

Tom Bachik for Entity

Beauty/Cloutier.

Models: Karen Ambrus

and Michelle Flicks.

forehead; a giraffe neck; enormous eyes that are usually spaced low on the head and wide apart; an imperceptible nose; a pillowy or pouty mouth, but one with the lips always everted, as if ready to be kissed. Because the body on which this face is set is, needless to say, thin to thinner to twiglike, the head looks proportionally larger, even otherworldly. Think Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. Victoria Beckham. Models like Alice Gibb and Gemma Ward. Think, in a nutshell, Nicole Kidman at this year's Oscars, whose weirdly vacant mien (especially unsettling in light of her naive comeliness) had everyone (who managed to stay up) talking.

The New York plastic surgeon Yael Halaas, who notes that the laws of beauty have been "amped up," attributes Kidman's cyboresque look to the "Vulcan eyebrows" that can result from too much or wrongly placed Botox. It might also have to do with the silicone-smooth surface of Kidman's skin, from which all traces of emotional expressiveness — of having laughed or cried, struggled or aspired — have been erased, leaving a blank slate onto which we can read our own scripts. In this sense, Kidman functions both as herself and as a "sim" — a simulated version of herself, much like the Daryl Hannah character in "Blade Runner." Where once we tried to understand the fractured nature of identity by way of psychological concepts that pointed to an interior life, these days we seem to have traded in that somewhat demanding approach for an exteriorized, sci-fi dramatization of the seemingly inexplicable divisions within ourselves: goodbye doppelgänger, hello avatar. Goodbye therapist's couch, hello "Star Trek."

But while the ubiquity of computer-manipulated movies, photographs and other visual media may account for the extraterrestrial, "Beam me up, Scotty" aspect of Android Beauty, old-fashioned terrestrial science may help explain its equally disturbing, arrested-in-time quality. You might wonder, given the feminist legacy of self-determination and the long-ago (or what seems like long-ago) vision of power dressing, why women have suddenly been pushed back to, if not quite the cradle, then certainly to a state of prepubescence. Which is where evolutionary biology and the theory of neoteny — the persistence of larval or fetal features into adult life — enter the picture. Zoologists like Desmond Morris, in his book "The Naked Woman: A Study of the Female Body," have proposed that our species' — and especially men's — apparent preference for juvenile features can be traced back to (or, if you like, blamed on) neoteny.

This theory, which can be seen as a breakthrough or a bit of nonsensical speculation, depending on your view of evolutionary biology, is in truth no more than an extension of Darwin's principle of sexual selection, which he developed to account for what appeared to be cumbersome and nonfunctional characteristics. (Until he figured out that gender-specific traits — like attention-grabbing fans on male peacocks — informed the dynamics of the mating game, which trumped workaday survival needs, Darwin was in a state of despair about the validity of his revolutionary ideas. "The sight of a feather in a peacock's tail, whenever I gaze at it, makes me sick," he once admitted before finally embarking on "The

Origin of Species.") Accordingly, Morris points out that women have more neotenic physical traits — twice as much baby fat, smoother skin, larger eyes and puffier lips — the better to arouse a protective instinct in males. The zoologist Clive Bromhall, in his book "The Eternal Child," goes even further, suggesting that neoteny has been misunderstood. In a hubris-smashing moment, Bromhall claims that the entire human species has become "infantized" in order to physically survive and emotionally flourish. We have regressed, it would seem, into a state of permanent childhood.

Where, you might ask, does this leave us? No one needs to be told that the business of beauty is inherently superficial and pitiless, but it's another matter entirely when it starts to depart from all prevailing norms. So here's the burning question: Are Android Beauties ahead of the pack, leaving the rest of us who have not morphed to lag behind, fated to be nonbreeding singletons with our lurking expression lines, relatively teeny eyes, prominent (or at least visible) noses and collagen-free mouths? Or do they point to an alarming future in which little girls will be eroticized without the constrictions — the civilizing restraints — of guilt or of culturally mandated taboos and in which the Humbert Humberts of the world will be just one of the gang, just another regular pervert, free to cruise the playground without pretext or disguise?

In a remarkable essay, "Afternoon of the Sex Children," which appeared last spring in the journal *n+1*, Mark Greif makes a persuasive argument that the possibility of such a pedophilic scenario coming to pass is neither futuristic nor even all that unlikely. In fact, as Greif envisions it, the scenario has already begun without our even noticing. The trend of the last 50 years, he observes, has been toward focusing our lascivious gaze with ever greater intensity on the prepubescent rather than averting our eyes from them: "The representatives of the sex child in our entertainment culture," he writes, "are often 13 to 21 — legal adults. The root of their significance is that their sexual value points backward, to the status of the child, and not forward to the adult." One doesn't have to look far afield for confirmation. A study by the anthropologist Douglas Jones, in which he fed the images of various models into a computer that correlated the size and proportions of people's faces to their age, estimated the models' ages to be 6 or 7.

In which case, Stanley Kubrick was more prescient than even he suspected when he ended his sci-fi fantasy "2001: A Space Odyssey" with a puzzling (and somewhat pretentious) image of a fetus. It might well be — it is certainly worth considering — that what our information-stuffed, overstimulating and multitasking time has produced is not a yearning for new legal-age experience but rather a counter-yearning to evolve backward to some beckoning galaxy where life has literally just begun and adult consequence is yet to appear on the horizon. Perhaps the emergence of Android Beauty finally suggests that, rather than facing our respective futures with anticipation, we are, many of us, carrying a secret longing to tarry another day or two (make that a trimester) in the womb. ■