

ART REVIEW

Beauty is design, design beauty?

By Charles Desmarais

The critic's job is to explain why he or she feels a certain way about a work, not to tell you how to feel. That's why most art critics — and curators — generally avoid talking about beauty. The word is, at best, a grossly imprecise measure of value.

Nevertheless, a new show at the San Jose Museum of Art — organized by New York's Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum — goes there in a big way. "Beauty" is the bold title of the Cooper Hewitt's most recent design triennial, a grab bag of clothing, jewelry, home furnishings, graphics and more. It was presented in the New York museum's old mansion rooms earlier this year and comes west for the first time, a bit clumsily refashioned for San Jose's big, modern galleries.

Like all the best design exhibitions, the show sustains deep attention. It charms and confounds in just the right proportions. But it gets us no closer to a useful definition of beauty than the shopworn



Yoram Reshef / Stratasys Ltd.

"Otaared, From Wanderers Collection" (2014), a 3-D printed sculpture by Neri Oxman and Mediated Matter.

Beauty — Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through Feb. 19. \$5-\$10. San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose. (408) 271-6840. <http://sjmusart.org>

📺 To see a video of one of Neri Oxman's "wearable, synthetic organ systems": <http://bit.ly/mushtari>

proverb would have.

There's a page in the middle of the exhibition catalog devoted to attempts by participating designers to talk about beauty. I like the one from the Swedish team Simogo: "When you really can't explain why something is beautiful, then maybe that is beauty?"

Beauty is an experience. It is not an attribute, like texture, shape or scale. It isn't directly perceived by the senses — it doesn't have a scent or a sound. Colors might go in and out of style, but the essence of our concept of beauty is, itself, style: That Victorian sitting room was beautiful in the 19th century, ugly by 1930, beautiful again 40 years ago.

Beauty must be alive — or, at least, experienced live. That's why most paintings and photographs of sunsets are not truly beautiful: They are the carcass of something once beautiful, shriveled and drained of vitality. They are plastic replicas like the fake bouquet that can only, at best,

Art continues on E2

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Design exhibit explores idea of beauty

Art from page E1

"look real."

The exhibition includes a fair number of garments. They hang lifelessly on mannequins, like the pathetic skin of a once-free animal draped on vacation cabin furniture. Fashion can be truly beautiful only in relation to the sentience, the sensuality of the wearer. It has to breathe and move. It can be a soft echo, a countermelody or a jolting note of dissonance, but it must become the being it clothes.

If a photograph or a dummy is all we have, we are left with a kind of pornography. We yearn to engage the actual but are left with cold illusion. Take American Jean Yu's "Overflow" bodice (2015). A scarcely there

women's teddy formed of nothing but a single sheet of folded silk gazar is a useless thing, except to veil a lover's body.

Discard the exhibition's central thesis, such as it is, to focus not on surface elegance but conceptual clarity. Among the 280 works by 57 designers are some extraordinary finds. Israeli jewelry designer Noa Zilberman works, tellingly, not with gold but with gold-plated brass. Her "Wrinkles Jewelry" (2012) consists of fine metal strips that fill the age lines on the wearer's face. It propels the idea of ornamentation past external attractiveness — to see someone wearing certain of her pieces at a social occasion would be downright scary — to a celebration of maturity, an embrace of individuation.

Aaron Koblin, a "visual media designer," worked with

Canadian director Vincent Morisset on "Just a Reflektor" (2013), a how-did-they-do-that interactive music video for the band Arcade Fire (you can see it here: www.justareflektor.com). As complex as the coding must be, the imagery is simple, even simplistic, allowing a kind of high-tech doodling over recorded motion. But there's no denying the work's catchy visual energy, and the ability to peel back pictorial layers with the touch of a finger suggests further possibilities of storytelling.

Truly advanced design does not merely rejigger the look of things, however. Israeli American Neri Oxman plausibly conceives a future life wherein our costume will be our salvation.

Oxman is a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is developing the idea of synthetic human organs to be worn externally, like elaborate clothing or backpacks. Channels, tubes and capillaries would be filled with engineered microorganisms bred to help us digest, breathe, stay warm and otherwise sustain ourselves in deadly environments.

Oxman suggests far-off planets, but one can also imagine their use in the spoiled world we may leave to succeeding generations. A world where beauty may be defined as a gasp of fresh air or a sip of clean water.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1

**Most art critics —
and curators —
avoid talking
about beauty.**

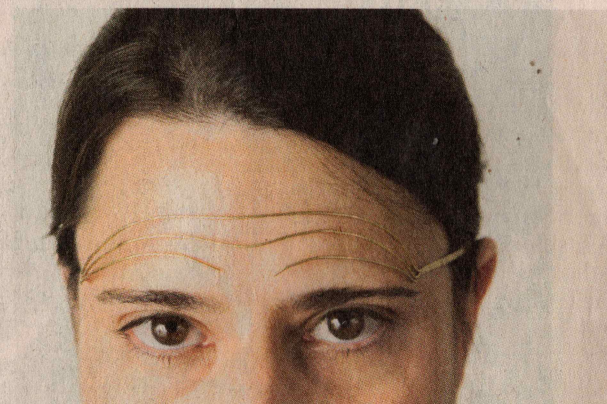


Joe Kramm / R & Co.

"Al-Gorilla, Eye-sik Newton, Neil Tongue, Bill Nyeland, Isle Be Back and Fungulliver," from the Afreaks series" (2015), the Haas Brothers with the Sisters of Monkeybiz.



Jeroen W. Mantel



Gideon Levine

Above: "Forehead Tiara" from "Wrinkles Jewelry" collection (2012), gold-plated brass, by Noa Zilberman.

Left: "Skin vs. G-Star Tension Light" (2014) by Pepe Heykoop is fashioned from jeans, two lamps and a melting pot.