

Love Me
Zed Nelson

contrasto





30805936

LOVE ME

ZED NELSON



contrasto

LOVE ME

Beauty is a \$160 billion-a-year global industry. The worldwide pursuit of body improvement has become like a new religion.

We live in a society that celebrates and iconises youth. The promise of bodily improvement is fuelled by advertising campaigns and a commercially driven Western media, reflecting an increasingly narrow palette of beauty. The modern Caucasian beauty ideal has been packaged and exported globally, and just as surgical operations to 'Westernise' oriental eyes have become increasingly popular, so the beauty standard has become increasingly prescriptive. In Africa the use of skin-lightening and hair-straightening products is widespread. In South America women have operations that bring them eerily close to the Barbie doll ideal, and blonde-haired models appear on the covers of most magazines. Anorexia is on the increase in Japan, and in China beauty pageants, once banned as 'spiritual pollution', are now held across the country.

'Westernising' the human body has become a new form of globalisation, and the homogenization of appearance has made 'Beauty' into a crude universal brand.

The more rigorously our vision is trained to appreciate the artificial, the more the beauty industry benefits. But who creates this culture? However much we may confidently point the finger at sinister commercial forces, we can't deny our own tacit, albeit culturally conditioned, involvement. Like it or not, we have created a world in which there are enormous social, psychological and economic rewards and penalties attached to the way we look.

Few of us can deny we want to be 'attractive'. Don't we all want to be loved? But have we been brainwashed into believing that in order to be loved, to be lovable, we need smaller noses, bigger breasts, tighter skin, longer legs, flatter stomachs and to remain forever youthful? Banks now offer loans for plastic surgery in Europe, and families in the USA with annual incomes under \$25,000 account for 30 per cent of all cosmetic surgery patients. Americans now spend more each year on beauty than they do on education.

As our role models become ever younger and more idealised, we are so afraid of ageing that the quest for youthful preservation generates an obsession with our bodies. As we align our sense of self-worth with self-image, the psychological and emotional consequences are tortuous.

Today the average life expectancy in Europe and the United States is 78 years old. Fifty years ago it was 68. One hundred years ago it was 48. As a society, we simply cannot face the unpleasant consequences of extreme old age, and nothing in our culture prepares us for them. The signs of ageing are perceived as so unacceptable that many in the public eye actively choose a strange and artificial appearance over a reflection of their actual years.

I began *Love Me* when I was in my mid thirties. I'm sure that was no coincidence. Like many of my long-term fascinations, I don't know exactly when the idea seeded itself. Perhaps it began quite simply, one day, when I looked in the mirror and realised I would not live forever. It sounds strange, but I'm sure I am not alone in being surprised by that actual revelation, and that it comes at around that age. The age you realise that the body you inhabit has been loaned to you, that it is not fully yours, not fully under your control. I realised too that the way I perceived myself was increasingly being influenced by others.

It was around that time also that I began to look increasingly into the dark shadows of my own culture. I had begun my life as a photographer trying to make sense of what it is that makes us human, and spent over a decade travelling the world documenting often traumatic events and manifestations of 'foreign' cultures with a determined fascination. But even in the farthest, most conflicted corners of the world, I could see the insidious influence of my own culture. Powerful governments playing strategic power-games in developing countries, the arms industry and their weapons, and the legacy of colonialism. My first book *Gun Nation* was inspired by the frustrations of witnessing that. A growing sense that to document conflict without a true sense of context was at best pointless, and at worst counter-productive. Perhaps *Love Me* is not so different. Again I am fascinated and appalled by the commercially driven export of ideals. But *Love Me* is also a response to the insidious forces that exploit and prey on the weakness and insecurities that are perhaps within us all.

My gaze has become more inward looking, more personal, more aware that I am not simply an observer. My work has become, in essence, more about 'us', and less about 'them'.

ZED NELSON

THE SKIN WE'RE IN

What do we think of when we think of our body? Do we see it as our friend or our enemy? The home of our pleasure or the source of our pain? Do we want to indulge and pamper it or starve and dominate it? What makes us desire to paint it, cut it, abuse it and poison it? Are we imprisoned by it or liberated in it?

One thing we do know for certain is that the body is the place where each of us lives, and the place where each of us will die: our body will always, in the end, betray us.

Another thing we know is that, given the choice, hardly any of us would select exactly the body that we inhabit. The desire to improve on our bodies, to mould and change them, seems to be coded somewhere deep within them.

Perhaps we are obsessed with the way our own bodies look and behave because we know how instinctively judgmental we are of the bodies we look at. Science suggests that we make decisions about the attractiveness of people we meet in the space of 150 milliseconds, and this instant perception of their beauty (or otherwise) hardly alters after longer examination.

These superficial appraisals have profound implications. In Dr. Nancy Etcoff's book *Survival of the Prettiest* she shows how our 'lookism' shapes our world: those we consider most beautiful not only find sexual partners more readily but also get better jobs and more lenient treatment in court. We are, in the main, more willing to trust them, help them, lend money to them and love them.

You might say, therefore, in wanting to change our bodies, to improve on our birth-given beauty, we are simply exercising our human rights: indulging in a little redistribution of wealth from the imbalances of the genetic lottery.

In Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* the future is populated by genetically screened, physically perfected humans. And it feels like a nightmare. Perhaps we know, somewhere within, that our dreams of bodily perfection distance us further and further from the flesh we inhabit; they undermine the notion, also ingrained, that it is our imperfections that make us fully human.

These fears are rooted in the complicated understanding of the relationship between our bodies and our essential selves. When we stop to think about it, which most of us do surprisingly rarely, it is impossible for us to define where our body ends and what we consider to be our 'true' self begins.

It was a legacy of Enlightenment philosophers that a fit and healthy body, and a clear and open face, were the visible expressions of human virtue. This perception still runs very deep in our culture. It underpins the prejudice against the overweight and the ageing; and it challenges us to make our outward selves representative of the traits our culture aspires to: the qualities of youth and sexuality. Because of this, the overriding theme of our times is that of self-transformation.

If psychoanalysis has, for nearly a century, offered us the possibility of transforming our interior lives, the techniques of plastic surgery offer us the chance to remake our outward selves also. We might think of this process as a desire to make ourselves feel at home in our skin: to make our 'envelope' reflect more fully the message we feel within.

The body, in this sense, has become just another consumer purchase. We can, in the spirit of our age, go shopping for a new one. Whereas once such vanity was piqued by snake-oil salesmen selling wrinkle-free vitality, now it is fuelled by global advertising campaigns and a magazine culture that reflects an increasingly narrow palette of beauty.

Naomi Wolf argued nearly twenty years ago in *The Beauty Myth* that, fuelled by international capitalism and personal insecurity, the pressure on women in particular to adhere to cultural norms of appearance would eventually become so great that 'no self-respecting woman will venture outdoors with a surgically unaltered face.'

At the time this sounded hysterical. Now it feels less so. As the beauty industry reports ever increasing expansion, new procedures and record profits, you might say such marketing is aimed at increasing the sum of human happiness and personal fulfilment. Some feminists even make the argument that cosmetic surgery is a statement of empowerment, allowing women to stress the strength of their sexuality and enhance their idea of self.

But is there not a sense, even as we line up on treadmills at the gym, watching statements of impossible physical perfection on MTV, that the project of eternal youth is doomed, and at least in part an expression of desperation. Our bodies have always been our biography, tracing the 'thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to'. However much we desire to wipe the slate clean, to give ourselves a new skin, to make ourselves 'like a virgin' once again, our bodies will eventually tell us otherwise. They will not let us be innocent twice.

TIM ADAMS

FOREWORD

In 2000 Zed Nelson published his first book, *Gun Nation*. The considered, layered approach to the project became his modus operandi, and in the way that photographers often become associated with subject matter, Nelson became 'the person' to turn to for stories of shootings and issues of violence. It was with courage and determination that he then side-stepped easy assignments that would pigeon-hole him as a certain kind of documentary photographer and turned his attention to the beauty industry. At first the two subjects might seem totally oppositional but Nelson's approach has a synoptic efficacy. Both projects look at an industry with a critical gaze, carefully balancing the seductive with the abhorrent, and have the desired effect of distanced wonder which never verges on the voyeuristic or becomes overly polemical.

They are interesting to compare. In *Gun Nation* the still-life 'product shots' are purposefully seductive with a crack and sparkle similar to the very best advertising: in *Love Me* similar images disturb in their strangeness. Hair and eyelash extensions, nose bridges and silicone implants seem clinical, alien and absurd as they are exposed before surgery instead of being hidden deep within human flesh. In *Gun Nation*, operations are shot with urgency and energy befitting the life-or-death situations, but in *Love Me* there is an analytical distance as fat is sucked from thighs or faces are stretched tighter over a skull. The discarded off-cuts of bodies, be they eyelids or nose gristle, sit in antiseptic environments unrecognisable once removed from the human. In both projects, portraits thread the different stories together and quotes stitch together the conceptual thinking, offering ballast to the photographs and a wider philosophical direction to the project.

But for all their intellectual and strategic similarities, *Gun Nation* and *Love Me* differ significantly too. Most obviously there is a stylistic shift from black and white to colour, and the narrative parlance has developed. *Love Me* feels more reflective and is careful not to contribute to the culture it depicts, but analyses it instead. The design and edit is more sober and considered, and it does not sensationalize. As a result the subjects frailties and pretensions are exposed, and so, too, are we the viewer: our motives for looking, for inspecting, along with uncomfortable reminders of our own vanities and insecurities, come to the fore. It is a powerful project that cuts to the core of human insecurities.

Love Me took over five years to complete. Nelson visited 17 countries spanning five continents, meeting cosmetic surgeons, anorexics, beauty queens, bodybuilders, trainee models, housewives, porn stars, businessmen and soldiers. An insatiable curiosity drives him to document, question and present. There is no fixed point of view, but a more open-ended presentation rooted in realism and a fascination for capturing the oddities and sinister undercurrents of what has, through a curious cultural brainwashing, come to be considered ordinary or everyday. The resulting work explores a range of complex emotions and subject matter, including the insidious power of the global beauty industry and our collective insecurity, vanity and fear of ageing. It represents a moment in our culture as defined by an almost pathological obsession with our bodies.

The beauty industry continues to grow as concepts of beauty develop and procedures become more accepted and accessible. People have a relentless desire to 'look their best' and are increasingly offered options of how to do so. *Love Me* presents this desire in a way which is at turns comic, horrific, abject and alluring. At the heart of the project lies a feeling of inevitability and melancholy as Nelson points to the basic human need for acceptance. It captures a powerful moment in our contemporary engagement with the body, and forces every one of us to question our own place in a culture that compels us to constantly judge, and be judged, by appearances.

The project feels like a compelling body of evidence, perhaps for a future generation to see a point in history where the abnormal became normal, or at least normalized. *Gun Nation's* dénouement was the horrific massacre at Columbine High School which resulted in the death of 12 students and a teacher in 1999. *Love Me's* climax is still unfolding and the results of society's fascination with appearances unknown. This book acts as warning shot to go beyond the surface, not be fooled by the verisimilar and to cherish what makes us individual and unique – warts and all.

SUSAN BRIGHT

2009

In 1920 American women were finally recognised as
legitimate citizens when they were given the right to vote.
In that same year the first Miss America pageant took place.

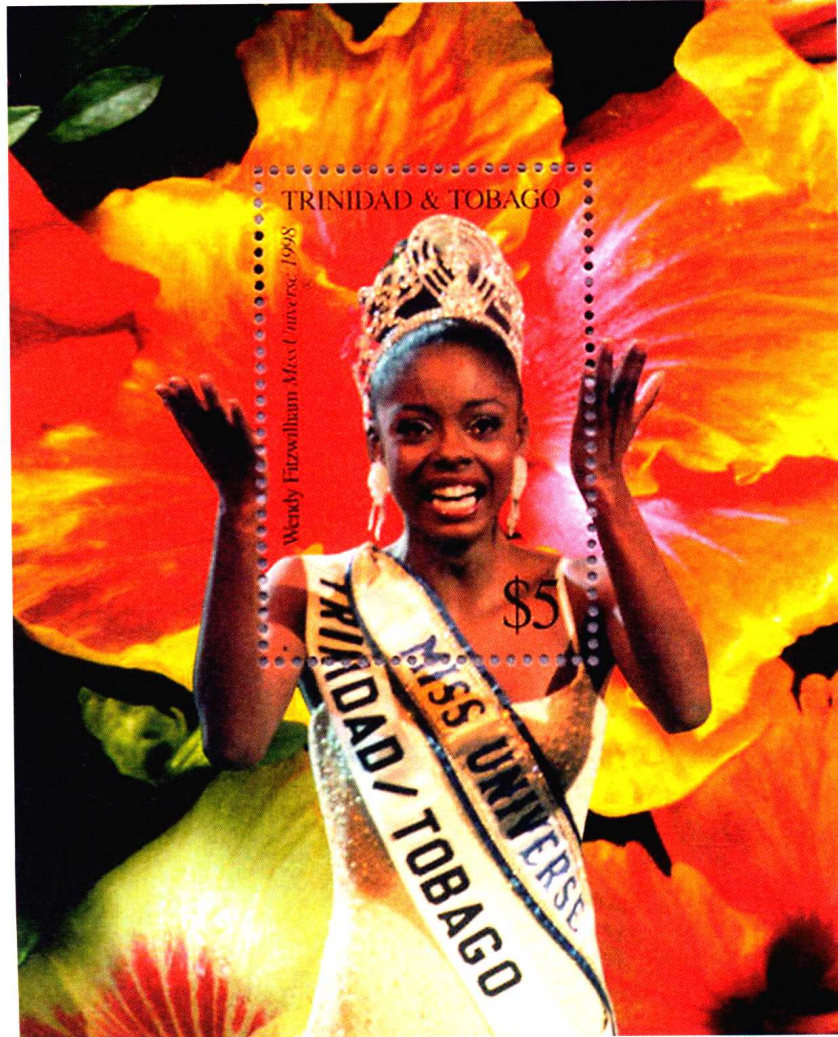
Katie, age 9.
Winner. Universal Royalty Texas State Pageant.
Texas, USA.



When Wendy Fitzwilliam, a law student from Trinidad and Tobago, was crowned Miss Universe, she became a national heroine. She appears on postage stamps and had a street, a city park, and a hospital wing named after her.

Trinidad and Tobago's most famous writer,
V.S. Naipaul, has been accorded no such honour.

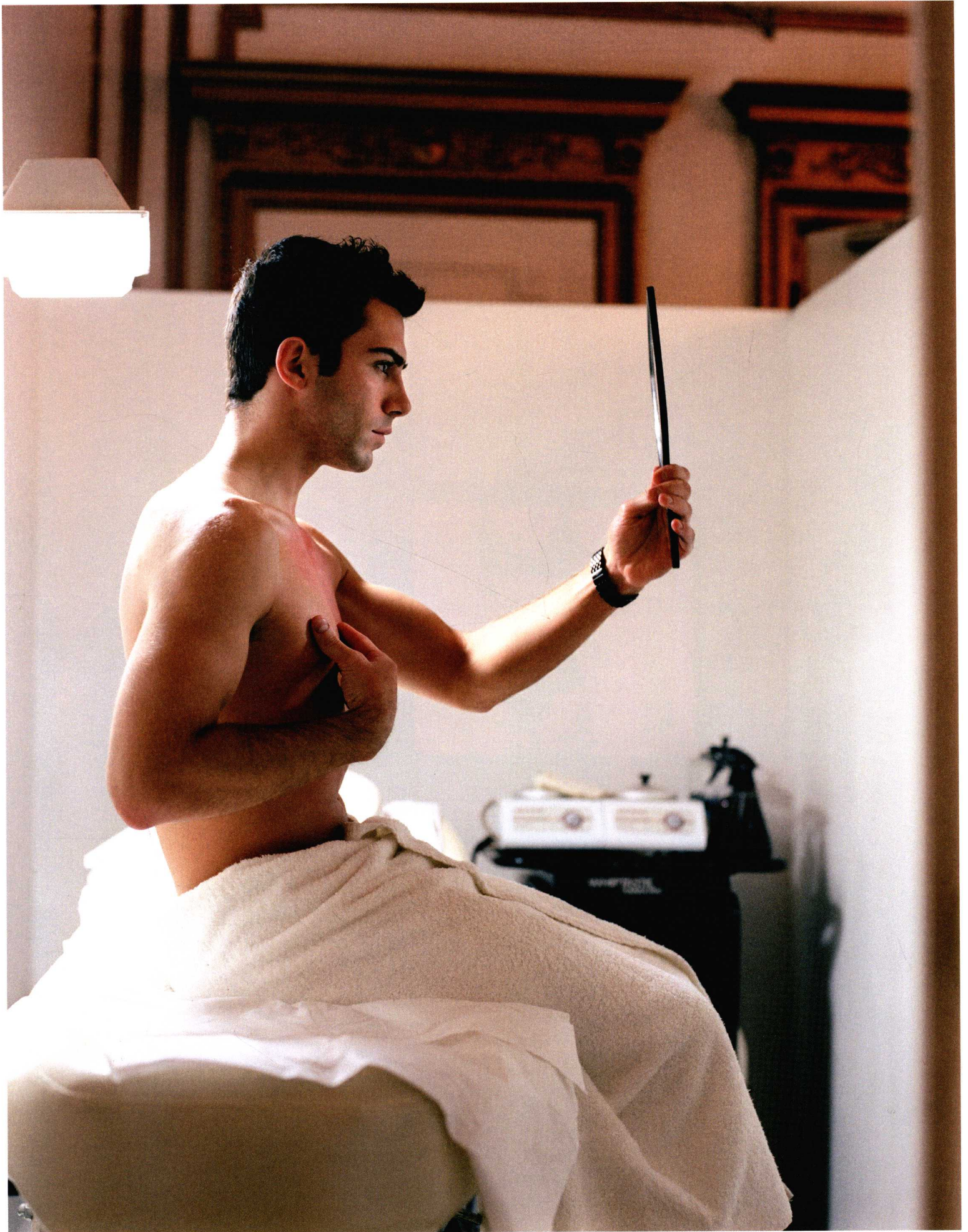
Commemorative \$5 postage stamp.
Trinidad and Tobago.



Every society has notions of what one should believe and how one should behave in order to avoid suspicion and unpopularity. Some of these societal conventions are given explicit formulation in a legal code, others are more intuitively held in a vast body of ethical and practical judgements described as 'common sense', which dictates what we should wear, which financial values we should adopt, whom we should esteem, which etiquette we should follow and what domestic life we should lead.

We refrain from questioning the status quo, because we associate what is popular with what is right.

Alain de Botton, Philosopher.



The Kremlin.
Moscow, Russia.





Ben and Chantalle, aged 13.
Amadeus under-16's nightclub.
Rochester, UK.