

Mask of Perfection

by Marc Erwin Babej



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Commentary

Just for a moment, as a short thought experiment, imagine you are from another planet and had never before seen a human being. You would have no idea how to interpret and think about the subject of this photograph. Fortunately, you do recognize the subject of this photograph as a fellow human being, in particular a woman. However, just like our visiting alien, it's probably also safe to say that you have no idea how to interpret the subject of this photograph and these strange marks we see on her face. Unless, that is, you are ushered into comprehension and an understanding of the conceptual foundation that is the *raison d'être* of this entire project.

Not every photographic project has a conceptual foundation, but in my experience those that do far outnumber those that don't. Stated simplistically, there is almost always some sort of back story that becomes important if we are to fully understand what we are seeing. This is precisely why a museum docent, exhibition catalogue, or audio program are so often necessary to develop a deeper understanding of artwork beyond a first glance. This is true for our photography, too.

The challenge for those of us who are image makers is that we are so easily lulled into thinking that any further explanations are not necessary. We know what the work is about—in fact we may think it's *obvious*. But anyone who has spent time at a gallery exhibition of their work can relate the experience of discovering just how disconnected and

even misinformed the public can be. It's a serious mistake to assume that our audience has sufficient background to understand our work without needing to provide any additional guidance. You know what they say about the word *assume*.

In this project by Marc Babej, a sufficient background that makes these images perfectly understandable is easy to convey: each subject in the project has been marked by a plastic surgeon indicating areas where surgical procedures could improve each models' face according to arbitrary standards of beauty. I could expand this introduction—and indeed Babej does, just a bit—but with these 27 words the entire project becomes decipherable. Explaining the conceptual foundation of the project need not be a thesis-length dissertation. In fact, the more text required to introduce a project, the greater is the likelihood that people won't read it. So, without any introduction people won't understand, and with too lengthy of an introduction people won't read—and won't understand. Like Goldilocks, it's necessary to find just the right amount.

The irony of the images in Babej's project is of course that each of the women photographed are quite beautiful without any surgical "corrections." Importantly, he purposefully leaves out this con-

clusion in his introductory text. It's an enlightened strategy to give viewers enough information so they can interpret the images, but that does not mean we should spoon-feed them everything you want them to know. It can be tricky crafting an introductory statement that explains the conceptual foundation of the project, without giving away the entire content. It would be a shame to rob viewers

of the experience of making discoveries for themselves. Enough, but not too much. We photographers expend considerable energy developing our image-making craft; because our introductory statements lay such an important foundation for interpreting our work, wouldn't it make sense to be as equally committed to developing the skill of writing a concise and well-crafted introduction?

