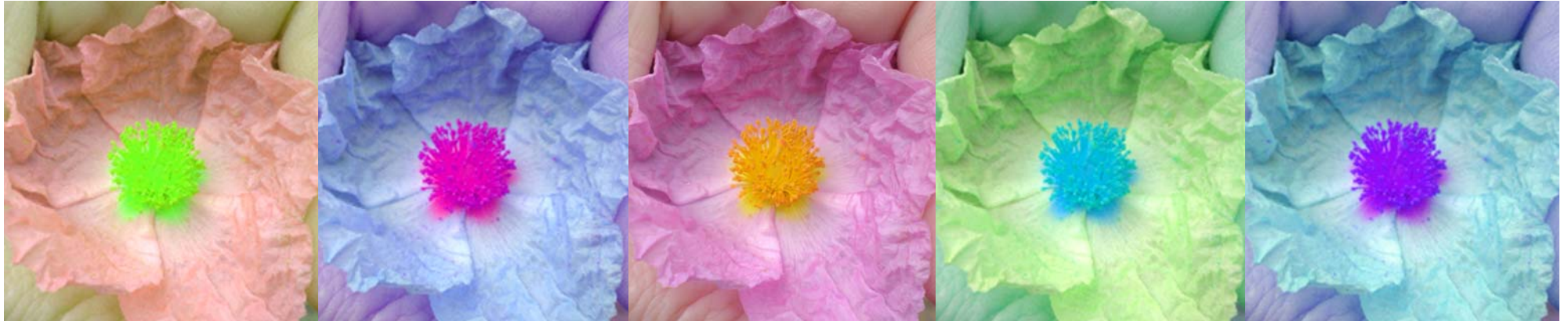




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## In Defense of Beauty

By Ruth Lorand

At a recent ASA (American Society of Aesthetics) meeting, upon expressing my interest in beauty and its relation to art, a colleague responded: "Oh, beauty is such a difficult concept, and it is so eighteenth century...." I certainly agree with the former part, but I entirely disagree with the latter. Indeed, beauty is a difficult concept. In fact, these are the concluding words of Hippias Major, the dialogue which Plato devoted to an inquiry into the concept of beauty. The interest in beauty was revived in the eighteenth century after its wide spread dismissal by the rationalists of the seventeenth century. Is it then an eighteenth-century concept? Beauty is as relevant now as it was at the time of Plato and of Kant simply because it has never ceased to be of interest in everyday life.

The study of beauty, however, has fallen from grace in contemporary aesthetics. Stolnitz observes: "We have... to recognize that 'beauty' has receded or even disappeared from contemporary aesthetic theory. For, like other once influential ideas, it has simply faded away" (1962: 185). And Nehamas writes: "Beauty is the most discredited philosophical notion – so discredited that I could not even find an entry for it in the index of the many books in the philosophy of art I consulted in order to find it discredited" (2000). Mothersill describes and strongly criticizes this tendency in her *Beauty Restored* (1984).

The fact that a concept is out of fashion does not make it useless or redundant. Given the great attention, time, energy and resources that are dedicated to creating, achieving or preserving beauty in various aspects of life, it is quite clear that beauty is vital and significant. One may disapprove of the role that beauty plays in human life, holding that "grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain" (Proverbs, 31:30), but one cannot deny the phenomenon. Beauty has never been in exile as far as experience is concerned. And yet it is avoided or treated with contempt by contemporary philosophers. The intriguing question is, Why? Have contemporary aestheticians come to realize something that the rest of humanity has not

yet discovered? I suspect that this is not the case.

Tatarkiewicz suggests that the explanation lies in the changes that the concept of beauty has undergone. "The Greek concept of beauty was broader than ours, extending not only to beautiful things, shapes, colors and sounds but also to beautiful thoughts and customs" (1972, 165). It may be true that contemporary professional discourse has thus limited the concept of beauty, but everyday discourse has not. Verbal products (idea, speeches, and stories), conducts, or solutions to all kinds of problems are often described as beautiful. Kant's concept of beauty as the product of the free play of the cognitive faculties is not limited to the sensual aspect either. Tatarkiewicz is right in suggesting that if we restrict the notion of beauty, it bears little explanatory power for the variety of aesthetic experience.

Passmore offers a different explanation. "There is something suspect ('phony') about 'beauty'. Artists seem to get along quite well without it: it is the café-haunters, the preachers, the metaphysicians, and the calendar-makers who talk of beauty.... 'Beauty' is always nice; always soothing; it is what the bourgeoisie pay the artist for ... it is the refuge of the metaphysician finding a home for art in his harmonious universe...." Thus, according to Passmore, beauty is useless and unreliable not because its range is too narrow, but rather because it serves or expresses the wrong social values. Indeed, many images of beauty have been criticized for promoting negative values such as racism, anti-feminism and the like. However, one should not conflate certain images of beauty (those that correspond to bourgeois taste) with the general concept. Beauty is not always "nice" and "soothing"; it can generate pain or restlessness, as well as great joy. One person's beauty may be another person's kitsch, but it does not follow that beauty (in general) is kitsch. In associating beauty with metaphysicians Passmore overlooks the fact that the great metaphysicians of the seventeenth century hardly ever mention beauty, let alone consider it central to their "harmonious universe". Spinoza, for one, regarded beauty as a subjective, irrational concept that merely expresses the individual standpoint (*Ethics*, I, Appendix). Furthermore, Passmore does not explain in what sense do artists "get along" without "it". Does it mean that artists do not use or create beauty in their work? Even if we were to agree that beauty

is irrelevant to art, there are still other aspects of life in which beauty is significant.

In his *Languages of Art*, Goodman briefly comments on the irrelevance of beauty to art appreciation. "Folklore has it that a good picture is pretty. At the next higher level, pretty is replaced by 'beautiful', since the best pictures are often obviously not pretty. But again, many of them are in the most obvious sense ugly. If the beautiful excludes the ugly, beauty is no measure of aesthetic merit; but if the beautiful may be ugly, then 'beauty' becomes only an alternative and misleading word for aesthetic merit" (1968, 255). Folklore, I dare say, is not always wrong. Sometimes it intuitively grasps that which philosophers overlook. Yet, although I disagree with Goodman's conclusion, his reasoning deserves consideration. Goodman offers two arguments: (1) Beauty is a confusing, and therefore useless, concept; and (2) Beauty cannot be a key concept in art appreciation, because many (good) works of art are ugly. Let us examine these arguments.

1. Goodman rightly suggests that there are (at least) two ways to understand the word "beauty": (i) "beauty" as an inclusive notion that is equivalent to "aesthetic value"; (ii) "beauty" as aesthetic praise. The former covers the whole range of aesthetic appreciation and includes ugliness as well as other degrees of aesthetic value. The latter indicates a high degree of aesthetic value, to which ugliness is an opposing pole.

Is this double meaning unique to "beauty"? Clearly not. Many words have multiple meanings. For instance, we use "art" sometimes in a classificatory sense that includes good and bad art, and sometimes as an expression of praise (Dickie 1974; 1984). We would have to avoid a great many words if multiple meanings were a sufficient reason for rendering a word useless and the concept it denotes futile. The confusion is usually resolved by context and linguistic conventions. Furthermore, one has to distinguish between the word that may have various meanings, and the concept that the word denotes in a given context. Words have their own history, which does not always reflect the significance of the ideas they denote. Analytic philosophers sometimes focus on the role of words and

decide the fate of a concept based on linguistic fashions.

For example, Wittgenstein remarked that, "in real life, when aesthetic judgments are made, aesthetic adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'fine', etc. play hardly any role at all" (1970, 3). Wittgenstein further states, that "right", "correct" and "precise" are more likely to be used as aesthetic praises. Whether Wittgenstein's account of "real life" is accurate or not, is beside the point here. Even if we were to agree with Wittgenstein that "right", "correct" and "precise" are proper expressions of aesthetic value, we would still need to clarify what it means for a piece of music to be correct or precise. I am certain that Wittgenstein did not have in mind the correctness or precision of a performance that meticulously follows the score without missing or adding a note to it. A good musical performance is certainly not correct or precise in the same sense that a weather report or a solution to a mathematical equation is. If we closely analyze the role that such adjectives play in aesthetic appreciation, we may discover that these adjectives also have double meanings, raise questions, and create difficulties, which are very similar to those that "beauty" creates. The problem is not the word but the nature of the concept denoted by the word.

2. Goodman's second argument concerning the detachment of art from beauty, expresses the general consensus prevailing in the last century. Goodman dismisses the idea that good art is necessarily beautiful. He claims that, since some good works of art are ugly, beauty cannot be an essential feature of art. Similarly, Danto holds that modern art presents clear evidence that good art need not be beautiful (2003).

This view (which I do not accept) comes about from confusing the value of the work as a whole with the value of its subject matter or its constituent parts. Kant already distinguished between the beauty of a given object and the beauty of the work which represents it: "A natural beauty is a beautiful thing; artificial beauty is a beautiful representation of a thing" (CJ, sect. 48). The beauty (or ugliness) of the components, and the beauty (or ugliness) of the work as a whole do not directly determine each other. This crucial distinction has been disregarded by

contemporary aestheticians. The fact that many good, even great works of art seem to be ugly can be explained on the basis of this distinction. The fact that a work distorts conventional beauty images and presents “ugly” images does not make the work itself ugly, just as a work that portrays beautiful objects is not necessarily beautiful. This is true of art as well as of every case where beauty is considered. A collection of beautiful flowers does not necessarily create a beautiful bouquet. The degree of beauty of a given object – art as well as non-art – depends on the interrelationships of its components, that is, its aesthetic order. In *Aesthetic Order, a Philosophy of Order, Beauty and Art* (2000) I have offered a detailed account of this order and its relevance to art. Aesthetic order is the order of the individual, not determined by general laws, unpredictable and highly sensitive to changes within and without. Its value is influenced by the values of the components that constitute it, but it is irreducible to them. Thus, a work can deal with ugly materials and still be beautiful as a whole.

A brief account of the great works of the past masters may reveal that art in general, not just modern art, tends to deal with disturbing, chaotic or painful materials, seeking to re-order them and reveal their significance for human experience. The beauty of Greek tragedies does not lie in the loveliness of their situations. Neither the plot nor the characters of most of the scenes of Crime and Punishment can be regarded beautiful, but the novel as a whole is beautiful. The crucifixion is not at all a pretty sight, yet it generated some very beautiful paintings. Danto points at a painting by Matisse (*Blue Nude*, 1907) and claims that it is a good work of art, perhaps great, but by no means beautiful (2003, 36-37). Danto does not elaborate. Indeed, the woman portrayed in the painting is not very pretty, the lines are not delicate, and most classical conventions are violated. But the painting is beautiful! Its beauty lies in its order that integrates sensual as well as conceptual elements, and offers thereby a new interpretation of these elements. Whatever makes it a good or great work also makes it beautiful.

To agree or disagree with this claim, we need to inquire into the nature of beauty, however difficult this may be. In Hippias Major Plato demonstrates that beauty is paradoxical, illusive and complex, and yet, what a challenge! There are so many intriguing questions involved here: What is beauty?

What makes it a difficult concept? How does it relate to other values? What needs, if any, does it fulfill? Why is it so powerful in motivating people? Socrates leads his inquiry into a dead end, but it does not have to end there. Mothersill argues that beauty is a “standing” concept “that ... is taken for granted in critical discussion of the art, and ... is indispensable” (1984, 247). I agree. Beauty – vague, illusive and paradoxical as the concept may be – is nonetheless the essence of aesthetic experience. We may play with words and create synonyms in order to avoid the use of “beauty”, yet avoiding the analysis of beauty amounts to avoiding a key concept without which a fully integrated understanding of aesthetic experience is not possible.

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## Candy Shue

Thank You, Shooters  
Dear Lonely Planet  
Herpetology  
Time Sink

### THANK YOU, SHOOTERS

We were shot.  
Shot so many times.

We became the hole in us.  
Instead of the whole.

It is not bad, being hole.  
A palpable lack.

Where there once was.  
Now there wasn't.

Do you see?  
Nothing.

Being a palpable lack.  
We were before.

We didn't know.  
We worried.

Our default position.  
Worry.

And lack.  
A partial thing, a paltry thing.

Now our lack is whole.  
Fills us up.

We embrace it.  
Finally.

Our absence.  
A palpable presence.

The ghosts you think about.  
Your dearest loved ones.

All the time.  
We are gone.

Listen.  
Can you hear us?

But wait.  
We'll stop talking.

## HERPETOLOGY

Fog-sensed,  
Non-tressed,  
Slick-skinned,  
Toe-jammed,  
Sticky-lipped,  
Tongue-pitched,  
Eyes quelled,  
Throat swelled,  
Gut-blessed,  
Fly less-ed,  
Un-swamped,  
De-twitched,  
Hamstrung,

Delish!

## DEAR LONELY PLANET

In the mornings, I sit in the Sky Lounge and eat exquisitely sweet strawberries, completely out of season. I have made offerings of wasabi peas and prawn chips to the vituperous monkeys and ponderous elephants at the Children's Zoo, attended the ceremonial ritual of the Singing Clock at the Sogo Department Store, and paid tribute to enter the great Buddha of Kamakura, a deity so enormous that dozens of people can stand in its bronze body, which is hollow like the inside of a chocolate Easter bunny. In the ceiling above the Sky Lounge, two 50,000 pound weights hover, delicately poised on opposite ends of a seesaw. If there is a storm or an earthquake, the weights are programmed to shift so the 70-story glass and steel tower will flex and bend, like a willow tree swaying in the wind. According to my guidebook, I should be able to see the World's Tallest Ferris Wheel (the one that flashes different colored lights corresponding to the season) at the amusement park across the street, but when I look out of my window, all I can see is an empty rectangle, a surprisingly small footprint, where the ferris wheel must once have been.

## TIME SINK

It's no big squeal,  
oh rock in my shoe,  
chocolate credit cards  
melting in my pocket.  
Snow-blind, buzzing,  
I trip over a hunch  
in the carpet,  
bite my tongue.  
The call of the sieve  
so strong; an overtow  
purling me under. Chop  
my mouse hand off; please,  
save me.

*About the Author: Candy Shue is a poet and fiction writer whose work has appeared in Poemeleon.com, Washington Square Review, Pif Online Magazine, Toasted Cheese Literary Journal, The Short Story Review, Paragraph, VerbSap.com, Kingfisher, The Booksmith Review, My Heart's First Steps and other publications.*





Eugene  
Rodriguez

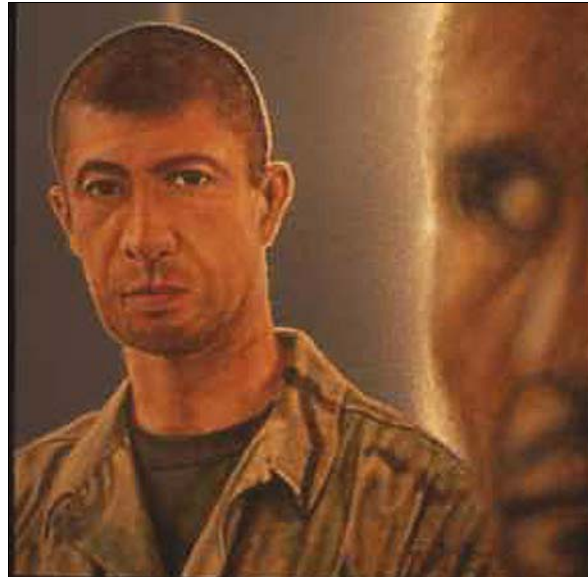


A San Francisco-based artist, Eugene Rodriguez's work includes painting, photography, film, video, and installation. For the past ten years, his artwork has increasingly become more focused on the intersection of issues of labor, immigration, class, gender, sexuality and the family. His paintings and films have attempted to highlight the struggles, conflicts and accomplishments working class Latin@s experience as they attempt to achieve upward mobility on the social ladder, maintain a connection to their ethnic heritage and redefine the notion of family. Aesthetically, all the work questions the superficial and disinterested form of postmodern appropriation and instead aims to inspire a revitalized look at the ability of narrative and realism to generate dialogue about the content of the art, as well as the political stakes of self-representation.

Rodriguez's latest work broadens his focus to investigate the ways in which transnational corporate media, while seeming to have a hold on the production/dissemination of information and entertainment, does permit for alternative means of image-making in order to forge openings of agency and resistance. This is something we desperately need to do in the twenty-first century as we grapple with transnational citizenship, labor practices, and human rights in a post-national world.

Eugene Rodriguez has been featured in solo exhibitions at Tribes Gallery, Franklin Furnace and Gallery 49 in New York and Encantada Gallery in San Francisco. He has also been included in group exhibitions across the United States and Canada. In addition to exhibiting, he has lectured and curated exhibitions around the Bay Area and has presented at conferences in New York and Los Angeles. His film/video work has been featured in numerous national and international film/video festivals. Most recently his latest video, WIN, was awarded first prize by Robert Storr, Dean of Fine Arts at Yale University and director of the 2007 Venice Biennale.









**Flood**

1. *n* . a very large amount of water that has overflowed from a source such as a river or a broken pipe onto a previously dry area
2. *n* . a very large number of people or things
3. *vt* to send a very large number of calls, letters, or complaints to an organization (usually used in the passive)
4. *vi* to feel a particular emotion, sensation, or memory suddenly and intensely
5. *vt* to supply too much of a product to a market, pushing prices down and keeping them low
6. *vti* to shine strongly so that a place becomes filled with a bright or glowing light (literary)

Eugene Rodriguez has a way with words: cutting to the chase, revealing what has been hidden, and interrupting conventional practices and belief systems. From the start, his focus has been on the Latino family, but in a way that stands out from other Latino visual and media artists, whose work often locates political resistance within cultural traditions. In *Straight, No Chaser* (1995), for example, Rodriguez combines the American avant-garde film (and Warhol in particular) with the Mexican telenovela in order to produce a stylistic hybrid suitable to his subject: redefining the traditional notion of the Latino family in order to account for gay desire, sexuality, and relationships.

Rodriguez seeks neither integration ("we are just like you") nor radical alternatives ("we are nothing like you"), but rather the messier in-between where a common ground must be based on difference-in-dialogue. This common ground – like the genetic diversity of the wetlands – is quickly drying up in our current political climate and media culture. If politics has been reduced to red-and-blue states, and the media to black-and-white viewpoints, Rodriguez's work emphasizes chiaroscuro, surrealism, and silence gazes. Indeed, if Rodriguez has a way with words – especially in the titles of his works – the work itself often does away with words, avoiding the expression of clear-cut positions, motivations, and outcomes.

What is most noticeable about Rodriguez's films, videos and paintings is that they are rooted in the vignette. He does not tell master narratives – the reassuring myths for our times or about our nation, culture, foreign policy – but rather presents us with brief scenes that suggest a before and after, but that leave the details and the outcomes open for discussion. We need such discussion; we need it to flood our society, and our emotions.

In *Flood* (2006), Rodriguez provides three vignettes, exploring: the decadence of celebrity culture; masculinity in a time of war and surveillance; and the post-apocalyptic couple. These distinct vignettes feature Latino actors, but the stories are global, speaking to a world overrun with certainty, yet riddled with contradictions, turmoil, and darkness. Latinos have been described as a flood overflowing into the United States . What if, *Flood* suggests, Latinos flooded the nation with a glowing light, or a memory, that things could be different?

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