



ELLIPSE ARTS CENTER
Arlington Cultural Affairs
4350 Fairfax Drive, Suite 125
Arlington, Virginia 22203

One block west of the Ballston Metro
Phone: 703.228.7710 TTY: 703-228-1855
www.arlingtonarts.org/ellipseartscenter.htm
Hours: Wednesday – Friday: 11am–7pm, Saturday: 11am–2pm
The Ellipse will close early Friday, October 17 at 4pm
and is also closed the week of Thanksgiving.
Garage parking, weekdays, \$3
All events free and open to the public



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Ellipse Arts Center + Washington Project for the Arts Present

Uncommon Beauty

OCTOBER 3 — DECEMBER 13, 2008

Juror: Sarah Tanguy, independent curator, critic, and ART in Embassies Program Curator

**Artists: Kay Chernush, Mary Coble, Frank Hallam Day,
Jason Horowitz, Lucian Perkins and Athena Tacha**

Opening Reception & Artists' Talk: Thursday, October 2, 5:30–9pm

Artist's Talk: 5:30–6:30pm, Reception follows

Dress: Your interpretation of "Uncommon Beauty"

**Personal Identity and the Disjunction of Public Perception;
A Discussion with Kay Chernush and Mary Coble:**

Thursday, October 16, 7–9pm

Art Eyes Happy Hour: Friday, November 7, 7–9pm

All are welcome to personally interact with select Uncommon Beauty artists
as we connect the Deaf and Visual Arts communities.

*ASL interpreters will be present and parking is free/open late the night of the reception,
the discussion and the Art Eyes happy hour.*

**Please note: "Uncommon Beauty" exhibits photographs with adult content
that may not be suitable for children. Parental discretion is advised.**

The ELLIPSE ARTS CENTER is managed by Arlington Cultural Affairs, Department of Parks,
Recreation and Cultural Resources. We will make reasonable accommodations for individuals
with disabilities upon request. The Ellipse Arts Center is accessible to people in wheelchairs.

When the Messenger is the Medium

by Sarah Tanguy, juror of *Uncommon Beauty*

In *Twilight Zone's* "Eye of the Beholder," an anxious young woman learns her surgery has failed, condemning her to a life of beauty in a piggish population, while in *Ugly Betty*, a gorgeous actress, made unattractive with braces and glasses, engages in the character's quest for self-worth. Both examples from TV culture test the stereotype of equating a woman's identity with her looks. In between these extremes, a realm of possibility opens where competing—and at times conflicting—standards of feminine beauty invite scrutiny.

The six artists in *Uncommon Beauty* peel away taboos and biases to tackle the underpinnings of desire and self-worth. By isolating conventional loci of corporeal and ornamental beauty, their photographs and videos reveal a charged intersection of strength, beauty, and identity, with implications both personal and cultural. Alternate perspectives emerge that move beyond victimization and acceptance of fads to empowerment and liberation of the individual. While approaches to the subject vary, the power of transformation in each project fuels a tension between outer and inner beauty. None of them are set-ups or constructed realities, reflecting the artists' self-conscious lens of raw honesty.

Dolled-up faces gaze at us through the bright palette and scratches in Frank Hallam Day's *Signs of Beauty*, images of worn advertising signs for beauty salons taken along the roadsides of Ethiopia. Like an anthropologist, he is drawn to the signs not for their coiffures, make-up or jewelry, but for the layered, cultural disconnect they represent. Their features, most likely from outdated, glamour magazines and videos, are Caucasian, Asian and Ethiopian composites, rendered in varying degrees of pictorial sophistication and anatomical accuracy. Some have been mysteriously vandalized. Meant to please and attract, the images offer an unattainable dream that rural Ethiopians cannot read in context, leaving us to realize that "we" have become the exoticised "Other."

In vivid contrast, Kay Chernush's *Self Examination* chronicles her bout with breast cancer, and addresses the loss of two potent carriers of feminine beauty—breasts and hair. Starting with *In my dreams I wear satin & lace*, we experience the power of the camera to transform the trauma of a double mastectomy and reconstruction and the fear of her own mortality into emotionally charged images of nuanced beauty. Digital and film snapshots of her body and scans of bandages and clothing are freely interwoven in the computer, producing a soft palette and radiating glow. In some, a hazy transparency takes on the melancholic aura of illness, with titles and text reinforcing ambivalent feelings about her altered reality and recovery. Scars become emblems of survival and hope, as we discover not a literal truth, but a story of growing at ease with a new self-image.

Healing is also a theme in Mary Coble's interdisciplinary *Blood Script*. In the antithesis of a red carpet performance, Coble stood vulnerable on a platform and invited viewers to write slurs on her body in New York, Washington, DC and

Madrid. Later, she had the most common of them tattooed without ink onto her skin, and had contact prints made with blood as the medium. Through her stoicism, the stigma of hearing, voicing and receiving hate words is ritually cleansed, their derogatory meanings masked by the prints' reverse lettering and blood smears. Instead the exquisite delicacy of their impressions and cursive font takes over. While the commingling of male and female epithets underscores the abuse of feminine beauty, Coble's defiance of gender specific labeling urges for communal introspection.

Like Chernush and Coble, Athena Tacha uses herself in the ongoing black and white series, *36 Years of Aging*, which documents temporal change to her face and body. Oscillating between abstraction and figuration, the vertical bands form a processional frieze evoking the serial motion photographs of Eadweard Muybridge and the disturbing racial studies of the late 19th century. Though taken with near clinical precision, the project abounds in subtle variations. With each smiling and serious face, or straightforward body image, small wrinkles and sags, or graying hair creep in. Accumulatively, these markers make permanent the vicissitudes of her life even as they throw into relief our youth-crazed culture and challenge their negative implications for feminine, but not masculine, beauty.

In Jason Horowitz's *Corpus*, everyday people willingly bare themselves to the camera in a manner of their own choosing. Using fashion lighting, he takes details of their anatomy and enlarges them into hyper-realistic, color prints. Their gigantism at once assaults our ideas of attraction and repulsion as we negotiate the ambiguous, fleshy landscapes that border on abstraction. Can a plucked eyebrow and smudged mascara, whose blue sheen echoes the letters of a contact lens, still beckon? Does a playful open mouth and nostrils, with lipstick line and facial hair exposed, spoil the anticipation of a kiss? Unlike other body-based work in the show, Horowitz's anonymous portraits juxtapose vulnerability with exhibitionism, raising the complicating issue of voyeurism.

Reality meets fantasy in Lucian Perkins' *Divine Divas*, a humorous riff on the popular urban fairytale, *Sex in the City*. Asking which came first, the divas or the series, the multimedia project explores how a show can generate a group experience that validates individual feelings. We observe four women discussing the two "L"s—labels and love, as they, like their TV surrogates, reveal their personal tribulations and the bond of friendship. Even as their talk reinforces the stereotype of a confirmed "fashionista," the ability to realize its downside checks their passion. With the unspoken innocence of childhood dress-up and role-playing in the background, they draw strength from knowing that aging fosters self-reliance and freedom of imaginative expression.

As a vision in progress, *Uncommon Beauty* seeks an expansion of attitude, a reclaiming of feminine beauty from the purveyors of diets, surgeries, and other so-called enhancements. The artists, as image brokers, encourage us, whatever our gender or sexual preference may be, to revisit standards moving past the labels, biases and clichés toward acceptance of a more holistic, more authentic beauty.





Clockwise from top left: Jason Horowitz, *Gia No. 2*; Lucian Perkins, *Divine Divas* (still from video); Mary Coble, *Untitled (Freak)* from *Blood Script* (detail) (Courtesy Conner Contemporary Art); Athena Tacha, *36 Years of Aging: 1972-2007 (2008)* – panel #1 of faces (detail) (photos by Richard E. Spear); Frank Hallam Day, *Ethiopian Beauty Salon 7*; Kay Chernush, *In my dreams I wear satin & lace*
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