

Saving face

New book by StFX professor explores beauty and cosmetic surgery

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In a culture obsessed with selfies, filters, and followers, it's no wonder many women are striving to achieve beauty in every form. But for Rachel Hurst, PhD, it's more than just an interest, it's her area of expertise. Author of the newly released *Surface Imaginations: Cosmetic Surgery, Photography, and Skin*, Hurst delves into the relatively new field of cosmetic alterations, both physical and photographic. As part of her ongoing research in femininity and beauty, as well as visual culture as a whole, the book will tackle some of the prominent perceptions of the cosmetic surgery industry.

Dr. Hurst is well-respected professor at St. Francis Xavier University with a long history of creative and evocative efforts for social change. This includes her involvement with numerous committees and serving on numerous faculty boards, as well as being the founder of the Hive for Feminist Research at St. FX and a photo-project entitled "Settler Fantasies and Colonial Before and After". These two projects in particular are both in keeping with the same research as was necessary for *Surface Imaginations*, although

Dr. Hurst says that her new book has yet to be presented to the Hive.

The book uses a unique combination of feminist theory and psychoanalytic theory, in order to better understand the topic. Its aim is to investigate the common notion in today's society that we are expected to fashion our identity and who we are largely through the surface presentations of ourselves, from clothes and cosmetics to the interior of our homes. Dr. Hurst believes that there is a common understanding that the ability to retrain behaviours on the surface will lead to deeper changes in the psychological state of mind. "This is where the title of the book and the central concept of the book is 'surface Imaginations', she describes, "which is the idea that what is on the outside is what is more important, and influences what is on the inside".

She explains that the book focuses on the two "primary cosmetic surfaces": the photograph and the surface of the skin.

Dr. Hurst points out that "[photographs] present an ideal, something we aspire to. You can do anything you want to a photograph and it doesn't hurt, it's easy", however the surface of the skin itself is not quite the same. Not as easily manipu-

lated, the surface of the skin is more "de-idealized", meaning that it in many ways is not entirely predictable.

Through interviews with many cosmetic surgery recipients, Dr. Hurst inferred that while we aspire to achieve a photograph-like perfection for our skin, surgery often requires a compromise and an acknowledgement of its inability to achieve said perfection. As Dr. Hurst was made to understand, for many people "surgery didn't do everything they wanted it to do, however it did enough".

Dr. Hurst calls the book a "hybrid creature" in that it is intended not only to spark new research and discussion, but also as an accessible tool for those who find cosmetic surgery within their realm of possibility. "I've been really lucky," she says, "to have a research topic that almost anyone has an opinion on, people are really willing to talk about it."

When asked how she feels about other media portrayals of cosmetic surgery, Dr. Hurst was quick to point out how television shows and documentaries can be culturally informative. She explains how many large-scale studies of cosmetic surgery have shown that cosmetic surgery does make people happier, and she argues that "such

a small change to the exterior of your body can have such a positive impact [...] because of the broader "surface imagination" way of thinking about our bodies and our lives in general".

Dr. Hurst's book *Surface Imaginations: Cosmetic Surgery, Photography, and Skin* is available at the campus bookstore and through McGill-Queens University Press.



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