



Linda Wells

on the Evolution of Beauty

LINDA WELLS as told to DAVID DENICOLO

For two and a half decades, Linda Wells has been the most influential figure at the intersection of beauty and media. After her early career at Vogue and The New York Times, she launched Allure in 1991 with a deceptively simple and ambitious idea: to bring journalistic rigor to the coverage of beauty. With provocative stories, sharp writing, edgy photography and design, and a bloodhound's nose for bullshit, Wells created a brand that is still the preeminent authority in the field, and expanded our ideas about the subject of beauty itself. Her message is informative, inclusive and irreverent. Like her subject, Wells is a study in contrasts: reflective and funny; driven and compassionate; confident and self-deprecating. Now the beauty editor-at-large for New York magazine's The Cut, there is no one better to assess the challenges of beauty right now, and to show us where we're going. —David DeNicolò

I think it's a very fertile time for beauty in our culture. There's a democratization happening. In terms of advertising and music and all media, really, there seems to be a greater acceptance of variety and diversity, which is really positive. I'm a big fan of the non-traditional and a proponent of individuality. The way you portray yourself on social media is under your own control, which can be liberating. You're out there all the time and you're on all the time. You create the narrative. Your image is part of the culture and it's open for commentary and praise—and also criticism. It's a double-edged sword. The commentary and the judgment can be alarmingly harsh.

When you see social media stars who manipulate their image, taking hundreds of pictures, filtering and retouching and repeating the process, they're internalizing the beauty tyranny that used to be blamed on traditional media, and turning it on themselves. And they end up in beautiful cages of their own creation.

Despite all the technological freedom, and the hunger to expand our perceptions of what's attractive, we're still always looking to see where we measure up, where we fit in to beauty standards. And for so many people, there's a sense that we don't quite hit the mark. We need to be aware of the standards, aware of their power, rather than trying to pretend they don't exist. But it's more than that. The thing that nobody ever talks about is: what's ugly? What damage does that do to someone if they feel truly ugly? If they grow up under that shadow? People are afraid even to think about beauty and its relationship to ugliness. We have to realize that there's a real cost when we judge one another and when we judge ourselves.

It used to be that we encountered the mirror a few times a day, maybe getting ready for work and before going out at night. Now the mirror, the phone, is in our pocket or bag at all times, a click away from posting images on a half dozen platforms. Our faces and bodies are under constant scrutiny. So how do we deal with all of these conflicting and confounding pressures?

I always come back to humor. I love Amy Schumer. I love the way she challenges all these preconceived notions about beauty, sexuality and femininity through humor. Same with Tina Fey. And Nora Ephron. I could read her book *I Feel Bad About My Neck* a thousand times. I like people who make change not through anger or hostility but with a more positive, entertaining and subtle form of persuasion. With these women, you don't get hit over the head by a message with a capital M. It helps to take a step back sometimes, not be so didactic, and not take yourself, or the subject, too seriously. It's far too easy to condemn.

Case in point: It's fashionable to say the Kardashians represent the end of civilization. Except why is everyone still interested in them? Why do people buy the makeup line, the hair products? Rather than dismiss it all, why not accept that Kim Kardashian has changed our culture? She's changed the perception of an ideal female body. She's opening up the conversation, and brilliantly marketing what others might perceive as flaws. I'm all for it. Wring your hands and complain if you want to; it's easy to dismiss with judgment and then never understand the phenomenon. I'd prefer to talk about why she is such a hot button and what's behind her success and what that means. To me, it shows that a little vulgarity is part of what makes beauty. There's a sexiness there. If everyone strives for good taste all the time, it's just plain boring.

This is why I'm interested in beauty. It's easy to dismiss the entire topic with labels, with facile judgment, and to diminish the subject. I think beauty makes people uncomfortable because it gets at issues that we don't particularly want to accept. Look at how gender fluidity went from transgressive to mainstream seemingly overnight (of course, it wasn't overnight; it took centuries). We don't want to embrace the serious parts of beauty because it makes us nervous, but we also don't embrace the fun and pleasure of it at the risk of seeming frivolous. There's this huge and dynamic industry that has grown up around a topic that is full of taboos, of unspoken questions and unflattering answers. Brilliant people such as Estée Lauder turned this ambivalence into a force by facing it head-on. Yes, she was selling a luxurious ideal, but she was also selling the tools to achieve it. What women bought was empowerment, with no apologies, packaged in perfect jewel boxes. The fact that she and her family became some of the greatest philanthropists that New York has ever seen makes her legacy that much more impressive.

The other misunderstood notion about beauty is that it's perceived to be stable when in fact it's always changing. We think of fashion as what happens from the neck down, and beauty as what happens from the neck up. From the neck down, we accept that the trends are seasonal, unpredictable, impermanent. That's part of the appeal. The great designers recognize that beauty is the same, and has to be integrated into their collections to reflect what's new and desirable at that moment. You see this in fashion history all the time. What is a flapper dress without a bob? It has no context. These days, I find that beauty is leading the charge in some ways. If you think about the amazing color palettes coming out from people like Pat McGrath, and the experimentation with hairstyles and ever-changing hair colors, or the contouring of the face, it all adds up to a lot of liveliness and creativity that in turn provides inspiration to fashion. And then, of course, the clothes have to conform to the body, and complement the shapes and silhouettes that are considered beautiful right now.

We are living in a time of enormous self-expression, fueled by social media, and that's reflected in what's selling now: very colorful makeup, contouring products, lip pencils, etc. They're the tools to promote individuality, to construct that all-important digital self-image, which in some cases looks better than—or at least different from—the actual 3D reality. It's possible that the ongoing separation between those two versions of the self will become too wide and disconcerting, and people will pull back. Because in order to look beautiful, you first have to look human.

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BEAUTY

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