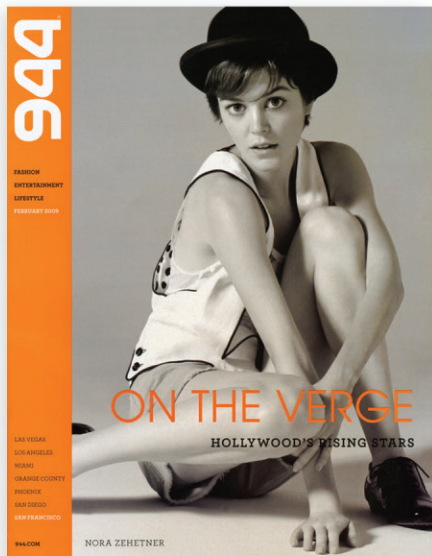


AU NATURAL? UH, NOT!

KICKING DOWN THE COSMETIC CLOSET DOOR

by NATE HANSEN



“A PERSON SHOULD BE IN A HEALTHY MENTAL STATE TO MAKE THIS DECISION.” —Dr. Carolyn Chang

Name some things San Francisco is known for and one of the last terms heard is “plastic surgery.” Isn’t that the topic of discussion screamed over the percussion of club music in Miami and gloated about over deep cleavage above rounds of vodka Red Bulls in Los Angeles’ latest Nobu? More than likely such elective surgery is openly discussed there, but not in San Francisco, not the au natural Bay Area, right? Au natural? Uh, not!

Though the two words separate from each other do not elicit controversy — plastic is defined as “any of various organic compounds produced by polymerization, capable of being molded, extruded, cast into various shapes and films, or drawn into filaments used as textile fibers,” and surgery is a branch of medicine that “deals with the diagnosis and treatment of injury, deformity and disease by manual and instrumental means” — together, the term evokes feelings of discomfort. It’s the proverbial elephant in the room.

It wasn’t long ago that the discussion of plastic surgery was taboo — a conversational no-no, just like politics and religion, at the dinner table. The mere mention of the term spawned the subtle ruckus of social jostling from those within earshot, all followed by peripheral looks, clearings of throats, shifting in chairs, changing of subjects, whispering and water cooler chit-chat. Somewhere around the same time of these sacrileges, curiosity for the body-altering operations appeared with the onset of tabloids. The gossip of Hollywood secret surgeries began greeting supermarket customers at check-out aisles with photographs of bandaged celebrities gracing the covers of *The National Enquirer*, *The Sun* and *The Star*.

Today, much is still the same, but instead of investigations and accusations there are bodily comparisons as tasteless and insensitive as they may be. There are photos labeled “before” set beside those labeled “after,” and highlighted arrows point to thighs where weight was lost, facial wrinkles ironed out and breasts made another two letter sizes larger. Today, within a human framework of pride, plastic surgery isn’t something people deny and hide from, but rather an elective medical procedure people are more apt to talk about and even recommend. Like transformations with the human body, the societal stigmas, too, are changing and evolving, and so it seems people suggest it is all for the better. That is, the people who don’t keep it secret.

According to an article in the September 2008 issue of *Men’s Health* titled “The Nip and Tuck Capitals,” San Francisco ranks No. 1 as the cutting capital of reconstruction, based on the per capita of board-certified plastic surgeons taken from the American Medical Association and cosmetic dentists from the American Academy for Cosmetic Dentistry — also factoring in regional rates from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons for common procedures: nose jobs, breast implants, liposuction, eyelid surgeries, wrinkle fillers and chemical peels. (Because Botox is the most common non-surgical procedure among women and men, they calculated the number of people who admitted having done this procedure from an Experian Local Market Services report).

In 2007, *Forbes* magazine declared San Francisco was second

in plastic surgeries only to Salt Lake City, based on the number of plastic surgeons per capita as reported by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. It’s been two years; it might be said that San Francisco has nosed out the competition. But how can that be? Bay Area citizens don’t claim to be modifying their bodies.

Dr. Carolyn Chang, plastic surgeon and vice chair at California Pacific Medical Center, says that although these statistics were at first baffling to even her, she learned to accept them. More so, she is able to theorize how San Francisco is the No. 1 city for plastic surgery. She reviews her list of clientele in her head. Who are they? Who are these people making San Francisco No. 1 for this particular body shop expertise?

Chang has a theory, but she’d like to say that it isn’t so much about looks as it is the balance between feeling healthy and looking healthy. “There is a dichotomy. People are working really hard to naturally be healthy and fit, but at some point they are not able to look as good as they feel and they turn to surgery,” she says. “Unfortunately, there are other factors working against these looks, for example, the environment and different genetic makeups.” She continues to say it’s these same people who choose to maintain their appearance by taking advantage of procedures that combat those aging factors that couldn’t otherwise be turned around — factors such as sunlight and hereditary traits passed on from family members.

According to Chang, a growing population of younger patients are coming in for smaller procedures, for “maintenance.” People in their early- to mid-30s come in for Botox to remove wrinkles, then a little later in life for lifts. Maybe around 42 or 45, the neckline or face is worked on. “Having this done earlier, by the time a person reaches 50 they’ll look younger and feel as good as they look.”

She gives an example of a 39-year-old



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mother of two children trying to get her body back. The mother has tried everything, and despite being in great shape, physically, aerobically, her breasts sag and her stomach is lax. Chang says this is a client she is looking for, someone who needs that boost, but isn't over ambitious requesting to be a “10.”

“A person should be in a healthy mental state to make this decision,” she says. “A person's condition needs to be stable both mentally and physically. And again, doing it [losing weight] on your own is always the best way — diet, exercise and realistic expectations.”

And there are the clients who remain anonymous, like the young woman who tried to talk herself out of an elective procedure ethically because she “went to Berkeley.” Or the anonymous people, all of those who will probably never say anything about “a little work done.” There will never be mention of Botox, tucks, lifts, enlargement, reductions or liposuctions because, to take off a Las Vegas theme, what happens in San Francisco doesn't always happen in San Francisco especially in the realm of plastic surgery.

“San Francisco is discrete,” says Chang. “We aren't boastful. In a way, we're reserved — nothing like Los Angeles or Miami. LA is Hollywood. It's entertainment-oriented, beautiful teeth, skin, hair

... Miami is similar. San Francisco is about health and fitness, a lifestyle that is natural.”

Fortunately, like most things that encounter social stigma, eventually they become more deeply researched until deemed compliant with ethics and morality. And now, more people are turning to plastic surgery as an aesthetic to enhance their appearance no differently than one would maintaining their health with a proper diet and exercise. At the same time, people are learning there is inherent value in cosmetic procedures. They are investing in themselves and finding intrinsic value of a product — themselves.

In the end, plastic surgery is an elective and alternate way to maintain one's appearance, and no longer what was once the tongue-in-cheek term for the artificiality and superficiality of the pompous populous. It's another trend, a step in the long road of life. But of course, all of that remains to be judged and said by the people of San Francisco who claim to know little about the topic or refuse to acknowledge the facts. For a city considered sacred for opening proverbial closet doors and providing cultural opportunity and acceptance for so many, this miniscule facet, another person's singular choice of what to do with their body, is still a skeleton hanging, waiting for a makeover.