

HEALTH | WELLNESS | THE SATURDAY ESSAY

I Used to Judge Women Who Got Boob Jobs. Then I Got One.

How a mastectomy followed by reconstructive surgery changed my thinking about the meaning and purpose of breasts.

The oversized, gravity-defying breasts shimmer with iodine under the bright lights of the operating room. A 41-year-old mother of two lies anesthetized on the table, her eyes taped shut. Black markings delineate the arcs of her areolas and the midlines of both sides of her chest. She is here so that [Dr. Carolyn Chang](#), a plastic surgeon in San Francisco, can correct the breast augmentation surgery she had done elsewhere, which proved too big for her slight frame.

“After breast-feeding, many women just want a lift, but some surgeons will say, ‘Oh, no, you won’t look good without an implant.’ It’s a male-centric aesthetic, and it’s out of date,” explains [Chang](#). “Implants, or at least large ones, are trending out. Women want athletic bodies,” she adds.

How had I spent so little time considering the significance of my boobs? My experience inspired a multiyear quest to understand the many meanings and uses of breasts. This is why I am here, in an operating room, watching [Chang](#) slice through the crease under the patient’s right breast and then use a thin cauterizing pencil to burn a crevice near the implant.

Breast sizes are subject to fashion. America’s obsession with big breasts coincided with the postwar success of Playboy magazine. Though the rate of breast augmentations peaked in 2007, it remained the most performed plastic surgery in America until 2021, when liposuction took over.

[Chang](#) specializes in complex breast revisions and “natural aesthetics,” often for upscale women seeking a post-pregnancy makeover. “I steer away from the anatomically abnormal,” she says, noting that some “very popular surgeons” make breasts she finds distasteful—too big, too round, too high. “My mission here is restorative—to give her back the breasts she had before she got pregnant. She wants her identity back.”

Having finished rearranging and restapling the right breast, [Chang](#) again measures the distance between the woman’s sternum and both of her nipples. “She had cute little boobs before, and now she has them again,” she says. “Perfect.”

“I don’t see women who are making choices as victims,” says [Chang](#).

“Women need to use the power they have. Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, Nefertiti—their beauty contributed to their influence.”