

The Price of Beauty

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Out Magazine

October 2005; Vol. 14 Issue 4, p66-77

Though separated by nearly a generation, Wilson Cleveland, 31, and Colin Lively, 59, are typical gay men in many respects. The former is a public relations manager who lives in New York City's Greenwich Village. His weekly routine involves going to the gym nearly every day, followed by regular trips to Pilates and yoga classes. He occasionally frequents bars and nightclubs with friends. The latter is a hairdresser who lives in New York's Hell's Kitchen area. He is as energetic and winsome as his surname implies, with a wicked tongue and irreverent good humor. He likes music, dancing, and the theater, he says, and he easily cultivates the friendship of men half his age.

The two share something else that makes them typical of many gay men: Obsessed with their looks, they are part of a growing number of men who have undergone plastic surgery in the last few years.

"I had absolutely no trepidation--I could not wait," Cleveland says of the liposuction he had at the end of 2004. "It was more to get the body I wanted and to be as close to perfect as my body would allow me."

Similarly, Lively, who had a face-lift about seven years ago and numerous other cosmetic procedures since then, remarks, "I am frightfully close to 60, and I feel like I look closer to 50. I attribute this to the face-lift, which probably shaved 10 years off my face."

They are not alone. An increasing number of gay men are turning to plastic surgeons to achieve the looks they may not be able to get from the gym. Or, faced with the inevitable facts and effects of aging, they turn to costly plastic surgery and other cosmetic procedures to turn back life's clock.

The reasons underpinning the shift toward plastic surgery are manifold. Urban gay male culture has always been notoriously concerned with looks. Some gay men search relentlessly for physical perfection, whether it's the perfect hair, skin, and clothing of Abercrombie models or the rippling musculature of Chelsea queens. Even those who reject these standards are often painfully aware that this template for beauty is frequently the lens through which they are viewed and judged.

There's a dark side to all of this as well: It seems many gay men are willing to undergo weeks, sometimes months of uncomfortable recovery and disfigurement, frequently at great risk to their health, in order to achieve the looks they can't otherwise attain.

Some psychotherapists worry it has become something of a mental health issue. "It is a real, ego-focused, almost passionate need that my clients have identified that directs them to go directly to plastic surgery," says psychologist Barbara J. Rubin, a lesbian with a primarily gay practice based in Atlanta. "There is a real desire to remain youthful in appearance to themselves and other folks who are tricks or partners, to make them seem desirable and available and forever young."

Gay men are also bombarded with media images that portray plastic surgery as sexy and easy, and they are succumbing to the messages of shows like *The Swan*, *Nip/Tuck*, and reality TV shows about miraculous transformations awaiting people on the other side of the operating table.

There are other reasons as well. The unfortunate truth is gay men tend to change relationships more frequently, experts say, and we may feel the pressure to maintain a "marketable" appearance longer. What's more, as gay men have climbed the corporate ladder, other more subtle messages must be transmitted: We are young and energetic, not tired and overwhelmed by the taxing careers we have chosen.

"If you feel insecure about your looks and you are out on the dating market, it is probably more of a motivation to pursue plastic surgery than if you are in a stable relationship where looks are not a day-to-day issue for you," says Tony Trachta, a gay man who is program director for psychiatric emergency services at Trinitas Hospital, based in Elizabeth, N.J.

Plastic surgeons have become today's ultimate dream doctors, catering to the whims and fantasies of patients seeking physical perfection. They specialize in turning back the hands of time through face-lifts, creating a new look through nose restructuring and cheek implants, producing instant weight reduction through liposuction, and sculpting a more idealized form through buttock and thigh lifts, pectoral and bicep implants. In their quest for bodily perfection and beauty, some gay men are even turning to far riskier procedures, such as penile and testicular enlargement, which most reputable plastic surgeons and other experts shun due to the perils involved.

Despite health risks posed by anesthesia or potential postoperative conditions such as shock or infection, over 9 million people sought plastic surgery in 2004, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, based in Arlington Heights, Ill. Of those, 1.2 million were men, up 16% from 2000.

The most common surgical procedures for men were nose jobs, followed by hair transplants, eyelid surgery, and liposuction, according to the association. For nonsurgical cosmetic procedures, Botox topped the list for men, with 329,000 seeking treatments in 2004, a 250% increase from 2000.

Though the middle class increasingly pursues plastic surgery, the price still doesn't come cheap. Top surgeons charge about \$6,000 for relatively simple procedures like an eyelid tuck, called blepharoplasty, and about \$45,000 for a full face-lift.

A multitude of reasons drove Cleveland to pursue liposuction. As he sips coffee in a Starbucks in midtown New York and talks about his reasons for the plastic surgery he had late last year, he seems far from the stereotypical candidate for such a procedure. He is taut and muscular, doe-eyed and good-looking.

Yet as he talks, he reveals longstanding dissatisfactions with his body image. Cleveland, who is single, says that since the age of 15 he has been troubled by the "love handles" in his abdominal area. Even though he was spending two hours a day at the gym lifting weights or doing cardio, the problem wouldn't go away.

"It was an obsession," Cleveland says. "When you look in the mirror and you are working out a lot, and you start to see changes in your body, and you see this one area where nothing was changing at all, it was incredibly frustrating and defeating."

He pulls up his shirt to reveal a now-nearly flat stomach--what he calls his "four-pack"--and then on either end of his waist, two dark brown scars, the diameter of knitting needles, where the lipo wand made its way into his abdomen to dislodge and suck out several quarts of fat.

He researched his procedure using a New York magazine story that listed top plastic surgeons in the city, he says, and eventually settled on a highly rated surgeon, checked out his credentials online, and then met with him for about an hour to discuss the procedure before making his decision. In total the process took about two weeks, he says.

The surgery took about four and a half hours and cost just over \$9,000. (Cleveland says he funded the operation by taking out a loan from his credit card company.)

By contrast, the desire to stay youthful was foremost in the mind of Lively, who is also single, and who spent \$16,000 of his savings for a face-lift in the late '90s.

He shares aspects of his life that led to his decision for surgery while sitting in his apartment, stroking his Siamese cats. He is surrounded by amateur oil paintings of masquerade balls and a replica of the outré puppet Madame. Girl Crazy with Judy Garland plays on the screen of his iMac, and Patsy Cline croons "Sweet Dreams" in the background. He pulls back his hair to show the faint scars nestled inside the creases of his ears, the residue of his face-lift.

"Someone over a certain age--and I don't know where that age is, but maybe as early as the mid 30s--is no longer going to be the one who the other guys have their tongues out for," he says.

His decision also seems motivated by his career circumstances. His clientele is half his age or younger, he says, and they expect him to look young too.

"For better or for worse, I live in a very young world," he says. "My whole job is to make other people look good, and if they look at me and see that I look haggard and worn and stressed, they are not really going to be comfortable and confident in me."

His current cosmetic regimen includes spending thousands of dollars annually for regular injections of Botox and Restylane as well as frequent trips to the dermatologist for dermabrasion. In the next year or so, he says, he plans to have more plastic surgery done, including another facelift, coupled with some facial remodeling--narrowing his nose and widening his eyes. He has budgeted about \$20,000 for these procedures.

(Donald Kress, a plastic surgeon based in Frederick, Md., says most patients who have plastic surgery once will have it again. The average appears to be 2.6 procedures. Cleveland likens the pursuit of plastic surgery to those who keep getting tattoos.)

Licensed psychotherapist Joshua Estrin, a gay man who practices in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and the author of the self-help book *Shut Up and Listen to Yourself*, says problems with body image are rooted deeply in gay culture.

"It is human nature to compare and contrast, and unfortunately there is no way to look 24 when you are 35 or 45," Estrin says. "Therein lies the pressure to look good and look young and keep up with the Joneses, and that means, for some men, to go under the knife."

Psychologists say the urge to undergo plastic surgery may also be related to a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder called body dysmorphic disorder, a type of mental illness in the

same category as anorexia. Generally speaking, it causes someone to focus obsessively on one body part, to the point that they think everyone notices it.

"It is taking to the extreme the recognition of your own bodily flaws and obsessing about them to the point where either you do something about it or you withdraw and don't participate [in life]," says Trachta.

While about 95% of people who suffer from eating disorders are women, Estrin says gay men and athletes represent 95% of the portion who are men. "There has been a sharp rise in body dysmorphic disorder in men," Estrin says.

Just as Cleveland fixated on his love handles, so B. Andrew Plant, a 39-year-old writer based in Atlanta, focused on the shape of his neck. In 1997 he spent about \$8,000 to have it reshaped, from what he describes as an unflattering 45-degree angle to one that is now 90 degrees.

"My neck was always what I focused on," Plant says. "I had always obsessed about it." The procedure required inserting something that looked like a heavy fishing wire beneath the chin and under the ear and cinching back the muscles of his neck, he says.

Though Cleveland, Lively, and Plant say they are pleased with their new bodily contours, all describe gruesome recovery periods that were in some ways more than they bargained for. For Cleveland, that meant tremendous abdominal soreness, accompanied by terrible black-and-blue contusions all over his torso and genital area.

"You bruise like crazy. My entire trunk and midsection to the breast area were literally black and purple," says Cleveland. "And what they don't tell you is that your penis turns bright purple and then dark black, and that scared me."

Lively says he had months of grossly disfiguring facial hematomas, or blood clots, that had to be drained in his plastic surgeon's office, sometimes twice a day.

"When this is going on you are scared to death. You are thinking, What am I going to look like? because right now you look unbelievably horrible," Lively says with a wry laugh. "The only thing that is going through your mind is you did this to look better and God has punished you for messing with his creation."

For Plant, it was months of pain and difficulty turning his head and many weeks before he felt like he wasn't attracting stares in public.

Yet for all the ups and downs associated with plastic surgery, experts say it is not only pathology that drives gay men to have such procedures. In some cases these operations can be beneficial, particularly if they are done in an overall context of taking care of oneself, including eating right, exercising, and seeking help for emotional and psychological problems. In the case of men who have HIV and facial wasting, for example, plastic surgery can be very helpful, experts say.

"It can be productive and be something that will help someone with his self-esteem," says Rubin.

Certainly for Cleveland, this has been the case. An avid exerciser, he says his liposuction gave him just the body-image boost he needed, and he now feels himself to be attractive and "cruise-worthy" for the first time in his life.

"I took my shirt off at the esplanade on Sunday," he says, referring to the Christopher Street Pier on the Hudson River in New York. "I have not done that before, ever."

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