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Nip and Tuck

By TONI BENTLEY
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“‘IT’S only liposuction’ are the three most dangerous words in the English language,” screams an outraged former patient played by Jill Clayburgh. She’s standing on a street corner in a business suit, shoving fliers at alarmed pedestrians. Each flier features a gruesome photograph of her botched stomach liposuction. It looks as if a pit bull was the doctor.

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Debbi Morello/The New York Times

This scene appears in “Nip/Tuck,” the subversive television drama that, in the words of its creator, is “anti-plastic-surgery” because “for the most part, plastic surgery does not solve your problems.” The word seems to be getting around. Now we have Alex Kuczynski’s “Beauty Junkies: Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery,” just in time to protect a few other bellies from butchery.

But it may well be a losing battle. Cosmetic surgery is now so prevalent that it could qualify as a national epidemic. And under all that Botox — the gateway procedure — as well as the face-lifts and tummy tucks, lies a sinister story, as deep as it is shallow. In exploring it, Kuczynski, a former reporter for The New York Times who now contributes the Critical Shopper column to Thursday Styles, has performed a real service. She gives you everything you need to know — the menu of procedures (right down to toe liposuction), the price tags, the names of doctors and dentists, the drugs, the implements and implants, the celebrity patients. She also lays out the dangers, the disasters and the deaths.

BEAUTY JUNKIES Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery.

By Alex Kuczynski.
290 pp. Doubleday. \$24.95.

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Along with the reporting, Kuczynski provides delicious tidbits for the cocktail-party circuit: that, for example, the synthetic collagen called Cosmoplast is manufactured from fetal foreskin stem cells harvested from a single baby boy, who would now be a teenager. (It’s probably a good thing, she notes, that he doesn’t know that cells from his penis are filling “the lips of hundreds of thousands of men and women around the planet.” He might need as many therapists.)

Kuczynski manages to sustain that light tone, and doesn’t spoil the illusion inherent in her subject by looking very far below the surface for the “why” of it all. She neglects, for example, to mention the sobering recent studies suggesting that women who have had cosmetic surgery are three times as likely as their sagging peers to kill themselves. In other words, depressed women are the most common beauty junkies.

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Make that depressed women with extra cash. Cosmetic surgery is still mostly an elitist preoccupation, though some plucky girls take up collections on the Internet, promising their benefactors pictures of their new breasts. Indulging in just a few of the procedures outlined in Kuczynski's book can cost more than \$50,000.

How did this practice of self-mutilation, masquerading as a search for beauty, become not only a society-sanctioned addiction but a \$15 billion industry? Economic greed and insecure women are such a potent combination that plastic surgery now rivals, economically, the far less disingenuous, much-criticized pornography industry. Which one, you have to wonder, hurts women more? Kuczynski connects the two, proposing that the desire to look like a porn star is one of the most prevalent motivations for the society ladies who indulge in the most cosmetic surgery. "Beauty Junkies" documents, in morbid detail, an obsession that represents a failure in the 150-year battle of American feminism to empower women. One of the faces of so-called third wave feminism may be the literally paralyzed mask of the surgically remastered woman.

Kuczynski is well equipped, given her own surgical dabbling, for her subject. Her book is, in fact, a curious hybrid — half investigation, half memoir. "I was myself a beauty junkie," she has admitted in an interview, adding: "I think of myself as a method journalist. ... I couldn't have written this book without knowing intimately the experience of the cosmetic surgery patient. I don't think anybody at The Times would say, She's shallow because she had puffy upper eyelids and had them fixed. The extent of the procedures that I subjected myself to was not so over-the-top that it invites ridicule."

This is debatable. Two-thirds of the way into her book, Kuczynski takes a detailed detour into an account of her own adventures, lasting almost a decade, with "what we refer to in New York as maintenance." This personal story — in which she moves from microdermabrasion to collagen treatments to Botox injections to liposuction, eyelid surgery and Restylane-plumped lips — may sell more books, enliven the gossip columns and provide a necessary pre-emptive strike against her critics. But Kuczynski's objective-subjective straddle can be compromising; at the very least, it argues against the supposition, in this age of the memoir, that one's vanity is expiated by self-exposure. This bright, well-employed, sophisticated woman confesses to being "honest and brutal and bitchy" and then proves her claim while cruelly assessing the sewn-up skin flaps on a formerly obese lawyer, a doctor's "prize patient" at a medical conference in New York. This vulnerable and brave woman is, in fact, one of the few truly poignant characters in the book, but Kuczynski demonstrates no compassion for her.

In addition to the story of the \$6,000 she spent to suction fat "out of my rear," Kuczynski tells a tale of her two eyelids. She had them lifted — the "puffy" problem — though she displays, with admirable humility, one of her pretty blue "before" eyes on her book's jacket. Sixteen times. At nearly 40, she has now sworn off surgery and informs us not only that aging is inevitable — "time's winged chariot will catch up to you and march all over your face" — but that she gets "smarter every year." Her surgical obsession, she confesses, did not achieve "its ultimate goal: happiness and satisfaction."

Kuczynski's book is most interesting when she switches from the confessional to the informative, as in her brief but fascinating chapter on the history of plastic surgery. In the second half of the 16th century, an ingenious method of rhinoplasty was devised by an Italian doctor, Gaspare Tagliacozzi, for a Knight of Malta whose nose had been mangled in a duel. Tagliacozzi cut two parallel incisions in one of the man's upper arms, encouraging the wound to heal with the flap hanging loose. Two weeks later, he secured the flap onto the man's face, holding the arm in place with a sling. After several weeks of this inconvenience, when the arm tissue had grown into the remaining nose tissue, the arm

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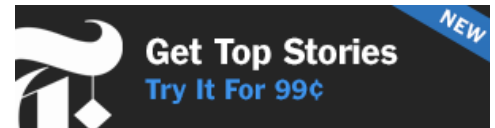
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was cut free. Thus began the first of six surgeries to shape the lump of scar tissue into something resembling a nose. (This elaborate procedure was admittedly imperfect. A sneeze could blow the whole thing right off your face and across the dinner table.)

Kuczynski's story of the beauty regimen of Mrs. X, the wife of a film-industry executive, demonstrates just how far we've come since the knight's battle of honor — although there's very little honor here. The compulsive activities of this "Hollywood housewife," suggest a kind of cosmetic Münchhausen syndrome. Her basic maintenance routine involves hair coloring and styling (twice a week), facials (once a week) and full-body waxing (once a week), as well as periodic use of tanners, regular manicures, teeth cleaning and whitening. Her face and body are slathered with expensive creams made from caviar, 24-karat gold, human growth hormone or wild yam extract. For keeping her muscles toned, there's Pilates, tennis and Rolfing. Mrs. X also visits two or three plastic surgeons about three times a year to discuss what needs fixing. She has been injected with Gore-Tex, Botox and Artecoll, and is a member of a Restylane frequent-user awards program. (How many miles of Restylane gets you a freebie?) She has had liposuction and breast augmentation — in, out, then in again, but bigger — and has "done" her eyes and brows. "She is," Kuczynski notes, "among her peer group, considered the norm."

Last year, Mrs. X crossed the final frontier with labiaplasty — getting that whole mess down there cleaned up, tightened up and, as it were, re-virginized. Genital cosmetic surgery is, according to Kuczynski, one of the most rapidly growing "areas in the field." Finally, the doctors have located the original sin and defanged the vagina dentata. This creation of an alternate surface through surgery — the Jungian shadow side taking a walk on the outside — raises interesting spiritual questions. At the pearly gates — and many Americans claim to believe in heaven — will St. Peter turn a blind eye to your body and see your soul? Or will he fail to recognize your reconstructed self and direct you to the unknown-persons department for all eternity?

At its most extreme, this craze for plastic surgery is more than a display of culturally conditioned self-hatred. It is, rather, a current manifestation of female masochism — a sister compulsion to anorexia, bulimia, cutting and excessive tattooing and piercing. Here ritual, aesthetics, theatrics and exhibitionism are ceremonious enactments of self-annihilation in the hope of transcendence (if you're a romantic) or escape (if you're a realist). These are death and resurrection exercises. Self-loathing, on the other hand, keeps you firmly in the eternal hell of the here and now.

But unlike religious or sexual masochism, which is free (except for the occasional dominatrix), plastic surgery is expensive — even if, as more and more people do, you put it on a credit card. It has become a perversion of a perversion, thanks to the cynicism of the pharmaceutical and medical industries, dynamo publicists and doctors who on occasion perform what one of Kuczynski's sources calls a "P.W.B." or "positive wallet biopsy." How paradoxical that in our society masochism is considered a pathology to be cured, while cosmetic surgery is celebrated and encouraged, especially in popular women's magazines.

Dare one note that this particular form of self-mortification intimates a kind of subcutaneous eroticism? Perhaps unwittingly, Kuczynski titles her own confessional chapter "My Love Affair With Dr. Michelle." After all, the doctor is an authority figure (whether male or female) who inserts various instruments into the body in order to implant "injectable fillers." It's difficult not to recall that in the late 19th century, doctors were the first to offer the vibrator cure for hysterical women. That too was once considered a legitimate "medical" practice.

Kuczynski finishes her book having sworn off surgery herself — after her Restylane "large

yam” lip debacle. “By the time this book comes out,” she writes proudly, “I won’t have had a Botox shot or a collagen shot for a year.” You go, girl! However, her simplistic admonishment to “stop and think. And think and stop,” will deter no one intent on surgical self-improvement. It doesn’t even begin to confront the hunger being assuaged by external alteration.

Asked if she ever considered a career, Mrs. X, the film-colony wife, replies: “No, because I was never going to be that good at anything. Or at least I was never going to be so good at anything that I would have made a difference.” The disguise of a woman who has sewn, injected and scraped her surface into a masked carapace is only a distraction from her profound, perhaps unconscious sadness. Here the pathos in the Bride of Frankenstein’s agonized cinematic scream finds a brand-new face.

Toni Bentley, a former dancer with the New York City Ballet, is the author, most recently, of “The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir.”

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