

## Like a Pearl: Kristin Beeler and the Art of Enfoliation Wendy Steiner

We do not like to see disfigurement. Looking at someone scarred or maimed seems an affront to them, and frightens us with our own vulnerability. Injuries are meant to heal with time, and scars to fade. Every seven years, each of the trillions of cells in our bodies is replaced by a fresh facsimile, and though the copying may occasionally be imperfect, the sheer scale of this renewal is staggering. Cell-deep, we are embodiments of optimism.

When disfigurement and death put the lie to optimism, art steps in to prop up the illusion. Throughout the body of the world, artists toil away, transforming tapped-out realities into “something rich and strange.” As Shakespeare’s Ariel sang:

*Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes;<sup>1</sup>*

This wishful thinking is the stuff of fairy tale and romance. Against all odds, monsters are slain, poisoned beauties awake, and blighted lands burst forth in flower.

But romance is a spring story. A winter’s tale is something darker.<sup>2</sup> “Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age,” wrote T. S. Eliot: “the cold friction of expiring sense/ Without enchantment, offering no promise.”<sup>3</sup> *No promise*: it is an all but unbearable realization. Its pathos fills a late poem by W. B. Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.” In youth, Yeats remembers, “Players and painted stage took all my love,/ And not those things that they were emblems of.” But in age, nothing is left but “those things”:

*A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.<sup>4</sup>*

A world of broken things, the rag-and-bone shop—and broken bodies, too. So much more comforting to scale ladders to a painted stage than sink down into the rubble of disenchantment.

As a child, Kristin Beeler read Yeats’s poetry with her mother, an English teacher and photographer, and years later, at an impasse in her career, she returned to “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.” The result is the extraordinary outpouring of jewelry art, photography, clothing, embroidery—and pearls—that make up *Rag and Bone*. “[B]eauty and monstrosity are [my] background themes,” she tells us; “Pearls form the basis of my visual language.”<sup>5</sup>

Beeler’s theme in *Rag and Bone* is the disfigurement of bodies, and not just any bodies either. She shows us friends, colleagues, even her partner, permanently marked: the neat slash of a mastectomy scar, the random scatter of pits in the flesh of a bomb victim, a back torqued where the spine was severed in a snowboarding accident, the gap in the hand of a nine-fingered ex-soldier. These are rag-and-bone bodies, irredeemable, cut off from optimism.

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act I, scene ii.

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye in the *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), divides literature into roughly four categories—romance, comedy, tragedy, and irony—each correlated with a different season of the year.

<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding” ll. 129, 131-32 (London: Faber, 1959), p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Kristin Beeler, “Beauty and Other Monsters,” *Metalsmith*, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 50.

Brokenness and the loss of enchantment are nothing new in art, of course, and as in Yeats and Eliot, they are typically a source of sadness. Not so in Japanese aesthetics. In a remarkable essay, “Beauty and Other Monsters,” Beeler points us to the practices of *kintsugi* and *wabi-sabi*. Art informed by the principles of *kintsugi*—“the beauty of scars”—treats “breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.”<sup>6</sup> In *wabi-sabi*, beauty is conceived as rough simplicity, naturalness, and the real, however damaged, on the assumption that everything in life is impermanent, imperfect, and incomplete.<sup>7</sup> For designer Leonard Koren, “the beauty of *wabi-sabi* is, in one respect, the condition of coming to terms with what you consider ugly.”<sup>8</sup>

That is well and good when it comes to moldering walls and cracked pots, we might object, but surely the matter is not so simple if what you consider ugly is a human being. *Rag and Bone*’s subjects are “unsightly,” a scandal to the eye. They form an archive of faulty specimens, like the medical anomalies housed in the Mutter Museum of Philadelphia, an institution Beeler visits often. She quotes its mission statement: “to find beauty, not in its conventional forms, but in its opposite: the deformed, the broken, the disfigured body of those who suffered physical abnormality, trauma, or destructive disease... [that] terrifying beauty.”<sup>9</sup>

Still, the creatures preserved in the Mutter’s jars and bottles are not aware of their deformity, nor do they know they have become objects of public scrutiny. Beeler’s models do know that (or did), and we imagine the trauma that produced their disfigurement returning at the thought of our revulsion. Almost all her subjects—outcast from optimism—admit to feelings of shame. What possible good can it do such unfortunates to have their vulnerability exposed in a photograph, a drawing, or an x-ray, so that we can “come to terms” with it—we who are not their friend, colleague, or lover, but random strangers who have wandered into an art gallery in hopes of finding a new ladder to a painted stage?

Beeler’s retort has often been that “an artist’s job isn’t necessarily about beauty or making people feel good.”<sup>10</sup> Fair enough, but what is that job?

The question takes me back in memory. My college math instructor—perhaps bored with a classful of clueless freshmen—assigned us an algebra problem that had no solution. She did not let on, of course, and I sat down conscientiously that evening to show how the second of her equations could be derived from the first. By the time the problem was due I had covered many pages with derived equations, ranks of equivalents marching down from the starting point, and phalanxes trouping up from the conclusion. They never met in the middle, but in the confusion of so many equivalent formulations I fooled myself that they had. The instructor knew better. My “solution” was a broken ladder if ever there was one, and this brush with disenchantment impressed me deeply. It is all I remember of freshman math.

Beeler’s *Rag and Bone* is memorable in much the same way. It presents an insoluble problem: disfigurement can never be squared with optimism. But Beeler goes on deriving equivalents. Painstakingly, lovingly, virtuosically, she photographs scars, diagrams the fractured column of a spine, and draws the surgical clamps and prostheses haunting the X-rays of damaged bodies. She replicates a mastectomy scar in a gold filament, and tapes it onto a faint image of the bearer of the scar. Then she welds the filament into an armature of wires that simulates the charts of currents by

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<sup>6</sup> Sasakawa Yoshinari, *The Art of Kintsugi: The Japanese art of repairing broken pottery that treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise* (Amazon: 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (Point Reyes, CA: Imperfect Publishing, 1994), pp. 31, 48-49.

<sup>8</sup> Koren, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Beeler, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Beeler, p. 44.

which Marshall Islanders navigate the seas. The mastectomy scar has entered new waters now, waters where some have developed ways to keep their bearings.

The derivations are just beginning. The armature of sea vectors becomes the understructure of an extravagant work of jewelry art: a gorgeous prosthesis for the breast that was removed in the mastectomy. Over the curved wires, Beeler layers mother-of-pearl in the shape of oak leaves, an iridescent foliage industrial-cut from the linings of mollusk shells. Beeler considers each shell “an archive of injury.” She sourced them not in the currents of the Marshall Islands, but in Tennessee riverbeds, where there once was a flourishing pearl industry. Are you still with me? We have come a long way from the mastectomy scar: so many layers and derivations and transformations, like a pearl with its anguished accretions of beauty.

Asked about the oak leaves, Beeler will explain that her friend Claudette, the one with the mastectomy scar, was buried in the autumn, and the gravesite was blanketed with leaves fallen from the oaks in the cemetery. We must pause a moment. Consider what has passed between artist and model from the photograph of the scar to this oak-leaved breast. *Rag and Bone* bears witness to a history of trust and caring. In this history lies the artist’s job.

If we seek a name for Beeler’s procedure, *enfoliation* comes to mind. It is barely a word—not to be found in the OED or other dictionaries. Try Googling “enfoliation,” and after a hit or two about faulty steel smelting and Buddhist theories of desire,<sup>11</sup> the results page assumes you really were looking for “exfoliation.” But Beeler is not engaged in that. Rather than peeling away worn-out layers to expose a new one beneath, she copies wear and tear in unlikely equivalents, layering it in foliage, foil, the pages of a folio. She even throws in a few broken ladders extrapolated from spinal columns and surgical clamps, just to remind us of the folly of our predilection for painted stages.

Though Beeler claims her job as an artist is not about beauty or making people feel good, it is deeply, profoundly, about just that. Her process has much in common with therapy. A scar is an ineradicable mark of trauma, but through the interchange she enters with her subjects, it is brought to light, acknowledged, and recreated in artful equivalents. After that, it no longer casts an unmanageable shadow over everything else in her subjects’ lives, or fills viewers with revulsion or anxiety. But enfoliation is not a back door to optimism. Though the pieces in *Rag and Bone* are often lovely, they do not let us forget how that loveliness arose. The photograph of the jewelry breast, for example, is superimposed over a faint image of Gabriela with her mastectomy scar.

Still, Beeler accepts that the elements of *Rag and Bone* may be prized for associations that have nothing to do with their starting point. (And after all, this is the case for any work of art.) The mother-of-pearl breast can be worn as a fashion statement, or perhaps a personal statement. In wearing it, the owner will unavoidably be calling attention to her own breast, intact or amputated. If she experiences pity for Claudette—and for the bereaved artist—that pity will probably coexist with nerviness, flare, sensuality, a complex of emotions that is closer to lived consciousness than the pathos of lost enchantment alone.

Indeed, were disfigurement not such a grave theme, *Rag and Bone* might almost seem whimsical, a free-associative romp. Beeler describes it as a scrapbook or archive, an unstructured assemblage of images, notes, and records, something like memory itself. The diversity of arts it employs is striking: photography, drawing, fashion design,

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<sup>11</sup> “The High Price of Desire,” in Ming Zhen Shakya, *The Seventh World of Chan Buddhism* (<http://zbohy.zatma.org/Dharma/zbohy/Literature/7thWorld/7th-world-home.html>): “The enfoliating process, then, constitutes a complex of ideas, memories and associations which adhere to each archetypal structure, giving it its peculiar characteristics. Through its many interfacing with consciousness, the complex transfers its data, thus influencing the ego to comply with the instinctive function.”

jewelry art, X-ray technology, embroidery, installation art, mapping and charts, botanic diagrams of the growth rings of ancient bristlecone pines.

The diversity of these practices, many of them considered domestic or “feminine,” recalls Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*, a work that Beeler greatly admires. *Rag and Bone* places the situation of women within the theme of disfiguration. Western culture regards the bodies and faces of all women as flawed, and our shame at our unsightliness has generated vast industries for cosmetics, fashion, hair products, dieting, plastic surgery. The armature supporting Gabriela’s mother-of-pearl breast can be seen as underwire in a bra or the bones in a corset.

Yet ultimately, *Rag and Bone* is more concerned with female sociability than objectification. Her women subjects collaborate in their staging and posing. The portrait of Suzanne Ramljak, for example, is the product of a sort of girls’ night out. Ramljak, the editor of *Metalsmith Magazine* and a noted expert on jewelry art, was attending a professional conference soon after back surgery left her with an angry red scar on her neck. Beeler was at the conference, too, and when she heard about the scar, she asked Ramljak to pose for *Rag and Bone*. They repaired to Ramljak’s hotel room with a woman photographer, and with a dozen sheets ordered from room service and a quantity of hairspray and bobby pins, Ramljak was draped and coifed to resemble a marble sculpture with a scar. This “marred” goddess emerged from a game of dress-up—at once a spoof and a wry comment on the history of female representation in art.

Gabriela’s portrait projects a similar tension between disfigurement and female self-fashioning. It presents a woman of advanced years who has taken pains with her haircut and color. Like Ramljak, she does not face the camera, though her scar is in full view. Beeler has designed her an elegant dress, a simple white sheath, cut and finished to the most exacting couturier standards, and accessorized with the long white gloves we associate with royalty, or strippers. The dress and gloves are made of Tyvec, which is not a fabric women wear. Exceptionally lightweight and strong, Tyvec is used for body armor, racing sails, and tamper-proof envelopes. Beeler reveals its luminous, textured beauty—at once graceful, indestructible, and protective. Like all her pieces, the dress is “compassionate armor.”

This collocation of disparate arts, technologies, and emotional registers is the norm in *Rag and Bone*. Beeler studies notions of interconnection—rhizomatic root structures, social identity theory, actor network theory. Human contact and sharing is her ultimate theme. If disfigurement does not square with optimism, we can at least come together in our disenchantment, and *Rag and Bone* would not exist at all were it not for the trust that grows up between Beeler and her subjects. Viewers, in turn, learn to emulate her empathy in an expanding network of interconnection.

The epigraph to *Rag and Bone* is a verse from Galatians, “Bear ye another’s burdens.” Beeler does not quote the verse that follows—“For every man shall bear his own burden.” It strikes most people as contradictory, but I doubt that Beeler would see it that way. Bearing Gabriela or Suzanne’s burdens has been a way for her to bear her own. “[B]eauty comes in through our vulnerabilities,” she notes. “It strikes a sympathetic chord...reflecting back some part of myself which is bent or broken or knows what it is to be ill-formed.”<sup>12</sup> In *wabi-sabi*, beauty is said to be “a dynamic event that occurs between you and something else.”<sup>13</sup> Far better if it occurs between us and someone else. For then we will bear our burden like a pearl, enfolded in beauty.

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<sup>12</sup> Beeler, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> Koren, p. 51. This notion of beauty as interaction has been central to my work in aesthetics: *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); *The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); *Beauty as Interaction*, 2015 *Metalsmith* “Exhibition in Print.”