

## THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8

**10:00 – 11:30 CRISPIN SARTWELL  
(PHILOSOPHY, DICKINSON COLLEGE)  
A Defense of Beauty**

Beauty has traditionally been considered as one of the ultimate values, along with truth, goodness, and justice. By 1900 or so, however, it had been kicked downstairs or even vaporized completely into a mere subjective response, making the word ‘beauty’ quite meaningless. Already in the 1890s, French revolutionaries came to regard beauty as a sign of royalist excess and catholic religious hierarchy; later on, the political left declared beauty to be the evil embodiment of capitalist greed, encouraged by wealthy collectors and entrepreneurs who fill museums and galleries with expensive masterpieces, and of political power games, as exemplified by Nazi propaganda; while some feminists saw the “beauty myth” as a key aspect of male supremacy. In spite of all of this, I’ll argue that beauty remains a fundamental human experience and value, and I will suggest ways in which it might be rescued from subjectivism and how we might think about it in relation to contemporary politics.

**11:30 – 13:00 KEYNOTE SPEAKER**

**CHARMAINE NELSON (ART HISTORY AND  
COMMUNICATION STUDIES, MCGILL  
UNIVERSITY; VISITING PROFESSOR OF  
CANADIAN STUDIES AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY)**

**‘I am the Only Woman’: Race, Sex, and Female  
Beauty in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century  
Anglo-Caribbean Art**

This presentation focuses on the idealization of white women as beautiful and feminine in the colonial culture of the Caribbean, a tactic which ensured that they were extended certain forms of social and legal protection that were denied to black females, enslaved or free. I argue that Transatlantic Slavery was the key institution through which the pre-modern and modern west differentiated people on the basis of race. The supposed brutishness and biological inferiority of Africans was used to distinguish them from Europeans and to highlight the assumed cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic superiority of the white body. Through an examination of examples of “high” and “low” art and popular culture, I shall argue that the racialization of beauty and the idealization of whiteness played a central role in the dehumanization of Africans and the justification of their enslavement and abuse.

## FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9

**8:30 – 10:00 HEBA MOSTAFA (ART HISTORY,  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO)  
Beauty and the Feminine in Early Islamic Art**

In this talk I will explore western reception of representations of women in the early Islamic palace during the first dynasty of the Islamic empire, known as the Umayyad period (661-750 CE). Captured in various forms of undress in both wall painting and sculpture, these representations had a profound and unexpected impact on the field of Islamic art. Aesthetic discussions of their femininity and sensuality in scholarly literature, rather than revealing anything, have obscured the historical identity of these women and hindered an understanding of their role within the Umayyad court. By coloring perceptions of the early Muslim ruler as decadent and pleasure seeking, the perceived sexuality of these female nudes reflected the biases of the predominantly male western gaze of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, subverting scholarly engagement with Umayyad art to this day.

**13:00 – 14:30 JONATHAN STERNE (SOUND  
STUDIES, MCGILL UNIVERSITY)  
Mastering Mastering: Artificial Intelligence,  
Standardization and the Sound of Music**

The presentation will focus on Landr, a Montreal-based company that applies artificial intelligence to music mastering, in order to consider new ways in which machines and technological standards shape the sounds we hear every day, defining what people perceive as “normal” music and changing our conceptions of beauty in music production. Beyond the aesthetic dimension of music, the talk will also address the politics of artificial intelligence.

*Charmaine Nelson and Rachel Zellars’ presentations are co-sponsored by the organizers of Black History Month. Funding provided by the Quebec Ministry of Education.*

**VANIER**  
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## Humanities Symposium 2018

**BEAUTY**



**February 5 - 9**

**Vanier College Auditorium - A 103**

**Featuring Charmaine Nelson (McGill/Harvard) Thursday, Feb 8 at 11:30**  
*Event Co-Sponsored by Black History Month with Funding Provided by the Quebec Ministry of Education*

**Also presenting: Crispin Sartwell (Dickinson College), Heba Mostafa (Toronto),  
Jonathan Sterne (McGill), Rachel Zellars (Vermont), and others**

**For more information, contact David Koloszyc at [koloszyd@vanier.college](mailto:koloszyd@vanier.college)**

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*Poster Artwork: Jim Kennedy*

# BEAUTY

## VANIER HUMANITIES SYMPOSIUM 2018

February 5-9, Vanier Auditorium (A-103)

“Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be at all,” declared the founder of the surrealist movement, André Breton, in his novel, *Nadja* (1928). Far from being a mere provocation, the statement embodies the modernist spirit which, from dance and music to art, architecture, and literature, set out to dismantle the classical idea of beauty as something that had to do with order, harmony, and reason, and that was supposed to be pleasing to the senses. Neither was this merely a youthful revolt against tradition. The modernists wanted to draw attention to the fact that classical beauty had increasingly come to appear meaningless: detached from old metaphysical ideals and incapable of responding to a world permeated by violence, injustice, and exploitation. Today, despite the enduring lack of agreement concerning the meaning or value of the concept, we nevertheless continue to be fascinated by beauty, and our responses to it reveal much about who we are. Ideas about beauty permeate our explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious notions of sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, health, or power, and today’s beauty industry is not only unprecedented in scale, but also in its function as a kind of moral, social, political, or economic imperative hardly anyone can escape. So how should we think about beauty in the 21st century? How should we speak about this seemingly indefinable quality that, all too often, can feel at once oppressive and rare?

### MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5

#### 10:00 – 11:30 MARY SODERSTROM (AUTHOR) Concrete Beauty, Beautiful Concrete

Concrete is ugly, or beautiful, depending on what it’s used for. This almost magical substance (what else starts out as a soupy mixture, can be poured into nearly any shape, and hardens to rock on its own?) forms the grand dome of Rome’s Pantheon and the “sails” of the Sydney Opera House. Yet it also made construction of 20th century highrises possible in cities as varied as New York, Moscow and Paris, as well as hundreds of millions of do-it-yourself houses all over the world. Some may consider these buildings blights on the landscape, but for others they are home. The idea that beauty is relative is brilliantly demonstrated in this ancient, yet modern, material.

#### 13:00 – 14:30 RACHEL ZELLARS (UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT) Bias and Beauty

In our current political climate, there is a crucial need to discuss human difference more often. What kind of language and understandings are needed to talk about human difference both in and outside of our classrooms? Implicit bias is a science that gives us tools for a better understanding human difference and, more importantly, for confronting human biases existent in all peoples. In this presentation, I will focus on human bias as it relates to the body—namely, how our biases affect our perception of others in the context of beauty, disability, and race. I will focus on the science of implicit bias: how it works, what histories it arises from, why it matters in the present, and how critical implicit bias training can support the transformation of our interpersonal relationships and classrooms.

#### 14:30 – 16:00 CHRISCINDA HENRY (ART HISTORY AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, MCGILL UNIVERSITY) Beauty, Desire, and Death in Renaissance Portraiture

The Renaissance was characterized by a fascination with the quasi-magical power of portraiture to conjure a living presence through the material representation of likeness, relating beauty to both moral ideals and desire. My talk will discuss portraiture with regard to the different forms of love and desire acknowledged in the Renaissance, particularly the desiring gaze of the patron/ beholder and the portrait as uncanny preserver of youth and beauty, as well as the idea of female beauty and ideal female form as the personification of beautiful art. To complement this discussion, I will examine the flip-side of the youth and beauty coin, that is, the relationship of portraiture to transience, the perceived destruction of beauty by age and death. And when I say flip-side I mean it literally: we’ll look at double-sided portraits and portraits with painted covers that figure an individual in the prime of life and physical appearance on the front, and an allegory of death and decay on their reverse.

### TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6

#### 8:30 – 10:00 MIKE TILLI (HUMANITIES, VANIER COLLEGE) Mathematical Beauty: Seeing Numbers as Beautiful and Understanding Beauty Numerically

This presentation will provide an overview of some prevalent ideas surrounding the relationship between beauty and mathematics. From antiquity to modern day,

some thinkers have provided accounts of the beauty of numbers, while others have sought to understand beauty through numbers. The talk will focus on three claims: 1. There is something beautiful about mathematics; 2. Math is found in beautiful works of art; 3. Beauty is nothing in the eye of the beholder; it might be best understood objectively through mathematics.

#### 10:00 – 11:30 ALANNA THAIN (ENGLISH, MCGILL UNIVERSITY) Sleeping Beauties: Vulnerability and Resistance

This talk takes a feminist approach to the vulnerability of the sleeping woman. How have feminist artists reimagined the vulnerability of the sleeping figure as sites of resistance and potential? I look at three works: Angela Carter’s revised and retranslated feminist fairy tales, Julia Leigh’s 2011 film *Sleeping Beauty*, and Indian activist Jasmeen Pantheja’s “Meet To Sleep Action Hero” project, which reclaims public spaces through napping in parks and other public zones. What is the beauty of vulnerability, as explored in these projects as sites of embodied resistance and collective engagement?

#### 11:30 – 13:00 LYNN HUGHES (STUDIO ARTS, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY) How Wide is Beauty?

In 2009, Dave Beech, in an essay called *Art and the Politics of Beauty*, observed that “It is not that babies, flowers and diamonds have stopped looking good. The critique of beauty is never a critique of beautiful objects but always of ideas, ideologies, social practices and cultural hierarchies”. Beauty is not a static thing and our ideas about it may change as we get older or when we experience a radical change of context. Beauty can also vary from one era to another and be different from one culture to another. But has the arrival of interactive culture – and, with it, of interactive works of art and games – affected the way we think about beauty?

#### 14:30 – 16:00 BERKELEY KAITE (ENGLISH, MCGILL UNIVERSITY) The Defiled Celebrity Body: The Case of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis is famous for having been sat beside her husband, President John F Kennedy, when he was assassinated in 1963. I investigate a particular way in which Jackie has been “imagined” in the popular press and biographies: her construction as a celebrity, her placement at the scene of the crime in Dallas, and her association with the pink Chanel suit defiled by JFK’s blood. I suggest these are related. The celebrity is one

on whom we lavish our many curious, sometimes adoring, gazes, but she doesn’t return the gaze. Jackie would not speak to us or address the media’s cannibalizing interest in JFK’s death, and for this she has been subjected to rituals of public humiliations which unconsciously revealed things that could not be publicly acknowledged. I will discuss the media construction of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and place her assumed grace, glamour and style in the context of the cold-war Presidency, the assassination, and her reincarnation as “Jackie O.”

### WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7

#### 13:30 – 15:00 ANGELIQUE WILLKIE (CONTEMPORARY DANCE, CONCORDIA) Beauty’s Agency: Changing Aesthetics in Dance

As an active practitioner of contemporary dance for over thirty years, I am still struck by the extent to which the beauty of a performance is often so closely associated with the “beauty” of the performers. As the traditionally hierarchical relationship of choreographer and dancer has shifted, so have notions of what is considered “beautiful” dance and, as a result, so too has the notion of the “beautiful” performer. Using the backdrop of my own professional experiences as a visible and linguistic minority woman artist in Europe for twenty-five years, I will look at changing aesthetics in dance and their impact on the agency exercised by and available to the performer during the creative process and on stage.

#### 16:00 – 17:30 JOHN POTVIN (ART HISTORY, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY) Masculinity, the Male Body, and Beauty in 1920s Consumer Culture

In surprising ways, our contemporary consumer-driven ideals surrounding gender fluidity, male beauty and the physically fit male body finds direct historical and analogous expressions in 1920s Paris consumer culture. Through the figure of the 1920s dandy as represented in various media, this presentation will explore the intersecting and competing idea(l)s of masculinity, male beauty and the body by focusing on the tensions between, but not limited to: effeminacy and muscular masculinity; fashion and fitness; beauty and civilization; and modernism and traditionalism.