

Plastic fantastic?

FOR RACHAEL OAKES-ASH, 40

I have been injected with Botox. There, I've said it. Within days, my facial muscles froze, although the marketers prefer to say "relaxed", and my frown lines disappeared. So I went a step further and got my forehead jabbed. The deep furrow slicing my face from hairline to hairline softened and disappeared.

Then someone commented on how my eyebrows looked like Jack Nicholson's and I noticed they only moved from the outside corners, the inner half not budging, aka "the Joker" effect. Terrified I had been caught out as a Botox devotee, I spent the next three months refraining from eyebrow movements.

That was five years ago when Botox was still a dirty word, done behind closed doors in discreet clinics, not like the franchised lunchtime cosmetic clinics of today. Did I feel guilty at the time? Yes. I felt as if I was entering a race only I was running and yet could never win. Have I had Botox since? Yes, on occasion. Does it work? Yes, it does exactly what it says it will: it stops the muscles from moving.

I had spent hundreds of dollars on creams and potions I knew were no more than hope in a jar. I had slathered chemicals on my skin, used caviar and diamond-infused cream, mixed oatmeal with honey and bathed in milk. All to no effect.

Beauty has always been about competition. There's a constant comparison among girls about thighs, butts and hair colour from the moment we step into the schoolyard. No wonder teenage girls go to such lengths to look the same, lest they attract the deadly gaze of a competitor. The obsession among young women wanting breast implants before their breasts have even finished growing seems imposed not so much by men as by other women.

As a writer on women's issues, I have never been one to condone surgery. To inject is one thing – it wears off after three months – but to go under the knife, with all its risks, for the sake of beauty is absurd.

It is not anti-sisterhood to choose injectables to ease the external ageing process. Women have fought hard for the freedom to choose what we do with our bodies. Other women's physiques are not public property for us to comment on, criticise or denigrate, although women's gossip magazines would say otherwise. But the schadenfreude we experience over coffee and cake at another woman's downfall is still prevalent in cafes around Australia.

It's those women who have Botox, collagen and

Restylane and don't admit it – you know who you are – who are doing others no favours. They present an unreal image for us to buy into and come up wanting. It's like denying that celebrity images in glossy magazines are Photoshopped.

I know lots of women who have had a jab or two or 10. The seriously addicted look addicted – wide-eyed and frozen manically – but the savvy ones know how to jab to enhance their beauty, not stun it.

The difference is those who own up to it and those who don't. Those who say, "I've had some ELOS laser therapy to reduce my skin pigmentation," or "Restylane around my lip line, that's the key, don't bloat the lips, just fill the outer line so it looks natural,"

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invoke a sigh of relief from the beholder. "Oh, thank God," they think. "We're on different playing fields, in different leagues. You have artificial support, I don't."

Half of Hollywood have had it done but the trouble is they won't admit it. Don't have it done and lose your highly paid onscreen job once you hit 40.

I tried the Restylane filler around my outer lipline once and voila, my lipstick no longer bled. It was a trial offer and I couldn't resist. Of course, I was terrified I would end up with trout lips like Melanie Griffiths. But the key is not to look 10 years younger, or permanently startled – it's to look softer and to have a face that moves with your expressions.

Of course, I can't afford to keep a year-round injection regimen and, frankly, I don't want to. At \$400 for a frown line and Botox eyebrow lift, another \$400 for the eyes, \$350 for the Restylane lips and \$350 for the forehead, we're talking \$1500 every four months.

But would I do it again? If you're paying, sure. Not too much and don't touch the forehead.

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Botox isn't so bad, argues Rachael Oakes-Ash – everybody's having cosmetic enhancements, they're just not admitting it. On the other hand, Rachel Hills believes that by succumbing to the needle or the scalpel, we're messing with things that just aren't broken.

AGAINST

RACHEL HILLS, 26

I have seen my future, and it includes a wrinkled forehead. I have what you might call an "expressive" face. My eyebrows, in particular, jump and dive all over the place when I speak. This means that, under the intense scrutiny we inflict only upon ourselves (and celebrities), my face can form some strange configurations. It also means, I realised recently, that I'm developing the finest of fine lines on my forehead.

It is fashionable in this day and age to inject such lines with toxic substances, in the hope of paralysing muscles and movement, and thereby inhibiting the formation of future creases. It's one of the reasons why, as columnist Mia Freedman pointed out in 2005, it can be difficult to distinguish between a Hollywood actress in her early 20s and one in her late 30s (imagine trying to guess the ages of Uma Thurman, Scarlett Johansson, Reese Witherspoon and Michelle Pfeiffer without their film biographies).

Recently, I watched a 26-year-old New York handbag designer have her cheeks injected with Restylane to fill out the creases in her nasal labial fold (that's "smile lines" to the rest of us). She'd videoed her visit to the dermatologist who performed the procedure and uploaded it to the internet.

In a decade that has produced TV shows such as *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*, this shouldn't come as much of a surprise. And it didn't, really. Botox, liposuction and boob jobs are still viewed as more of an indulgence (or an indicator of low self-esteem) than an everyday occurrence by most of us but when it comes to plastic surgery, we just don't judge like we used to. Far be it for us to criticise another person's pathway to higher self-regard.

And hey, if you think injecting a foreign substance into your face, or reshaping the tip of your nose

will make you happy, I'm not about to barricade the surgery doors to stop you. I do, however, have, ahem, a bone to pick with the process that gets people to that point. Take our New York handbag designer. Upon being informed by her dermatologist, Dr Bobby, of the smile lines she never knew existed, she asks how bad they are on a scale of one to 10. "About a seven," he replies.

She is horrified, "A seven?"

"Twenty-six is a bitch," she adds, without irony.

Or take the "collagen workshop" I attended a few years ago, hosted by a major Australian women's magazine. One of the staffers – we'll call her Lisa – had been injected with collagen earlier that day. Lisa's "before" face, stripped bare of make-up, was projected onto the screen behind the presenter, who outlined her previous "deformities" (I kid you not). Applauding Lisa's post-collagen look, the presenter continued, "Now she needs to have some Botox..."

Not that the blame lies entirely with doctors. This style of rhetoric wouldn't work if we didn't live in a society in which the mainstream definitions of beauty are strict, narrow and impossible to achieve (even for the airbrushed celebrities who are held up to us as idols) – even if our personal definitions of beauty are broad, variable and comparatively unpredictable.

The beauty industry relies on this. For every Dove "Campaign for Real Beauty", there's a salesperson insisting you'll destroy your epidermis if you don't buy her \$120 moisturiser, a hairdresser tutting your choice of shampoo, a magazine reinforcing the Brazilian wax, which is de rigueur if you ever want to get laid.

But where the skincare salesperson or magazine might make you feel ugly, ashamed and inadequate, cosmetic surgery takes the rhetoric one step further, pathologising normal human variations and processes (like ageing). It makes physical imperfection – whether it's an unusual nose, non-perky breasts, saddlebags or a wrinkled forehead – a disease to be "cured".

Where make-up, expensive moisturiser or hair extensions can, at best, be viewed as a celebration or enhancement of the beauty we have, cosmetic surgery is about fixing the things we think are wrong with us. It's the most extreme example of the way the beauty industry preys upon women and creates insecurities, rendering us all ugly, unhealthy and as potential candidates for going under its knife.

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