



Portrait by Sam Omeillas acrylic on canvas 45"x65"

THE BODY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

by Trudy Smith

I've seen the massive banners advertising expensive whitening cream hung on the walls of houses in rural Laotian villages, where brown people spend their lives getting browner under the sun as they toil away in their fields. I've seen those same oppressive whitening cream ads looming over the Asian slum, where I live. My beautiful neighbors sit helplessly under those billboards, lamenting their brown skin, assuring that the r "ugly color" must be a defect caused by dirty water or some other aspect of their poverty. They stare up into what seems to be the good life: wealthy, successful women wearing fashionable, modern clothes and sitting in comfortable surroundings. All of that glamor and success is connected to being fair-skinned. Beauty is equated with the features of another race entirely—my race.

These women assure me that as a representative of that other world of glamor and paleness called America, I must be living the dream. I try to explain that over there, the make-up and facial cream companies still have to make a profit, so they tell us light-skinned people other things to make sure we don't feel pretty either. My neighbors are shocked to learn that women in my culture buy bionazars and even lay out under the sun or artificial lights to make their skin a deep, beautiful brown! They also wonder at my revelation that women in the West want to be as thin as possible. My neighbors are always encouraging me to eat more so that I'll get "nice and fat." I tell them I think we're all crazy, buying those lies when they've just been made up by advertisers to good us into spending more money. Didn't God make

all of us? If He finds us beautiful, then who are we to argue? At this point, all of us are usually laughing, and the giant billboard overhead is forgotten, if only momentarily. But it will take more than a single, lighthearted conversation to detox any of us.

The truth is that in spite of my firsthand experiences with the sometimes humorously conflicting standards of beauty across different cultures, I struggle myself to see the beauty in my body and to recognize its inherent goodness. I'm not sucked in by whitening creams, but in my own country there are other kinds of images which all march in lock-step communicating a single image of beauty: the magazines at the grocery store check-out, the pornography that sucks so many into addiction even before they ever enter a real sexual relationship, and the ads that assault us everywhere. For a nation and a world populated with such vibrantly diverse people of all shapes, sizes, and colors, the not-quite-human projections which populate this virtual world are strikingly, monotonously uniform. More often than not, I find my real-life, un-airbrushed human body to be outside the bounds of what these images promote as beautiful.

In every era of human history, there have been absurd categories of what is and is not considered beautiful—we have only to think of corsets in the U.S. or foot-binding in China to remind ourselves of the arbitrary

(and opposing!) ideas of beauty that various societies have held over time. But perhaps no other generation in history has had to deal with the scale of institutionalized standards of beauty that we face now. In today's globalized world, all the machinery is in place to maintain the unprecedented monopoly of a single, universal ideal. Nobody really wins in this caste-system of beauty, but Western, developed countries exporting their view of the body now means that the beauty industrial complex has also taken on the features of an oppressive, international empire with all of the racist and ethnocentric tendencies that entails.

This impossibly limited standard of beauty is bad enough, but behind it lurks an even deeper deception: that our bodies are primarily for looks anyway. Before we even learn to evaluate the appearance of our bodies and compare them to others, we've already swallowed the assumption that our bodies are artistic objects to be observed and appraised. Our cultural lens teaches us that our sexuality and our physical appearance are the most important part of ourselves; they are the main thing we have to offer, the source of our power, or the basis of our worth. That puts us in a precarious position, because once we have reduced our significance to our bodies, then falling short of the standards our society has set for them is likely to lead us to the conclusion that we aren't worth much at all. Popular

culture simultaneously over-emphasizes and under-values the human body, and especially the female body.

By the time we're measuring ourselves against these standards, we've already forgotten that God has given us bodies to run, jump, play and work in rather than to merely put on display. Our bellies are for laughing, our voices are for singing and speaking truth into the world, our arms are for cuddling children and embracing lovers and reaching out to the lonely. Our bodies are beautiful as they give expression to our hearts and the workings of our minds; they are beautiful as they receive the warmth and goodness of the world through touch and taste and smell. There is certainly beauty in the physical form of our bodies, but it is sacrilege to reduce such a complex, embodied soul to a combination of any number of desirable or undesirable physical traits!

So how can we free ourselves and our world from the stranglehold of such a destructive way of thinking? The range of physical acceptability is primarily communicated to us through mass media in the form of advertisements and entertainment, but because we have come to believe them ourselves, we also repeat these messages to each other: mother to daughter, husband to wife, friend to friend. Encountering hundreds or even thousands of repetitions of our culture's message every day is enough to cause anyone to begin slowly internalizing

these cultural ideals as universal truths which span all cultures and centuries.

Having grown up soaking in these messages myself, I'm still learning what it means to grow into an acceptance of myself that includes my body (that same body that I have been taught to criticize, discipline, modify, and reject in pursuit of an impossible ideal). I think the healing begins by speaking the truth against the roar of the lies. We need to hear the truth reflected back to us from our community and our Creator as many times as we've heard the lies. We can begin dismantling the system by beginning to speak acceptance and love over ourselves and one another, passing on this sense of indestructible, God-given worth to our mothers and daughters and sisters and friends. We can begin to call out those attempts to manufacture insecurity for profit when we see them at the check-out line, or seeping into our own thoughts and conversations.

When we decide as individuals and communities to affirm the goodness of all of our bodies, the change we create is sure to begin slowly, on a small-scale. That's how the coming of the Kingdom usually is. But like tiny mustard seeds growing into an unruly plant with surprising reach, this Truth quietly taking root in our hearts has the power to grow into something which will truly transform the landscape of our lives and of our world, whether or not it ever takes over the whole garden.