

Things to Do

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Yves Saint Laurent



My Body My Business
(American Tourister)
by Michele Pred



Mermaid and
Worms by Judy Fox

Beautiful, stranger

Three exhibitions around the city explore what beauty means in the female experience.
By **Heather Corcoran**

There are things and experiences in life that can be both attractive and repellent at the same time. The French expression *jolie laide*, which translates literally to “pretty ugly,” describes that antithesis well; it’s used to describe someone who is unconventionally attractive, but might as well apply to anything that offers beauty in an unexpected package. This week, a trio of exhibitions explores the definition of beauty and its place within the female experience.

“YSL + Halston: Fashioning the ‘70s” (*The Museum at FIT, Seventh Ave at 27th St; free*) celebrates one of the most exuberant moments in fashion history through the lens of two of its most iconic figures. Digging deeper than the traditional narratives about the glamorous lives of the designers, the exhibition lets the clothing speak for itself about a

moment when traditional dress codes ceased to apply as cultural and social boundaries began to blur.

By incorporating menswear into their womenswear, and looking beyond the Western tradition for inspiration, Saint Laurent and Halston provided a wardrobe for the women’s liberation movement, explains Emma McClendon, the Museum at FIT’s assistant curator of costume. “The many body-skimming, diaphanous dresses on view would often be worn without bras, a major shift from just a decade earlier, when girls were taught how to wear girdles in school,” McClendon says.

Gender politics are more than just a fashion statement in the art of Michele Pred, whose exhibition, “Choice” (*Nancy Hoffman Gallery, 520 W 27th St between Tenth and Eleventh Aves; free*), draws attention

to the current crisis of access to women’s reproductive-health services with works that include hearts and flags made of expired birth-control pills. Fashion does factor in the show, however, through vintage handbags embellished with electroluminescent wires spelling out phrases like PRO CHOICE and MY BODY MY BUSINESS, meant to be carried as walking billboards.

Inevitably, conversations about women’s rights often return to the body, which is the subject of the sculpture show, “Beautiful Beast” (*Wilkinson Gallery, 111 Franklin St between Church St and West Broadway; free*), at the New York Academy of Art. The exhibition looks at 16 contemporary artists who contort and distort the human form in an effort to understand it better. Alongside works like a pair of hyper-realistic self-portraits by Evan Penny

(each representing a younger and older self) and a duo of monstrous marble busts by Barry X. Ball (a demonlike visage and an aging, toothless Medusa with sagging breasts), the exhibition features a number of powerful statements on the female form. Kiki Smith’s life-size *Mary Magdalene*—a bronze figure chained at the ankle—from 1994 is part of a career-long effort to reclaim the female body, while Judy Fox’s terra-cotta *Worm* sculptures exaggerate curves into a garish cartoon simulacrum of sexuality.

“You are simultaneously being seduced and repelled in many of the works in the show, never certain of how you should feel,” says the show’s curator, artist and dean of academic affairs Peter Drake. “The truth is that the beautiful and the grotesque are never far away from each other.”

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