

*Posthuman Packaging: Katerina Jebb for Skims*

Written by Nathan Jon Smith

Finally, I was stuck. A buffer period was commencing. Was I connecting or disconnecting? Even in its most direct moment, I had to consider the intentions of these interfacing images. My iPhone screen, the Instagram platform, post after post, image after image, all just repeating frames within frames—all just an act of hypnosis. The ones and zeros of fashion and beauty photographs flood my feed, whispering, “Buy these clothes... shop for a new identity ... purchase your beauty...” in a seductive language. So long as the scrolling never stops, the seduction continues—the daily algorithmic repetition building up an endlessly purchasable image of beauty. Images can speak a thousand words, yet Katerina Jebb’s uncanny fashion photographs for Kim Kardashian’s shapewear brand, Skims, challenged my fluency.

Beautiful faces are familiar faces in this pixelated sublime, but that’s no surprise considering the cybernetic function of Instagram. Beauty and fashion standards now come pre-packaged, ready for shipment into the minds of your everyday consumer. It’s an easy process—we enjoy the feast, and as we sit and digest, letting notions of new fashions cycle through our system, new libidinal desires are slowly integrated into our mainframes. But here I was, unable to consume, challenged by the beauty presented before me. A Kardashian brand presenting this form of beauty only made the contradiction tougher to swallow. The family most synonymous with manufactured images and algorithmic influence was also producing a body of work that unsettled me. Aversion and attraction pushed and pulled on my finger like a pendulum, keeping me from scrolling past the brown-grey palette, but preventing me from fully engaging with the comely complexion.

Jebb’s machine-rendered aesthetic flattens the model’s body and segments it into new quadrants, transforming her into a grid of rendered resolution, each pixel ready for delivery into the appetite of the masses. Her face, a pleasant mask of striking

beauty, is processed as a standalone product; her body, acutely sculpted by the shapewear and seemingly compressed into another package, is sold separately. Her arms hover awkwardly above and to the sides, misaligned and jumbled, as if the limbs themselves had glitched and were stripped of utility and importance, ultimately being discarded into a pile. Her body is left open and vulnerable. The shapewear, being the only offering of resistance against the gaze, clings to her body like plastic wrap, its translucent cast blurring the line between protection and solicitation. The immediacy of mass production is emphasized by the duplicate silhouettes, which are directly adjacent and overlapping like products on an assembly line. The general symmetry of the artwork further contributes to this quality of mechanized fabrication. Jebb's creates an uncanny essence, reminiscent of CGI, that seemingly contradicts presumptions of the ideal attached to authenticity.

Signals of beauty filled the frame, but what I was looking at, in its totality, was not beautiful. It was an amalgamation of our desperate corporeal desires. These images are the seductive whispers that streamline body ideals into the algorithm. My initial confusion unfolded into a feeling of strange relief, as if I had caught a lie attached to that which I'm trauma-bonded to, and could finally be free of it. The beauty ideals I had long recognized were still present, but pushed to their extreme and compacted into product-like partitions, they revealed themselves as grotesque. The whole structure was unnatural. Why fake it anymore? Shapewear, meant to forcefully change the silhouette form of the body—this is an unnatural process deserving of Jebb's unnatural rendering. It was perhaps inevitable that a Kardashian brand would become the testing ground for this confrontation. Isn't this what we've come to expect; a pre-approved model of beauty selling the steps on how to achieve the standard?

The Skims' ad evoked the spirit of Narcissus in a twisted fashion. We are unable to part with our distorted reflection, drawn in by the mirage upon the violent waves. Society's shame reveals itself on the surface. The comments were unified in their protest: 'Something is really wrong here.' 'This just doesn't feel right.' And, ironically: 'I'm not even going to say it because I'm sure we're all thinking the same thing.' The general audience was overwhelmed with notions of disgust. Jebb played into our

self-obsession and pushed it to its limit, creating a moment of self-reflection, and perhaps a moment of shame as well. In viewing the artwork, we are forced to face the reality of the digital, how we fit all of beauty into virtual boxes, ready for on-demand distribution. My relief came only from engaging with the campaign seriously—respecting Jebb as an artist and approaching the work as true art. Its virality was predicated on a shared denunciation (my own included). By these measures, the partnership between Jebb and Skims was a success.

Evidently, there is an enigma within us that is beyond the control of coded directives. It recoils at the sight of patterns that reflect a manufactured perfection while striving toward absolute beauty. Narcissus was also unable to obtain that phantom image, resulting in his eventual death. Have we finally arrived at ours? Has all that is packaged into Capitalism—the spectacle, the overproduction, the consumerism, the commodification of beauty, bodies, and identities—has it all finally brought a collapse? Our fundamental understanding of beauty and appreciation for aesthetics appears decayed. Jebb's postmodern style entertains this notion of a cultural demise. Her image expresses a rejection or indifference toward any form of belief, dogma, or ideology. All that exists is the product—beauty; a cursed ideal. Yet still, even in her sterile, packaged form, some trace of vulnerability, humanity, and inherent beauty remains embedded deeply into the essence of the artwork. It is for this reason that we feel so offended by her botched visage. What has been debased in her corruption is our own sense of beauty. By its very own participation, Jebb critiques Capitalism and makes us confront our own participation. Disgust, shame, confusion, and relief are the emotional residues for such a discovery.

