

SEDUCED BY

NARCISSESSUS

APOLLONIA VANOVA'S

SENSUAL APPROACH TO

AN ANCIENT MYTH

by Julia Teeluck

The desire for beauty can bewitch and overtake the human mind. The illusion beauty creates can be misleading, and once acquired does not always satisfy as promised. The classic Greek myth of Narcissus—a handsome man whose self-love and vanity destroys him—illustrates this paradox and is the source of inspiration for *Inaccessible Beauty*, a collection by artist Apollonia Vanova.

Through a series of sculptures, sketches and installation pieces, Vanova draws a parallel between Narcissus's story and Western society's use of beauty as self-appraisal. She presents the dual nature of beauty as a source of both pleasure and pain. Wrought in symbolism and infused with sensuality, her work highlights the disillusionment of a beauty-obsessed culture. The pieces in her collection are composed from "sensual and tactile" materials such as supple hair and high-gloss bronze that stimulate the senses. Her work impels us to ask ourselves

what it is about the inaccessibility of an object that makes it desirable.

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young man so beautiful that any person who gazed upon him fell in love. One day, Narcissus sat down by a spring for a drink of water and became mesmerized by the beauty of his reflection in the pool. Upon realizing that he was "burning with love for himself," he died, and in the spot where he lay bloomed the flower we call "narcissus." The myth of Narcissus has penetrated and saturated modern culture to such an extent that according to psychologists and professors Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, we are now facing a narcissism epidemic. Today, people struggle to afford lifestyles beyond their means and obtain objects out of their reach.

Vanova believes that once a person obtains the object of their desire, they are still unsatisfied. The hunt is more thrilling than the conquest. "First, there's the illusion and the seduction of any given beautiful form, followed by the painful realization that this object will not fulfill the desire promised. Like the image of Narcissus, my sculptures captivate and behold the viewer, and desire is awakened. But the closer one approaches, there is a realization that they will not fulfill the desire evoked."

In her work, Vanova intentionally chose materials that would stimulate the senses. She contoured these materials to demonstrate the allure often associated with the acquisition of beautiful objects. Her work is diverse in addressing different elements. While Rapunzel, a 45-foot blonde braid fashioned into a noose, plays on the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, it is also rooted in deeper psychological meaning. "The sensual and shiny braid of long hair hung from a beam draws the viewer closer, but the hangman's noose alludes to an imminent death. It is a metaphor for the id, including all the instinctual impulses, the destructive instinct, as well as Eros and the instinct to create," she said. The piece also expresses the disappointment experienced by those who fall in love for the wrong reasons. She explains that some people tend to fall in love with those who "affirm our external beauty," which distorts their sense of self-worth.

There is a palpable aspect to her work. When I viewed Her Hair, an installation of floor-length black hair hanging in a doorway at The Artist Project, Toronto's annual mass art exhibition, I wanted to reach out and run my fingers through the soft, glistening hair. As I moved closer, I discovered I could only venture so far as there was a wall on the other side blocking me from advancing. For centuries, long hair on women has signified feminine sexuality and biological desirability such as youth, health and fertility. The wall symbolizes a block, combining these elements to reflect unobtainable beauty.

The allure of beauty is embodied in a sculpture entitled Fe-Male. I was drawn to the golden glow of a pair of glossy bronze high heels illuminated underneath

the light. The heels are linked together by a chain, and on each ankle band there is a padlock. I could not help but read into these symbols as a bold feminist statement. I thought, Well, here is a clear reference to women being chained to preconceptions of femininity (i.e., "feminine" women wear high-heels). However, Vanova explained that while she prefers viewers to develop their own meanings, her work should not be placed in these terms: "With its lock and shackle intact, they conjure up fantasies of bondage, but then the inflexibility and heaviness of the material makes it impossible to wear. The idea of being bound to high heel shoes is a powerful position for me, as it accentuates beauty and feminine form."

There is an obvious appeal to the aesthetic form in her work. Art observers sometimes strive to rationalize what draws us to these pieces. Author Wilfried Van Damme suggests in *Beauty in Context* that an object is perceived as beautiful in relation to its reflection of wealth. Vanova's Chanel canvas piece—a black and white checkered canvas layered with Shakespeare's famous line from *Romeo and Juliet*, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," written in elegant handwriting placed horizontally and the word "Chanel" in block letters vertically—demonstrates this juxtaposition. A person who owns a Chanel, a luxury brand, sends a message to society that she is affluent. Not everyone is in the position to expend thousands of dollars on a handbag or item of clothing. And while a person may believe she is attracted to the beauty in the strength and durability of quality leather, the feel and scent of the material and the faint glimmer of gold hardware, the subconscious mind is attracted to the expression of wealth, again reflecting the epidemic of narcissism in our society and our ego-motivated culture.

By integrating the Shakespearean quote, Vanova's message is that the Chanel handbag is not attractive because of its physical appearance, but because the brand name is associated with high fashion, luxury and class. Once purchased, the glamour and excitement wears off causing the person to seek more. "Once a person becomes seduced by a physical form of beauty, it inevitably leads to one's downfall," she explained. Hence the reason why shopping addiction and credit card debt are major problems today.

Vanova's art provokes thought and induces self-reflection. In a society where we have become defined by things we own as a symbol of wealth, true beauty remains to be discovered.

