

07 Jan 2025

South China Morning Post - PostMag

“Do beauty and spa routines secretly control our lives? This South Korean artist asks the question”

Link: https://www.scmp.com/postmag/wellness/article/3293718/do-beauty-and-spa-routines-secretly-control-our-lives-south-korean-artist-asks-question?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article

PostMag


LIFE.
CULTURE.
DISCOVERY.

ART PostMag / Wellness

Do beauty and spa routines secretly control our lives? This South Korean artist asks the question

In Geumhyung Jeong’s recent exhibition ‘Spa & Beauty’, the performance artist and choreographer explores beauty and body-care products, and our complicated relationships to them

Reading Time: 5 minutes

Why you can trust SCMP 



Karen Cheung

Published: 6:15pm, 7 Jan 2025 | Updated: 2:58pm, 9 Jan 2025

Maybe this is just me, but spas are stressful. Like everything else in my adult life, I blame childhood trauma – my mother used to drag me from one beauty salon to another on her sporadic trips from Singapore, where she lived, to visit me in Hong Kong. She was concerned that I lacked a strong feminine presence, one palatable for a male gaze during my crucial teenage years (I was raised by a grandmother who had an arranged marriage and worked in a factory). What I remember most about my mother’s visits was not her presence, but the sensation of being confined to a salon chair as someone fixed my untidy eyebrows underneath blinding white lights.

Then there's also the warped time-space of the spa itself: the soundtrack of soft jazz that commands us to calm down, the incidental intimacy between you and the stranger to whose touch you have consented to, the instructions to just *relax* and let yourself be pampered. Who is really in control here: me, the paying customer, lying down and naked, or the beautician-masseuse, who could do anything to my face and my body for an hour?

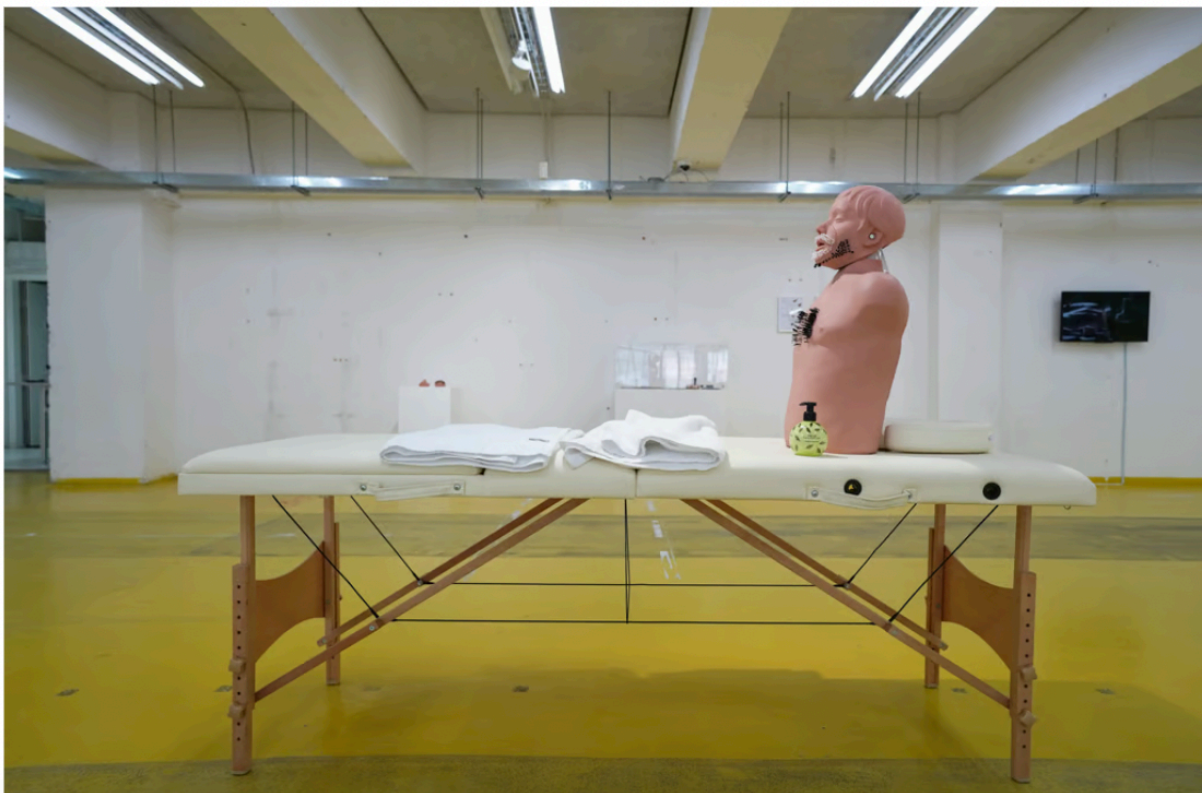


Geumhyung Jeong's Spa & Beauty exhibition was held at Tin Wan gallery in Hong Kong. Photo: Kiang Malingue

These were the questions running through my head when, on a Saturday afternoon in December, in an industrial building unit that houses Kiang Malingue's Tin Wan gallery, Korean artist Geumhyung Jeong announces to the crowd, "Today I'm going to demonstrate spa and beauty."

She's in a forest-green gown and red slippers, and there are about 50 of us at the gallery for the closing performance of the week-long exhibition titled "Spa & Beauty". The space is strewn with uncanny objects and contraptions: a bottle of "foot shampoo", flesh-coloured mannequins with bristles protruding from their chest, a glossy bust with sharp toe brushes for arms, a bathtub with a bearded man plopped at its head so the tub resembles an extension of his body.

Over the course of half an hour or so, Jeong approaches several of these figures; she caresses them, strips down to a neon-blue and yellow bikini and rubs herself against their rough, spiny surfaces in sensual, increasingly acrobatic movements. At one point, she hoists herself above an inanimate body on an orange rescue sling strop. We move through the room without a sound, and some viewers smile hesitantly, unsure how to react. Jeong continues to play the role of the masseuse, bringing to the forefront the erotic subtext of the kneading and stroking that takes place on [the massage table](#).



Geumhyung Jeong's Spa & Beauty exhibition was a play on irony and the absurd. Photo: Kiang Malingue

There is something clinical, almost menacing, about the mechanical swing set in one of the installations, and the solemn, affectless demeanour Jeong maintains throughout her performance renders it less a soothing set of motions than a re-enactment of medical procedures, like a student conducting CPR on a dummy. That Jeong plays it straight, in a show clearly intended to be ironic, amplifies the absurdity. She seems to be asking: is grooming not simply a series of convoluted gestures that, at the end of it, promises to turn us into sexual objects? And similarly, the objects in the room can be read as provocations: if we were going to put snail essence on our faces or [take Ozempic](#), why *not* scrub the gaps between our toes while we're at it?

Born in 1980 in Seoul, Jeong has a background in theatre and choreography, and is known for her ongoing artistic investigation of the relationship between the body and its associated objects. She's also self-trained in robotics; some of her past shows, such as "Under Maintenance" (2021), have featured her engaging with an array of complicated machinery in a space that resembles a robotic operating room. The artist has referred to her mannequins and machines as "collaborators", often assigning them the typically male pronoun "he", according to Ocula magazine.



Spa & Beauty seems to ask the question: does grooming turn us into sexual objects? Photo: Kiang Malingue

“Machines help humans,” Jeong said in an interview with Red Eye ahead of a collaboration [with Miu Miu](#) in 2023. “We usually think about what machines can do for us. But maybe we need to start to think about what we can do for machines.”

Jeong has done just this, here at Hong Kong’s Tin Wan gallery, serving – or servicing – an inanimate apparatus made to look human. At the same time, however, she is being “groomed” by the bristles of her mannequin collaborator, and it is her movements that make that possible; she takes up an active, not passive, role. She is anything but lying down. There is a constant shift in power between man and machine, male dummy and female human masseuse.

“When I deal with my body as a medium,” she told Red Eye, “what I do becomes a work on the female body.”



Geumhyung Jeong's Spa & Beauty questions the boundaries between human and object. Photo: Kiang Malingue

Jeong's work can be considered in the context of [the cyborg](#) as conceptualised in Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), which, among other things, questions the rigidity of boundaries between human and object, and, by extension, offers a feminist critique of the objectification of the female body. If even the line between what is man and what is machine can be blurred – day after day, our online avatars become stand-ins for our real selves, and [artificially intelligent assistants](#) with humanlike voices infiltrate households – then who is to say that traditional gender dynamics and delineations cannot be broken down?

Cyborgs have been a mainstay in contemporary art over the past few decades, from Lee Bul's sculptures to exhibitions closer to home, such as "Post-human Narratives" at the Cattle Depot in Kowloon in 2021. Meanwhile, unrealistic beauty standards have contributed to the cyborgification of our bodies in contemporary times; look around and you see cyborgs everywhere, from [Kardashian lip fillers](#) and implants to Facetuned selfies or "Instagram face". In recent years, Anne Anlin Cheng has taken this one step further by arguing in *Ornamentalism* (2018) that the "yellow woman" is the "original cyborg", the female Asian body having always been especially fetishised.



Geumhyung Jeong's Spa & Beauty frames beauty as an absurd artifice. Photo: Kiang Malingue

If we've been enslaved by unrealistic beauty standards, there is nowhere this is more true than in Jeong's native South Korea, a world leader in the cosmetics industry and the country to which [visitors flock for plastic surgery](#) procedures. Jeong's performance, then, with her determined, self-possessed movements, is a quiet protest against the historical formulation of the submissive female. And as for beauty itself, it is but an absurd artifice.

Later that night, I returned home and counted the number of grooming products in my bathroom: a razor that promises a "super smooth shave", a golden jar of hair oil for my curls that have exploded in the dry winter air, and no fewer than seven bottles of facial toners and creams. I think about the ads for laser and facial treatments I pass by every day, and how I'm soon due for an appointment at the salon to trim my once again untidy eyebrows. Are we exerting control over our own bodies, or have we been controlled by these prescribed consumerist objects and rituals?

To add insult to injury, my phone has clearly overheard my conversation with friends about bristle brushes that afternoon – I open Instagram and immediately find ads for an eyelash-curling set and soap from Kameyama. Against my better judgment, I screencap the products to bookmark for purchase as a holiday gift to myself. I already know what's happening next: the goods will arrive in a box in a few days, and I'll stash them in a corner of my bathroom, then forget all about them until probably next Christmas.