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Review The meaning of makeup in the Instagram age: Artist Gina Beavers strips away the gloss



Gina Beavers, "Mona Lisa nail," acrylic on linen on panel, 2015. (Jeff McLane)

By **Sharon Mizota**
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Many artists, mostly female, have explored the relationship between art and makeup. New York painter Gina Beavers focuses on that relationship too, but with an eye to Internet culture. Her paintings of how-tos and nail art at the Michael Benevento gallery in Los Angeles operate somewhere between critique and affection. Whereas Janine Antoni and Rachel Lachowicz use makeup as a raw material, and Marilyn Minter's photographs of glitter-drenched eyes and mouths convey a dark sense of decay, Beavers works from images she finds on

[Instagram](#). She selects ones that document a particularly striking look or step-by-step instructions for creating an "Egyptian" eye or a sun-kissed lip.

Compositionally, her paintings seem to be fairly straightforward copies: Most are square — Instagram's traditional format — and divided into discrete frames, one for each step. Yet in plucking these images from the digital flow, Beavers allows us to see them as aesthetic, not just didactic objects. In this light, they are weird grids of truncated body parts; multitudes of eyes gaze dispassionately back at us. The effect is somewhat cinematic and thoroughly surreal.

This impression is exacerbated by Beavers' technique. Far from reproducing the slick gloss of digital surfaces, the paintings are built up thickly, their contours bulging out from the canvas like reliefs. Skin, lashes and lips are textured with rough, caked-on brushstrokes that mimic and exaggerate wrinkles and gloppy mascara. This treatment gives the subjects back some of the clunky physicality that the camera and the digital screen strip away. Beavers' paintings, in some measure, undo the gloss of the photographic image.

They also pointedly mimic the act of putting on makeup, reminding us that it is something like sedimentation, built up layer by layer. There is no effortless glamour here, only sticky accretion.

That quality itself feels like an indictment — of the beauty industry, of restrictive gender roles. But an element of playfulness and admiration lives in Beavers' work. "Mona Lisa nail" is a painting of a wrinkled, dry-looking hand that proudly sports a likeness of the Mona Lisa on one digit. Other hands display tiny skulls, or bold abstract patterns. There are faces made up like a jack-o-lantern or Disney's Little Mermaid, and even an eye painted to look like a hamburger with green lettuce lashes.

Despite their unusual subject matter, these images feel less creepy than the grids of more conventionally styled eyes and lips. They speak of makeup as a site of creativity and self-transformation, and Instagram and other social media sites as democratizing forces in the spread of culture. To be sure, social media may be the spur for increasingly outré acts, which are often a form of bragging, but why shouldn't a hamburger eye be as popular as a smoky eye?

In translating these photographs into something more physical, Beavers asks us to consider these questions and exposes the duality of the makeup industry: The same business that strives to make us insecure also enables us to reinvent ourselves, not just in the image of the beautiful as it's already defined, but in images of our own devising.