

The ingredients of attraction

By Ruth Ostrow

A GIRLFRIEND rang me last week sounding very distressed. She had just found out that her ex-boyfriend, who she'd broken up with the year before, had taken up with a woman half her age.

The woman, in her 40s, launched into an all-too-familiar diatribe. "How can I compete with younger women? I saw him with her. Her skin was so soft and firm. She's only 22!

"I look in the mirror and I feel so unattractive. My age is really starting to show. Those lines around my eyes have grown so much worse over the past couple of years. Probably because of him! Who's going to want an older, single woman? I've really lost it."

On it went. The conversation so similar to those we've heard in movies or even in our own heads as to be too cliched to write. She hated her big nose. She hated her belly which, after two children, was less than firm. She bemoaned the loss of beauty.

And after a while I wanted to slit my wrists, until I remembered a few lines from a Leonard Cohen poem I'd read in *The Energy of Slaves* (Jonathan Cape, 1972) many years ago that probably saved the emotional lives of thousands of teenage girls.

"She sits behind the wooden shutters/
on a very hot day/
The room is dark, the
photographs gloomy/
She is profoundly worried/
that her thighs are too big/
and her ass is fat and ugly/
Also she is too hairy/
The lucky American girls are not
hairy/
She sweats too much/
There is a fine mist caught/
on the dark hairs above
her mouth.

"I wish I could show her/
what such hair and haunches/
do for one like me..."

The rawness of the poem is in its validation of sensuality, confirming that beauty always remains in the eye of the beholder. But I think it also confirms that beauty is quite different from sexuality. My girlfriend may not be deemed classically beautiful anymore in an ageist society, but she is an incredibly sexy woman, as women who have borne and raised children, and lived a rich, sensuous life, can so often be.

And while neither she nor any male of her age can compete with a 22-year-old in the beauty stakes, nor can many 22-year-olds compete with her in the mysterious, fruity, erotic realms of sexiness.

Which opens up the age-old question. What is sexy anyway?

When a couple of years ago I edited the book of sexual fantasies *Burning Urges* (Pan Macmillan), I was surprised to see what Australians considered sexy or a turn-on. It certainly blew out of the water the cliché: All men desire tall, leggy blondes with large breasts.

Move over Pamela! In their secret thoughts men desire other men, men dressed as women, fat women, older women, dirty women with sexy smells, horny, raunchy women with body hair and foul mouths. One man, married for decades, craved a large, black, African male, dressed up in drag.

The world of sexual fantasy knows no boundaries and pays little homage to stereotypical aesthetics. And it is certainly free of any hint of political correctness. In other words, beauty holds little sway in the real world of erotic potential, turn-ons and lusty, libidinous things, which have more to do with our own private fixations, our childhoods, ethnic orientations, obsession with various body bits, our need to be punished, devoured, or validated, than any "external" aesthetic reality.

I'm not saying that there aren't men and women who get a powerful sexual charge out of beauty. But beauty -- like youth -- is just one ingredient in the mysterious soup of arousal.

During my years as sex writer and broadcaster I often touted for responses on the nature of sexiness. In one radio program I examined the carnal charisma of our stars to probe the issue. Many agreed that the flirty, brazen, pouty eroticism of Madonna and Sharon Stone, or the feline magnetism of Helen Mirren (Prime Suspect), inspired more lust than the pristine beauty of Princess Diana or the inaccessible perfection of Elle.

Rumour has it that ripe, slitty-eyed provocateur Marilyn Monroe wasn't very well groomed -- often not showering for days. But far from putting off her suitors, this attracted them to her like bees to a honey pot, flying in the face of what women's magazines would have us believe about our natural smells, body hair and appearance.

Many women, too, reacted to raw energy rather than beauty, agreeing that the menacing, sulking sensuality of an Antonio Banderas -- always threatening to erupt -- held more sexual appeal than the contained good looks of a Tom Cruise or Pierce Brosnan.

Meanwhile, androgynous stars were often deemed sexy, I believe for their ability to spark hidden homoerotic feelings in viewers.

At any rate, the beauty myth remains a myth in that it is illogical. Crudely put: if all men want busty, beautiful blondes, how come the rest of us are getting laid? The same applies for men.

The recent and contentious film *Romance* explores the concept of beauty. In it the lead man, who describes himself as ugly and who is indeed fat, paunchy and plain, testifies to having bedded more than 10,000 women. His sexiness, he claims, is his self-confidence and the confidence and freedom of expression he instills in his conquests.

Which makes the point. Ultimately, our sex appeal lies in the energy we emit. Something probably unseen and inexplicable, which would explain why some plainer people get more attention from the opposite sex than their prettier peers, like a girl I know who despite being chubby and rather homely is always besieged by fabulous men.

Her love of her own body and her lusty joy are intoxicating. To be in her company is to be in light energy. She laughs and makes people laugh, which rocks the lower sexual chakras and releases wonderful feel-good hormones.

I think the truth is, our real sexual power lies more in what we are capable of opening, tapping into or unleashing in others than in how we look -- and it doesn't have to fade as our beauty does.

But as I explained to my girlfriend, the real alchemy of being sexy is that you have to believe it. The minute you doubt you've got it, obsessing about wrinkles and cellulite, your energy becomes insecure and heavy, and it's gone!

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 09 DEC 2000