

in search of perfection

Photography Daniel Mahon





With cosmetic procedures once again in the spotlight, top “aesthetic surgeon” Bryan Mendelson agreed to let us watch him work – and to meet the women he changes forever. By **Kathy Evans**

Today’s music is Beethoven. The gentle *Sonata in F* wafts

through speakers into the sterile room. It is a particularly lovely piece of music; the sweet notes of the violin float above the comatose body of a woman who also wants her share of beauty.

Right now, she doesn’t even come close. At this moment, she is grotesque. Her face is marked with black ink – secret signs and squiggles that indicate where the incisions will be made – and is pumped with a mix of adrenalin and local anaesthetic which inflates the blood vessels and furrows the surface like a farmer’s field in autumn. A dot of blood sits on her forehead, neat as a bindi, while a thin trickle leaks from a puncture wound at the side of her mouth. Surgeon Bryan Mendelson, hovering above her, dressed in dark green scrubs, disagrees. An operating theatre, he insists, is a work of art. The face is a canvas. The scarlet hues of blood and the deep sunset yellow of extracted fat are his palette. The scalpel is his brush; he wields it with the deep concentration of an artist as he studies the outlines before him. But this is also about so much more. You cannot throw away a face gone wrong. It has to be perfect first time.

The music has a calming effect. Theatre feels a little tense because the patient arrived late after her car broke down. Surgery should run like clockwork. This small team clustered round the patient has worked together for many years, and their communication is more subtle than words. The silver scalpel flashes white as it passed to Mendelson, a shining light attached to his head as he leans over the patient and carefully draws a fine incision along the dotted line that marks the lid above her →

Bryan Mendelson in the operating theatre at his Toorak rooms.

right eye. From beneath the cut, he tweaks out a thin strip of muscle to reveal the fibrous tissue underneath. More tiny slivers are carefully removed and placed on the green sterile cloth resting on her chest, like delicate morsels. A neat stitch tightens the underlying support layers and the lid is sewn up. It is a fairly quick procedure, one that Mendelson learned during his time in the US, particularly in Honolulu, where many Asian people have surgery on their eyelids. "People think that skin gets baggy with age, but that's not the case," he says from beneath his surgical mask. "We now know that bones in the face shrink as we get older. What I do is not about skin tightening at all; it's more about internal fixation, picking up the support layers under the skin and tightening them."

The days of the Bride of Wildenstein are long gone.

No one wants to look as if they have been trapped in a wind tunnel. Now it's all about not being able to tell. This patient, for instance, is hoping to keep her surgery a secret. A divorced mother of two small children, she has gone to elaborate lengths to do so. Enlarged photos of her pinned to the wall

"The stories I hear can be very moving. Ninety per cent of people would say, 'I know you think I am being vain', but actually I don't."

of the operating theatre show a fairly attractive woman who looks like most 40-year-olds; there is nothing abnormal about her appearance. But, says Mendelson, she is unhappy about a "blank look" around her eyes, which does not match her "bubbly, outgoing" personality.

To this end, she has decided to have her cheekbones lifted three millimetres as well as the surgery on her lids. It cannot be a decision that is taken lightly. As she lies torpid on the table, her life is in the hands of a machine that is pumping her with substances, and a white-haired anaesthetist, Richard Ranger, who is skimming her notes.

"A lot of people think we are overpaid doctors who put people to sleep and wake them up at the end, but we are the life support," he says, glancing at the flashing, beeping hunk of metal which, with its coloured graphs and charts, is not unlike the cockpit of a plane. Anaesthesia has come a long way since the early 1800s when a patient was held down in case the opium they'd been given wore off before the operation was finished. With its sophisticated monitoring of oxygen and blood saturation levels, it also means that bruising in cosmetic surgery can be reduced.

"Beautiful fat, Tony," says Ranger, admiring a syringe filled with a golden red semi-liquid, the colour of a freshly hatched sunset, which glows under the surgical light. The fat has been milked from the patient's stomach and is being re-injected into her face to soften the creases above her lip. It sounds simple but the science of fat is intricate. Some sizes of globules work better than others. Big blobs look lumpy and tend to "die", smaller bubbles have a better chance of relocating successfully to their new home. Fat, so loathed and despised, is a living thing, bursting with stem cells, the body's second-largest source after bone marrow. The cannula used to inject the fat is tiny. Some are even made from gold, which stops the globules sticking.

Mendelson inserts his scalpel beneath her right eye and carefully lifts off a layer of skin to expose the red rawness underneath. The lower lid and cheek are intimately connected. Burrowing further with the scalpel, he splits the lower lid in two; strangely, there is no bleeding. "If you understand anatomy you can use it to your advantage," he says. Beauty, it seems, is not skin deep. If you want to make a real difference, it is the bones, muscles and support layers below the surface that give away your age. Mendelson works a lot with spaces – empty pockets within the grit and gristle of the face where there is nothing to disturb; no nerves to navigate, or pools of blood to risk infection. And then there is the sound of scraping as the scalpel meets the cheekbone.

Mendelson positions himself over the gape in her face. He drills into the bone to provide an anchor for a stitch; a wisp of blue smoke dances in the light beam from his head, revealing tiny powdery fragments whirling up. Beethoven is temporarily drowned out by the noise; then a stitch is inserted to attach the muscle to the bone; it is pulled tight and the cheek immediately responds like a puppet; it jerks higher and sits perched on the hill of her face.

It is almost three hours before the patient is wheeled to recovery. Five days later, her eyes are slits in pools of yellow and brown bruises and she is hiding behind Victoria Beckham-sized dark glasses and an intricately spun tale to explain her temporary absence from daily life. But her lips are smiling.

Why do people subject themselves to this? Cosmetic surgery – or "aesthetic surgery", as Mendelson prefers it to be known – is not without risk. In August, a Victorian coroner found that Lauren James, 26, died as a result of "wholly inadequate" post-operative care after she received liposuction at a clinic in North Caulfield. Recently, a working group for the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council floated some measures to ensure patients are protected, such as a ban on cosmetic clinics offering incentives such as discounts or loans, alongside an advertising crackdown on "before and after" shots of cosmetic procedures. Figures from the Australasian College of Cosmetic Surgery estimate that the total annual expenditure on cosmetic surgical and medical procedures in Australia to be around the \$1 billion mark.

Mendelson, a former president of the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, is concerned about the public's attitude. He doesn't like the idea that it's only for the very vain. After all, you'd have to be very insecure to risk your life for slimmer thighs. "The stories I hear in my rooms can be very moving," he says over lunch in a Toorak eatery. "Ninety per cent of people would say, 'I know you think I am being vain' but actually I don't. I see women who have undergone surgery for breast cancer and want facial surgery to boost their self-esteem. It's not about conceit."

For Lucy, 47, surgery has been about reclaiming her life after a traumatic episode with a suicidal work colleague. "I was literally too scared to walk out of the door. It was a terrible incident that affected my life." She watched her life disintegrate in slow motion. Her marriage broke down and her house was sold. Once confident, outgoing and successful, she ended up living with a friend, not seeing her kids.

Bit by bit, she began piecing herself back together. A couple of years ago, she met a man during a walk in the park and remarried. She still sees a counsellor on a weekly basis to try and heal the internal wounds. Last November, she had a full facelift, paid for by the new husband who, she says, understood this to be part of the healing process. "I can't control what happened to me. But this is something I can control. I am trying to get back to the place I used to be seven years ago before all this happened. It's not just about being a pretty face." →

THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

Upper eyelid "lift"

People who are born with "bright" eyes tend to retain them even as they age but for those who don't have them, the look can be surgically created permanently. It involves spending about an hour under a light general anaesthetic. The procedure itself is called "tarsal fixation", reattaching connective tissue in the concavity of the eyelids so the structure of naturally "bright" eyes is mimicked.

Cost: \$9000–\$12,000



Correction of lower lid bags by mid-cheek lifting

What looks like ageing of the lower eyelid is usually caused by a sagging mid-cheek – as we age, our cheekbones shrink. This operation tightens up the tissue in the mid-cheek, with an incision concealed under the eyelashes. There is swelling of the lower lids that requires camouflage for a couple of weeks.

Cost: \$9000–\$25,000



Facelift

The results of a facelift should look completely natural, without any tell-tale signs (such as the "caught in a wind tunnel" effect). There is no pulling of the skin; the surgeon tightens lax support layers and ligaments under the skin. The inner cheek, jawline, and neck are some of the areas corrected. An extended facelift may also include correction of the mid-cheek and/or temple. Operating time varies from four hours.

Cost: \$20,000–\$42,000



Enhancement of facial skeleton

Coral granules are used to correct deficiencies of shape in the face. Unlike silicone or polyethylene implants, coral granules are almost identical to human bone. The cheek, temple, pyriform (area around the base of the nose) jawline and chin areas can be corrected. This technique is different from injectable fillers because the coral corrects the bone structure permanently.

Cost: \$5000–\$16,000



Temple-brow lifts

The major droop, known as "hooding", usually occurs at the outer brow; a temple lift corrects this to create a subtle brightening effect. The incision placed in the scalp is imperceptible and does not result in any hair loss.

Cost: \$10,000–\$16,000



Rhinoplasty

Before surgery, you can see a computer image of your intended new nose created using morphing technology, to check that its shape and size suits you. The nose is a complex structure, which accounts for the fact that five per cent of patients require a later "touch up" procedure. After two weeks, the correction is not obvious and it can take a year for internal healing to completely settle. The operation takes about two hours.

Cost: \$12,000–\$18,000



Details supplied by Dr Bryan Mendelson



Bryan Mendelson: "I have had left-wing patients who had always vowed not to alter their appearance, and then changes happen which they don't like ..."

"The nose is the hardest thing. It's such a complicated structure. To get a predictable result is not easy."

Lying on the operating table in the Epworth Private

in Richmond is a woman with model features; a perfectly chiselled jaw, big blue eyes, and beneath the green operating garb is a pair of perfect surgically enhanced breasts. But she is unhappy with her nose, which, she feels, is too bulbous at the tip. Within minutes, it is cut open and neatly splayed. There is no music today. "We don't have music when he's doing noses," whispers the nurse. "It can get very tense." Mendelson says, "The nose is the hardest thing. It's such a complicated structure. To get a predictable result is not easy."

On the wall are photos of the 30-year-old as she is, and a digitally remodelled one, by a specialist professional photographer, showing her nose as she would like it to be. It's a very subtle change. Mendelson likens it to going to the builders with the architect's plans.

The minutes creep by on the big 24-hour theatre clock. Mendelson extracts a one-inch shard of bloodied cartilage and passes it to a nurse. "Guard that with your life." The cartilage is painstakingly cut into a triangular shape and sewn onto the tip. Next, he takes the surgical equivalent of a hammer and chisel, inserts it into the nostril and gives it a gentle whack. There is a splitting sound as the bone fractures, part of the reshaping process. In surgery, it is the incidentals rather than the main event that create the most horror: the noise of bones breaking, the smell of skin burning, tiny particles of flesh caught in a shaft of light, the spatter of blood on a rubber glove.

After two hours, the job is done and the mood is considerably lighter. Her face is reconstructed and all that she has to remind of her what happened is a bandage strapped across the bridge, and bruises under her eyes. She has wavered for years about having the surgery. Now it is all over. "It's not a consumer product where you can get your money back," says Mendelson. "If it's a snap decision, you are not going to tolerate the reality."

The 61-year-old surgeon is avuncular and charming. Patients fall in love with him, they cannot help it. He is their "before and after" man. He operates out of thickly carpeted rooms in a pleasant side street in Toorak, where none of the staff looks their real age. "I'm going to keep coming back until I look like you," coos a client as she makes an appointment

with the particularly youthful receptionist. Mendelson, 61, sees some 20 prospective patients a week here and goes ahead with about 80 per cent of their procedures.

Most of his patients are "normal people" who, he says, in the process of life may have been hurt by events or who are disappointed with what nature has done to them. He is by now, he thinks, a good judge of character and well able to flag those with body dysmorphic disorder and the plastic surgery junkies who shop around and are never happy with the result. The father of three girls, one with Asperger syndrome, he's aware that life has its challenges. Roughly a fifth of his patients are men but the bulk of his clients are women, roughly half of them wanting to improve a particular feature, the other half middle-aged and older and wanting to look younger and "fresh" again.

The best age to get a facelift, he says, is in your forties, the results of which can last a lifetime. Today's patient is 70 and Vivaldi's *Spring Allegro* fills the operating room with sounds of sunshine and hope. Outside, the rain buckets, but the theatre is warm and calm.

The team of three cluster around the shrouded body and watch the scalpel slide down the inside of her skin from the left ear. Her face shines with antiseptic. Mendelson cuts through the soft tissue until he finds a cave in the flesh, the premaxillary space, where he can reattach the loose layers. This woman is also having bone enhancement, where hydroxyapatite, a type of sea coral, is grafted onto the bones of her face to build them up. The coral has journeyed far to reach her: from the seabeds of the Philippines, it is sent to America to be cleaned and have the proteins removed. In the theatre, Mendelson's assistant mixes the grains with some of the patient's blood before it is injected on to her cheekbones. As he works, the meter is running. The cost of this operation will set her back up to \$30,000 by the time she's paid not only Mendelson's fee but the anaesthetist's and for theatre staff and after care. None of it is redeemable on Medicare, a fact that Mendelson is in agreement with. "In an ideal world, yes of course it would be good if it was available, but when you have to prioritise the health dollar, then it's not plausible."

What are the benefits? For Tracy, it's a second marriage, to a man 18 years her junior with film-star looks. When her first

marriage of 20 years broke down, Tracy, who has a teenage son with autism, recalls, "Someone came to our house to value it and I remember him saying I was 'too old' to be getting divorced."

His words echoed around her head; her future seemed bleak. "I was not ready to sit in a lounge room with my son and the blinds drawn. I thought, that's where I am headed. I will live with this boy in a gloomy residence and wait on him and basically become a bullied old lady because he had the capacity to do that to me. I could be his servant for the rest of my life or look for a way out."

Tracy, who made her money through buying and selling property, underwent a full facelift with liposuction on her arms. It wasn't an easy decision. "It's a very lonely place going into surgery when you have no partner and there is no family there." She has been thrilled with the results. "I like buying clothes I want to buy. When your head is mismatched, you can't dress how you want. My face was too old and I had to dress demurely ... now the hemline is going up and the cleavage coming down."

She met her current husband at a dinner party. At first, she didn't tell him about the age difference. He only found out when he discovered a document with her date of birth on it. She is philosophical: "I have done something most people said would end up in tears, but that's the choice I made and I'm enjoying it. I am a vain woman, I like looking young. I hate the signs of ageing, they depress me. You know how many people say that youth is lost on the young because they don't appreciate it? Well I did. I knew it was the best time of my life and I want to recapture it."

The pressure on women to look good is well

documented and lamented – best cut off your nose if it spites your face. Feminists argue that women are mutilating themselves to please men, that surgery is actually disempowering women, that after years of being told there was "something wrong" with their brains, now it's our faces that must be fixed.

Over lunch, Mendelson listens to these arguments and nods sagely. He has heard them all before. "The way you age is genetic. I have had left-wing patients who had always vowed not to alter their appearance, and then changes happen which they don't like. It's very hard for them because they feel they are betraying their own belief system. The mind is saying one thing and their heart another. It's not easy for them."

The importance of appearance, he believes, is innate. "Beauty is defined as a quality that pleases the senses." Over the centuries, philosophers and artists have attempted to describe what exactly it is that pleases. For the sixth-century Greek mathematician Pythagoras, it was harmonic proportions. For the artist Hogarth, it was curves. But beer guts are not appealing and while models tend to have symmetrical faces, so does Ronald McDonald. Beauty hints at something more elusive, perhaps indefinable.

Mendelson feels for women who wake up one morning and no longer like what they see, who are frightened at the thought of losing their looks. Back in the surgery, sharp suit replaced by the green scrubs, scalpel poised, he acknowledges: "Beauty can be a curse." **(m)**
Some of the names in this story have been changed.