Artists’ Life: Cut, Nip and Tuck

You may remember that the body, the return of beauty and fashion as art were big themes batted around in the 1980s. They all reconverge with a clinical vengeance in a group show called “I Am Art: An Expression of the Visual & Artistic Process of Plastic Surgery” at Apexart, a nonprofit space in TriBeCa.

The curator is a plastic surgeon, Anthony C. Berlet, who has training as an architect, experience as a medical illustrator and a busy practice in northern New Jersey. Along with his own work he has selected that of three colleagues: Antonino Cassisi, an Italian specialist in pediatric plastic surgery; Michael Cohen, a partner in the Cosmetic Surgery Center of Maryland and a breast surgery specialist who also paints, sculptures and collects art; and Scott Spira, another New Jerseyan, with a particular interest in body contouring, a sideline in painting and drawing, and a membership in the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

How is their art, which is also their surgery, best described? The human body is their medium, the operating room their studio. The tools of their craft include multilayered cutting, clamping, probing and sewing devices, as well as digital and laser technologies. Most of the work that results is a living art. It can be seen walking among us in the form of recaptured and — this is, of course, the point — improved faces and figures.

For purposes of a gallery display, however, we get photographs and videos of those bodies, often seen before, during and after surgery. And if a doctor-artist can turn you into one, that’s art to me. And if he can rescue a body from serious ruin and a soul from despair, God bless him; he’s as good as Michelangelo. Does he cater to the rich and charge too much? Check out all the drecky Picassos still selling for huge prices at auction. Do all those nose jobs look pretty much alike? Check out paintings in Chelsea galleries these days.

The big problem with the kind of procedures quality as art and when not to. The basic face lift, for example, is arote operation “that can be taught to almost anyone.” That’s nothing more than a lift, slitch, and of story. Not art. Creativity begins with other, more option-rich manipulations. With rhinoplasty — nose jobs — you are on aesthetic ground. Each nose is unique, so decisions about shaping it must be imaginative, though always guided by a fundamental form-fellow-fact principle: i.e., the patient should be able to breathe through the nose when the work is finished.

Other procedures involving different and larger parts of the anatomy, and requiring masses of skin and tissue to be moved from here to there and blood supplies to be reconstituted, can be formally even more complex. And the ramifications of every move must be considered. In all art, there is a fine line separating dignity too little, just enough and too much. Ethical, philosophical and psychological inquiries are ever present.

Who defines the terms “too little” and “too much”? Who defines beauty, perfection, the ideal? To what degree is perfection another version of distortion? The examination of culturally based and gender-based values was central to certain artists of the 1990s, who would have noted as significant that all four artists in the Apexart show are male, while almost all the models or patients in the photographs are female.

And what about hierarchical ranking within the aesthetics of plastic surgery? Are certain types of heroic, skill-intensive surgery — the repair of severe birth defects, say — high art? And are more fashion-oriented procedures like breast lifts, tummy tucks, mommy makeovers and liposuction low art, or possibly not-art?

Personally, I have no problem accepting the work in “I Am Art” art. A thing of beauty is a joy forever, or for a day, and if a doctor-artist can turn you into one, that’s art to me. And if he can rescue a body from serious ruin and a soul from despair, God bless him; he’s as good as Michelangelo. Does he cater to the rich and charge too much? Check out all the drecky Picassos still selling for huge prices at auction. Do all those nose jobs look pretty much alike? Check out paintings in Chelsea galleries these days.

Apexart show, as least for certain sensitive types, is looking at some of it. Dr. Cohen’s pictures of breast enhancement are as aggressive as lingerie advertisements, but his colleagues deliver some pretty strong stuff. Many artists do their work in private and give you only a final, polished product, leaving the scarpings, scrapings and splats on the suture floor. Here you get the whole schmnce — the blood, the gush, the slice, the equivalent of Counter-Reformation paintings of martyrdoms, but with real bodies.

The show gives you some warning as to what you’re in for. The following words appear in tiny type far down on the back of the brochure: “This exhibition contains material that may not be suitable for all viewing audiences. Please use your discretion.”

Heed that advice. And if your discretion says, “Go,” then brace yourself, keep your mind open and respect what you see. After all, given the frailties of the flesh, the vanities of age and the possibilities of accident, you too may end up as art someday.