

Leading By A Nose

With rhinoplasties now a pop culture commodity, Jewish artists are sculpting a feisty new response.

Liel Leibovitz
Staff Writer

Suddenly, the Jewish schnozz is turning heads.

In films, Internet postings with a viral life of their own, high-brow feminist essays and a novel by one of the Jewish world's superstar writers,

the nose job — and all the burdensome cultural baggage it lugs — is getting a fresh life.

And while the number of rhinoplasties is actually ticking up after a long slide from the '70s and '80s, a surge of ethnic pride is producing a compelling counterweight to what may be the ultimate symbol of assimilation.



Profile of a Jewish schnozz: Gayle Kirschenbaum in her film "My Nose."

Over the last several years, an increasing number of works by Jewish artists

Continued on page 2

Nose *continued from page 1*

have addressed the Jewish nose face first, so to speak, all asserting, some humorously and others less so, that the scalpel is sin.

Take, for example, "The Nose Job Jew," a short film produced in 2000 by two NYU film students that has since become a hit with young Jews, put on YouTube and forwarded reverentially from friend to friend. The film is narrated by a young Hebrew named Tim, a blue-eyed blonde, who laments his decidedly non-Semitic features and fantasizes about the nose job that might help him look a bit more like his ancestors.

Then, there's "My Jewish Nose," written in 1998 by Lisa Jervis, one of America's most influential feminist leaders, which has since been included in several anthologies and is enjoying somewhat of a cult following online. "To me," writes Jervis, "being a Jew is cultural ... and that means I'll grab onto anything I need to keep that identity — including my nose."

More recently, there's Nathan Englander's novel, "The Ministry of Special Cases." Released earlier this year to great acclaim, the novel's protagonist is an Argentine Jew named Kaddish, who makes his living defacing the tombstones of disreputable Jews, paid by their families to erase the shame and the memory. One of his clients, a plastic surgeon, offers procedures as payment, and Kaddish and his wife, Lillian, soon go under the knife. Lillian, alas, is horrified when her new nose falls off, refusing to stay on her face, refusing to let her conceal her Jewish identity by altering her facial features.

And now, Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Gayle Kirschenbaum is tackling the topic directly in "My Nose," the 13-minute short to be screened next week at the Museum of Jewish Heritage as part of its Best Emerging Jewish Artists series.

For the 50-something Kirschenbaum, it was her nose that first helped her realize what it meant to be Jewish.

She was in her teens, an art student in Europe, happy to be away from the constraints of Long Island. She had been unhappy back home, where a person was measured by her possessions and good looks seemed to matter more than good intentions. This shallow materialism, she thought then, was what being Jewish was all about. And being from Long Island, she thought the whole world was Jewish.

All that changed in Europe. "Because of how I looked," she said, "people were constantly identifying me as a Jew." There was no doubt about it: the curly hair, the complexion, all sang a song of Semitism. But above all it was the nose, prominent and glorious, that gave her away. A nose like hers left little room for wonder; she was Jewish. Gradually, she realized what it was like to be in a minority, easily identifiable by facial features alone.

"It's almost like I walk around with the Star of David on my face," she said. And she felt proud.

Not her mother, though. Since Kirschenbaum was 12 years old, her mother has been suggesting, with an exponentially growing sense of urgency, that a nose job was de rigueur if she ever wished to have a shot at matrimonial bliss.

And while Kirschenbaum's film is a hilarious romp, the topic itself is a serious one, an issue that has helped define and re-define American-Jewish identity for the past half-century. Roughly, goes the common wisdom, the Jewish nose in America evolved in three distinct waves: first was the shame, with young women, their bat mitzvahs barely behind

them, lining up at the doctor's office for corrective surgery and replacing the Semitic bump with a nose shaped like a minuscule ski slope.

Then, however, came a moment of ethnic pride, a decade in which America's movie stars looked more like Ben Stiller than Robert Redford, and large appendages everywhere were saved from the surgeon's scalpel. While the total number of cosmetic procedures in the United States increased 76 percent between 1992 and 1996, the number of nose jobs declined by 8 percent, down to a mere 46,000 procedures per year, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

Enter the Third Wave: In 2005, the plastic surgery society reported, American surgeons performed 200,924 rhinoplasties, an increase of 21 percent over the previous year, placing nose jobs as the fourth most popular aesthetic procedure in the country.

But even as young Jewish artists lead the resistance to rhinoplasty, the procedure itself, some experts say, has become somewhat of a liberation moment for the young Jews who opt to have it.

Dr. H. George Brennan, a Beverly Hills-based plastic surgeon considered one of the country's most prominent nose job experts, said that the procedure has changed greatly



In Nathan Englander's debut novel, "The Ministry of Special Cases," set during Argentina's "dirty war," nose jobs figure prominently.

over the last several decades, morphing from a somber family affair to a cheerful personal choice.

"Years ago," he said, "it was almost like, at the time of bat mitzvah, the parent used to drag their child in to have their

nose done." His colleague at the time, he recalled, used to joke that the family waiting for the patient to leave the operating theater was sitting shiva for her old nose.

"Today, however," he added, "it seems that it's the child who says, 'No offense mom or dad, but I'd like to have my nose done.' So that's the trend we're seeing."

Kirschenbaum, despite her mother's pressure, never joined in on that trend.

In her film, she sheeps from one plastic surgeon to another, overbearing mother in tow, discussing the possible merits of

a nose job. One surgeon offers up a digital image of what her face might look like if she opts for the procedure. Another, a kabbalist, stares into space, saying that he's imagining the husband who is sure to materialize once the rhinoplasty frees Kirschenbaum from the burden of her appendage. And sometimes, she said, she, too, saw the merits of a nose job.

"Now, when I'm shooting video of myself," she said, "which, unlike a photograph, is three-dimensional, I have gotten a look at my nose. And sometimes, it does not look very appealing to me. But I guess it just doesn't bother me enough."

Besides, she added, even with rhinoplasty as popular as ever, society's ideals of beauty are sufficiently flexible now, accommodating a variety of alternatives.

"I think that in the world today, due to the Internet and globalization, people are accepting each other's differences," she said. "We're getting used to seeing each other with our physical and social differences, and I think that's great." ■



Mother knows best? Gayle Kirschenbaum's mother, right, kept the pressure on her daughter to get her nose fixed.

Gayle Kirschenbaum's "My Nose" will be screened as part of New York's Best Emerging Jewish Artist celebration on Wednesday, July 25, at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, 36 Battery Place, (646) 437-4200. Performances begin at 7 p.m., and tickets are \$30.