War Paint

Emily Carter's new mall gig demands full hair and make-up. But does she want to play against type?

May 1, 2000 By Emily Carter

Late arrival to the wonderful world of cosmetics, for 20 years I drew a black outline around my eyes, slashed some carmine on my lips and left it at that. And that only when going out somewhere special. The guy behind the counter at the convenience store got to see my face the way God and I have made it—bleached out, puffed up, with eyes blinking quizzically under the relentless glare of the overhead fluorescent lights.

But I recently found myself with a part-time job at a slightly upscale boutique catering to fashion-conscious trophy wives. Think middle-management gals looking for a marital shortcut through the glass ceiling: lightly sexy but not slutty, low-cut but not plunging. For the sake of my continued employment, let's call this place Tre-Tre (originally Très-Très, but people kept pronouncing it phonetically).

At my first employee review, I was told my customer-service skills were outstanding, my presentation and appearance appropriate, but that I needed to develop a more "Tre-Tre" approach to my own cosmetics usage. "It doesn't have to be some robotic corporate thing," said my manager, a six-foot-tall blonde who looked exactly like one of the women in the Tre-Tre catalog. "You see, everyone here has her own look, but each reflects the Tre-Tre aesthetic."

And so I got up an hour earlier than usual in order to deal with the little tubes, brushes, gels and powders that had accumulated in plastic boxes on the tank of my toilet. Exfoliant Face Scrub. Moisture-Soak Miracle Age-Eraser with retinol and alpha-hydroxy acid. Eye-lift Depuffing Cream. Foundation. A light eyeshadow on the lid, a darker one in the crease, with a dot of white in the inside
corner to "really make the eyes pop a little." A smudge-stick eyeliner, blended for subtlety. Lash-separating mascara. An eyebrow brush. A light sand-sparkle highlighter on my cheekbones and a suggestion of terra-cotta shade in the hollows beneath. A smear of moisturizer on the lips and then a glossy daytime lipstick. After 20 minutes I looked like someone who sold real estate or hoped for a career as a network broadcaster—as close to the mainstream version of myself as I could ever get. It was fascinating, this mask of common denomination. Let the games begin.

At work, it's true that everyone has an individual spin on her own look. Olga, for instance, goes for

the total mask: shaved brows replaced with painted on crescents, pancake foundation, dark blue eyeshadow, red lips. No one can tell how old she is—23? 40? Most of the women, though, attempt some version of the “no makeup” makeup look. This takes as much time as a “made up” makeup look, and you can still—in the bright lights of the store—see the makeup. The older women look like orange rinds, their pores overly defined; the very young ones as if they are in a dressing room, waiting to go on a talk show. What do I look like? A 40-year-old woman with an unusual life history and a plethora of secret health issues. They gave me points for trying, anyway.

“You look great,” my manager said when I showed up with the “Tre-Tre” look. The men buying stuff for their girlfriends and mistresses chatted me up a great deal longer than usual.

I admit it, I usually love attention from men, but not these lunch-hour shoppers, and not for this not-so-brilliant disguise.

And that, finally, is the difference I can’t disguise. It’s one of intent. These women are making up their faces as if they are longing to be discovered. In a photo or on video, they would look presentable, competent, put together. In the lighting real life provides, however, they just look like they are wearing too much makeup. But that, too, identifies their membership in a group. I, on the other hand, am using all this stuff in the literal sense of the word concealer. Conceal, please, the sorrow in my mind. Cover up my constant fear that no one will get my jokes. Lighten and highlight whatever features I might actually share with the majority. Put a second coat on the bruise over my heart.

Of course, this can only work sporadically. Laugh a little too loud, make a sudden gesture, and your pancake foundation develops threadlike fissures. Lipstick needs to be reapplied constantly, especially to lips dried and cracked from a medication-induced lack of saliva. The waves of exhaustion must be camouflaged by standing against a wall and smiling with the bright ferocity of a spokesmodel.

Vigilance is what is necessary here, and vigilance is exactly what I lack. My attention, thank God, wanders.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/War-Paint-10423-2671