

Size Matters: Imagery of the Fat Female Body in the Art of Lucian Freud, Jenny Saville,
Joe-Peter Witkin, Laurie Toby Edison, Leonard Nimoy, and Laura Aguilar

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, a number of prominent artists have begun to produce images of the nude fat body. This dissertation looks at the works of several of those artists—Lucian Freud, Jenny Saville, Joel-Peter Witkin, Laurie Toby Edison, Leonard Nimoy, and Laura Aguilar—seeking to discover what meanings each individual artist layers onto the fat body.

Asking why these artists might be interested in the fat body may seem an unnecessary question, as anxiety about fatness pervades Western culture. It is impossible to watch television, listen to the radio, or even read a magazine without being inundated by this unease; whether in the form of advertisements for various weight-loss programs and products, stories about the “obesity epidemic” facing the West, or human interest stories about life as an obese American. Therefore, this dissertation situates artistic images within a larger cultural context.

In attempting to understand the meanings layered onto the body in the works of Freud, Saville, Witkin, Edison, Nimoy, and Aguilar, the dissertation draws heavily from the newly developing discipline of fat studies. Authors in this field are challenging the unexposed assumptions that underlie contemporary anxieties about the fat body—that the human body is natural, and that thinness is its natural state—on a number of grounds. Although there is no one unified fat theory, just as there is no one unified feminism, those working in the field share an understanding of the human body as socially constructed, and an understanding of the fat body as the site of many converging discourses; the discourse of science and medicine, of religion and morality, and of gender, racial and

class difference. Using this understanding of fatness to read images, the dissertation approaches artistic representations of the body from a new perspective.

High art traditionally depicts images of the ideal body (there are, of course, exceptions, such as Velazquez's paintings of court dwarfs) and there exist many art historical readings of this body. Contemporary art, however, has moved away from the idealized body to images of the grotesque: for example, Kiki Smith's images of flayed or dismembered bodies. This dissertation treats the fat body, not as an example of the abnormal or grotesque, but as a marginalized body, and attempts to address the reasons for its growing prevalence in contemporary art as well as locate representations of fatness within contemporary discourse about the body. As such, readings of contemporary artists are supplemented with cultural readings of popular media.

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Introduction: The Growing Field of Knowledge: An Introduction to Fat in Western Culture

The desire to be slim is not simply a result of fashion. It must be understood in terms of a confluence of movements in the sciences and in dance, in home economics and political economy, in medical technology and food marketing, in evangelical religion and life insurance. Our sense of the body, of its heft and momentum, is shaped more by the theater of our lives than by our costume. Our furniture, our toys, our architecture, our etiquette are designed for, or impel us toward, a certain kind of body and a certain feeling of weight.¹

On May 13, 2008, Lucian Freud's painting of model Sue Tilley, entitled *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995, fig. 1-5), sold for 33.6 million dollars, making him the most expensive living artist, a title he held until his death in 2011.² In the painting, Tilley (dubbed "Big Sue" by the press) naps on a dilapidated old sofa, her face pressed into the arm cushion, her body canted uncomfortably forward as though it could slide off at any moment. This work generated a lot of attention from authors both popular and scholarly, and despite their differing opinions about the meaning and quality of the painting, all the authors agreed about at least one point: Sue Tilley is fat.³

This general consensus about Tilley's size is unusual, because "fat" is a cultural construct, not an objective state of being. Attempts to delineate who is fat and who is thin illustrate the cultural constructs that underpin Western conceptualizations of the

¹ Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: Anchor Books, 1986), 4.

² Hoyle, Ben, "Paintbrush Pals Are on Top of the World Art Market after Huge Sales," *Times* (London), May 15, 2008.

³ Throughout this dissertation, I will use the term "fat" rather than "overweight" or "obese" because "fat," while it has pejorative connotations, is at its root merely a descriptive term. On the other hand, "overweight" is linked to an "ideal weight" based on tables that have proven to be arbitrary and "obese" is a clinical term taken from the medical establishment designating certain bodies as diseased, and like "overweight," the designation of "obesity" is based on certain arbitrary standards. Moreover, most fat activists and feminists agree that fat should continue to be used until repetition dulls its pejorative connotations. The only exception to this general rule will be when I refer to specific medical constructions of the fat body as pathological, as in this introduction. For a fuller discussion of the history and continued usage of the terms "overweight" and "obese" as opposed to "fat," see: Marcia Millman, *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1976); and Laura S. Brown, "Fat- Oppressive Attitudes and the Feminist Therapist: Directions for Change," in *Fat Oppression and Psychotherapy: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Laura S. Brown and Esther D. Rothblum (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, Inc., 1989), 19-30.

body. A person's age, gender, race, and even region of origin all impact how she perceives her own body and the bodies of others. Science, particularly medicine, seems to provide stable, objective categories for fat and thin, but as this introduction will demonstrate, even scientific definitions of these terms fluctuate over time, responding to the pressures of culture.⁴ Fat and thin prove slippery; they cannot be defined as stable, impartial categories.

Certainly Western requirements for the thin human body have become increasingly stringent over the last hundred years. For instance, in the United States, the gap between the bodies shown in movies and on television and the bodies that the majority of Americans inhabit is widening; in 1975, the average model weighed eight percent less than the average woman, but by 1990, she weighed twenty-three percent less.⁵ Fear of fat used to be confined largely to teenage girls and economically privileged women, but today, broad segments of the population in Europe and America practice dieting or experience eating disorders, including men and people of color, the elderly and children as young as six.⁶ This affects the definition of fat: as the conception of thinness narrows, the category of "fat" correspondingly widens.

Rather than attempting to define a nebulous and constantly changing term, this dissertation will focus on seeing all bodies from a fat-positive position, by using the principles of fat theory.⁷ Defining fat theory is as difficult as defining fat. As with any

⁴ For one example, a Blue Cross of California health insurance underwriter told Marilyn Wann in 2003 that the company's definition of "morbidly obese" had changed six times in the previous decade. Marilyn Wann, "Foreword," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York UP, 2009), xiv.

⁵ Roberta Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989), 15.

⁶ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 244-251.

⁷ I will use "fat theory" and "fat studies" interchangeably, both for the sake of easy reading and also because the delineation between these two terms has not yet been clearly demarcated.

broad theoretical construct, like queer theory or feminism, fat theory is as diverse as the scholars that employ it. Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum provide the clearest and most inclusive definition of fat theory, and as such, it merits extended quotation here.

In the tradition of critical race studies, queer studies, and women's studies, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body. The field of fat studies invites scholars to pause, interrupt the everyday thinking about fat...and do something daring and bold...they must question the very questions that surround fatness and fat people...Fat studies requires approaching the construction of fat and fatness with a critical methodology—the same sort of progressive, systematic academic rigor with which we approach negative attitudes and stereotypes about women, queer people, and racial groups.⁸

However, this definition leaves a key premise unstated. At its heart, fat theory understands the human body to be the proper purview of culture, more than science. Fat theory therefore deconstructs scientific and medical assertions about the body that otherwise largely go unchallenged.

Fat Medicine

Contemporary Western culture understands the fat body as a diseased body. The medical industry itself posits obesity as the proper domain of science. It claims fat as a medical issue by launching journals that publish solely on the topic of fatness as disease⁹ and performing multiple studies attempting to establish a causal link between fat and early mortality, or fat and life-threatening illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease. The link between medicine and the fat body has been cemented in the minds of the

⁸ Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, "Introduction," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 2.

⁹ Such as, among others: *International Journal of Obesity*, *Obesity Research*, and *Healthy Weight Journal*.

general populace by regular mention in the mass media, both print and television,¹⁰ such that even some fat activists believe this association. However, a number of scholars from disparate fields have challenged medical assumptions about obesity; these challenges allow fat to be placed firmly in the arena of culture, rather than medicine.

Medicine's case against fat depends upon the truth of three basic premises, all of which hinge on the belief that thinness is normal, and fatness an aberration. Those three premises can be summarized as follows:

1. Being obese, or even overweight, is inherently unhealthy.
2. There is a successful way to make fat people thin.
3. Making fat people thin confers upon them the same advantages enjoyed by people who have always been thin.

These three statements are ingrained so deeply in Western culture that they seem self-evident, even unassailable. Yet the evidence used to prove these points is contradictory at best.¹¹

¹⁰ A search for the term "obesity" in the *New York Times* for the two-month period of October to November of 2007, for example, elicited over eighty articles and editorials. On one day alone, the following two articles could be found side by side, both blaming obesity for an increased risk of mortality. Nicholas Bakalar, "Prostate Tests and Obese Are Studied," *New York Times*, November 13, 2007; Nicholas Bakalar, "Too Little Sleep May Pose Obesity Risk," *New York Times*, November 13, 2007.

¹¹ It is impossible to completely survey the literature on fat and medicine here, as this field is vast. However, for a starting point, see: Frances Berg, *Health Risks of Weight Loss*, 3rd ed. (North Dakota: Healthy Weight Journal, 1995); Deb Burgund, "What is 'Health at Every Size'?" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 41-53; Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004); Paul Ernsberger, "Exploding the Myth: Weight Loss Makes You Healthier," *Healthy Weight Journal* 13, no. 1 (January-February 1999):4-6; Paul Ernsberger and Peter Haskew, *Rethinking Obesity: An Alternative View of Its Health Implications*, (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1987); Glenn A. Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies: The Truth about Your Weight and Your Health* (Carlsbad, CA: Gürze Books, 2002); Glen A. Gaesser, "Is 'Permanent Weight Loss' an Oxymoron? The Statistics on Weight Loss and the National Weight Control Registry," in Rothblum, *Fat Studies Reader*, 37-40; David Garner, "The Effects of Starvation on Behavior: Implications for Dieting and Eating Disorders," *Healthy Weight Journal* 12, no. 5 (September-October 1998): 68-72; Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000); Marilyn Wann, *FAT!SO? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1998).

Since the 1940s, medical researchers have been conducting studies attempting to directly correlate “overweight” and “obesity” with increased mortality. As part of this struggle, the medical industry searched for an objective standard with which to measure fatness. The medical industry first used height and weight charts inherited from insurance companies, but when this proved too arbitrary¹² they switched to Body Mass Index (or BMI), a measurement that collapses weight and height into a single number. Yet BMI definitions of “overweight” and “obesity” turned out to be equally changeable: in 1998, the cutoff points for those designations dropped, and overnight millions of “healthy weight” individuals suddenly became fat. The “obesity” researchers who argued for this change claimed that they did so based on evidence of illness: the “overweight” category denoted an increased risk of disease (morbidity) and the “obese” category indicated an increased risk of death (mortality).¹³ But morbidity/mortality correlations with BMI are inconsistent—sometimes fatness actually protects against disease, and sometimes people with higher BMIs live longer.¹⁴ BMI cannot accurately predict health, eating habits, or exercise regimens, despite cultural assumptions about the meaning of body size.

If popular culture considers fatness unhealthy, it also posits fatness as mutable. The cultural belief that a proven and successful means for making fat people thin exists dominates Western society. Magazine, diet books, and television gurus promote variations on this method of transforming fat into thin, which can be summarized as: eat

¹² For more on the history of height and weight charts, see Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*.

¹³ Wann, “Foreword,” xiv.

¹⁴ R. Andres, “Effects of Obesity on Total Mortality,” *International Journal of Obesity*, vol. 4 no. 4 (1980): 381-386; Katherine M. Flegal, Barry I. Grabaud, David F. Williamson, and Mitchell H. Gail, “Excess Deaths Associated with Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 293 (2005): 1861-1867.

fewer calories and expend more calories through increased physical activity. Yet the prescription to restrict caloric intake and increase exercise rarely works. As Paul Campos writes, “this statement is in one sense shocking, despite the fact that there are few better-established empirical propositions in the entire field of medicine. How can this be? After all...everyone knows how to lose weight: eat less and exercise more.”¹⁵

Despite the vast number of dieters¹⁶ following the medical prescription to cure their malady, not one single long-term study documents the effects of weight loss on fatness for the simple reason that there *is no statistically significant group* that has maintained such a weight loss. Depending on the source, statistics indicate that anywhere between ninety and ninety-eight percent of dieters regain all the weight they lost within five years, and a significant number (at least a third, according to Paul Ernsberger) gain back more besides.¹⁷

If no proven method for transforming fat people into thin ones exists, why do doctors continue to urge their patients to lose weight? Another assumption made by the medical establishment is that losing weight makes fat people healthier. Yet over two dozen studies from the past twenty years have shown weight loss to *increase* mortality rates, in some cases by several hundred percent. There have been a small number of studies showing the opposite result (less than five). Of those, one showed an eleven hour

¹⁵ Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 28.

¹⁶ For more on the number of dieters in the United States, see Campos, *Obesity Myth* and Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*.

¹⁷ See Ernsberger and Haskew; see also Paul Ernsberger, “Exploding the Myth: Weight Loss Makes You Healthier,” *Healthy Weight Journal* 13, no. 1 (January-February 1999):4-6. How then to explain the fact that almost everyone knows *someone* who has successfully negotiated the weight loss waters? Like lottery winners, the very few successful dieters seem to belie these statistics. Even if we assume the failure rate of dieters to be a dismal ninety-eight percent, that still leaves two percent of dieters successful—and with such a large population of dieters, that means that approximately fourteen million dieters have managed a significant weight loss in the short term. However, the statistics on successful dieters also decrease sharply over time—that is, even people who successfully lose weight are frequently unable to maintain that weight loss for more than a year. For more on this topic, see also: Gaesser, “Is ‘Permanent Weight Loss’ an Oxymoron?” in Rothblum, *Fat Studies Reader*, 37-40.

increase in life expectancy per pound lost—meaning that to increase life expectancy by a full year, the successful dieter should lose 796 pounds! In two other studies, the reduced death rate associated with weight loss was not observed across all groups, and in fact, weight loss in some of the subgroups actually indicated a higher mortality rate. The reasons for this increased mortality rate among chronic dieters are manifold, including the fact that yo-yo dieting, in particular, increases risk of a number of diseases, among them cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and even certain cancers. It may even affect mental function—one study reported that a quarter of girls between the ages of eleven and eighteen could be damaging their IQs as a result of dieting.¹⁸

If all this evidence fails to convince the reader that fatness is, in fact, a cultural rather than a natural issue,¹⁹ then consider the following. It is not just the results from medicine’s study of fatness that reveals its bias. It is the way discourse is framed; the questions that researchers ask in the first place. Studies do not ask: how is fat beneficial? They ask: how much does fatness increase risk of mortality? Researchers look for a “fat gene,” presuming that fatness is an aberration that must be explained; they do not look for a “thin gene,” presuming instead that thin is the human body’s natural state. The way that the medical industry structures its debate about fat reveals its investment in a cultural understanding of the fat body as undesirable, and worse, as unnatural. As Margaret MacKenzie said, over thirty years ago:

¹⁸ Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*, 135-40, 35. This account also excludes other significant dangers of dieting, such as the risks of diet drugs and the dangers of weight-loss surgeries, be they liposuction or bariatric. For a brief historical account of the drugs prescribed for weight loss (among them digitalis and amphetamines) see Marilyn Wann, *FAT!SO?*. See also Solovay, *Scales of Justice*.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that even Campos, Fraser, Gaesser, Schwartz, Seid, et al. have limits. Most of the authors cited above, and particularly those working from within the medical field, carefully caution the reader that these results only apply to moderate obesity. Super, or morbid, obesity, they claim, is obviously hazardous to one’s health. It seems that even those fighting against fat prejudice feel comfortable only when certain barriers are established, as if they must establish *some* limits and exclude *some* bodies from their new healthtopia (only Wann and Solovay are exceptions to this rule).

What we're dealing with is not an unbiased, objective science. The experiments may in fact be carried out immaculately once the hypotheses are phrased. But it's the hypotheses and the theories that tend, again and again, to have moral axioms that go unrecognized and are taken for granted.²⁰

Applications in this Dissertation

In contemporary culture, the fat body possesses complicated and multivalent meanings. Authors working in the field of fat studies explore some of the meanings by exposing prejudice against fat in medicine, in law, and in popular culture. They present alternative histories of the dieting industry and explain how our culture arrived at its current state of worshipping thinness. Some fat-positive authors even create visions of worlds in which the fat body, rather than a liability, is a revolutionary and rebellious vehicle of change. However, a lacuna exists in fat theory in regards to artistic images of the fat body—the already limited discussion about fine art imagery is further narrowed to historical precedents such as Rubens, Greek statuary, or prehistoric figurines. These images receive much more cursory and simplistic readings than those accorded to contemporary popular culture representations; philosopher Susan Bordo writes eloquently for pages about a single Häagen Dazs advertisement, but Richard Klein accepts Rubens at face value as evidence that seventeenth-century Europe idolized the plump body. Moreover, contemporary art is completely unrepresented in fat theory. This dissertation aims to correct this oversight. It attempts, as Solovay and Rothblum recommended, to

²⁰ Margaret MacKenzie, "The Politics of Body Size: Fear of Fat" (Los Angeles: Pacifica Tape Library, 1980). Some recent authors, taking their cue from fat theory, now attempt to ask "why are thin people thin" as well as "why are fat people fat?" However, they often fall back on cultural assumptions about what makes people fat—see, for instance, Alexandra A. Brewis, *Obesity: Cultural and Biocultural Perspectives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2011). Perhaps because she operates from the assumption that fatness is problematic, even though Brewis often asks what makes thin people thin, she assumes (without providing any empirical evidence) that they are thin because they eat less, eat more healthfully, and exercise more.

look critically at the contemporary fat body. It challenges the assumptions about it made by artists and audiences for that art, investigating the dialogue between the imagery and larger cultural understandings of the fat body as diseased and abnormal. However, there is no direct, one-to-one correlation between a particular scholar or fat theorist and the methodology employed in this dissertation. The author's understanding of the body is informed by an additional interest in feminism and queer theory.

This dissertation focuses specifically on images of the fat female nude. In one sense, the phrase "fat female nude" seems to be an oxymoron. Kenneth Clark distinguished between naked and nude bodies in *The Nude*. He wrote, "a mass of naked figures does not move us to empathy, but to disillusion and dismay. We do not wish to imitate; we wish to perfect."²¹ The nude, on the other hand, "...is not a huddled and defenceless body, but...a balanced, prosperous and confident body."²² He adds, "...it is necessary to labour the obvious and say that no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling...and if it does not do so, it is bad art..."²³ Although scholarship on the nude has changed significantly since the publication of *The Nude*, Clark's emphasis on the perfection and eroticism of the nude meshes with traditional understandings of its purpose. Perfection and eroticism, moreover, are the two ideals that the fat body cannot achieve in a fat-hating culture. This failure on the part of the fat body to meet both cultural norms and traditional artistic aims provides fertile ground to explore its cultural meanings. The dissertation focuses specifically on the fat *female* nude because beauty norms weigh more heavily on women

²¹ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1956): 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

than on men.²⁴ Additionally, in post-classical Europe, the female nude is *the* art historical tradition.

Because fat is a gendered issue, it was important for me to look at both male and female artists. Male artists approach the female body from a distance that female artists do not. For a male artist, the female body is an object to interrogate, whereas female artists feel cultural sanctions about the female body directly, in a subjective way. Exploring the work of both male and female artists allows for a multivalent reading of the meanings of fatness and femininity. Furthermore, I purposefully chose artists who are well known for their portrayals of fat bodies. This provided a rich vein of criticism to mine for popular responses to those depictions, allowing me to situate the fat body in a larger cultural context in a clearer, more convincing fashion.

The dissertation looks at both photography and painting, in part because in Britain artists most prominently address the issue of fatness in painting, while in America they do so most notably in photography. These two media, in particular, are also closely tied to the traditional history of the female nude, even more so than the graphic arts, and certainly more than (relatively) new media like performance or installation. Because painting and photography recall traditional female nudes, their usage to depict the fat body helps to illuminate the cultural underpinnings of both the genre itself and also the fat body. Moreover, photography and painting provide an interesting counterpoint to one another, as photography putatively shows “real” bodies, unmanipulated bodies, unlike painting. Of course, this is a simplification. Photography can “transform the visible world under the deliberate control of the photographer, and [it can] respond to the

²⁴ For a more thorough discussion of the concepts of beauty (now firmly linked to thinness) and femininity, see Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 1983), particularly pages 19-29 of the introduction.

subjective vision of the photographer...”²⁵ Directly contrasting different media creates its own problematics, but also illuminates the common cultural constructions that undergird the artists working in each medium.

The dissertation addresses both America and the United Kingdom. These are both English-speaking nations, with rich artistic heritages not directly tied to the classicism of Mediterranean nations. Furthermore, although Germany and the Netherlands have a rich tradition of addressing the body in the graphic arts, this dissertation focuses on photography and painting. Additionally, American and British attitudes regarding fatness run in parallel, and sometimes entwined, lines. British undertaker William Banting provides but one example of this interrelationship. In the 1860s, Banting published his *Letter on Corpulence*, outlining the eating program that helped him drop about fifty pounds. This early dieting manual proved so popular that, by the time of his death, the book sold 58,000 copies, and his last name transformed into a verb for reducing weight. “Banting” grew to equal popularity in America, becoming the most popular diet by the 1880s.²⁶ Moreover, juxtaposing American and British artists and cultural contexts throws the particularities of each environment into sharper relief—as well as highlighting the fact that fat is not “an issue sited specifically within the United States,” as British fat activist Charlotte Cooper reminds us.²⁷

However, expanding beyond the boundaries of these two countries would complicate the issues of the fat body rather than clarifying them. The United Kingdom and the United States are similar enough for productive comparison, with useful differences. However, the fat body has a totally different context in other European

²⁵ Joel Eisinger, *Trace and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995): 2.

²⁶ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 101-102.

²⁷ Charlotte Cooper, “Maybe It Should Be Called Fat American Studies,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 327.

nations. One might, for instance, consider France as an example. Concern about the fat body is much less exaggerated there, as obesity rates climbed more slowly in the 1990s and early 2000s than in the United States or elsewhere in Europe.²⁸ In addition to a myriad of smaller cultural differences, the overall attitude toward fat in France is also significantly different from the attitude in America or Britain. Rather than approach the fat body as a largely moral and health issue, the French treat fat as a largely *aesthetic* and health issue.²⁹

A Brief History of Anti-Fat Attitudes in the West³⁰

A small foot, a round, plump thigh and a fat backside speak to the prick straight...few men will keep long to a bony lady whose skinny buttocks can be held in one hand.
Victorian author Frank Harris³¹

Despite the persistent myth that the emphasis on thinness is a new phenomenon,³² Western culture has been invested in the achievement of the ideal body since the classical period. Consider, for instance, the fact that the Romans and Byzantines practiced the surgical removal of fat, or that the Greeks reputedly envied the wasp-waisted Etruscans, and believed they possessed a magic potion that kept them slim.³³ Yet contemporary American society seems unique in its continually narrowing standards of beauty; that is,

²⁸ Peter, Stearns, *Fat History* (New York: New York UP, 2002): xiv -xv.

²⁹ For a more finely nuanced explication of these issues, see Stearns, *Fat History*.

³⁰ The scope of this introduction is confined to prevailing cultural attitudes about fat. Dissenting voices did and do exist to counteract anti-fat attitudes, but the focus of the dissertation narrows in on contemporary artistic imagery. Thus, due to the limits of space and emphasis, this section only traces the major opinions and attitudes that inflect the present. Moreover, this brief history is in no way meant to suggest that *all* medical research is prejudiced or irrelevant, or that no one should be concerned about the ways that diet and exercise affect overall health. This section is merely intended to shed light on the ways in which fatness has come to be entwined with larger discourses about health, fashion, and desirability.

³¹ Frank Harris, *My Secret Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1966): 1.

³² See, for instance, Richard Klein, *Eat Fat* (New York: Random House, 1996). He writes, “Our commitment to a slim ideal of human beauty is only about a century old...” (pp. 10)

³³ Roberta Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989): 45.

rather than swinging back and forth between ideals of plumpness and thinness, rather than focusing on different areas of eroticism like the ankle or the wasp waist, contemporary society continually demands thinner and thinner female bodies. The reasons why American society's views of the female body have changed from Frank Harris's to the predominance of the credo "you can never be too rich or too thin" are myriad and complex.

Certainly America inherited an involved ideological system from Europe. From the Greeks America took an abhorrence of gluttony and an admiration for moderation,³⁴ from Christianity the understanding that the body is fragile, vulnerable, and susceptible to temptations that can lead to damnation.³⁵ From the Renaissance, America gained the certainty that the human body could be perfected. From the Enlightenment, America absorbed Cartesian dualism, according to which the body is the site of man's animal impulses and his mind the source of his admirable rational qualities—among many others.

³⁴ See for instance Semonides of Amorgos's poem about choosing a wife, in which he abhors the fat wife, saying the "long-haired sow doesn't take baths but sits about/In the shit of dirty clothes and gets fatter and fatter," while the skinny wife, "hardly has an ass and her legs are skinny. What a poor wretch is the husband/Who has to put his arms around such a mess!" Cited in Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975): 49-52.

³⁵ It was from these Christian beliefs that the cult of ascetic fasting developed. Women, in particular, believed that mortification of the body through self-flagellation and fasting could serve as penance for sin and help the soul achieve purity. These so-called "holy anorexics" however, despite their surface similarities to modern anorexics, acted not out of a desire to exceed social norms, but to achieve salvation, and often destroyed outward signs of beauty in addition to starving their bodies. Margaret of Cortona, for instance, bought a razor to cut her nose and lips because, she said, "with the beauty of my face I did harm to many souls. Therefore, wishing to do justice upon myself, by myself, for this offense to god and transform the beauty of my body into ugliness, I pray you to permit me..." Quoted in Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 99. See Bell's book for more on women, fasting and early Christianity.

The Trend of Thinness Begins, 1830-1900

The first significant trend for thinness in the United States began roughly around 1830. It was presaged by the development of America's own authoritative fashion journal, Sara Joseph Hale's *Godey's Lady's Book*. The "Steel Engraving Lady" popularized by *Godey's* was young and demure, and above all else, slender. This model became so predominant that in 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote that "we in America have got so far out of the way of a womanhood that has any vigor of outline or opulence of physical proportions that, when we see a woman as a woman ought to be, she strikes us as a monster."³⁶ Even female mill workers subscribed to the publication.³⁷ Foreign visitors to American shores noted this American taste for thin women, frequently describing them as "sylphlike" and "ethereal."³⁸

This sensibility for thinness was associated with Romantic ideals which emphasized a lack of corporeality. As the *Newark Daily Observer* claimed in 1838, "Obesity is a deadly foe to genius; in carneous and unwieldy bodies the spirit is like a gudgeon in a large frying pan of fat, which is either totally absorbed, or tastes of nothing but lard." The innovation of *pointe* shoes for ballerinas allowed a new range of fluttering movements, and prima ballerinas like Fanny Essler epitomized the new taste for slender elegance. Even illnesses like tuberculosis, associated with pallor and emaciation, became fashionable. The burden of this new taste for slenderness rested increasingly on women for a number of reasons. As democracy extended to men without property and appropriate dress for men became more uniform, the dress and gentility (including table

³⁶ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 60-62; Stowe Quoted in Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 61.

³⁷ Banner, 33.

³⁸ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 62.

manners) of wives and daughters came to mark the distinction between the upper and lower classes.³⁹

An 1844 illustration from *Graham's Magazine* (fig. 0-1) helps to illuminate this point. The cartoon depicts two couples, each composed of one upper-crust and one lower-crust partner, at a ball. The way that the artist renders the bodies provides evidence of American concerns not just with wastefulness, but also class and the body. The illustration's upper-class figures are elongated to stand head and shoulders above the squat lower-class figures, and so thin they almost disappear completely. The artist obviously exaggerated the proportions to make the image humorous and satirical, but also to display the newly fashionably Romantic sensibility.

This peculiar emphasis on slenderness for women was reinforced by the newly emerging idea of "separate spheres" fostered by the Industrial Revolution. A variety of fields from biology to theology addressed the appropriate role of women and stressed the concept of sexual differentiation. Women were now seen as the soul of sentiment and purity, rather than the seat of animal passion. Women were the guardians of refinement, and a lady was expected to restrain the baser passions of both her husband and her male children at home.⁴⁰

This admiration of the slender body nevertheless differed significantly from our own. It would take another twenty years for dieting to become an openly discussed, viable option for slimming; William Banting's "Letter on Corpulence," which describes the diet he followed to reduce from 202 to 156 pounds, was first published in 1864. The

³⁹ Banner, *American Beauty*, 40-44; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 62-65. *Newark Daily Observer* Quoted in Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 62. Hillel Schwartz discusses this idea in relation to the concept of buoyancy—how the body moved and conformed to standards of deportment was as important, if not more so, than what it weighed. See his book, *Never Satisfied*, 47-74.

⁴⁰ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 64-65.

influence of that text can be seen in the addition of a new word for reducing or slimming—*banting*—to the American dialect. Moreover, unlike today, the Americans of the 1830s associated delicacy and fragility, rather than fitness and energy, with the slender body. The women of the nineteenth century strove not for an all-over thinness, but for a tiny waist accompanied by plenitude in the shoulders, bust, and derriere. Perhaps most importantly, in this era before the prevalence of mass-produced clothing, upper class men and women still relied on the services of tailors and seamstresses, so that a range of body sizes was not abhorred, but expected. Concurrent with this presumption was the understanding that women's bodies would differ with age, and bodily ideals for unmarried girls differed widely from those of their more mature counterparts. Finally, in this period, slenderness was not a hegemonic ideal—it was challenged by rosier, plumper, competition which shared the pages of the same fashion magazines, side by side with *Godey's* "Steel Engraving Lady."⁴¹

Despite these challenges to the ideal of the "Steel Engraving Lady," the roots of the contemporary attitude toward fatness appear in this period. A host of new dietary and health reformers emerged. They underlined the new idea that human beings could control their health, and that the route to perfecting the body came through diet and, to a more limited extent, exercise. This new philosophy made the sight of bodies suffering from disease or physical abnormality an impetus to reform, rather than a cause for

⁴¹ Laura Fraser, *Losing It: False Hopes and Fat Profits in the Diet Industry* (New York: Plume, 1998): 53-54; Joyce Huff, "A 'Horror of Corpulence': Interrogating Bantigism and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fat-Phobia," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 39-59; Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 100-101; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 64-68.

resignation—an attitude that would significantly influence later discussions of the fat body.⁴²

The pendulum swung back towards a taste for plumpness in the 1850s. Worried about neurasthenia (or nervous exhaustion), doctors advocated an increase of fat in the blood, and the emaciated pallor admired in the previous period became abhorrent. The taste for rounder bodies was not limited to medical professionals; “personals,” ads written by men advertising for female mates in the *Water-Cure Journal* of the 1850s, give details about the desired female form. One writer wanted “a form medium-sized, well-developed, erect, and plump (not gross, but full and round—I do not admire skeletons),” while others provided specific measurements—a woman of 5’4” and 120 to 140 pounds, a shorter woman who ranged between 130 and 160 pounds. Although at-home scales and, indeed, the very idea of weighing oneself were not yet common, data from various state fairs suggest that these figures roughly corresponded to the size of the average woman.⁴³

Running counter to the acceptance of a broad range of figures were the new concepts of “scientific eating” promulgated by Wilbur Atwater of Yale University, and early discoveries about nutrition. A new understanding about the calories and nutrients needed for health appeared, along with cooking schools and scientific nutritionists. This was the period of “hunger artists” like Henry Tanner, who fasted for forty-two days in New York City. Physicians at the time were astounded by the feat, as they had believed

⁴² Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 69-70.

⁴³ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 168-182; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 70-72. *Water-Cure Journal* Quoted in Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 71. To put this in context, although weight charts are rarely used now, entering the data that a 5’4” woman weighs 130 pounds, the Rush University medical center suggests that she is at the outside range of normal (133 puts her at overweight: see www.rush.edu) and a variety of other sites (www.disabled-world.com, www.weightwatchers.com, etc.) put BMI for this weight at 22.3—a BMI of greater than 24 is overweight.

that human beings could go only twelve to fifteen days without food. A new awareness emerged that periods of few meals, or even no meals at all, would not necessarily have deleterious effects on health.⁴⁴

Anxieties Increase, 1900-WWII

From around 1900 until the First World War, attitudes toward fatness began to change. Fashion slowly swung away from the wasp-waisted, S-curved woman. First came Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Girl," appearing in 1894, part of a new culture that encouraged activity for women, rather than delicacy and restraint. Upper class women were now expected to go fishing, play golf, even ride bicycles. Concurrently, the bulky layers of the corset and petticoat disappeared, and a new, slender, streamlined silhouette appeared in 1908, introduced by Parisian designer Paul Poiret. The new clothing style was, if not more practical, then certainly less unwieldy, fitting for the new roles of upper class women in public life, because it was at this time that women began to attend college and enter previously male-only professions like medicine and law. But this new fashion trend came with consequences. Women could no longer depend on clothing to achieve the ideal body—although still voluminous by our standards, the new garments could not conceal corsets, girdles, or padding that would allow a woman to meet the standards without changing her physical size. As a consequence, dieting became the fashion conscious woman's new imperative.⁴⁵

At the turn of the century, the medical profession still wavered on the utility and possible beneficent qualities of fat. While some physicians continued to see fat as useful,

⁴⁴ Fraser, *Losing It*, 55; Schwartz *Never Satisfied*, 86-88 and 131-135; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 77-78.

⁴⁵ Fraser, *Losing It*, 26-32; Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 86-88 and 131-135; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 81-85.

stored-up energy, others, like Dr. Charles Purdy of Harvard, began warning that Americans were becoming “unduly stout at middle age.”⁴⁶ At the same time, a variety of American researchers like Wilbur Atwater and Russell H. Chittenden, inspired by their German counterparts,⁴⁷ began experimenting with food intake, attempting to determine the number of calories it was advisable to consume in one day, and the types of foods that should compose those calories. Although these experiments did introduce the idea that food and eating—previously assumed to be sensual, pleasurable, and an aspect of personal life rather than the purview of science and medicine—had a place in scientific discourse, the purpose of the experiments was to find how to run the human body *efficiently*. The science of diet was not yet linked to the passion for dieting.⁴⁸

Soon, however, not just food, but the size of one’s body changed from a personal issue to a medical concern. And the driving force behind that transition was the newly developed life insurance industry. Before 1840, life insurance was essentially unknown, and by 1874, only about 850,000 policies had been created. Over time, in an effort to make better investments in policy-holders, insurance companies began looking for a simple way to determine the likely longevity of their insured. The investigator for the New York Life Insurance Company, Dr. Oscar Rogers, decided to focus on overweight as the determining factor for overall health, although he had also found higher risk for mortality in underweight and even tall applicants.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 85. Dr. Charles Purdy, “Popular Errors in Living and their Influence Over the Public Health,” *North American Review* 164, no. 487 (June 1897): 664-677. Quote, 670.

⁴⁷ As early as the 1880s German scientists were at work, discovering how many calories the human body burned at rest and during activity.

⁴⁸ Fraser, *Losing It*, 55; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 85-90.

⁴⁹ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 85-87. The choice to focus on weight as a determining factor of mortality also happened in spite of shoddy methodology—the sample was limited to those privileged enough to afford insurance, meaning almost exclusively white, Protestant, middle- or upper-class men, largely from the East Coast. Furthermore, at this time, medical professionals still feared “wasting diseases” like tuberculosis, and

Yet by 1909, Dr. Brandeth Symonds, another physician affiliated with the insurance industry, was appearing before doctors' conferences and announcing that being overweight—whether from muscle or fat—was unequivocally unhealthy. He warned that being even ten percent over average weight “universally shortens life.”⁵⁰ In 1914, the Actuarial Society of America and the Association of Life Insurance Medical Directors published the results of their own investigations of the 700,000 policy holders insured between 1885 and 1908, confirming the assertion that overweight increased mortality risks, adding another layer of approval for the trend for thinness.⁵¹

In the period between the wars, the momentum toward thinness continued. The insurance companies reconfirmed the links between slenderness and longevity in 1919, 1923, 1929, 1932, and 1937, ensuring that by 1931, *Scientific Monthly* was publishing the news that “stout persons usually feel, and look, less fit”: a total reversal of cultural and medical assumptions in the nineteenth century, which associated stoutness with health and thinness with delicacy and fragility. Moreover, medical studies began to link increased weight to all of those things so indelibly associated in contemporary minds: diabetes, hypertension, arteriosclerosis, heart disease.⁵² These statistics are not included

ergo thin applicants were much more rigorously screened than fatter ones. Policyholders were weighed only at the time they purchased the insurance, so if a policyholder died twenty years after his application, no adjustment was made for changes in weight during the interim. Moreover, variables such as clothing were not taken into account, and only about half of the applicants were actually weighed—those that were not weighed received very unreliable estimates in their insurance applications, with the estimate often coming from the applicant himself. See Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Gotham, 2004); Fraser, *Losing It*; Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*; Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York UP, 2002); et al. for more on this topic.

⁵⁰ Brandeth Symonds, “The Mortality of Overweights and Underweights,” *McClure's Magazine*, January 1909, 319.

⁵¹ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 85-87.

⁵² Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 90. The studies can be explained both by newly emerging cultural attitudes toward weight and also the increased general health of the populace—meaning that Americans were living longer, and thus more susceptible to degenerative conditions. For more on the isolation of diabetes as an illness and its association with fat, see Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 172-174.

in an effort to suggest that eating a diet lower in fat and sodium cannot help reduce the risk of these ailments, but to indicate the extent to which these illnesses are linked specifically to fat in Western culture, to the detriment of thin and fat alike.

An advertisement for Frank J. Kellogg's "Safe Fat Reducer," published in *Woman Beautiful* (1910), fig. 0-2, illustrates the growing medicalization of fat. The text of the ad assures the fat woman (the target audience, which can be discerned both from its placement in a ladies' magazine and the illustration that shows two women) that the "Safe Fat Reducer" actually "builds up your health," and "promotes proper digestion and assimilation of food." The ad also emphasizes that the "[Safe Fat Reducer] is prepared scientifically." The text of the advertisement expresses themes still found in anti-fat prejudice today. For instance, if the fat woman's health needs to be "built up," then she must not be healthy, likely because she does not have proper digestion or assimilation of food. The ad also suggests that the fat body can be cured, and that the cure lies with science. Additionally, the drawing which accompanies the text already displays the stereotypes that fat people are unhappy and want to change, and that they can change. The fat woman in the ad weeps miserably, while she is comforted by a thin woman, who has used the product (the caption reads "Don't Cry Because You Are Fat. Send To Prof. Kellogg and He Will Reduce You As He Did Me"). Although many fat people were (and still are) unhappy with their bodies, and some fat people did (and still do) change their bodies by dieting, the advertisement shows the prevailing anti-fat attitudes that helped cause that unhappiness and necessitate that dieting.

The "Safe Fat Reducer" ad also shows the way that fashion and cultural changes helped push women, especially, to embrace slenderness. Note that advertisement features

two *women*. A newly developed concept of youth as a special class emerged, and art and fashion embraced youth culture. The term “sex appeal” first entered American vocabulary in the 1920s, at the same time that changing standards for marriage decreed that wives should be lovers and keep the romance alive, rather than be content to become mothers. Concomitantly, women of all ages were expected to maintain a slender, youthful figure.⁵³

The two objects that would become the most enduring symbols of fat prejudice in America appeared in recognizable form during this period: the scale and the calorie. Although in the period between 1900 and 1915, penny scales had become more popular, it was only after the First World War that the new, in-home scale became a “materialized conscious.”⁵⁴ American women were beginning to believe that there was an impartial, scientific truth about not just their bodies, but also their appearance. It was also in this period that counting calories began to be seen as crucial to dieting success. The first best-selling weight-loss book, *Diet and Health with Key to the Calories*, written by Dr. Lulu Hunt Peters in 1917, contained advice that sounds surprisingly contemporary even today. She exhorted readers to begin with a fast, proceed to 1,200 calories per day, and then follow a “maintenance diet” after the weight was shed. She warned readers that they would have to count calories for the rest of their lives. Underlying the growing calorie-counting culture was the belief that a woman not only *should* control her size and weight, but that she *could* control it.⁵⁵ Here again, this information is included not to suggest that

⁵³ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 90-95.

⁵⁴ So called by Christine Herrick in her book, *Lose Weight and Be Well: The Story of a Stout Woman Now Thin* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1917).

⁵⁵ Fraser, *Losing It*, 55-56; Schwartz *Never Satisfied*, 174-177; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 95-96.

body size is completely out of the control of the individual, but to note the cultural forces that drive women to change that size in the first place.

Nevertheless, the standards of fashionable thinness remained steady, and close to the actual weights of average women. For instance, the 1922-23 Miss America, Mary Campbell, at 5'7", weighed a healthy 140 pounds.⁵⁶ Even the "ideal" weights promulgated by insurance company height/weight charts matched the actual average weight of policy holders, and the ideal weights even took into account aging—a woman of 5'5" was allowed to gain up to twenty pounds between the ages of twenty-five and sixty, without straying from her insurance company ideal weight. Women consequently still sought an ideal figure in the median; they wanted to be neither too fat nor too thin. For instance, an ad in 1930 which ran in *Vogue* magazine claimed that "the most envied women today...are slim, but you would never think of calling them thin. Rounded slenderness seems to describe them perfectly."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, the negative connotations associated with fatness only continued to accumulate. Fat was seen as stubbornly resistant to removal and an indicator of both insatiable appetite and personal sadness.⁵⁸

However much this period laid the groundwork for later crusades against fat, dieting remained the province of the upper class. As late as 1944, for example, eight out of ten housewives did not know the difference between a calorie and a vitamin. And the double crises of the Great Depression and World War II, both accompanied by food shortages and rationing, brought the rounded, small-waisted model back into fashion.

⁵⁶ This can be compared to sizes of more recent winners—in 1998, the winner (Kate Shindle) weighed 145 pounds—but was 5'11". In 1990 and 1991, winners were less than an inch from Campbell's height, but weighed 118 and 110 pounds, respectively. To see the information, visit:

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/sfeature/sf_list.html (*American Experience*, PBS, "...The Winners Are..." accessed August 1, 2011).

⁵⁷ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 97-101.

⁵⁸ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 189-235.

The boyish flapper was replaced by the curvaceous pin-up girl; Greta Garbo gave way to Betty Grable.⁵⁹

Medicalization of Fat, 1950-1960

Great social changes after World War II left America ripe for a new, anti-fat culture. In contrast to the scarcity of the Great Depression or the rationing of the war period, the U.S. experienced a period of great abundance, intensified by new technological developments like the refrigerator, or convenience foods such as frozen vegetables. The average citizen became more prosperous, and jobs became less laborious, as machines aided in labor-intensive tasks like washing clothing or sowing fields. Additionally, a growing prosperity meant more middle-class citizens, and that growing numbers of men engaged in white-collar occupations.⁶⁰

These changes triggered fears that had been percolating in American culture since the late 1800s. New prosperity amplified anxieties that Americans were getting soft, and the Cold War further exaggerated old worries that “native” Americans (the Northern European variety) were being replaced by immigrants from Southern and Eastern European. People believed that Americans needed to be mentally, morally, and physically fit to compete with the Russians.⁶¹

It is a small surprise, then, that fashion, insurance, medicine, and even psychology combined to endorse the thin body as not only the ideal body, but also the natural one. By the early 1950s the “New Look” (inspired primarily by the young

⁵⁹ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 100-102.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 128-133.

⁶¹ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 232-235; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 128-133.

designer Christian Dior) had fully infiltrated Europe and America. Although on the surface Dior's fashion appeared to be a throwback to the voluptuous ideal of an earlier century, in actuality his emphasis on a tiny, tucked-in waist ushered in a new wave of slimmer models. The 1950s was also the decade of the rising hemline and the bathing suit, both of which exposed previously hidden elements of the woman's body. Bare legs, bare backs, and bare arms could not hide their flaws, and women's magazines began to emphasize not just the slenderness required for the new fashions, but also the difference between fit bodies and flabby ones. The term "muscle tone" began to appear in *Vogue*, and became the vogue.⁶²

Additionally, a new suburban culture for middle class women developed in the post-war period. With working-age young men back in the country, women previously employed outside of the home retreated to their kitchens. The cult of the suburban housewife was born, ushering in the era of the Feminine Mystique. Women's clubs emerged, and the beauty industry began catering to these house-bound homemakers. The sexual attractiveness of the housewife became just as important as the tidiness of her home, and magazines assured her that she could achieve beauty if she followed the appropriate regimen and bought the right products. The rise of television, the proliferation of billboards, and the growing popularity of print media homogenized standards of beauty. Consequently, beauty ceased to be an ideal, an exceptional quality. It became the standard that women not only believed that they could achieve, but that was expected.⁶³

⁶² Fraser, *Losing It*, 52; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 108-111.

⁶³ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 111-114.

A typical advertisement from the January 1955 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* (fig. 0-3) illustrates this point. The text reads "I was a hopeless fatty...now I'm a model." Above these words, an "average"-sized woman stands in a slump-shouldered posture. To the right of them, a smiling woman (presumably the same one) poses framed in a doorway. She smiles broadly as she shows off her ideal physique—although she is broader-hipped than the ideal of today, even by contemporary standards her waist is tiny. The narrative of the advertisement fits into the understanding of beauty in this decade as well. The woman in the photographs (identified as Diane Macom) is an average housewife and mother, the president of her "small town" P.T.A. Yet, through weight loss, she not only goes from "dowdy" to "beauty," but she also becomes a model, reifying the idea that anyone could achieve ideal beauty if she tried hard enough.

The increasing emphasis on women's appearances, and their belief that they could change that appearance, was reflected in a burgeoning diet culture. Sales of dieting books and products blossomed. As early as 1951, a diet guide had become a bestseller, as Gaylord Hauser's *Look Younger, Live Longer* sold 500,000 copies. By 1959, ninety-two diet books were in print. Concordantly, sales of diet products also increased exponentially. In 1952, only 50,000 cases of diet soda were sold in America; by 1955, fifteen million cases were sold. New products also emerged to service the weight-loss conscious consumer. In 1959, Metrecal, the first meal-replacement liquid (the ancestor of modern products like Slim-Fast) was invented. In one year, the product boosted the income of the manufacturer from four million to thirteen million dollars.⁶⁴

The taste for dieting and the fashion for slenderness might have dissipated at the end of the decade, as it had in the 1850s and 1930s, but the social checks and balances

⁶⁴ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 240-268; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 103-107.

which traditionally served to moderate fashion trends instead began to reinforce fashion's dictates. The Christian religion, historically the damper on fashion's excesses, embraced thinness. The first diet book by a preacher, *Pray Your Weight Away*, by Reverend Charles W. Shedd, D.D., was published in the 1950s. It exposed prevailing religious attitudes in which gluttony, previously a moral failing unrelated to body size, became associated with a particular body type. Dr. Shedd and his contemporaries associated "fat with sin...God really made us all to be thin...if our bodies really are to be temples of the Holy Spirit, we had best get them down to the size God intended." To say that God intended everyone to be thin meant that dieting could be seen as a holy quest. The quest for beauty, rather than detracting from spiritual enlightenment (as it had historically been understood to do) became a path to fulfill God's design.⁶⁵ Of course, not every religious leader in the West endorsed this approach to the body, but Shedd's book demonstrates the way the anti-fat trends in Western culture could influence even theological interpretations of the meaning of the body.

Led by Louis I. Dublin of the Metropolitan Insurance Company, the insurance industry also preached the gospel of thinness to the world at large, and particularly to the medical industry. Dublin reconfirmed the findings of the earliest insurance surveys, firmly associating early mortality with overweight. Moreover, the new weight charts he and his company advocated were no longer based on the actual weight of their customers. Instead, Dublin introduced the concept of "Ideal Weights": weights everyone was expected to achieve for maximum health benefits. Metropolitan explained that their new

⁶⁵ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 307-310; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 107. Quote from Gerald Weales, "A Family that Prays Together, Stays Together," *New Republic*, March 25, 1957, 19-20. The confluence of religion and dieting also fit nicely with the language already embedded in dieting rhetoric. Testimonials which read like religious conversion stories had long been a standard part of advertised diets and dieting products. See Fraser, *Losing It*; Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 307-315; and Stearns, *Fat History*, 105.

charts were “to help people aim for a weight below the average for their height.” The charts made the assumption that certain weights correlated with better health, and that these weights were universally desirable. That is, that what was average was unhealthy, and that everyone should strive to achieve the same body.⁶⁶

Moreover, because Dublin’s weights were ideal and not actual, the categories for obesity and overweight changed. By Dublin’s standards, overweight began at ten percent above ideal weights, and obesity at twenty-thirty percent above them. In other words, large groups of people whose weights fell within the actual average weight group suddenly became overweight based on Dublin’s charts. Dublin also propagated a pernicious myth that persists until this day. He claimed that weight loss returned a dieter’s mortality rate to the same as their thinner counterparts, although he had no empirical basis for this claim.⁶⁷

This time around, the medical community embraced the insurance company’s assertions with few reservations. Dr. James Hundley of the National Institutes of Health proclaimed that “obesity has replaced vitamin-deficiency diseases as the #1 nutrition

⁶⁶ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 116-117.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 117-118. Dublin’s study, however, did not correct the flawed methodology of Dr. Oscar Rogers. The policyholders remained a self-selected group of largely Anglo-Saxon Protestants, although more women were included. There were no countermeasures taken to counteract biases such as the fact that overweight policy holders had more expensive premiums—thus, the overweight policy holders were more likely to be ill than their thin counterparts, since a healthy overweight person would be less inclined to purchase insurance. The data collection and analysis techniques remained sloppy—applicants were weighed clothed and shod, with only vague estimates about the weight of their apparel. At least twenty percent of participants provided their own weights, and then, as now, self-reported weights tend to average a minimum of five pounds under actual weights. And policyholders continued to be asked for their weight only when they first applied for a policy or if they reapplied for a lower rate. The weight of a twenty-five-year-old policy purchaser has little bearing on his weight when he dies thirty or more years later. The lack of consistent weighing processes over time may account for Dublin’s bizarre conclusion that the ideal weight for a twenty-five year old was the ideal weight for everyone. But perhaps the most damaging flaw in Dublin’s study was his continuation of the bias from earlier versions. Like Dr. Rogers, he focused on weight from the outset, rather than searching for other variables. And Dublin presumed a causal relationship between weight and correlated illnesses; rather than seeing overweight as a symptom of diabetes, for instance, he saw it as the cause, despite the fact that insulin is a fat-producing hormone.

problem in the United States,” and the *New York Times* announced “Overweight: America’s #1 Health Problem.” But when asked for the basis of this argument, Dr. Hundley called “the most widely accepted figures” those of Louis Dublin and the MLIC, as did Dr. Jean Mayer of Harvard’s School of Public Health. In other words, members of the medical community simply accepted Dublin’s figures as fact, without performing their own research. The medical profession was so convinced by Metropolitan and Dr. Dublin that even when their own study results conflicted with Dublin’s theories, those results were considered puzzling and not reliable.⁶⁸

Why were medical professionals so much more open to the results of the insurance company study in the 1950s than in previous decades? The answer is complex, but the decline in glandular and genetic explanations for variations in weight contributed greatly. Simply put, the majority of doctors now believed that weight was under the control of the patient. Even genetic predisposition became seen as a factor of overall body weight rather than the determining cause.⁶⁹

Mental health professionals also contributed to the belief that body weight was determined by the individual. Many of the stigmas associated with fatness today appeared in this period. Psychiatry stressed the unhappiness of fat individuals; personality traits once believed to cause excessive thinness (nervousness, tension, and worry) now became associated with fat. Psychiatry also influenced attitudes toward

⁶⁸ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 120-121. Hundley and *New York Times* Quoted in Seid. For instance, Dr. Lester Breslow (Consultant to the President’s Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation) conducted a five-year study of San Francisco longshoremen. The subjects were uniformly overweight: on average, participants were seventeen percent above MLIC standards. Breslow presumed that their mortality rates would be equally above average, yet the reverse was true. The longshoremen had a strikingly lower rate of coronary problems and other early mortality factors compared to all California males of comparable age groups. Even so, the researchers never questioned Dublin’s data. Instead, they were “perplexed by their own data,” and wanted to be “cautious about drawing conclusions.”

⁶⁹ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 123-124.

eating. What was once seen as a pleasurable or biological function came to be seen as a largely psychological one. Many psychoanalysts associated overweight with overeating, and overeating with a variety of unresolved conflicts. The overfed body became, strangely, the empty body. According to one popular theory, fat people ate to fulfill emotional cravings such as the longing for love or as a result of displaced sexual urges. By this logic, the craving for a rich dessert was not a biological craving, but a desire for sex, love, emotional connection, self-respect, or emotional love, and that craving could not be fulfilled.⁷⁰

However, the full-fledged panic about diet and exercise extant in today's culture had yet to take hold completely. Americans continued to see food as, at worst, a sedative or drug; food had no inherently negative qualities, but derived them from the motives of the eater. And exercise remained purely a health choice, separate from weight loss efforts. As late as 1956, the amount and type of exercise recommended for weight loss remained moderate—fifteen knee bends and a two-mile walk each day, according to *Newsweek*.⁷¹

Contemporary Attitudes Begin, 1960-1970

American culture underwent yet another dramatic transformation in the 1960s, the decade when the baby boomers came of age. For decades before the baby boomers, America had had a falling birthrate—so as the boomers matured, a new subculture was formed. And that subculture was the culture of youth. Youth became the hottest new commodity, and everyone wanted to market it. The baby boomers, however, generally

⁷⁰ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 202-204; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 125-127.

⁷¹ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 133-136.

defined themselves as against the establishment, against the commodity culture of their parents' generations.⁷²

Fashion, for example, which had previously trickled down from the aristocracy to the ordinary woman via magazines like *Vogue*, now came from the ground up. Rather than emulating the fashions of the elite or aping *haute couture* designers, fashion came from the youth, from the streets. And the two things that the media saw as unifying youth fashion were skin and thin. See-through crocheted garments worn without a slip and the bikini were some of the hallmarks of the new fashion. Nudity or semi-nudity became acceptable in mainstream publications. And so the body became a commodity, just like the garments models wore.⁷³

The beauty icons of the 1960s enforced the link between thinness and youth. Although robust sex symbols continued to be celebrated (like Brigitte Bardot or Raquel Welch), the fashion icons of the decade were Edie Sedgwick and Twiggy, who was nearly 5'8" and only 91 pounds when she made her debut. Their attenuated bodies fit neatly into the new discourse about sexual freedom, which associated youth with sex, and also an animal or child-like innocence. Additionally, although these two very thin icons proved to be exceptions to the still-curvy ideal, they provided a new body type for models that would come to dominate the fashion industry.⁷⁴

The dictates of fashion were reinforced by those of the medical community, which also associated thinness with health and youthfulness. Once again, the medical community took its cues from the insurance companies. Dr. Louis Dublin published his *magnum opus* in 1959—the *Build and Blood Pressure Study* (BBPS), which claimed a

⁷² Ibid., 144-151.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

linear relationship between the degree of overweight and the risk of premature death. Additionally, Dublin's study once again dropped ideal weights, now labeled "desirable weights." They were lower than the previous ideal weights, and now ten to fifteen percent below the weight of the average American. For a second time, millions of Americans went to bed in the normal weight range, and woke up with an unhealthy weight problem. Equally as troubling, the study revised earlier findings that underweight was linked to early mortality, suggesting that the goal of every American should be to lose as much weight as possible.⁷⁵

The American government helped cement the idea of the fat body as diseased by conducting its own height-weight studies of the U.S. population under the auspices of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS), in 1961 and 1962. Their recommendations followed the BBPS study, as the USPHS declared "obesity is a real health problem...mortality rates...are higher for the obese person." The survey actually exacerbated the fears stirred up by the BBPS because weights for uninsured Americans were even higher. If the survey counted those people who were five percent or more over the desired weight for their height, almost ninety percent of the uninsured were overweight or obese.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., 138-140. Although the sample group widened significantly for this study (it was compiled from the data of almost five million people) the tome contained all the flaws of previous insurance studies, including the lax method of collecting data about weight and mortality. It also instituted the new idea of small, medium, and large frames, which troubled readers at the time because there were no concrete data for determining frame size. Moreover, the statistical correlations of the study still failed to describe whether obesity was actually a *cause* of mortality or merely a *symptom* of body types more prone to early mortality. Furthermore, throughout the study, mortality was defined in relation to *average* weights, and yet Dublin promoted the notion that mortality was linked to weight in excess of *desirable* weights. Although a 1966 study by the *New England Journal of Medicine* noted that there was no real, statistically significant risk of early mortality until patients reached what they called "extreme obesity," the media and the broader medical profession largely accepted the results of Dublin's study.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 141.

Compounding these factors were new fears about cholesterol, spearheaded by researcher Ancel Keys's new study. Keys linked cholesterol, particularly the type found in saturated fats, to heart disease. Americans now had to fear not only visible fat, but also fat *within* their bodies. Certain kinds of foods were now seen as inherently dangerous, and advertisers glommed onto this rationale to promote their products. This is not to say that high cholesterol does not affect heart health; but it is important to note the ways that fat bodies and heart disease became further linked in the public's mind, so that advertising, fashion, and medicine now all reinforced one another in a kind of circular logic.⁷⁷

Exercise also became linked not just to health, but to weight loss. Dr. Jean Mayer of Harvard University, searching for the reasons for growing weight among the American population despite the increase in dieters, locked onto exercise as the answer. Studying both rodents and overweight teenage girls, he linked two previously disparate concepts. Now exercise was a crucial factor in body weight. Authorities in the government and medical fields embraced Mayer's theories as an explanation for why dieters continued to gain weight. More and more strenuous forms of exercise were advocated, especially after the 1967 publication of *Jogging* by the coach of the University of Oregon's track team. Now fat gained a whole new set of associations—the fat person was not only unhappy, but also ate poorly and did not exercise.⁷⁸ In no way is this meant to be an argument that exercise does not have health benefits, or to suggest that people should not exercise. However, it is important to note the new emphasis on exercise *for the sake* of weight loss, and the emphasis on body size as a visible marker of health and exercise habits.

⁷⁷ Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 240-268; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 155-157.

⁷⁸ Fraser, *Losing It*, 58-60; Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 233-234; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 151-153.

In response to this variety of cultural pressures, efforts at weight loss skyrocketed. By 1973, *Newsweek* reported hundreds of diet books on the shelves, many written by physicians. Alternatives to high-calorie foods proliferated, from Tab and Diet-Rite to Metrecal's newest competitor, Pet Milk's Sego. In 1960, Overeaters Anonymous was founded, and in 1964, Jean Nidetch started Weight Watchers.⁷⁹ Her revenues jumped from \$164,000 in that year to eight million dollars by 1970.⁸⁰ Employers in both the military and civic sectors added to the pressure by instituting weight policies. Employees could be denied promotion or even fired for failing to meet body weight standards.⁸¹

The new discourses about the fat body were absorbed into American culture, and researchers began to document the growing stigma against fat. In 1966, G.L. Maddox and other researchers concluded that "Americans regard obesity as a socially deviant form of physical disability."⁸² This was confirmed by evidence that the overweight were at a significant disadvantage in competitions for jobs and promotions. A 1967 study concluded that fat people had the same IQ's and college entrance examination scores as their thin counterparts—but the very fact that it was necessary to ask the question demonstrates the abiding prejudice against the fat body. Researchers found the same prejudices in broad spectrums of society, from physicians who described their fat patients

⁷⁹ These groups were heavily skewed towards women, who made up ninety-five percent of OA members, and ninety-eight percent of a similar group called TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly). Stearns also notes that job place discrimination reflected the disparity between men's and women's attitudes toward fat. Female workers were dismissed more often for being overweight than their male counterparts. A female law officer in California was fired for being ten pounds overweight, and the number of airlines with policies featuring strict weight requirements increased—but those requirements applied *only* to female stewards, not pilots, baggage handlers, etc. Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 115. See also Schwartz, 208-211.

⁸⁰ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 137-139.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 160.

as “weak-willed, ugly and awkward,” to children as young as seven, already shunning their “overweight” peers.⁸³

These prevailing cultural attitudes about fatness inform the images created by the artists discussed in this dissertation. All of the artists examined here enter into a dialogue with these attitudes through the act of depicting fat bodies, and each artist demonstrates a complicated relationship to the culture of the body.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter one of this dissertation, “Nature Morte/Corps Mort: Fat, Sex, and Death in the Paintings of Lucian Freud,” deals with British painter Lucian Freud’s series of images of fat model Sue Tilley. The chapter compares and contrasts images of Tilley with thin models in similar poses, arguing that Freud displaces the erotic charge of his thin female nudes into an erotics of repulsion in his images of Tilley. The chapter then places these images in a larger cultural context, discussing British attitudes toward fat in the 1990s, and the way that Freud’s paintings respond to and reinforce those attitudes, as demonstrated by critical response to them.

The second chapter, “Facing the Fat Body in the Early Works of Jenny Saville,” looks at Jenny Saville’s early paintings of fat models. It discusses the ways in which these paintings demonstrate more conflicted attitudes toward fatness than Freud’s works. They demonstrate the complex relationship that many contemporary women in the West have with their bodies—their desire to accept the body as it is, and yet their contradictory desire to shape it to meet beauty standards.

⁸³ Ibid., 159-162.

The third chapter, “American Culture, Fat, and Photographic Responses: Witkin, Edison, and Nimoy,” discusses photographic images of fat female nudes by Joel-Peter Witkin, Laurie Toby Edison, and Leonard Nimoy. It attempts to place these images into a brief survey of the history of American attitudes toward fat, as each photographer worked in a different decade (the 1970/80s, 1990s, and 2000s, respectively). I argue that Witkin’s photographs, despite literature that suggests they iterate fat prejudice, can actually work to undermine that prejudice. Edison’s photographs, on the other hand, ideologically attempt to recontextualize fat as beautiful, but visually reinforce stereotypes of fatness. The chapter concludes by arguing that Nimoy’s pictures elaborate the photographer’s ambivalent attitudes toward fatness.

Chapter Four, “Full(ly) Figuring the Body,” scrutinizes self-portraits by photographer Laura Aguilar. Aguilar, as a fat, Chicana lesbian, is subject to multiple layers of discrimination. Critics typically single out individual layers of Aguilar’s subjectivity, focusing on each one in turn. The chapter attempts to engage with multiple meanings at one time, reading Aguilar’s photographs as multivalent, constantly reinforcing and then undermining our understandings of the fat, Chicana, lesbian body.

Chapter One: *Nature Morte/Corps Mort*: Fat, Sex, and Death in the Paintings of Lucian Freud

Freud the Painter/Freud the Persona

As far as I'm concerned, the paint is the person. I want it to work for me just as flesh does. Lucian Freud¹

Although Lucian Freud is best known today as a painter of the human body, he began his painting career studying the natural world, rather than the nude model. His earliest paintings include a box of apples in the Welsh countryside, a dead heron, and a still life with squid and sea urchin (all date to the 1940s). Many of the animals that Freud painted were dead, either brought to him by friends (like the heron) or given to him by a pet store near his first studio.² However, at the same time Freud painted his morbid menagerie, he also made simple portraits of friends and colleagues, usually in pencil on paper. The aesthetic of his literally “dead nature” still lifes translated into those portraits. Freud turned the same uncompromising eye on his human subjects, showing them in the detailed, almost crystalline, style of his still lifes. In each genre, he articulated every element of surface detail, whether by delineating each individual feather on the dead heron, or individual hairs on his sitters. There is a sense of morbidity, a sinister element in many of his portraits from this period. For example, in *Evacuee Boy* (1942) the black background with red tones, the boy’s oversized mouth and teeth, and the repeated black lines on his chest all indicate that an ominous event has occurred. He even depicted dead

¹ Quoted in Lawrence Gowing, *Lucian Freud* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982): 191. Emphasis original.

² Richard Calvocoressi, *Early Works: Lucian Freud* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997): 4.

and dying human sitters—early in his career, he represented the artist Christian Bérard on his deathbed, and in 1989, he painted his mother’s corpse.

Freud shifted from painting largely in the still life genre to primarily painting the people around him during a stint in the merchant navy, when he was hospitalized for tonsillitis. Although he returned to still life on occasion throughout his career, portraits became his most enduring subject. In the 1960s, he switched from painting clothed portraits to painting “naked portraits.”³ Freud has insisted that his focus of interest in these nudes is in the body. He said, “I used to leave the face until last. I wanted the expression to be in the body. The head must be just another limb.”⁴

Despite Freud’s insistence on the primacy of the body in his paintings, much of the art criticism and scholarly literature devoted to his work attempts to penetrate the psychological interior of either Freud or his sitters, rather than focusing on historical or social analysis of the works themselves.⁵ Other aspects of Freud’s work that vie for precedence in the literature include his development from a linear to a more volumetric style and details about his relationships with the models for his various works (e.g. how his close friendship with Francis Bacon influenced the portrait he made of that artist).

However, the facet of Freud’s work that receives the greatest amount of attention and reflection by far in the monographs and essays devoted to his painting (which are almost exclusively written by old friends, among them Lawrence Gowing, William Feaver, and John Richardson) is its relation to the biographical details of his life. This

³ I have set this phrase off with quotation marks because it is the way that Freud often refers to these images, going so far as to label several of them as such and to publish a book with this title—*Lucian Freud: Naked Portraits* (New York: Hatje Cantz, 2001).

⁴ Robert Hughes, *Lucian Freud Paintings* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989): 20.

⁵ See, for example, Holland Cotter, “The Psychologically Revealing Etchings of Lucian Freud,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1992.

tendency is understandable—after all, Freud’s life story reads like an epic novel. His grandfather was *that* Freud; his children include two well-known British novelists (Rose Boyt and Esther Freud) and an established fashion designer (Bella Freud); his (Jewish) family presciently immigrated to Great Britain from Berlin in 1933, the year that Hitler became chancellor of Germany; he attended (or rather, elected not to attend) classes at one of the first experimental schools in the United Kingdom; later he studied at an *atelier*-style art school which he was rumored to have burned down by failing to stub out his cigarette fully; he ran away from this establishment to become a sailor, and so on. Perhaps this interest also stems, in part, from Freud’s guarded sense of privacy—he routinely changed his phone number, and rarely gave it out even to old friends, to avoid harassment from the press⁶ and avid art historians.

At least part of this rabid interest in Freud and his everyday life comes from the subject matter of his works, which are overwhelmingly dedicated to the nude figure, both male and female. While it might seem unusual that the mere depiction of the nude could generate so much interest in the artist’s personal life, Freud’s insistence on working with models with whom he had a relationship (whether sexual, familial, or merely cordial) has sparked speculation and controversy among British museum goers and critics alike. This speculation derives largely from the fact that he turned down offers to paint sitters as prestigious as the Pope and Princess Diana,⁷ while he *did* choose to depict his own adult daughters in the nude.

⁶ John Richardson, *Sacred Monsters, Sacred Masters* (New York: Random House, 2001): 329.

⁷ “Freud Asked to Paint the Queen,” *Daily Mail*, February 23, 1999. This is not to say that he never painted the rich and famous—he did picture a number of well-known sitters, like Queen Elizabeth II of England, Kate Moss, and Jerry Hall.

In fact, at least in the United Kingdom, the interest in Freud's personal life greatly outpaces interest in his art itself. The media fuels this public fascination with his biography. Scanning the British press for articles about Freud, one finds journalists mythologizing Freud into a shady, reclusive character, liberally sprinkling articles with tantalizing gossip about incest (in the 1990s he won a libel suit against *The Daily Telegraph* for alleging that his daughter, Rose Boyt, mothered five of his children)⁸ and ties to the seedy underworld of London (especially after the author of an unauthorized biography of Freud's life disappeared for several months and then cancelled plans for the book's publication, claiming that he had received threats⁹ and, saying, "Wild horses would not now bring me to write a biography of any living person"¹⁰).

However, both the popular press and scholars generally neglect to provide close, sustained readings of Freud's paintings. This chapter will attempt to accomplish precisely that goal—offering a close observation of Freud's images of a particular, fat, sitter named Sue Tilley, by interpreting them through the lens of fat theory and Julia Kristeva's conception of abjection. At first glance, the abject¹¹ quality of Freud's "naked portraits," the awkwardness and vulnerability¹² of the nudes, seems to transcend the type of body portrayed (in essence, not privileging thin over fat or vice versa). The chapter will argue that despite this surface similarity, his works treat the fat body differently from the thin body, by denying it the sexual charge with which he imbues the thin body.

⁸ "Freud Damages," *Times* (London), October 8, 1997.

⁹ Jojo Moyes and Ross Wynne-Jones, "Rumors Fly as 'Frightened' Freud Biographer Vanishes," *Independent*, August 31, 1997.

¹⁰ Damian Whitworth, "Freud Lifts Veil on Private Life," *Times* (London), May 23, 1998.

¹¹ See next section for an elaboration on this concept.

¹² An aspect that did not escape Freud himself, who said, "Vulnerable! Of course a model—above all, a naked model—is going to feel vulnerable. The fact that a model would never find himself or herself in this particular situation were it not for the artist's behest makes for vulnerability. So does being scrutinized by me for weeks at a time..." Quoted in Richardson, *Sacred Monsters*, 332.

Moreover, Freud also associates the fat body with the objects around it in a way that both enforces its otherness and also restricts fat to its physicality and removes any hint of narrative or symbolic qualities.

However, this is not to say that Freud's fat nudes lack any sense of eroticism. His attention to, and obsession with, detailing the bulges, folds, and curves of the nude creates an eroticized surface. Nevertheless, the artist does not articulate this eroticization as fully as he does in his thin nudes, and he does not allow the fat female nude the same sense of sexual attention and desire that he focuses on the thin female nude. Instead, he exhibits an erotic fascination with the alien and the other.

Fat, Thin, Object—Theory and Context for Freud¹³

Lucian Freud's grotesquely fat nudes are a mix of cor-blimey fascination and ambitions to take on the old masters. Waldemar Januszczak.¹⁴

In our everyday lexicon, when we use the word “fat” or “thin” to describe someone, we assume that everyone knows what those terms signify. In practice, defining “fat” and “thin” is rather like defining “pornography”—a comprehensive definition is difficult, but in the words of Justice Potter Stewart, “...I know it when I see it.”¹⁵ This difficulty in defining what, on the surface, appears to be transparent reveals that our ideas about the human body, like those about gender, are socially constructed. To quote the art historian Lynda Nead:

¹³ The introduction to this dissertation addresses fat theory in more depth, but this section discusses its use more particularly in regards to Freud's model. Additionally, this chapter uses Kristeva's concept of abjection in a direct way.

¹⁴ Waldemar Januszczak, “Large as Life, and up There with Titian,” *Sunday Times* (London), June 30, 1996.

¹⁵ In 1964, in an attempt to explain what constituted “hard-core” pornography, or what is legally considered “obscene,” Justice Stewart famously said, “I shall not today attempt further to define [those] kinds of material...[b]ut I know it when I see it.”

The categories of ‘fat’ and ‘thin’ are not innate and do not have intrinsic meanings; rather, they are socially constituted, along with definitions of perfection and beauty. Social and cultural representations are central in forming these definitions and in giving meaning to the configurations of the body.¹⁶

The culturally-constructed nature of the terms “fat” and “thin” and the difficulty in pinning down a single meaning for them is an issue that haunts not only the field of fat theory, but also this dissertation. The dissertation cannot rely on the medical distinctions between “ideal” weights and “overweight” or “obese” when selecting which models to discuss as “fat” and which as “thin,” not only because it is impossible to determine weight or BMI from a representation, but also because these terms are, themselves, culturally constructed and lack objectivity and neutrality.¹⁷ In part, the chapter focuses on images of Sue Tilley because she is consistently referred to in the media as “fat,” which provides a cultural consensus on her status as a fat woman. However, given the ever-increasing slenderness of the women considered “thin” in Western culture, it is quite possible that some (or even many) readers may object to the inclusion of some of the women placed in this category. In answer to this concern, I suggest that one can distinguish the models that Freud believed were “fat” or “thin” based on differences in the way that he painted these models. This does not mean that thin sitters will have idealized bodies, by any means. Freud mercilessly turns his eye to the physicality of his sitters, depicting wrinkles, sagging flesh, and even fat on his thin sitters.

The definition of the term “abject” is less amorphous. The chapter constructs an interpretation of Freud’s images of Sue Tilley in terms of abjection, a concept derived

¹⁶ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992): 10. For more on the culturally constructed nature of the human body, see the introduction to this dissertation.

¹⁷ See the introduction to this dissertation for more on this topic.

from Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.¹⁸ According to Kristeva, the abject is the human reaction to a perceived or threatened breakdown in meaning caused by a loss of distinction between self and other, between subject and object. Kristeva uses the corpse as her primary example, because it traumatically confronts us with the materiality of our own body (although the corpse is not the only object that functions in this way—sewage, vomit, even shit can cause the same traumatic reaction). That is, the abject horrifies and traumatizes us because it removes the distinction between what is human and what is animal (that is, sex, violence, and murder), between culture and what predates culture.

The corpse, in particular, signifies the abject for Kristeva because it makes visible the breakdown of the separation between self and other. She believes such separation is necessary for the establishment of our identity and our entrance into what she calls “the symbolic order.”¹⁹ What confronts us, when viewing a corpse, is the trauma of witnessing our own eventual death made transparently real. In her words:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being... The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.²⁰

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

¹⁹ Kristeva takes this notion of the symbolic order from Freud, and more directly, Lacan. The symbolic order is the social world of linguistic communication, inter-subjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law. Once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, she is able to deal with others.

²⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

This quotation reveals the true significance of the vulnerability and abjection associated with Freud's nudes; he paints them as living corpses, which forces the viewer of his works to confront the reality of his eventual death by embodying it in the models.

Although this chapter will argue that Lucian Freud makes both his thin and fat models abject, this practice holds a different resonance for viewers when they look at the fat models. The fat models are doubly abjected, because fatness itself is always already abject; it threatens the boundaries between self and other. As Kathleen LeBesco argues (based on the work of Mary Douglas) Western culture links dirt and fat together (consider the trope of the "fat slob," for instance). Dirt (and fat) are dangerous because they threaten to pollute otherwise stable categories ("purity" or "thinness"). Only by rejecting dirt and fat, then, can individuals (and society) maintain order.²¹ Like the corpse (or vomit or excrement) fatness disgusts and horrifies us by threatening to break down the distinction between categories necessary to maintain Kristeva's "symbolic order." Critics will focus on this quality, Tilley's fat and the revulsion it causes them, in their discussion of the Tilley images, while they will see the corpse-like qualities of Freud's thin nudes.

Sex and Death in Freud's Thin Nudes

I paint what I see, not what you want me to see. Lucian Freud²²

In the thin nude, *Naked Portrait in a Red Chair* (1999), figure 1-1, a white woman sits in a reddish-brown leather chair. Freud centers the chair and model in the composition, and together, they occupy about three-quarters of the canvas. The scene

²¹ Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

²² Quoted in Gowing, *Freud*, 124.

lacks a detailed, clearly understandable setting. A wall (or perhaps a curtain) is visible behind the chair, as is a negative space to the left of the chair, which, although ambiguous, could be read as the floor rushing up at an awkward angle.

The figure tucks her left leg under her buttock and bends her right leg at the knee, drawing it into her body as though wary of spilling off the canvas. She leans her head against the back of the chair, and gazes off the left side of the picture. Her expression is unfocused, perhaps even a little dreamy. The awkwardness of the position makes her body seem fleshier, more animal. The pose is condensed, pulled in upon itself, and this posture creates some jarring disjunctions. The figure's left arm seems to disappear where it moves behind her leg. Her right arm, too, looks strange, as her right leg hides it up to the shoulder. Although her right forearm and hand rest on her belly, they appear unconnected to the rest of her body.

In this painting, as in his other works, Freud scrutinizes his sitter, maintaining a sense of detachment from her in the work. He said, “freshly felt emotion can't be used in art without a filter. It's like people thinking manure is just shit, so they shit in a field and they think the shit will feed the plant. In fact it half-kills it.”²³ He further stated, “[I] mustn't be indulgent to the subject-matter. I'm so conscious that that is a recipe for bad art.”²⁴ This denial of attachment, of sentimentality (after all, following his logic, freshly felt emotion would “kill” the work) clearly manifests itself in the way that every conventionally unappealing area of the woman's body shows, with nothing idealized. The woman's thick neck awkwardly transitions into her head, showing the jowls around her face. Freud foreshortens the figure so that her head also appears unnaturally small.

²³ Quoted in William Feaver, *Lucian Freud* (London: Tate Pub., 2002): 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

Her stomach bulges out in an unflattering way, and Freud draws the viewer's attention to that bulge by placing the model's hand over it, as though she wished to shield her imperfection from our eyes. Her thighs ripple and sag with excess flesh—and even the roots of her presumably dyed blonde hair show in a flurry of black brushstrokes.

Freud delineates the forms in the figure's body with broad strokes of the brush, bright highlights and dense, sooty shadows. He applies the paint so vigorously that even in reproduction one gets a sense of the heavy impasto and clearly visible brushstrokes. This buildup of paint, its insistence on being read as paint, contributes to the unsettling quality of the work; Freud creates a tension between the figure as nude and the figure as paint, a tension that cannot be resolved. But what is most disturbing about the materiality of the paint is the fact that, as Arthur C. Danto describes, "at times one has to make up one's mind whether [the paint] belongs to the surface of the painting or the skin of the subject as a kind of eczema."²⁵ Freud's palette further underscores this quality. The bloodless white and bruised black of the figure's flesh read like a *memento mori*. The mottled skin seems to remind the viewer that if this body is not already decaying, it will someday be nothing more than a corpse—and by extension, so too will his.²⁶ In his use of the abject, Freud's work demonstrates a certain affinity for the morbidity of artists like Ivan Albright and Stanley Spencer.

However, for all the body's abjectness and vulnerability, there is a sense of sexual awareness, a charge of eroticism at work. Part of this eroticism derives from the insistent

²⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Madonna of the Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 37.

²⁶ Throughout this chapter, the viewer of the works will be presumed to be male. There are a number of reasons for this supposition: it is less complicated to posit a male viewer grammatically, rather than switching back and forth between genders in the pronouns. More importantly, this choice was made in deference to both the gender of the artist and to the paintings themselves, which by the sexual eroticism of the nudes, (see following paragraph) as well as their adherence to the traditions of the Western female nude, seem to posit an heterosexual, male viewer.

repetition of the shape of the exposed, accessible, genital area. The pubic triangle is echoed in the figure's body, by the pink shadows of her sternum and the place above it where the neck meets the collarbone. It is repeated again in the triangular highlights behind the figure's head, where light reflects off the glossy surface of the leather chair, and in the V-shaped patterning of the surface behind the chair. Moreover, in addition to revealing her genitals, the figure fully displays her breasts.

The way that Freud positions the viewer in relation to the nude enhances the erotic charge of the image. The angle at which the chair recedes places the viewer standing, looking down on the woman from very nearby. Freud puts the viewer so close that it seems his thighs might brush against the nude's toes where they extend beyond the chair cushion. While the viewer hovers over the woman, she stares off the edge of the painting, offering no challenge to the gaze, but giving herself up as an object to be looked at. And while her pose may be awkward and unsettling, it does leave her vulnerable, exposed to the viewer.

In another thin nude, *Naked Portrait* (2004), fig. 1-2, a white woman lies across a white bed, her head propped up on a stack of pillows. She is in the same sort of ambiguous space as in the previous work. The entire room seems to be made of floorboards that rush vertiginously up to the top of the canvas, except for a fringed piece of fabric to the right of the picture that reads alternately as a curtain casting a shadow on the floor or a wrinkled rug covering a stain. Her position on the bed looks uncomfortable and precarious; she turns toward the viewer as if lying back fully would cause her to fall off the mattress.

The pose demonstrates jarring disjunctions similar to the ones found in *Naked Portrait in a Red Chair*. The half-turned sprawl amputates the figure's left arm, while her left leg attaches to her body at a bizarre angle. Moreover, the awkward foreshortening makes her legs look too long for her torso and her head too small for her body. The figure's head echoes her left leg in its attachment to the body; it seems to be in an entirely different plane than her shoulders. Freud also refuses to idealize her body. Once again, he exposes a fleshy ripple of fat on the foreshortened thigh of the sitter's bent left leg, and her stomach sags over her left hipbone in an undulation of skin.

Freud models the figure's body with a similar corpse-like aesthetic to the *Naked Portrait in a Red Chair*; blue shadows on the model's legs read as both veins and dark bruising. The darker areas of her skin, which contrast against the bright whiteness of his highlights, have a purple cast not unlike a rotting plum. Freud emphasizes the putridity of this hue through the contrast between the dark areas of flesh and the grey-white of the sheets against which the figure reclines. Additionally, everywhere that Freud illuminates a highlight, he leaves thick, crusted globs of paint that bring to mind sores, puss, and decay. He concentrates the majority of these markings on the sitter's face and neck, literally defacing her, as if some terrible virus is eating away at her skin. Her eyes, too, appear faded and sickly. It is just possible to make out the darkness of her pupils, but not the color of her irises, and this, combined with her wide open lids, conspires to give her the vacant stare of a corpse.

Once again, in addition to being read as sores or pus, the thick build-up of paint that Freud employs to describe the highlights on the model's body also insists on being read as paint. This creates a similar tension between reading the body as nude and the

body as paint; between the re-presentation of the human form and presentation of the material of the paint on canvas.

Again, as in *Naked Portrait in a Red Chair*, in *Naked Portrait* Freud eroticizes the body. Merely locating the nude body reclining on a bed generates a titillating frisson. If the viewer reads the element at the right of the canvas as a curtain, it heightens this frisson by suggesting an element of voyeurism—the curtain draws the viewer’s attention to the fact that what he sees is meant to be “curtained” off from everyday life, hidden and private. Moreover, the blankness of the woman’s gaze, and the way it turns away from the viewer, invites a lengthy perusal, without interruption or challenge.

The woman’s posture also provokes erotic speculation. She rests her left hand on her chest, but places it on her sternum rather than using it to conceal her breast. This half-hides, half-reveals her left breast, but leaves the nipple peeking out from under her forearm in a seemingly illicit view. Her hips, too, tilt invitingly toward the viewer, and her tucked up leg opens and exposes her genital region, which the viewer is positioned to look down on. The viewer stands farther back from this model than he did in the *Naked Portrait in a Red Chair*, but the model still invades his space—the edge of the canvas cuts off her right leg above the ankle, so that her leg would presumably project into the viewer’s space if the canvas were larger.

Big Sue in Freud's Words

[Sue Tilley] *would arrive panting at the top of the stairs, her bulk an exotic quality, a sort of aura.* William Feaver²⁷

Freud met Sue Tilley, who worked at the Islington Labour Exchange, through the best known of his fat models—the Australian-born performance artist Leigh Bowery, perhaps most famous today as the inspiration for the main character in the musical *Taboo*. In fact, the reason that Tilley stopped modeling for Freud was to write a biography about Bowery, entitled *The Life and Times of an Icon*.²⁸ She began modeling for Freud in the mid 1990s; he produced four paintings and also several works on paper depicting Tilley.

When Freud relates his impressions of Tilley, it is clear that he views her in a different light than from his other models. He said, after working with Tilley for a few months, “I have perhaps a predilection towards people of unusual or strange proportions, which I don't want to over-indulge.”²⁹ He also described the process of seeing Tilley in some detail. In his words, he was, “initially...very aware of all kinds of spectacular things to do with her size, like amazing craters and things one's never seen before, my eye was naturally drawn round to the sores and chafes made by weight and heat.”³⁰ He even compared his work with Tilley to a series of paintings of court dwarfs painted by Velazquez.³¹

²⁷ Feaver, *Lucian Freud* (2002), 45.

²⁸ Richardson, *Sacred Monsters*, 334-335.

²⁹ Feaver, *Lucian Freud* (2002), 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

Although elsewhere Freud has said that he is “not interested in cripples or freaks,”³² the language he uses to describe Tilley likens her to a circus freak. Comparing his paintings of her to Velazquez’s court dwarfs relegates them all to the status of sideshow attractions (midgets and the fat lady) and his description of Tilley as having “strange” proportions suggests an assumption that thin is the “natural” state of the human body, labeling her as “other.”

This denaturalization of the fat body continues in the rest of Freud’s description, as he uses adjectives like “spectacular,” and “amazing,” and in particular, calls her physiognomy “[something] one’s never seen before.” This language works both to make Tilley seem more “other,” and also to de-humanize her. In the description, Freud sounds as though he is discovering a heretofore unknown continent, rather than viewing an ordinary woman.

This theme of viewing Tilley as abnormal and freakish comes out in another interview, where Freud describes her as “in her way very feminine.”³³ This suggests that, because of her body size, Tilley is incapable of possessing traditional or conventional femininity. She must, rather, develop her *own way* of being feminine. In the same interview, the questioner asks Freud, “But then, with familiarity, didn’t you look at her more ordinarily?” Freud replies, “Isn’t it true when, for instance, you see in the street a dwarf that you don’t know, you are taken by the fact that the dwarf is a dwarf, but if you knew him, you’d notice that he’d be wearing a new tie...”³⁴ Again, Freud suggests that

³² Richardson, *Sacred Monsters*, 335.

³³ William Feaver, “Pin-up: Jerry Hall Painted by Lucian Freud. Who is Revealing More?” *Observer*, May 17, 1998.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Tilley's body is abnormal, something that has to be adjusted to, and exposes his underlying assumption that Tilley is freakish, as are little people, for that matter.

Big Sue in Freud's Works *or* Big Sue's Big Nudes

*I'm not the 'ideal woman,' I know I'm not. But who is? And he never made the skinny ones look any better. He picks out every single little detail. Sue Tilley*³⁵

This spectacular-ization of Tilley (making of her a spectacle, seeing her as something spectacular) also emerges in Freud's painted works, like his first image of Tilley, entitled *Evening in the Studio* (1993), fig. 1-3. This first painting is also the only work in which she appears with another model,³⁶ and the most complex composition of his Tilley paintings. A nude Tilley sprawls on the floor in the foreground of the image, her body tilted toward the viewer in an exceedingly uneasy pose (she pitches so steeply it appears as though her spine must hover above the floorboards), legs akimbo and head turned. A bed (occupied by a sleeping greyhound) and a chair (in which another woman sits, fully clothed and covered by a patterned blanket, reading) are located behind Tilley.

Although the figure occupies a much more legible setting than the ones that the thin nudes occupy—this is obviously a room, with walls, a window, wooden floors, and furniture (albeit an oddly tip-tilted floor with furniture that seems to slide down that tilt)—Tilley poses every bit as gracelessly as the other models. Besides the odd balancing of her weight on her hip, rather than her spine, Tilley seems to be missing a

³⁵ Quoted in Francesca, "Big Girls in Art: Sue Tilley," *Manolo for the Big Girl* (blog). May 20, 2008, <http://manolobig.com/2008/05/20/big-girls-in-art-sue-tilley/>

³⁶ In this case, the second model is Leigh Bowery's seamstress and wife, who also appeared in a number of Freud's paintings, most famously with Bowery in a work entitled *And the Bridegroom* (1993). Her name is Nicola Bateman. For a complete listing of the works in which she appears as well as a discussion of her role in Freud's paintings, see: William Feaver, *Lucian Freud* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007).

few body parts. Her left arm, which rests on her belly, appears strangely disproportionate: it looks bizarrely shrunken next to her ballooning stomach, out of which it seemingly grows, because the pose hides her shoulder. Additionally, the weight of her breasts draws them toward her neck, obscuring it totally and making her head look like it emerges directly from her cleavage.

Tilley's body is as unidealized here as those of either of Freud's thin sitters. Her thighs and stomach form irregular lumps, and her swollen belly falls oddly asymmetrically, especially the portion around her belly button, which seems to be melting off her body. The expected bruise-like shadowing and build-up of paint enhances the unflattering elements of the painting. In Tilley's case, the paint is largely built up beneath her breasts, in what appear to be a series of rotted sores or deep tissue bruises; below her belly button in some type of burn or rash; and on her inner thighs, which sport similarly ambiguous but unwholesome markings. Altogether, Tilley's body reads as diseased and decomposing, an effect enhanced by the previously mentioned position of her stomach, which one may imagine to be rotting off her bones.

The juxtaposition of Tilley against the fully-clothed thin model and the relaxed body of the sleeping greyhound only exacerbates her likeness to a corpse. The fact that both of the other figures occupy furniture draws attention to the oddity of Tilley's lolling sprawl on the floor (the location where we would expect to find a corpse) just as the clothing and blanket of the seated woman draw attention to Tilley's nudity. Moreover, the animation of the seated figure—her upright pose, her active engagement in reading—contrasts with Tilley's inactivity, as the relaxed posture of the sleeping dog contrasts with her unnatural rigidity.

However, Tilley's stance is not entirely corpse-like. The tension in her body (see particularly the tightened muscles of her left leg) makes her pose awkward, but very life-like. Much of the abject quality and the charge of disgust or horror in this image come from Tilley's aura of disease and dirt, the threat of pollution and contagion. In this case, the dark shading implies dirt as much as it evokes contusions, and the red spots could as easily be infected, festering pustules as rot. Here again, Tilley's placement on the floor and her nudity contribute to her abjection: hair, dust, grime, crumbs, etc. collect on the ground.³⁷

Evening in the Studio, unlike Freud's other pictures of Tilley, possesses an eroticism comparable to that found in his thin nudes. The viewer stands over Tilley, looking down on her exposed flesh, particularly her pubic triangle, which Tilley's spread-legged posture leaves visible and open. Her long, falling hair also stands as a conventional sign of feminine eroticism. However, the rest of the composition challenges this traditional eroticism. The strangeness of the additional seated figure and the insertion of the sleeping dog establish a strained, unsettled atmosphere which undermines the voyeuristic potential of the image, unlike the compositions of the previously discussed thin nudes.

However, Freud crafts an additional eroticism of flesh in this image—a sensual fascination with the very size of Tilley's body. He plays with the roundness of Tilley's form, making repeated circular forms throughout her figure: he emphasizes the circle of her knee and repeats it in the thigh of her upraised leg; he marks her lower leg with a

³⁷ This neatly meshes with contemporary understandings of fat (the actual substance) as disgusting. For more on the revulsion engendered by fat and its tactile qualities, see Christopher Forth, "Materializing Fat, Historicizing Disgust" (unpublished paper provided for a lecture at the Hall Center for the Humanities, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, February 28, 2011).

broad circle across the thigh and calf; he fashions a series of widening circular forms in her belly, beginning with the oblong oval of her belly-button; and he inserts a myriad of other small circles in her body, like her nipples, the round of her heel, her head, and so forth. Moreover, Freud's absorption with Tilley's size leads him to exaggerate it through his compositional choices. He juxtaposes her against an exceptionally thin and frail model, and an exceptionally thin and frail breed of dog. He further magnifies this effect by placing Tilley in the foreground, making her seem even larger. The minimalist furniture enhances this effect, especially the flat, narrow bed frame, which seems too fragile to support Tilley's bulk.

The second of Freud's series of images of Tilley is entitled *Benefits Supervisor Resting* (1994), fig. 1-4. In it, Tilley reclines on a patterned sofa, turned so that one arm lies along the back while the other rests on the sofa's arm. Her head leans back against a corner of the couch, facing away from the viewer, providing a lost-profile view of her features. More space surrounds Tilley than the model in *Naked Portrait in a Red Chair*, as she and the sofa take up only about two-thirds of the canvas, but that space is equally ambiguous. This time the floor is visible, but the walls behind the sofa are darkly painted, murky, and unclear.

Like the woman in *Naked Portrait*, Tilley sits in an exposed, ungainly pose. Her body lists toward the viewer, with her left leg jutting off the sofa's edge. Combined with the way her flesh sags toward the floor, she appears to be in imminent danger of sliding off the sofa. The pose causes bizarre disjunctions in Tilley's body, as well. The toes of her left foot almost melt into the flesh of her right foot, and the elbow of her right arm disappears. Freud also turns his detached eye to the flaws of Tilley's body in his

customary manner, showing the weighty folds and sags of her flesh. He depicts her neck vanishing smoothly into her face, as though she had no jaw line, and emphasizes the enlarged “crater” that is her belly button.

The brushstrokes that make up Tilley’s body are less visible than in the previously discussed work, but once again Freud’s thick impasto can be discerned even in reproduction. If the tension caused by the visible brushstrokes is lessened, the effect of the impasto is magnified here. The heavy granulation of the paint and the ridges caused by the palette knife emphasize the materiality of the medium, again creating tension between the paint as flesh and the paint as paint.

Freud uses less contrast between dark and shadow in *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, as Tilley is all-over more white and pink than the women in the *Naked Portraits*. However, several areas of her body—especially her feet and hands—echo the bruise-like mottling of the *Naked Portraits* and impart that same abject sensibility of rotting flesh. The sole of Tilley’s right foot, in particular, looks less shadowed and dirty and more putrefied or mangled. This effect is enhanced by the aforementioned gritty paint texture, which provides the illusion that her skin is in the process of chaffing off her body.

However, for all the similarities between this portrait of Tilley and Freud’s paintings of thin women, he treats Tilley very differently. He denies her body the possibility of carrying the erotic weight found in both of the *Naked Portraits*. Although here, too, Tilley’s legs spread out as if to frame her genitals, Freud rotates her body to the side, so that her billowing stomach and jutting knee obscure them. Freud positions Tilley farther away from the surface of the picture plane than he does his thin nudes, creating a less intimate relationship between Tilley and the viewer in this work. The viewer stands

several paces away from Tilley, far enough to see the floor beneath the sofa, and so that there is no danger of (imaginary) contact between her protruding knee and his legs.

As in the thin nudes, the viewer looks down on the sleeping figure, and Tilley's averted face invites voyeurism—she does not confront or challenge the viewer's gaze, which allows her body to be examined like an object. However, the erotic charge from *Naked Portrait*, enabled by the open and vulnerable posture of the sitter and the repeated genital forms, fails to materialize here. Although Tilley's knees fall apart, the way that her feet meet and her flesh blocks her genitals from view creates a sense of closure, a denial of visual penetration. Without the focus on the genitals, the emphasis in the painting shifts to Tilley's pale, mushroom-like stomach and drooping breasts.

In this image, Freud visually associates Tilley with the inanimate objects around her rather than accentuating her sensuality or contrasting her solidity with their frailness. Her skin nearly matches the tone of the couch on which she sits; her right arm echoes the horizontal of the door or window behind it; and the plant-like, organic decoration of the couch rhymes with Tilley's posture where it is near her body. For instance, beside her right leg, the green lines follow its arch, and below her dangling left hand, a patch of green mimics her hanging fingers, in reverse. All of this suggests that, like the room around her, Tilley is a landscape to be surveyed, rather than a woman to be desired. Moreover, visually equating Tilley to the sofa implies that she, too, is "cushioned," heavy, and immobile.

In another portrait of Tilley, resting on the same couch, titled *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995), fig. 1-5, Freud presents her body in the same abject, objectified manner. In this work, he places the couch nearly in the center of the canvas. Once again, an

ambiguous curtain/wall hovers behind the couch, and the same wooden floor rushes up to meet it (although here the floor angles less steeply upward—it almost looks as if one could walk on the floor in this painting). Tilley reclines along the couch and faces the viewer; she tucks up her feet and cradles her breast with the arm underneath her body, while the other rests across the back of the sofa.

Even though the room feels more stable in this composition than in *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, Tilley's posture does not. Tilley's knee and belly project beyond the edge of the sofa cushion, engendering a feeling that at any moment she might topple off onto the floor. The hand that cradles her breast and the one that grips the sofa back heighten this effect, creating the impression that she tries vainly to restrain her body within the boundaries of the couch. The pose demonstrates the now-familiar oddities and disjunctions that appear in Freud's *Naked Portraits*. These disjunctions can be seen in the way that the hand holding her breast appears out of nowhere, seemingly severed from the rest of her body, the way that the awkward angle of her neck and face suggests that her vertebrae have been snapped, and the compression of her face against the divan arm that wrinkles her countenance into a sour expression.

Freud creates the same effect of abraded and mottled, abject, corpse-like flesh with his treatment of color as he did in *Benefits Supervisor Resting*. Here there are two areas that seem particularly abject—the veins in Tilley's breasts, which appear on the surface of her skin, rather than behind it, and look like mold or scrapes, and the emphatic redness of her right shoulder, which, combined with the heavy impasto of the image, produce the texture and color raw hamburger.

Once again, Freud refuses Tilley's body any suggestion of eroticism, and instead treats it as an inanimate object. Although the viewer again stands above Tilley, he is set away from her, and her closed-off posture denies any view of her genitals. Her form echoes the swells and undulations of the curtain behind her, which bows out just as her pendulous stomach does. Freud also visually equates Tilley with the sofa, which echoes the rounded upthrust of her hip in its back, and also in its lumpy, overstuffed arms. As in *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, Tilley takes on the same insensate, unwieldy, cumbrous qualities as the divan.

This visual emphasis on, and repetition of, the swells and undulations of Tilley's flesh does have the potential for a different kind of eroticism, however. The minute detailing of Tilley's physiognomy, the sensuous roundedness of her body and the repeated curves in the couch upon which she rests, do possess a certain sensuality. However, the image lacks the sexual appeal, the imagined penetration, found in the thin nudes described earlier.

Big Sue's Animal Appeal

*Work on social stigma reports that stigmatized individuals are typically depicted as a composite of three overwhelming characteristics: animalistic, hypersexual, and overvisible...it takes little imagination to conjure up "pig" or "cow" as a popular term of insult for fat people, and their reputed sexual desperation is the stuff of legend... Kathleen LeBesco*³⁸

Another of Freud's paintings of Sue Tilley, entitled *Sleeping by the Lion Carpet* (1996) fig. 1-6, shows her seated in a brown chair. She and the chair take up only about half of the composition. Again, Freud locates Tilley in an ambiguous setting. The wooden floor beneath her chair slides diagonally up to meet the titular carpet behind her

³⁸ LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 86-87.

head in a strange, perspective-defying maneuver. On the right side of the chair, some sort of loose fabric cascades over the arm and to the floor.

Tilley leans her head on her right arm, which rests on the chair. Her right leg is straight while the left leg bends, foot firmly planted. The pose contains the sort of awkward ambiguities discussed earlier. For instance, Tilley's right arm looks as though it is attached to her breast, the boundaries between them smudged and obscured. The stance itself, combined with the strange perspective Freud uses, makes it seem as though Tilley is suspended somewhere between sitting and standing, with the chair somehow attached to her body. Once more, we find the familiar tension between interpreting the paint as Tilley's body, seeing it as paint, and imagining it as bruised and cadaver-like shadows.

Again, the strange perspective places the viewer in the position of hovering over Tilley's inert form, but here he stands at a greater distance from her than he did in *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*. And this time, the up-tilted floor makes the viewer's position as unstable as the sitter's, as if he might topple forward onto her lap. The pose denies a view of Tilley's genitals, and is more closed off than either of the previously discussed works. In fact, the folds of her belly seem to replace her genitals. The drooping folds form a triangle that sinks toward her leg and is infused with a rosy blush tint. This fits with Freud's emphasis on the curving swirls of Tilley's flesh in his other paintings of her, and displaces any sexual interest in Tilley's body into an erotics of flesh. Three darker comma-shaped brushstrokes beneath Tilley's right breast emphasize the ballooning shape of her stomach and echo the outlines of her pendulous breasts. Freud reiterates these comma-like swells in Tilley's legs—in her right calf and left knee, and in

the curve of her right flank and shoulder. Freud further exaggerates Tilley's roundness by contrasting her to the rest of her surroundings; the flatness and hardness of the wooden floor beneath her only makes her seem more bulbous.

As in Freud's other paintings, he visually associates Tilley's body with the room around her, particularly with the titular lion carpet that fills one full quarter of the canvas. Its vibrant blue color draws the viewer's attention, as does the busy pattern evoked by Freud's brushwork. The carpet shows a lioness and a lion crouching in a natural setting that Freud leaves largely unarticulated. He places the top of the brown chair, and Tilley's sleeping head, inside the boundary of the carpet. Moreover, the lions form a line above her head, both echoing her form and extending it upward. This visually identifies Tilley with the scene depicted on the carpet, associating her with the animal world her in multiple ways.

Firstly, because Tilley's form echoes that of the lions, she becomes associated with the natural, and the animal. As Kathleen LeBesco points out, fatness is frequently associated with animal-like qualities. The visual link between Tilley and the lions can call to mind these associations for the viewer, could suggest that Tilley can no more control her appetites (be they alimentary or sexual) than can the lions above her.³⁹ Secondly, the association with the lion carpet exoticizes her. The location of the lions in a savannah-like environment, so different from the cooler clime of the United Kingdom, gives them an exotic, foreign appeal. Their visual rhyme with Tilley can be seen to imply that Tilley is just as unusual and alien as the animals above her head. The association between Tilley and the carpet does, however, suggest some kind of interior, dreaming, life for her.

³⁹ For more on the associations between fat women, food, and sex, see Chapter Four of this dissertation.

Press and Critical Response to Freud's Nudes

No one seems to understand it was all about art. I'd never taken my clothes off before I sat for Lucian and I don't intend to again—well, unless it's for a really fantastic artist, and I can't think of one off-hand. Sue Tilley⁴⁰

Response to Freud's works in the popular press is always varied. For instance, a small, post-card size painting of the pregnant Jerry Hall (ex-model and then wife to Mick Jagger) entitled *Eight Months Gone* (1998) is described as everything from “vulgar and vulnerable...[Hall is] acting a ‘whore’ in the studio...”⁴¹ to “observant...[but] affectionate.”⁴² However, the paintings of Sue Tilley received surprisingly little attention in the media at the time of their completion; there are far more stories about *Eight Months Gone*, or an incident in which one of Freud's paintings was accidentally destroyed by the staff at Sotheby's. This has changed since the painting *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* sold at auction in 2008 for over twenty-one million pounds (thirty-three million dollars) and made Freud the most expensive living artist.⁴³ Many of the mentions of Tilley before this benchmark was reached are fleeting, and made in connection with Freud's paintings of Leigh Bowery, as if she were merely Bowery's female counterpart (one article even calls her “the alternative Leigh Bowery”⁴⁴). Even these works, however, typically characterize Tilley as “outsized”⁴⁵ or “enormously fat,”⁴⁶ and nearly all of them call her “Big Sue” or “Big Sue Tilley.”⁴⁷ This insistence on calling Tilley by her first name (and labeling her as “Big”) objectifies her, insists on her corporeality as her defining feature and denies her a personality outside of her physicality.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Caroline Davies, “Don't Ask Me to Strip,” *Observer*, May 18, 2008.

⁴¹ Joan Burnie, “Jerry's Freudian Slip-up,” *Scottish Daily Record*, June 4, 1998.

⁴² Tim Hilton, “Grand Master Flesh,” *The Independent*, May 31, 1998, 18.

⁴³ “21.6m for Freud Nude,” *Daily Mail*, May 15, 2008.

⁴⁴ “Freud's Latest, Barely Finished,” *Observer*, November 14, 1993.

⁴⁵ Mark Inglefield, “Freud Ego,” *Times* (London), April 10, 2000.

⁴⁶ Bryan Appyard, “The World Made Flesh,” *Sunday Times* (London), May 24, 1998.

⁴⁷ Richard Ingleby, “Freudian Economics,” *Independent*, June 6, 1998.

However, reading what *is* written about these paintings of Tilley in the press supports the idea that Freud's renderings of her never move beyond her physicality. The critics and reviewers read nothing in the works past an interest in Tilley's size. Even in the longer articles that discuss the paintings of Tilley, it is clear that the authors see her as grotesque and abnormal. The critic Waldemar Januszczak offers the most extended discussion of any of the paintings of Tilley (in this case, *Sleeping by the Lion Carpet*) but he characterizes her as undesirable, freakish, and other. In the article, "Large as Life, and up there with Titian," he writes:

Lucian Freud's grotesquely fat nudes are a mix of cor-blimey fascination and ambitions to take on the old masters...Big Sue is not the kind of woman who generally takes her clothes off in public...Sue is the first of [Freud's models] to be extremely fat...Women of Sue's size are much rarer in art. After all, they are neither reliably sexy models nor handily versatile symbols. As objects of desire they are an exceptional taste. So, if you are not actually having a relationship with one of them, why paint them?...she appears in two etchings and a king-sized slumber-painting that dominates the other nudes in the selection through sheer bulk. Freud was always an admirer of the unusual; has he now become a fan of the freakish?⁴⁸

The thrust of Januszczak's questions is telling. He evinces no interest in the *way* that Freud paints Tilley, or how these paintings differ from other works by Freud; he is only interested in *why* Freud would bother to paint someone of Tilley's size.

Januszczak asserts that Tilley (who never gets a last name in the article—she is always "Sue" or "Big Sue," although he respectfully refers to Leigh Bowery by full or last name only in later sections of the article) is "not the kind of woman who generally takes her clothes off in public..." and then explains that this is because she is "extremely fat" and not an object of desire. Her body, in addition to being "freakish" and undesirable is also not as "versatile" as a regular nude—where a thin nude can hold a

⁴⁸ Januszczak, "Large as Life."

variety of meanings, Tilley's body is mired in its physicality. The immanence of her fatness restricts her ability to act as a symbol—she, unlike a thin model, can never transcend her body and enter the realm of the symbolic. Januszcak's fascination with Tilley's size even spills over into his description of the canvas. Rather than saying that the canvas is large or giving its scale/dimensions, he calls it "king-size" and conflates it and Tilley, confusingly saying that the work "dominates other nudes in the selection through sheer bulk." Tilley's bulk and the painting's bulk are the same for Januszcak. There is no separation between the "sheer bulk" of her flesh and the "sheer bulk" of the "king-size" canvas.

In the end, the only motivation that Januszcak can imagine to explain why Freud might "become a fan of the freakish" is Freud's intention to assert his genius. Januszcak cannot fathom the idea of painting Tilley merely as a nude model, like any other nude model. Her physicality is so foreign to him that, for Januszcak, tackling Tilley as subject matter is an heroic act. In this case, he attributes Freud's interest in Tilley to the artist's epic journey toward becoming the "finest living painter" and his "battling" with "Titian,"⁴⁹ presumably for the title of greatest artist of all time.

Other authors, like the art historian William Feaver, give very similar readings of these paintings of Tilley. Feaver writes:

Nobody's victim and nobody's fool, Big Sue proved a vivid resource; her body, in *Benefits Supervisor Resting* 1994, yields nothing in its baroque loops and contortions...*Sleeping by the Lion Carpet* transforms her body mass into resplendent monumentality, the folds and curves shining against the fuzzy half-light of the silken safari scene hung behind the chair. Big Sue could dream of being a Diana, or a Callisto, but no mythology is needed to sustain her, no glorifying allusion.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Januszcak, "Large as Life."

⁵⁰ Feaver, *Lucian Freud* (2002), 45.

Here again, we have the reduction of Tilley to an object by labeling her as “Big Sue,” a labeling done once again by an author who writes of Leigh Bowery as “Bowery.” Moreover, the insistence on Tilley as a purely corporeal being continues throughout the discussion. She is “resplendent monumentality,” her most “vivid resource” is her body, and although she “could dream” of being a mythological goddess, the allusion falls flat in juxtaposition to her sheer mass. Perhaps most telling is the way Feaver characterizes her body. It “yields nothing,” presumably unlike the bodies of Freud’s other models. It merely exists. For Feaver, as for Januszczak, Tilley cannot go beyond her body, to yield the inner workings of her mind or anything else.

That the critics understand Freud’s paintings of Sue Tilley differently from his other nudes is borne out in their writings. In Freud’s depictions of thin nudes, critics see the shocking and abject in Freud’s manner of painting. In other words, they see beyond the model’s mere bodies. In a review of Freud, the critic James Hall begins with a description of an unnamed painting, writing:

We ought to be at the scene of a crime. A sex crime. A drugs crime. Some kind of violent crime. Why else would two young women be laid out cold like this? They are stretched stark naked on a narrow, cast-iron bed...both look more comatose than conscious...for sure, the prostrate arm hints at heroin and hypodermics.⁵¹

Certainly, here, the critic has identified the abject quality of the painting in a way that Januszczak and Feaver were unable to do with Tilley. He sees the models as bodies, victims of a crime. He clearly also notes the bruised quality of Freud’s flesh, when he looks for tracks from a hypodermic needle on the outstretched arm. In a crucial difference from readings of Tilley in Freud’s paintings, Hall constructs a narrative around the image. This time, the model’s bodies are not trapped by their flesh; they transcend their

⁵¹ James Hall, “Horror of the Hollow,” *Guardian*, September 13, 1993.

shape. Hall is able to imagine a role for the nudes beyond just “fat nude.” Moreover, Hall also associates sexuality with the figures, claiming them as victims of not just any crime, but a *sex* crime, which is his first hypothesis in the story he invents for the figures.

James Hall is not the only critic to see both the abject and sexual elements in Freud’s work. Although he does not articulate them as such, Tom Lubbock also identifies both these qualities in Freud’s painting. Writing about Freud’s nudes as a whole (rather than any one individual work), he describes them as, “bruised, braised, lightly flayed...” and says, “his sitters do often look done over or ravished.”⁵² Clearly, he sees beyond the subject matter to the abject and sexual manner in which the sitters are portrayed, something that does not happen in the articles focusing on Tilley. In another article, discussing a work entitled *Portrait on a Red Sofa*, Lubbock writes about the sexual potential of Freud’s nudes even more explicitly, declaring, “if you look for an everyday life reading of this pose, it can only be a sex-position, though whether auto-erotic or with an off-stage partner isn’t clear.”⁵³ Even Januszcak sees sexual potential in Freud’s other works—he writes, “[Lucian Freud] is a painter who paints dirty in the way that some people talk dirty. Most of his art is filled with the promise of impolite sex. Parks have flashers, art has Freud.”⁵⁴

Arthur C. Danto also clearly articulates the abjectness and sexuality of Freud’s work in an essay in his book, *The Madonna of the Future*. He argues that Freud is the first painter (after Courbet) to show the human body as naked, rather than nude. He writes: “nakedness is the natural metaphor for vulnerability, defenselessness, helplessness. The naked body cries out for cover not so much against cold and rain but

⁵² Tom Lubbock, “On the Couch in Freud’s Truth Room,” *Independent*, February 9, 1992.

⁵³ Tom Lubbock, “It’s Life, But Not as We Know It,” *Independent*, June 9, 1998.

⁵⁴ Waldemar Januszcak, “The Way That’s All Flesh,” *Sunday Times* (London), September 12, 1993.

against the eyes of the clothed. It is the ultimate humiliation to be stripped...”⁵⁵ Danto goes beyond this, and truly gets at the abject quality of the models when he describes his own experience of viewing Freud’s pictures: “I felt the price...of going naked for the artist was a form of victimization. I felt, in fact, a kind of perversity in the canvases that bothered me...”⁵⁶ Danto’s view of the models as vulnerable, helpless, and perversely victimized is an apt description for the kind of abjection found in Freud’s works.

Moreover, Danto also acknowledges the sexual overtones of the works here, not only where he implies it through his use of the term “perversity,” but he also writes openly about it in other places. He says:

...I am aware that under the auspices of nudism, families insist on the wholesomeness of playing together in the buff. But once again, Lucien [sic] Freud is insisting on nakedness, and that strikes me as a heavy psychological load to impose, even in modern times, when the way in which the sons avert their eyes from their father’s nakedness in the great painting *The Drunkenness of Noah*, attributed to Giovanni Bellini, still speaks to us.⁵⁷

The psychological load which forces sons to turn their eyes away from their fathers’ nudity is the burden of sexuality, an uncomfortable and even “perverse” sexuality. That Danto finds this in Freud’s images is demonstrated by his choice of analogy and his verbal juxtaposition of Freud’s paintings against a kind of “wholesome” nudity, even though, later in the essay, he tries to backpedal from reading anything sexual into Freud’s works.

⁵⁵ Danto, *Madonna of the Future*, 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

Big Sue's Big Price

They put [Evening in the Studio] up for the last week of the exhibition. I went in there one day and there was a man giving a talk in front of the picture, saying, look at this revolting woman, she's so fat and disgusting, there's obviously something wrong with her skin. I just started laughing. The man stopped and asked if there was anything wrong. I said: 'That's me you're talking about,' and he just looked like he wanted to die. After that I didn't really mind what people said. Sue Tilley⁵⁸

However much Tilley has been ignored in the past, the critics have recently begun to sit up and take notice of Freud's paintings of her, or at least one particular painting, since May 2008, when *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* sold for over \$33 million at auction, displacing Jeff Koons' *Hanging Heart* to make Freud the highest-priced living (at that time) artist. And it is not just the painting itself which is the focus of media attention—Tilley herself has become a popular interview subject. The media perception of the model echoes closely the tone of the previously discussed articles about the Tilley paintings.

For example, in an interview with Stephanie Theobald, Tilley asserts her belief that Freud chose her as a model because of her "ordinariness."⁵⁹ Yet from the very title of the piece—"How Big Sue became art's biggest muse"—Theobald asserts the opposite: that Tilley's size makes her strange and unusual. Within the first two sentences of the article, Theobald reiterates this theme, calling Tilley "twenty-stone" and "bulky."⁶⁰ She also reiterates Walter Januszczak's surprise that Freud would want to paint Tilley at all, saying "she seems an unlikely choice of muse to one of Britain's greatest living artists."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Quoted in Francesca, "Big Girls in Art."

⁵⁹ Stephanie Theobald, "How Big Sue Became Art's Biggest Muse," *Guardian*, June 23, 2002.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

This focus on Tilley's size underlies other interviews with her. In fact, one interviewer misspoke her nickname, addressing her as "Fat Sue" on live television.⁶² The articles also continue Theobald's emphasis on Tilley's size, as in Caroline Mallan's piece, "Weighing in with Big Sue." Mallan cannot seem to escape from her fascination with Tilley's size in the article, which contains lines like, "Tilley... is about as ample as a woman can be," "she needs her girth to accommodate her personality," and "[she] does not seem to have a precious, 'arty' bone in her 300-plus-pound body."⁶³

In fact, these articles seem even less able to move beyond Tilley's size than those published before the break-through sale occurred. Now there is no hint of interest in the meaning of the picture, no sense of a narrative being constructed in the work other than a sort of freak-show fascination with an abnormally sized woman. At a certain point, the articles become so repetitive that endless and nearly indistinguishable quotes outlining this theme could be included here. One article reads, "at 20 stone she seemed an unlikely choice of muse for an artist,"⁶⁴ while another describes Tilley as "the grotesquely fat woman who posed naked,"⁶⁵ and another calls the image "a life-sized painting of a rotund Job Centre manager."⁶⁶ Many articles focus on a particularly self-effacing quote by Tilley, as in the following examples: "when the plump, naked model for one of Lucian Freud's paintings remarked that the artist 'got value for his money,' because he 'got a lot of flesh,'..."⁶⁷ "[Tilley] has previously speculated that about why she may have been

⁶² Elisa Roche, "Katie Apology over 'Fat Sue'," *Express*, May 15, 2008.

⁶³ Caroline Mallan, "Weighing in with Big Sue," *Toronto Star*, June 23, 2008.

⁶⁴ Dayla Alberge, "Freud's Naked Civil Servant to Smash Auction Record for Living Artist," *Times* (London), April 12, 2008.

⁶⁵ Carole Malone, "Slim... on Humour," *News of the World*, May 18, 2008.

⁶⁶ "21.6m for Freud Nude."

⁶⁷ Suzy Jagger, "Big Sue Worth Weight in Gold," *Australian*, May 15, 2008.

selected by Freud as a model, saying ‘I think he probably picked me because he got value for money. He got a lot of flesh.’⁶⁸

There is, however, one positive aspect to these articles. Because of their focus on Tilley as the subject matter, rather than Freud as the artist, they do include more humanizing details about Tilley’s life. They often mention her association with Bowery, the inclusion of a character based on Tilley in Boy George’s musical, *Taboo* (called, incidentally, Big Sue) and her biography of Bowery, soon to be made into a film.⁶⁹ In this case, Freud’s notorious avoidance of the press has led to a positive consequence; the potential for the press to humanize Tilley. And, in fact, the press gives the occasional hint that Freud’s paintings of Tilley might be read in a fat positive way, as in an article that describes her as “abundantly, gloriously fleshy,” and goes on to say, “*Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* is a mighty thing, in every possible sense.”⁷⁰

It is important to close this discussion of the reception of Freud’s images of Sue Tilley by noting that the lack of sexualization in these paintings is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, Tilley’s resistance to sexual objectification can be interpreted as a revolutionary position for a female nude. Moreover, the issue of sexual attractiveness and the fat body has become one of the central debates in fat theory and one that many fat women feel conflicted about. It is easy to sympathize with the feelings of shame and low self-worth engendered in fat women by the failure to achieve society’s primary demand of women (to be sexually desirable), while at the same time, the fat body’s inherent

⁶⁸ Arifa Akbar, “Freud’s ‘Big Sue’ Expected to Fetch £18 Million at Auction,” *Independent*, April 12, 2008. See also: Anita Singh, “Freud’s Job Centre Muse Set to Fetch Pounds 18m,” *Daily Telegraph*, April 12, 2008; Tim Cornwell, “Freud and the Big Picture,” *Scotsman*, May 15, 2008; and others.

⁶⁹ See, for example: Davies, *Don’t Ask Me*; Damien, “Sue Tilley,” *London Kicks* (blog), last accessed May 13, 2008, http://www.londonkicks.com/go/art/Sue_Tilley

⁷⁰ Melissa Kent, “‘Big Sue’ Set to Fetch Big Bucks and Top Record,” *Sunday Age*, April 13, 2008.

inability to meet that demand provides the opportunity to underscore that body's cultural construction and larger implications.⁷¹ However, this chapter argues that, although he does so in a different way than he does with his female nudes, Freud still objectifies Tilley; in this case, by associating her with literal inanimate objects like sofas and carpets, so that even though Tilley is not sexualized, she is still not accorded subjectivity. Additionally, Freud's failure to imagine the possibility that Tilley might be sexually attractive fits in with larger cultural discourses about the fat female body at play in the UK in the late 1990s.

Fat Context

I am fat, grossly fat. Each night when I go to bed I hope I shall die in the night...I seem to have been written off entirely and feel of no account whatsoever...Most people I meet are contemptuous and imagine I indulge in an orgy of food. Far from it. Life is bleak and there seems no escape...How I envy thin people, they look pleasant and have lots of energy. Letter from a 75-year-old British woman to author Shelley Bovey⁷²

Lucian Freud's paintings, with their mixture of fascination and repulsion toward Sue Tilley's body, express and elaborate on larger cultural attitudes toward the fat body in the UK. Freud's eroticization of Tilley's flesh, his emphasis on her roundness, his association of her with overstuffed, inanimate objects and animals, has its counterpart in popular culture. Columnist Lynda Lee-Potter, writing at essentially the same moment that Freud painted Tilley, expressed some of the latent hostility harbored by the British toward the fat body in a series of columns sparked, innocuously enough, by an incident on a television program. In the series, a character played by actress Judi Dench was abandoned by her husband. Lee-Potter claimed that this was justified because of Dench's

⁷¹ For a perceptive discussion of this topic, see Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

⁷² Shelley Bovey, *The Forbidden Body: Why Being Fat Is Not a Sin* (London: Harper Collins, 1994): 2.

weight—an attitude which parallels Freud’s denial of any sexuality in his images of Tilley. Like Lee-Potter, he seems unable to imagine that anyone could find a fat woman sexually attractive. Lee-Potter’s attitude prompted outrage from some of her readers, which she belittled:

Letters from outraged fatties have poured in...The main message is that the overweight are constantly upset at being pressured by the media. But since there are so many portly bodies around, I can only suggest that they’re not pressured enough. However, I shall bravely continue to do my worst.⁷³

But it was Lee-Potter’s response to the possibility that the American anti-dieting organization, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), might spread to the UK that really revealed underlying cultural assumptions about the fat body. NAAFA executive member Sally Smith characterized the message of the organization as “Women[’s] size is not their fault.” Lee-Potter mocked this assertion, saying, “I don’t know whose fault it is then, since it’s the fatties who control their intake of doughnuts, éclairs, Mars Bars, hamburgers, and suet dumplings.” She also implied that NAAFA members cannot enjoy the beach, “running through the surf in a swimsuit if [they are] so hefty [they] look as though [they] could kick-start a Concorde.”⁷⁴ Again, Lee-Potter’s statement matches some of the elements in Freud’s paintings: the association of the fat body with inanimate objects, the emphasis on its large size.

What is important about the articles discussed above is not so much a single journalist’s discussion of fatness, but the underlying cultural attitudes that her discussion reveals. The operative assumptions of Lee-Potter’s columns are these: that every woman could be slim if she wanted to be (and would be thin if enough “pressure” were put on

⁷³ Lynda Lee-Potter, Lynda Lee-Potter Column, *Daily Mail*, March 22, 1989.

⁷⁴ Lynda Lee-Potter, “Expansive Message that Spells a Fat Load of Nonsense,” *Daily Mail*, April 15, 1992.

her); that fat people are fat because they sit around all day eating fatty foods like “doughnuts, éclairs, [and] Mars Bars”; that fat women are aesthetically and sexually unattractive and deserve to be dumped for slim women; and that fat women cannot enjoy outdoor activities, like riding a bike (mentioned elsewhere in the article) or going to the beach.

These cultural biases against fat appeared not just in writing, but also in more tangible forms, such as job discrimination. In 1989, *What Diet and Lifestyle* magazine reported the results of a survey, in which eighty-six percent of the participants responded that they felt fat people were discriminated against.⁷⁵ This was borne out in actual life scenarios. In one 1988 incident, for example, a school dinner server named Jane Meachem was fired on the recommendation of the medical officer, who felt that her obesity put her at risk for cardiac and muscular problems, as well as making her an economic liability (he believed that fat people take more time off due to illness). Meachem’s story was featured in newspaper articles and a television show, eventually forcing the Staffordshire County Council to retract her lay-off. However, Meachem declined the job offer, and took one with a cleaning firm—who also made weight loss a condition of her employment, despite the fact that Meachem was in good health and walked and swam regularly.⁷⁶ The assumptions made about Meachem’s level of activity find a counterpoint in Freud’s paintings of Tilley—his insistence on associating her with

⁷⁵ As cited in Bovey, *Forbidden Body*, 35.

⁷⁶ Bovey, *Forbidden Body*, 37. Bovey also recounts several personal incidents of discrimination against herself, including being told “that [her] size precluded [her] from being considered as a newsreader” (38) as well as incidents reported to her by other British women as she was researching her book—including one woman who “was told when applying for one job that they had so many applicants they didn’t need to choose a fat one.” (39) See chapter two of her book for further instances.

bulky, *immobile*, furniture suggests a similar presumption that she cannot and does not move.

Just as Tilley was beginning to model for Freud, in June of 1992, UK magazine *Slimmer* published the results of their survey on job discrimination. Certain professions automatically screened out overweight applicants, among them flight attendants and nurses. As the article says, “the implication seems to be that as a rule, overweight people are sloppy individuals who don’t care enough about their appearance.”⁷⁷ British employees have little protection against such discrimination—then, as now, the Equal Opportunities Commission will only take cases in which the discrimination is based on age, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, and religion.⁷⁸

These attitudes by British employers were echoed in Britain’s government, particularly those segments which dealt with health care. In 1993, The British Government’s chief medical officer responded to concerns about overall health in the UK, especially relating to obesity, by providing a list of changes people could make in their everyday life to increase their overall health. Although some of the changes relate to common sense rather than weight loss (for example: “don’t drink and drive”) the majority seem to be geared toward making people thin. Among the list: “Watch how much you eat—think twice before seconds,” and “Try fresh fruit instead of cake or biscuits.”⁷⁹ In 1994, when Freud was in the midst of his series of Tilley paintings, the Office of Health Economics issued a report stating that obesity cost British taxpayers 200 million pounds per year, and characterizing it as the “most preventable” cause of ill

⁷⁷ As cited in Bovey, *Forbidden Body*, 41.

⁷⁸ For more information, see the Equality and Human Rights website (UK) at the following location: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/yourrights/equalityanddiscrimination/pages/equalityhome.aspx>

⁷⁹ David Brindle, “Healthier Lifestyles Are Offset by a Sharp Rise in Obesity,” *Guardian*, July 2, 1993.

health, despite the fact that a research associate for the office noted that obese patients could expect to make higher insurance payments. And that same year, a study of Irish doctors found that one in five would give treating an obese patient a lower priority to treating a slim patient, even if the patients had the exact same medical problems.⁸⁰

But perhaps the most obvious example of British disgust toward fat bodies can be found in the world of dieting. As in the US, the history of dieting in Great Britain stretches back for more than a hundred years.⁸¹ While dieting (and the use of weight loss products eerily similar to those marketed today) continued to gain popularity over the next hundred years, it was really only in the 1960s and 1970s that it began to reach epidemic proportions. In Britain, as in America, women's magazines devoted increasing numbers of pages to weight loss, and in particular fad diets. Diet names familiar to American readers appeared in the UK and were followed with the same fanaticism—the Scarsdale Diet, the Stillman Diet, the Mayo Clinic Diet, the Beverley Hills Diet (which has recently had a resurgence of popularity in the US).⁸² Newspapers began to do feature articles on women who had lost enormous quantities of weight, giving them the title “slimmer of the year.”⁸³

In the 1980s, a number of “new” approaches to eating appeared on the dieting scene in England. A look at the year 1983 alone will indicate the desperation of the British populace to lose weight. Early in 1983, the Royal College of Physicians, who claimed that all the old ideas about avoiding carbohydrates were wrong, published a

⁸⁰ Celia Hall, “Obesity Costs Health Service Pounds 200m a Year,” *Independent*, July 18, 1994.

⁸¹ For more on this topic, see the introduction to this dissertation.

⁸² See Bovey, *Forbidden Body*, chapter six, “Your Loss Is Their Gain: Diets and the Dieting Industry,” 209-280.

⁸³ This practice was popular during the period that Freud was painting Tilley (and remains popular today). See, for example: Gillian Harris, “Winning Way to Lose Extra Pounds,” *Scotsman*, August 19, 1993.

weight-loss plan which advocated a diet high in unrefined carbohydrates (like wholegrain bread and pasta). Then there was Audrey Eyton's *F-Plan Diet*, which became a bestseller and had a number of reprints. This one also argued for eating lots of bread, pasta, rice and cereal. A third bestseller emerged in the form of Geoffrey Cannon's *Dieting Makes You Fat*, which argued for strenuous cardiovascular exercise as a form of weight control. There were also specific books aimed at coercing men into the diet and weight loss market, like *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*. The list of bestselling, extremely profitable, diet books published in the UK in the 1980s and into the early 1990s goes on: Martin Katahn's *The Rotation Diet*, Rosemary Conley's *The Hip and Thigh Diet*, as well as her *The Complete Hip and Thigh Diet*, *Inch Loss Plan*, *Metabolism Booster Diet*, and *The Whole Body Programme*, etc.⁸⁴ And that merely covers dieting books; by 1994, it was estimated that "Britons pay pounds 80m a year for non-prescription products in the form of replacement meals, another pounds 5.5m on slimming magazines, and an untold figure on other slimming products."⁸⁵ All of which suggests that the general populace accepts the premises expressed by Lynda Lee-Potter, as cited above, to the point that they are willing to invest not just time, but a significant portion of their income in the task of losing weight. These are the same feelings and attitudes about fatness expressed by the critics responding to Freud's images of Tilley—especially Waldemar Januszczak.

But more than just fitting in with cultural ideas about the fat body, Freud's paintings capture a certain timely interest in the subject. At the same time Freud was painting his images of Tilley, the fat body was very much in the news and in the minds of London locals. Although fat acceptance groups have long been a part of American

⁸⁴ Bovey, *Forbidden Body*, 222-230.

⁸⁵ Hall, "Obesity Costs."

culture (however little success they may have had in changing said culture), with the largest group, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, formed in the 1960s, in the UK these groups were in their infancy. And they were being born just as Lucian Freud turned to Sue Tilley as a model for his paintings. In early 1992, Mary Evans Young founded "Dietbreakers," a group meant to encourage women to stop dieting and begin to accept their own bodies. As Young says:

I started [the program] in the spring of '92 after seeing a television programme where women were having their stomachs stapled. One woman had split the staples and was in for her third op. And then a young girl of 15 committed suicide because she 'couldn't cope' [with] being fat. She was a size 14...I decided somebody had to stand up and try and stop this bloody madness and in the absence of anybody else, I decided it would be me. So I sent out a press release titled "Fat Woman Bites Back."⁸⁶

Dietbreakers attracted a significant amount of press attention, even receiving its own episode on the BBC2 program "Open Space" in November of 1992. Young also, in collaboration with Charlotte Cooper, opened Planet Big-Girl, a plus size disco at the London club Equinox.⁸⁷ And Young attracted more media attention by founding "International No Diet Day" in May of 1992. That year, rain prevented the event from taking place outdoors, but in 1993, she garnered the interest of the press by taking a large group of large women to publicly eat at a picnic in Hyde Park.⁸⁸ All of these events received publicity, especially in London.⁸⁹ Whether or not Freud was aware of these

⁸⁶ Mary Evans Young, "How INDD Began," *Largesse, the Network for Size Esteem*, last accessed August 1, 2011. <http://www.eskimo.com/~largesse/INDD/origin.html>

⁸⁷ Sarah Harris, "Welcome to Planet Big-Girl," *Guardian*, December 12, 1992.

⁸⁸ "Being Tubby Is a Good Thing," *USA Today* (International Edition), May 4, 1993.

⁸⁹ See, for instance: Nancy Banks-Smith, "Television: Pole to Pole, Open Space, News at Ten," *Guardian*, November 12, 1992; Geraldine Bedell, "Slim Pickings," *Independent*, June 21, 1992; Celia Dodd, "Compulsive Eaters Come out of the Closet," *Independent*, July 11, 1993; Alan Hamilton, "Diet Dictators Face Stout Resistance," *Times* (London), May 6, 1992; Christopher Leake, "Diet 'Cons' Pounded," *Mail on Sunday*, April 11, 1993; Victor Lewis-Smith, "A Canter with the Calories," *Evening Standard*, November 12, 1992; David Nicholson-Lord, "Slimming Aids Firms 'Should Be Prosecuted,'" *Independent*, April 8,

specific events—and as a long-time London resident, it seems likely that he would have been—his interest in painting Tilley is part of a larger cultural phenomenon demonstrated by the heightened awareness of the fat body in London in the early 1990s. Moreover, the attitudes toward the fat body expressed in his paintings and also by the critics of those paintings reflect those of the general populace.

Continuing Antipathy

Lucian Freud's painting...set to break auction records—surely not!...this thing I find, frankly, visually obscene...my opinions on such matters carry little or no weight (un like [sic] the model)—but tell me this...Does that look simply disgusting? Rod Collins⁹⁰

With the introduction to the UK of fat-positive groups like Dietbreakers, it might be expected that attitudes toward the fat body have become more progressive over the past two decades. But this is a false assumption—if anything, standards of thinness have become ever more stringent, and fear about rotundity has grown ever more rampant. In the 2000s, there was a scientific and journalistic preoccupation with Britain's "obesity epidemic," fostered by articles with titles like, "Britain obesity levels the highest in Europe," and "Britain is the fattest country in Europe."⁹¹ These articles are flooded with alarming statistics, like: "the level of obesity in Britain has doubled over the last 25 years...the report's projection for the future based on current trends is that by the year

1993; Vikki Orvice, "Breaking the Dieting Habit," *Daily Mail*, May 7, 1992; Lynne Truss, The Lynne Truss Column, *Times* (London), May 11, 1993; Louisa Young, "Fat Fights Back," *Marie Claire* (UK), September 1993. However, note that not all of this attention is positive; in particular, see the Victor Lewis-Smith article.

⁹⁰ Rod Collins, "Lucian Freud Benefits Supervisor Sleeping Is Rubbish," *Rod Collins: A Site about Everything and Nothing* (blog) April 14, 2008. <http://www.rodcollins.com/wordpress/lucian-freud-benefits-supervisor-sleeping-is-rubbish>

⁹¹ Barry Mason, "British Obesity Levels Highest in Europe," *World Socialist*, November 21, 2007, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/nov2007/obes-n21.shtml>; "Britain is the fattest country in Europe." *BBC News Online Magazine* October 12, 2006. Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6040156.stm>

2025, around 20 percent of the population will be classified as obese. For the year 2050...60 percent of men, 50 percent of women...will be obese.”⁹²

These statistics have made obesity and its causes a popular topic of study for British researchers, who attempt to explain how Britons reached their current girth.⁹³ A team from Aberdeen University did a study about how weather affects weight loss, concluding that the British were more likely to pack on the pounds because of the typically cloudy weather conditions in the UK.⁹⁴ The British Nutrition Foundation formed a task force to study obesity in the late 1990s, including experts on biochemistry, medicine, dietetics, exercise, genetics, health, education, psychology, and surgery. After two years of study, they recommended “a higher level of physical activity and a universal diet which includes more fruit and vegetables.”⁹⁵ This solution sounds remarkably like the same ineffectual advice for weight loss⁹⁶ that has been offered for the past hundred years or more.

Other British organizations taking the “obesity epidemic” seriously include a Birmingham program (financed by the American insurance company, Humana) which will pay bonuses to nurses and other National Health Service (NHS) employees for keeping their weight down. Successful employees will receive gift certificates to local shops. This of course, reinforces the assumption that people can easily control their weight, and that if fat people just tried harder, they could become thin. In an even more

⁹² Mason, “British Obesity Levels.” For more on how these statistics can be misleading, if not outright arbitrary, see the introduction to this dissertation.

⁹³ For more on how these types of studies de-naturalize the fat body and contribute to prejudice, see the introduction to this dissertation.

⁹⁴ Daniel Bates, “Poor Weather to Blame for Britain’s Obesity Epidemic, Scientists Say,” *Daily Mail*, July 14, 2008.

⁹⁵ “Health: Task Force Takes on Obesity,” *BBC Online*, May 29, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/353717.stm>

⁹⁶ Of course, if the focus were merely on achieving better health and not specifically *weight loss*, this advice would be excellent.

extreme action, nearly the entire town of Rotherham (some 2,000 families) was to be compulsorily enrolled in “slimming camps” by the NHS to teach them how to prepare “healthy” meals—again fostering the assumption that fat people are fat because they eat too much, and too much of the “wrong” foods.⁹⁷

Even the National Audit Office (NAO) hopped on the “obesity epidemic” bandwagon in 2001, producing a report for Parliament called “Tackling Obesity in England.” The report focused on the growing prevalence of obesity in the UK, and the concurrent costs to the NHS. Unsurprisingly, this document echoed the anti-fat tone toward this topic found in the popular press, which can be garnered merely from looking at the section headings in the pamphlet publishing the results of the report. Those headings read like a summary of all the ideas being challenged by fat activists and theorists currently, and as such deserve a listing here:

About a fifth of the population is obese and nearly two thirds of men and over half of women in England are either overweight or obese.

The prevalence of obesity has almost tripled since 1980 and will increase further on present trends.

Evidence suggests that obesity is increasing more rapidly in England than in other parts of Europe.

Changes in eating patterns and increasingly sedentary lifestyles are the most likely explanation for the upward trend in obesity.

We estimate that obesity cost the National Health Service at least around £1/2 billion in 1998.

The indirect costs of obesity in England may be around £2 billion a year.

On present trends, the costs of obesity could increase by a further £1 billion by 2010.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Sarah E. White, “British Obesity Solutions,” *Calorielab.com*

<http://calorielab.com/news/2008/07/14/british-obesity-solutions-pay-people-fat-camp-blame-weather/>

⁹⁸ “Tackling Obesity in England: Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 220 Session 2000-2001: 15 February 2001.” London: The Stationery Office, 2001, <http://www.nao.org.uk/> Again, the problem here is not the desire to teach better eating habits, but the concordant assumption that fat people *must* eat badly, and that weight loss is in itself a desirable goal.

But perhaps the most ridiculous example of the depths of loathing and fear inspired by the fat body in the UK is a growing obsession with fat *pets*. They were the subject of a 2007 documentary entitled “Fat Pets” which aired on the American television network Animal Planet. The documentary chronicled the lives of several fat pets and their owners, most of whom went to great lengths to help their pets reduce, even going to the newly established (2005) Royal Canin Weight Management Clinic at the University of Liverpool’s Small Animal Hospital. The short film also chronicled the hostility and ridicule faced by the owners who chose not to make their pets diet. There have been a number of news stories focusing on the rise of obesity in Britain’s pet population,⁹⁹ and even a case in which a pair of brothers were convicted of animal cruelty and had their dog taken away for obesity (although he was later returned).¹⁰⁰

Freud’s images of Tilley and the response to them demonstrate and elaborate upon the alternately fascinated and censorious attitude of the British public toward the fat body in the early 1990s. This is the same fascination that led to newspaper publications about “slimmers of the year,” typically women of Tilley’s size who had managed to rigorously discipline their bodies to fit the cultural norm. The same fascination led the British tabloid *The Sun* to publish pictures of 280-pound Jenny Freeman as an example of a fat and fit woman in July 1993; but a fat, fit, and *nude* woman, inviting salacious and/or contemptuous surveys of her body.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ See for example: Tony Bonnici, “Our Porky Pets in Peril,” *The Express*, August 20, 2007; Sophie Borland, “One in Three Dogs Overweight,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 6, 2008; Philip Jackman, “Fat Cats, Heavy Hounds; Eight of Britain’s Pets Compete,” *Globe and Mail*, November 18, 2008; Ann Palmer, “Animal Charity Is Helping to Spread Pet Obesity Epidemic,” *Express*, March 10, 2008; Paul Sims, “Man’s Fat Friend Rivals his Owners in Obesity Stakes,” *Daily Mail*, February 23, 2007; “Slimming Pill to Help Dogs Fight Fat,” *Daily Mail*, January 8, 2007; and others.

¹⁰⁰ Marco Giannangeli, “Victim of Cruelty, Labrador that Weighs in at 11 ½ Stone,” *Express*, January 13, 2007.

¹⁰¹ Bovey, *Forbidden Body*, 331.

Despite the efforts of groups like Dietbreakers, in the fifteen-plus years since Freud painted Tilley, the gaze that he turned on her body has become the same eye that the British populace has turned on their neighbors, their pets, and in some cases, themselves. Fear, hostility, and loathing directed toward the fat body have become increasingly ingrained and are expressed more and more openly. And while the societal message that fat is unhealthful, unaesthetic, asexual, and morally repugnant is trumpeted to both men and women, it is women who have historically been singled out for their bodies, and women who have more invested in trying to live up to beauty standards. Correspondingly, it is women who have most thoroughly internalized these messages about the fat body. The following chapter will explore how a female painter's images of the fat female body differ substantially from Freud's.

Chapter Two: Facing the Fat Body in the Early Works of Jenny Saville

Feminism and Formalism Meet

...mark-making is an essential human activity; the art form. With painting, you're in total control. Jenny Saville¹

I'm painting these kinds of figures because I think it's important to challenge traditional representations of the female nude. The fleshiness of the women's bodies is something that is never put on display in the 20th century, it's always airbrushed or suppressed. I'm trying to do it with a certain sympathy and emotion, and also put it in the context of feminist thought. Jenny Saville²

As a young artist, Jenny Saville achieved near-immediate success in her career. In 1992, the year that she graduated from the Glasgow School of Art, newspaper critic Clare Henry featured her work in the London Critics' Choice show. As a result of Saville's participation in that exhibition, one of her paintings captured the attention of British advertising mogul and art collector Charles Saatchi. Saatchi gave Saville a retainer to paint for a year, then highlighted Saville in a show alongside only two other artists.³ This led a pair of wealthy American collectors—businesswoman Susan Kasen Summer and Sony executive Robert Summer—to fund a trip to the United States, all expenses paid, for Saville and her boyfriend (fellow artist Phil MacPhail) to work in the Summers' newly established Connecticut studio complex.⁴

Perhaps part of the reason for Saville's early success lies in her choice of painting as a medium, and the female nude as subject matter. These two factors allow both for feminist interpretations and also the ability to claim Saville as a part of a canonical British modernist history, thus making her of interest to both feminist and traditional

¹ Quoted in Clare Henry, "To Paint the Body Eccentric," *Herald* (Glasgow), December 9, 1996.

² Quoted in "A Full Body of Work," *Observer*, January 23, 1994.

³ Clare Henry, "Troubled Oils," *Herald* (Glasgow), January 15, 2000.

⁴ Clare Henry, "A Passion that Puts Glasgow to Shame," *Herald* (Glasgow), December 19, 1994.

scholars and collectors. Scholars and critics in the modernist camp tend to group Saville as a descendent of Lucian Freud,⁵ and at first viewing, her nudes bear a strong resemblance to his. For instance, both use a somber color palette, with a thick and gestural application of paint, and both typically place the nudes in ambiguous settings and portray their sitters without flattery, sometimes to the point that their subjects look corpse-like. Both artists' works tend to have a disturbing effect on viewers,⁶ and both artists turned to fat models within the same period.⁷ However, Freud's images of his fat sitter, Sue Tilley, draw their charge from a remote, distanced view of the subject, a conflicting push/pull between erotic fascination and repulsion. The discomfort caused by Saville's paintings of fat women comes not from distance but from closeness, from her identification with her subjects. Saville's images resonate with women's fears about the size and shape of their own bodies, the obsessive fixation on their imperfections—fears that are exacerbated by contemporary discourses that link sickness and fatness.

Unlike the criticism that discusses Freud's Tilley paintings, the articles and essays that deal with Saville's *oeuvre* often move beyond fixation with the size of her women.

⁵ Among others, Guy Peplow describes Saville's works as "disturbing Lucian Freudian nudes," James Hall notes that "Saville is undoubtedly indebted to Lucian Freud," Richard Jaques describes her work as "belonging to the Lucien [*sic*] Freud school of painting," and Andrew Graham-Dixon claims one of her paintings is "a Freud sitter suddenly allowed to develop some attitude." Andrew Graham-Dixon, "She Ain't Heavy, She's My Sister," *Independent*, February 8, 1994; James Hall, "Repetitive Art, Come Again?" *Guardian*, January 31, 1994; Richard Jaques, "Edinburgh Art Show," *Scotsman*, August 30, 1994; Guy Peplow, "How to Hype Youth and Influence the Buying Public," *Sunday Times* (London), September 20, 1992.

⁶ Saville's figures have been described as "enormous repellent creatures," and her works as generating "deliberate unpleasantness," and "flouting all normal canons of decency and taste." In response to her appearance in a UK documentary, John McDonald wrote the *Daily Record* to say that "her paintings of fat naked women were not fascinating. They were revolting, and I changed channels immediately." Even the photographs from which Saville works have stirred controversy, as Boots, the British chemist chain, refused to continue to develop them, with a sales manager informing Saville that her photos were "disgusting." See: John Arlidge, "Boots Decides Artist's Nude Snapshots Are Over-Exposed," *Independent*, March 30, 1994; "Blubbernauts," *Scotland on Sunday*, February 13, 1994; "You said it!" *Daily Record*, March 8, 1995.

⁷ Freud painted his most famous fat sitter, Sue Tilley, between 1993 and 1996; Saville's paintings of fat women date between 1992 and 1999.

Many of these readings deal with Saville's openly feminist intentions and read her images as being filled with the potential to trouble cultural expectations of femininity. However, many of these writings are dismissive of fatness as an appropriate topic for a feminist artist, or in the course of their argumentation, act to re-naturalize the thin body at the expense of the fat body (whether intentionally or not). Alternatively, critics and fat activists tend to read these images as uncomplicated celebrations of the fat body. What this essay offers is a necessary intervention into the scholarship on Saville, starting from the premise that the fat body is as natural a form as the thin body, and interpreting Saville's images as complex and ambiguous products of the culture that vilifies and pathologizes the fat body, particularly the fat female body. The chapter will attempt to parse out the various fears about the body which Saville's paintings embody.

Troubled and Troubling Feminist Readings of Saville

Saville's time-honored subject...belie[s] a revolutionary, feminist stance. For Saville's obsession is fat: the body as obese vehicle. In an age of super-star waifs, her defiant sitters flaunt their Rubensian girth, brandishing titanic rolls of flesh—gigantic thighs, breasts, and bellies—as trophy. Amazons all. Clare Henry⁸

One of the most pervasive problems facing authors desiring to write approvingly about Saville's paintings is a linguistic one. The overwhelming and insidious fat-hatred that saturates Western culture also affects the English language. In a culture that perceives fat as a visible sign of disease and immorality, the words used to describe the fat body have all taken on pejorative connotations. There is really no neutral, let alone positive, adjective to describe fat or fatness. As such, when writing about Saville's paintings, authors often end up rendering the fat body as other or even (accidentally)

⁸ Clare Henry, "Jenny Saville: Gagosian," *Artnews*, vol. 98, no. 11, December 1999, 171.

maligning it in their attempts to describe it. There are almost countless examples of this phenomenon, even from authors who usually apply language carefully and rigorously, like Linda Nochlin, who describes Saville's nudes as "excess[ive]," "gargantuan," "gigantesque," "huge," and "gross flesh," all in the course of a single article.⁹ While it can be argued that not all of these terms are pejorative, certainly the term "excessive" implies that the fat body transgresses appropriate boundaries, and "gross flesh" reduces the body to its physicality. Perhaps though, my objection to some of these words merely demonstrates my inculcation into the bodily norms of American society. I literally cannot imagine the circumstances under which a woman would appreciate being called "huge" or "gargantuan."

These linguistic issues appear again in Erin Witte's writing, to the detriment of her argument. In her thesis, Witte seeks to situate Saville's paintings in a narrative of disgust, which is the opposite of or the boundary that contains and defines the aesthetic (that which is pleasing or beautiful). She reads Saville's paintings as an ultimate, universal vision of disgust, as bodies that completely fail to conform to aesthetic standards (i.e. the bodies are mottled instead of smooth, fat instead of taut, and riddled with imperfections). She believes that Saville's images evoke a visceral reaction that illuminates the cultural constructs that produce that reaction—that is, if fatness did not violate cultural norms, there would be no disgust in the viewing of the images.¹⁰

However, Witte ultimately re-naturalizes the thin body in her closing remarks about Saville's paintings. She carefully points out that "Saville's paintings are not meant to depict the 'typical' woman's body. She is not painting the 'normal' body; she is

⁹ Linda Nochlin, "Floating in a Gender Nirvana," *Art in America* 88, no. 3 (March 2000): 94-97.

¹⁰ Erin Witte, "Disgust and (Dis)embodiment: Evaluating the Work of Jenny Saville" (master's thesis, Wake Forest University: Winston-Salem NC, 2006).

painting the ‘difficult’ body.”¹¹ Saying that Saville’s nudes do not exemplify a “typical” woman’s body suggests that there is, in fact, a normal or typical body, and it is the opposite of Saville’s nudes (i.e. it is thin). And although Witte’s labeling of this body as “difficult” was surely meant to refer to the viewer’s reaction to a body which falls outside of societal norms, the language itself removes any power of this body to trouble those norms, by marking it as abnormal and atypical, thus reinscribing the fat body as the other that allows the thin body to exist as the normative, naturalized body.

Even authors who aim to give fat-positive readings can fall into societal traps and end up writing articles that do the opposite of their expressed intentions. For example, Sidonie Smith’s essay “Bodies of Evidence: Jenny Saville, Faith Ringgold, and Janine Antoni Weigh In”¹² does an admirable job of opening up Saville’s painting, *Branded* (fig. 2-8), to multiple meanings and exploring its ambiguity. One of Smith’s central points concerns the way that:

The signifiers [such as “petite” and “delicate,” written across the figure’s body] expose the inadequacy of the excessive body to measure up to a fetishized ideal. Yet the oppositionality of words and image goes both ways. This excessive body also refuses the adequacy and exposes the unnaturalness of the words and meanings carved across it. The fat body empties the signifier of referential meaning.¹³

However, Smith’s essay goes on to reinscribe the meaning of the signifier on the body of the viewer, de-naturalizing the fat body and re-naturalizing the thin body.

Smith opens her discussion of the painting by noting that Saville implicates the viewer in the image, constructing it in such a way that she forces the viewer to assess her

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² Sidonie Smith, “Bodies of Evidence: Jenny Saville, Faith Ringgold, and Janine Antoni Weigh In,” in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 132-159.

¹³ Ibid., 138.

own position in relation to the depicted body. Smith argues that this sets up a dichotomy between the viewer's body and that of the sitter, such that the former becomes the thin man to the fat lady, as in nineteenth-century freak shows. She writes, "such placement [of the thin body next to the fat body] produced the 'scale' of difference that exaggerated [the fat lady's] excessive weight and the insubstantiality of [the thin man's] excessive thinness." In this short introduction, Smith reifies body norms both by her language—Saville's painting represents not just a large woman but an "excessive" one—and by her presumptions about the viewer's body. She denies a place for a viewer who is the same size as the subject of the painting, let alone larger. Smith's dichotomy falls apart if the viewer's body is anything other than a "normal," or thin, body.

Smith ends her article with a discussion of the physical size of Saville's painting. She writes that, "like the fat lady in the sideshow, this female nude hovers over the viewer, diminishes him, dwarfs her, to the extent that the viewer can no longer recognize his own likeness, her own size. This figure is too close to call."¹⁴ However, the size of the canvas can produce another effect in the viewer. The overwhelming size of the painting suggests a common experience among women, especially fat women: the sense that the body is too big, not normal, that it overflows boundaries (airplane seats, turnstiles, bus aisles) and dwarfs smaller people. It also references the imaginative experience of women who feel that they are fat. Many women struggle with that same sense that the body is too big, too excessive, that it overflows (in this case) imaginary limits, so that a thin woman may believe she is too big to wear a bikini, to work out in public, to dance at a club, etc.

¹⁴ Ibid., 141.

Moreover, a certain anti-fat prejudice underlies many of the articles with feminist intentions. Alison Rowley, whose feminist bent is openly manifest in the title of her article, provides an example of ambivalence toward the fat body. She concludes her interpretation of critical responses to Saville's paintings with the opinion that, for critics, "feminism, at best, becomes a sub-category of figurative painting, at worst, it is simply synonymous with 'fattist.'" ¹⁵ Why should the association of feminism and "fattism" be a worst-case scenario? Rowley denigrates the very real theoretical concerns of fat theory, placing it as the marginalized term in a dichotomy with feminism—feminism then becomes the privileged term in a sort of Cartesian dualism. Feminism is important; fattism is marginal. Feminism is concerned with the intellect; fattism mired in the body.

Catherine Wilcox-Titus, another feminist scholar, exhibits her underlying fat-bias in an article ¹⁶ that is critical of Saville's images. ¹⁷ She sees these paintings as images of excess, as folds of flesh that focus on the surface and deny the figures any interiority. Wilcox-Titus sees nothing in the fat body but its immanence. Even when she compares Saville's nudes to images of martyrdom, she always chooses bodies that privilege surface and deny interiority (that focus on the body and deny the soul) or bodies that signify the "primitive" or excessive (or, in the case of the *Venus of Willendorf*, do both). ¹⁸

Wilcox-Titus ultimately sees Saville's paintings as denigrating the fat body. She compares Saville's nudes to her images of pig carcasses, writing:

¹⁵ Alison Rowley, "On Viewing Three Paintings by Jenny Saville: Rethinking a Feminist Practice of Painting," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996): 88-109. Quote 90.

¹⁶ Catherine Wilcox-Titus, "Neo-Baroque Spectacle and the Female Body in the Work of Jenny Saville, Lisa Yuskavage, and John Currin," in *Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art*, ed. Kelly A. Wacker (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007): 97-115.

¹⁷ I would like to make it clear that I do not fault any scholar for thinking critically about Saville's images, but rather the anti-fat attitude that drives Wilcox-Titus' particular evaluation.

¹⁸ Wilcox-Titus, "Neo-Baroque Spectacle," 97-115.

These canvases, [depicting pigs] framed by the larger context of Saville's preference for painting outsized human females, inevitably draw an association between her human subjects and her animal paintings. Though the analogy between pig and human is well-established by way of their proximity to humans, their ingestion of human food, and their pink skin, the constellation of associated repellent behaviors—dirt, disgust, and indiscriminate appetite—are redirected by inference back to the female bodies that form Saville's primary subjects.¹⁹

Wilcox-Titus draws parallels between pigs and Saville's "outsized" women in particular, not with her works in general (and she has painted bodies that are thin). Rather than remarking on the similarities of Saville's general technique for rendering human flesh to her rendering of pig flesh, Wilcox-Titus focuses in on those subjects she believes are the best fit for the analogy, thus revealing the impact of cultural assumptions about the fat body on her reading of Saville. She also removes the allegorical context Saville provides for the pig paintings, which seems to suggest that because pigs exhibit a "constellation of repellent behaviors" they are an appropriate comparison for fat women²⁰ and need no further narrative explanation.

In fact, Saville's first pig image, *Host*, was inspired by a fairy tale about a girl who turned into a pig. The girl was first desired by the men around her (when she was still fully human) and then despised as she became increasingly animalistic; her mother nearly slaughtered her, and then the girl was forced to commit matricide and retire to nature.²¹ This allegory suggests greater thematic concerns that make the pig images appropriate comparisons for Saville's larger body of work, not just her works about large bodies. For instance, the idea of bodies undergoing changes or transformation appears in

¹⁹ Ibid., 106.

²⁰ See the discussion of fat and abject in Chapter One of this dissertation for more on the associations between fat and dirt/pollution.

²¹ Demetrio Paporoni, "Jenny Saville and the Origin of the Wound," in *Damien Hirst, David Salle, and Jenny Saville: the Bilotti Chapel* (Milan: Electa, 2006), 86-99.

a number of her works, like *Matrix* and *Cindy*, among others. Moreover, Saville's interest in the image of a butchered (or at least headless) animal carcass puts her in dialogue with a succession of old and new masters, including Rembrandt, Soutine, and Bacon.

Saville's Nudes as Celebration

...contrary to claims made for it, her practice no more indicts than it relies upon society's stereotypes of the female. For we are forced to read the extreme distortions of her nude figures against the 'conventional' female nude and thus to accept as granted an 'ideal' from which her depicted anatomies diverge. Neil Mulholland²²

At what might seem to be the opposite end of the spectrum from the more complex readings given to Saville's works by the previously discussed authors lie those who posit her images as either overt or covert celebrations of the large female body. For instance, an article about the difficulties faced by disfigured people in the UK claims that Saville's paintings demonstrate that "even the art world is accepting less than perfect bodies,"²³ while an article about a British fat activist and comedienne argues that Saville's "latest paintings...are controversial primarily because of their unorthodox celebration of female flesh,"²⁴ and a third states that "these are paintings which celebrate our commonness and our fallibilities whilst ridiculing the falsehood and fascism of

²² Neil Mulholland, "Sensation, London," *Burlington Magazine* 139, no. 1137 (December 1997): 886-888. Quote 886-887.

²³ Jean Donald, "Beyond the Looking Glass," *Herald* (Glasgow), March 1, 1994.

²⁴ "Dawn French Has Militant Views," *Scotsman*, May 4, 1994. Of course, it is interesting to note that this same article, in a discussion of plus-size fashion, claims that "invariably the waist and hip area is best skimmed over—metaphorically and stylistically," demonstrating that the author continues to be uncomfortable with the real-life examples of the types of bodies "celebrated" in Saville's works. Even more level-headed critics, such as Clare Henry, occasionally fall into this trope—see her article "Fruitful Times and Lemons," *Herald* (Glasgow), January 4, 1999—in which she summarizes Saville's work thusly: "Her celebrations of flesh and fatness..." It appears as a frequent theme in brief summaries of her work, as in "The List," *Herald* (Glasgow), June 15, 2002; which says, "Internationally known for her celebrations of flesh and fatness..."

advertising role models.”²⁵ Fat activists are not the only ones who find Saville’s images to be both aesthetically pleasing and affirming. Women all over Europe have written to tell her this: “I am obese, but now I don’t feel bad about it,” one wrote.²⁶ This interest in bodies outside of the traditional ideal fits in with the work of Saville’s Young British Artist contemporaries. Although her fat nudes predate the work by almost a decade, YBA sculptor Marc Quinn produced a larger-than-life size nude of a woman born with truncated limbs, entitled *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), to occupy the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square.

Although it is tempting to believe that the very act of depicting a large woman is a positive or celebratory step—after all, images of large women are so rare that in order to satisfy her interest in the subject, Saville had to resort to finding models in medical texts and pornography²⁷—this is not necessarily true. There is no reason to assume that the mere act of representing the fat body allows an artist to disrupt cultural stereotypes; after all, this is not the case for other marginalized bodies.

Moreover, arguments that Saville’s images are celebratory fall prey to the same linguistic problems and anti-fat-bias as the essays in the previous section. Sometimes, the author describes Saville’s (theoretical) praise of the fat body at the very same moment that she reassures us that she does not agree with this celebration—at least not unreservedly. Suzanne de Villiers Human writes about *Branded*:

From within the body of the represented nude who has apparently outgrown herself through the excessive and indulgent intake of food and liquid, there is an unstoppable eruption of milk. The female character’s abandonment to her lower drives seems irreversible. There is a smoldering sense of ecstasy for having passionately violated the social

²⁵ “Jenny Saville and Gwen Hardie London Galleries,” *Scotsman*, March 24, 1994.

²⁶ Quoted in Clare Henry, “Stinging Salvos of Flesh,” *Herald* (Glasgow), February 4, 1994.

²⁷ Ann Trenemen, “Vile bodies?” *Independent* (London), March 24, 1998.

norms of acceptability. The perverse gesture of indulgently clutching the flabby rolls of skin and fat in *Branded* underscores the sense of shy celebration which is evident in both [this painting and *Hem*].²⁸

De Villiers Human's writing signals her absorption of the societal messages that women *should be* a certain size (the figure in *Branded* has "outgrown herself"), that they become fat only because they eat too much (she has become this way through "excessive and indulgent intake of food") and that most people find this disgusting (she has "violated the social norms of acceptability" and her gesture, and possibly even her state of being, is "perverse"). Is it any wonder, if de Villiers Human intended this interpretation, that she sees the figure's celebration as "shy" at best?

Other critics suggest that the paintings, despite undermining contemporary beauty norms, must show women who are unhappy with their bodies, or else these critics use real-life examples that weaken positive readings of Saville's works. For instance, one author writes, "the defiant flaunting of reality, nailing the glossy lie that bony bodies are the norm, is paired with the acknowledgment that, if they could, Saville's nudes would have this burden lifted from them."²⁹ Meanwhile, another believes that Saville *could* be celebrating the fat body, but undercuts this suggestion by announcing that "polaroids of the fabulously corpulent woman whose body is depicted in 'Strategy' litter the floor. Ironically, this particular woman doesn't share Saville's celebration of the voluptuous female: she has chosen to have liposuction treatment."³⁰ Saville herself has flat-out

²⁸ Suzanne de Villiers Human, "Explosions in Visual Art, Literature, and Music," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 1 (June 2005): 179-197. Quote 188.

²⁹ "Blubbernauts."

³⁰ "Full Body."

denied the suggestion that her paintings celebrate fat. She says, “[m]y paintings don’t celebrate bigness.”³¹

While it is possible to read Saville’s images in fat-positive ways, this chapter shares more in common with the views of Lynda Nead than with those who hail Saville’s paintings as unreservedly celebratory. Nead writes, “it should be clear by now that Saville’s work is no simple celebration of the transgressive female body; indeed, it expresses a deep ambivalence towards the body that is both fascinating and disturbing.”³² Indeed, Saville’s images are disturbing because they explode a tangled nexus of contemporary fears encapsulated in the fat body—fear of illness, disease, and death, fear that the body itself is not a contained entity, and by extension, fear that identity is fluid and changeable.

***Plan*, Body Image Distortion Syndrome and the Conflation of Size/Scale**

Saville’s naked women are a million miles from the idealized Venus of old, and even more remote from today’s wafer-thin model girls. They are every woman’s nightmare: vast mountains of obesity, flesh run riot, enormous repellent creatures who make even Rubens’s chubby femme fatales look positively gaunt. Clare Henry³³

Plan (1993), fig. 2-1, is arguably the most famous of Saville’s paintings. Like most of her early works, it depicts a female nude whose body is based on Saville’s own; she paints from photographs of her own body, supplemented by photographs of life models, and a variety of other sources.³⁴ *Plan* shows a nude female figure, viewed from the mid-thighs up, centered in the frame with her pubic hair (Saville incorporated real

³¹ Quoted in Clare Henry, “Absolutely Flabulous,” *Herald* (Glasgow), March 28, 1994.

³² Lynda Nead, “Caught in the Act of Staring,” *Women’s Art Magazine*, no. 58 (May/June 1994): 18-19. Quote 18.

³³ Henry, “Stinging Salvos of Flesh.”

³⁴ David Sylvester, “Areas of Flesh,” *Independent* (London), January 30, 1994.

pubic hair in her painted version) at eye level. She tilts her head to the side, looks down to meet the viewer's gaze, and her right arm cradles her breasts. The figure itself is quite large; not only does it fill roughly three-quarters of the canvas, but it also spills beyond the boundaries of that canvas. The figure's head is partially cut off, as are the edges of her thighs. Behind her, an ambiguous grey background is visible, giving no indications as to her location; this background could be anything from a wall to a floor. Many viewers also find the figure's pose ambiguous, as it is difficult to determine whether the woman in *Plan* stands or reclines. However, based on the way her body remains relatively taut and rounded, it seems likely that the figure is meant to be seen as standing upright.

The figure's skin is mottled and bruised, especially in the arms and thighs. The paint here is dominated by greys, blues, and mauves, all of which evoke diseased or decaying flesh. Saville's brushwork adds to the feeling of decay. Her thin washes of color overlay each other, and her delicate, patchy brushwork augments the color to produce the sense that the flesh is dissolving. This suggests that the fat body is the ill body, not unlike the works of Lucian Freud. Moreover, the most noticeable feature of this image—a series of concentric circles and ovals on the nude's thighs and stomach, which have actually been incised into the paint itself—suggest the idea of the body under attack. These markings open themselves to multiple interpretations. The two most popular readings identify the circles as the marks made prior to cosmetic surgery (specifically, liposuction) or the lines on a topographical map.

Clearly, Saville is aware of both these implications. She acknowledges that the original inspiration for these lines came from a tabloid article about the surgery; see the

image in her studio in fig. 2-2. However, she also said that “[the body in *Plan* is] also like a landscape in a way. The viewer visually navigates and climbs the body.”³⁵ The title of the work furthers the interpretation of these lines as liposuction marks, suggesting that the figure has a plan she intends to carry out, and that it involves her body. Judith Batalion adds additional interpretations for these markings, suggesting that “they resemble military maps for conquest, and concentric circular targets. Saville’s drawn lines evoke something brutal, something aggressive.”³⁶ Again, the title reinforces this idea, bringing to mind expressions like “plan of action,” and even “plan of attack.”

Like most of Saville’s works, *Plan* is physically large, measuring nine by seven feet. In fact, Saville’s paintings are so large that she uses mirrors to get the full view while painting, and in her student days, she had to leave her studio and look in from a window to see the work as a whole. Although this figure is larger-than-life size, her body is not fat. She has a distinct waist, which looks small in comparison to her hips. Her belly is slightly rounded, but does not swell out toward the viewer or overhang her pubis. Her thighs touch, but also appear relatively flat, especially in relationship to her hips. The impression of fatness given by the thighs comes largely from the strange angle at which we view the figure, which causes dramatic foreshortening such that her head appears tiny in comparison to the mass of her thighs and torso. This distinction between the size of the canvas and the size of the depicted body is not always made clearly by the viewers of Saville’s works, who have difficulty separating the size of her canvases from the figures depicted on them.

³⁵ Quoted in Pernilla Holmes, “The Body Unbeautiful,” *Artnews* 102, no. 10 (November 2003): 145.

³⁶ Judith Batalion, “Back to the Drawing Board: Feminist Reconsiderations in the Work of Jenny Saville and Sarah Sze,” *Immediations Magazine* 1, no.1 (Spring 2004): 90-108. Quote 99.

This is what Waldemar Januszczak has to say about Saville, based on this image, which he reads as a self-portrait:

Fat—what an unpleasant word. Other descriptions of the same condition take a few syllables to register their mild disapproval corpulent [sic], obese, overweight, gorbellied. But “fat” comes to the point immediately. “Fat” loathes what it describes. Saying the word involves the mouth in a short spit of disgust. And the hard, harsh fact of the matter is that Jenny Saville is fat. Very fat.³⁷

He continues with a description of the work itself:

Plan [sic] is what a film-maker would call a pan up the body, a view from below traveling upwards through a clump of unruly pubic hair towards a pair of giant breast mountains. The artist has drawn contour lines across the whole journey; she has made an Ordnance Survey map of her body: there is an awful lot of high ground.³⁸

Demetrio Paparoni calls *Plan*'s subject “an obese woman,”³⁹ and Witte also confuses the size of the canvas with the size of the body in her analysis of *Plan*; she writes, “There are those who would argue that this figure elicits disgust because her extreme obesity is not ‘healthy.’”⁴⁰ Although the extreme foreshortening of the figure creates the potential to misread this body as fat, designating it as an example of “extreme obesity” (as Witte does) seems a bit far-fetched; compare *Plan* to any of Lucian Freud's images of Sue Tilley, for instance (figs. 1-3 to 1-6).

Alison Rowley provides a remarkable reading of this image, clearly elaborating the source of this misrecognition of the size of the depicted body. Rowley regards the painting as a sort of psychic projection, showing Saville's internal belief about the (over)size of her own body, rather than reflecting the size of her actual body. In part, she derives this reading from the strained foreshortening of the body, which she convincingly

³⁷ Waldemar Januszczak, “As Large as Life,” *Sunday Times* (London), July 31, 1994.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Paparoni, *Jenny Saville*, 89.

⁴⁰ Witte, “Disgust and (Dis)embodiment,” 66.

argues is seen from an angle that could only be achieved by the sitter staring into a mirror at her feet.⁴¹ However, the same angle could be achieved if the nude were looking into a scale, so that the painting depicts an imaginary “scale’s eye view” of the woman. The scale is an instrument which many women use daily to measure the weight of their bodies, to determine whether they are successful or failing in their quest to normalize and regulate those bodies. If this is the case, then the viewer, dragging her gaze up the figure’s body to meet her eyes, plays the role of the scale—assessing, weighing, and ultimately judging that body. As Lynda Nead says, “with Saville, there is no easy connoisseurial pleasure to be derived from this view [of a nude woman], we may indeed appraise these bodies but we are made aware of being ourselves assessed, of being caught in the act of staring and judging.”⁴²

Saville’s own discussion of her work adds to the interpretation of her painting as a psychological, as much as a physical, portrait. About *Plan*, she says that “women have usually only taken the role of model. I’m both, artist and model. I’m also the viewer, so I have three roles.”⁴³ In this scenario, Saville plays out this psychological drama for herself, in a never-ending circuit—modeling for the image, acting as judge and interpreter as she paints, and viewing the image—critiquing her own body and her painted body at the same time. Certainly Saville is frank about her own struggles with body image. She has said, “why should I conform to this? But I can’t escape it. I’m just as susceptible to the pressures as anyone else, and yet I don’t believe in those pressures.”⁴⁴ She has also admitted, “I haven’t had liposuction myself but I did fall for that body wrap thing where

⁴¹ Rowley, “On Viewing Three Paintings,” 93-95.

⁴² Nead, “Caught in the Act,” 18.

⁴³ Quoted in Hunter Davies, “This Is Jenny and This Is Her Plan,” *Independent* (London), March 1, 1994.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

they promise four inches off, or your money back.”⁴⁵ She speaks about deliberately intending to portray these struggles in her images. “I do hope I play out the contradictions that I feel, all the anxieties and dilemmas. If they’re there in the work, then that’s brilliant.”⁴⁶

In addition to being read as a psychological or physical portrait of Saville, *Plan* can also be read as a psychological self-portrait for any female viewer. Saville has frequently discussed the pressure to conform to body image experienced by her peers, including the impulse to weigh and judge one’s own body: “as a female you get so used to the sensation of being looked at, you are always taught to assess yourself.”⁴⁷ She speaks frankly about the tensions and fears that center around women’s bodies, saying “everybody goes through a whole range of feeling about their bodies—at one point or another, we all hate ourselves or love ourselves.”⁴⁸ She has commented numerous times on what she calls a secret epidemic. “There’s a secret epidemic at large; 85% of women are on a diet. It’s as though we can’t succeed in life without a supermodel figure... You’d think art school students were less conformist, but all my contemporaries were obsessed with dieting; some taking hundreds of laxatives a day. ‘I want to be close to the bone,’ one told me.”⁴⁹ And Saville certainly intended these anxieties about the fat body to be communicated by the way that the figure’s body overflows boundaries and towers over the viewer, which leads many to misinterpret the body size of the painted figure. Saville said about her early works, including *Plan*, “I’m not painting disgusting, big women. I’m

⁴⁵ Quoted in “Jenny Saville,” *Scotland on Sunday*, February 13, 1994.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Jenny Saville, interview by Elton John. “Jenny Saville Interview,” *Interview* 33, no. 9 (October 2003):168-171.

⁴⁷ Quoted in David Brittain, “Jenny Saville,” *Creative Camera*, 334 (June/July 1999): 25-29. Quote 26.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Saville, interview with Elton John.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Henry, “Stinging Salvos.”

painting women who've been made to think they're big and disgusting, who imagine their thighs go on for ever."⁵⁰

But the psychological tension of imagining one's body to be larger than it actually is goes beyond any one viewer of the painting. The mis-recognition of the size of one's own body (by imagining it to be larger than its actual size) commonly features as an aspect of anorexia and bulimia. The clinical term for this symptom is Body Image Distortion Syndrome (BIDS) or anorexic ideation. It has long been, in fact, one of the criteria by which anorexics and bulimics are identified. Moreover, before eating disorders became commonplace, clinical discussions of this "bizarre" phenomenon were often accompanied by illustrations of the anorexic *standing in front of a mirror* which reflected back a distorted image of her body, a trope which continues to be popular on eating disorder websites today (fig. 2-3).⁵¹

Furthermore, as many authors have pointed out, if one attempted to diagnose eating disorders based on BIDS alone, almost every woman in England and America would need treatment. In 1984, seventy-five percent of 33,000 American women surveyed considered themselves "too fat" despite the fact that only one-quarter of the respondents fell into the "overweight" category on medical charts, and, in fact, almost one-third of the women actually fell into the *underweight* category; the percentage of women who consider themselves too fat is only growing as normative body standards become more stringent.⁵² This phenomenon is not unique to America. Researchers at St. George's Hospital Medical School in London sought to prove that BIDS was a function

⁵⁰ Quoted in "Jenny Saville," *Scotland on Sunday*.

⁵¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 55.

⁵² Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 56.

of women's poor spatial skills in general. In a study of fifty women, all were able to accurately estimate the size of a breadbox, but on average overestimated the size of their own hips by sixteen percent, and of their waists by twenty-five percent.⁵³ The misreading of the size of the body in *Plan* as "obese" and "fat" by critics indicates that Saville's painting does more than merely tap into individual fears. It taps into a cultural BIDS in which viewers not only cannot judge the size of their own bodies, but also cannot accurately judge the size of *other women's* bodies.

***Propped*, and Saville's Ambiguous Relationship to Fat**

Propped (1992) has a huge hunk of woman planted on an ithyphallic, black metallic stool...A feminist text has been graffitied across her, but with the writing in reverse. This forces you, both physically and mentally, to twist your neck and look at her in a new way. You lay yourself open to ambush. James Hall.⁵⁴

Propped, painted in 1992 (fig. 2-4), is a seven by six foot canvas that shows a large female nude, wearing only glossy white shoes, perched on an improbably small, black, stool.⁵⁵ The stool has only one leg and can also be read as a pedestal, a bed post, or even an object of phallic penetration.⁵⁶ Saville centers the nude on the canvas, and as in *Plan*, the borders of the canvas cut off her head. Her posture indicates the precariousness of her position on the stool: the figure's feet cross behind the stool, and her torso hunches forward over her thighs to maintain balance, her arms also cross, and

⁵³ Laura Fraser, *Losing It: False Hopes and Fat Profits in the Diet Industry* (New York: Plume, 1998), 281.

⁵⁴ Hall, "Repetitive Art."

⁵⁵ I say stool here because in two variations on the same theme, *Untitled* (1992) and *Prop* (1992) the support structure is obviously a stool (figs. 2-5 and 2-6, respectively), although the structure in *Propped* clearly differs from the one used in these two paintings.

⁵⁶ For more on the stool as penetrative, see my later discussion of *Batalion*.

her fingers dig into her thighs with such painful urgency that the flesh bunches around them.

Similar to the composition of *Plan*, Saville depicts the figure from below, and again she tilts her head to meet our gaze, although she lowers her eyelids to such an extent that her eyes can also read as closed. Also as in *Plan*, the figure is dramatically foreshortened, although in this case she expands toward us (rather than retreating) to the extent that her knees almost project into our space. However, Saville undermines the three-dimensionality of the image by writing *into* the paint, across the figure, setting up a tension between the illusionism of the figure and the flatness of the picture plane. The quote, which comes from French feminist Luce Irigaray, is written backwards, and states, “If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again words will pass through our bodies, above our heads...make us disappear.”⁵⁷

In contrast to *Plan*, this figure takes up relatively little of the canvas, approximately one-third. Behind her is another ambiguous grey background; the post and the figure seem to be floating precariously in an amorphous space. The figure’s body is fat, although not to the exaggerated extent that critics claim. Her thighs and breasts are certainly substantial. Her thighs balloon out around her knees, and their irregular contours suggest the sagging of fat flesh. Moreover, even though her position squeezes her legs together, her knees do not meet. Her breasts also bulge around the confinement of her arms. However, her ability to achieve this posture suggests a relatively flat stomach. Otherwise, she would have to lean much further over her thighs to achieve balance, and her breasts would be pushed up and out instead of in and down.

⁵⁷ Sarah Kent, *Shark Infested Waters* (London: Zwemmer, 1994): 84.

Additionally, her collar bones are sharply delineated, where in a fatter body they would be smoothed over. And, as in *Plan*, some of the thickness of her thighs in relation to her head and torso can be attributed to the extreme foreshortening of the pose and the angle from which we view her.

Saville's choice of palette and application of paint produce similar effects in *Propped* as they did in *Plan*. The artist picks out the figure's upper thighs and calves in dark greys and purples, which recall shadows, plum-like bruises, and decay. Similar colors on her upper arms and around her collar bones convey the same associations of fatness, sickness, and eventual death (an idea which will be addressed in more depth later in this chapter). Saville constructs the figure's kneecaps, however, with warmer, redder tones. Instead of looking bruised, they seem burned or scabbed. The redness of the kneecaps, combined with their location at eye level and the foreshortening which makes them appear to project out from the leg, also has the curious effect of making them look like nipples. This effect is heightened on the left side of the canvas, where the figure's knee echoes in form and color the nipple which peeks out from behind her arm, and also by Saville's distortion of the knee caps' size—they are disproportionately small (which, of course, also serves to make the figure's thighs look disproportionately large).

In many ways, *Propped* epitomizes the ambiguities of Saville's feminist project, as well as her own ambiguous attitude toward the fat body. Despite the injunction of the Irigaray quote that is literally inscribed around and in the figure's flesh, her pose on a phallic object and the sexualization of her knees seems to encourage the interpretation of the figure as a sex object, as do the shiny white shoes which draw attention to her nudity. In this case, the nude's clenched fingers, slightly parted mouth, lowered eyelids, and

languid expression suggest nothing so much as orgasm. Although here, too, the image is complex, since seeing the fat body as an object of physical desire or as capable of sexual pleasure troubles societal expectations of that body, which insist that the fat body in undesirable and asexual. Judith Batalion's interpretation of the image's sexual potential highlights another contradiction:

Propped suggests that penetrative sex might relay another example of self-mutilation...one cannot help but wonder what exactly the figure is propped upon? Grabbing, groaning, and in stilettos, she seems to be smack in the act. But the penetrative engagement does not evoke a sense of pleasure. Further the figure cannot negotiate her awkward limbs and seems confused. Perhaps penetrative sex, whether masturbatory or not, is also a form of self-mutilation.⁵⁸

The same features that can be seen as signs of sexual fulfillment can be read as signs of self-abuse or sexual punishment. The question then becomes whether Saville intended this reading at all, if this punitive aspect is possibly an unconscious reaction to the fat woman for aspiring to sexuality, or if it is to be read as applying more broadly to all women, perhaps in conjunction with Irigaray's statement.

Saville obviously intended to implicate the viewer in *Propped*. In its original exhibition, the painting was shown with an equivalently sized mirror, placed seven feet opposite the painting.⁵⁹ In order to read the writing, then, the viewer had to turn and face the mirror, literally becoming part of the image. This inclusion of the mirror and of mirrored writing only complicates the implications that were present in *Plan*. When first facing *Propped*, the backwards writing implies that, like Alice, the viewer has passed through the looking glass, into the world of the mirror. The viewer is the figure's reflection, the mirror that judges and condemns her, as in the BIDS images (or as in the

⁵⁸ Batalion, "Back to the Drawing Board," 103.

⁵⁹ Linda Nochlin. *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006): 235.

case of the “scale’s eye view” in *Plan*). But when the viewer turns to read the writing in the mirror, she crosses back through the looking glass, and becomes a part of the image. The viewer is forced to evaluate and assess his own body as he does the figure’s, and in turn become viscerally aware of the way that his own body is also constantly being evaluated and assessed.⁶⁰ In combination with Irigaray’s text, this would seem to suggest that it is patriarchal society that causes us to evaluate the woman’s body so harshly.

Yet Saville’s pictorial language seems to encourage negative readings of the figure. The smallness of the figure’s perch and the extreme foreshortening of the image serve only to exaggerate the size of her body. The clenched fingers, which can be read as a sexual gesture, or an attempt to achieve balance, also suggest a punitive scoring of the flesh. This implies not only that the figure feels ashamed of her body, but that there is something amoral about it, that her fatness is a sin for which she is impelled to atone (this aligns with constructions of fat as immoral, as LeBesco explains). This type of comparison does not escape critics, from Wilcox-Titus’ comparison of Saville’s works to images of martyrs, to Waldemar Januszczak. Although he is speaking here of *Branded*, his comments are equally applicable to *Propped*:

I was reminded of those mass-produced Christian images of saints displaying their stigmata. The unspoken but unmissable meaning of such art is: I have suffered this for you. The Christ who asks doubting Thomas to insert his finger into his spear-wound is an image designed to evoke guilt in the spectator. Saville’s twist on this traditional cycle of accusation and confession is that she gets to play both accuser and confessor at once.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For an alternative reading of the mirror in regards to psychoanalysis, *l’écriture féminine*, and gender, see: Isabelle Wallace, “The Looking Glass from the Other Side: Reflections on Jenny Saville’s *Propped*,” *Visual Culture in Britain* no. 5, iss. 2 (2004): 77-91. However, it is important to note that Wallace disregards the figure’s size entirely, as though it were completely irrelevant to the interpretation of the painting, and (like Smith) presumes a thin viewer (she provides a diagram of a theoretical viewer standing in front of the painting, and that viewer is quite small in both scale and body size).

⁶¹ Januszczak, “As large as life.”

The ambiguities of this image come from Saville's own ambiguous relationship to the fat body. She has said: "My work was never about empowering fat women. It was never that simplistic..." and describes her subjects as examples of "extreme humanness."⁶² This characterization serves to de-naturalize the fat body, making it something outside the boundaries of "normal" humanity. As previously mentioned, this kind of language only serves to normalize the thin body. This theme continues as Saville says, "Anything against normality. I find the narrow view of normality quite boring. I like extreme humanness."⁶³ In an even more ambivalent quote, Saville said, "My paintings don't celebrate bigness. More than half the population are size 16 or over. Fine. But obesity is something else. Many women are not happy with their size. Dieting is a secret epidemic."⁶⁴ Here her words are clearly contradictory. She is prescribing limits for the "acceptable" female body ("obesity is something else") yet indicting culture for creating a "secret epidemic" of dieting and making women unhappy with their size. She seems unaware that women's unhappiness with their bodies and anti-fat prejudice are linked.

Saville has also demonstrated her inculcation into medical discourses which denaturalize the fat body. She has said, "It's not necessarily about criticizing ideals. I'm more fascinated by the stories that imprint themselves on the body. Whether it's a fat, injured, or scarred body, it has undergone a journey to get that way."⁶⁵ Here she draws parallels between fatness and sickness by lumping the fat body in with the injured and scarred body, but she also implies that fatness is unnatural in a way that thin bodies are

⁶² Quoted in Holmes, "The Body Unbeautiful."

⁶³ Quoted in Peter Ross, "Bringing Home the Bacon," *Sunday Herald*, September 17, 2000.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Clare Henry. "Absolutely Flabulous."

⁶⁵ Quoted in Holmes, "The Body Unbeautiful."

not; after all, there is no intimation in her interviews that thin people “undergo...a journey to get that way.”⁶⁶

Trace, Effacement, and Defacement

The influence of watching surgeons at work helped enormously...To see a surgeon's hand inside a body moving flesh around, you see a lot of damage and adjustment to the boundary of the body. Jenny Saville⁶⁷

Saville's ambivalent feelings about the fat body can be seen in the violence done to the bodies of her nudes, as in *Trace*, painted between 1993-94 (fig.2-7). Here again Saville fills a large canvas (seven by six feet) with a large body. In this case, the body fills almost the entirety of the picture plane, and in a now-familiar gesture, overflows that space. In this case, Saville depicts a back view of a female nude, from just below the buttocks to the top of the shoulders. The edge of the canvas cuts off the head and legs, as well as parts of both hands. Saville also places the figure in the familiar, ambiguous, grey space. However, unlike *Plan* or *Propped*, the perspective is straight-on, rather than tilted.

As with *Propped*, *Trace* shows a large body painted on a large scale. The figure's body makes a nearly rectangular shape that echoes and emphasizes the geometry of the canvas. However, as in *Plan*, the figure is not so fat as the criticism about the work might suggest. Although the overall shape is rectangular, there is still a clear indentation at the figure's waist, and the buttocks, though by no means taut, are relatively flat, rather

⁶⁶ This is not, of course, to suggest that babies are born at three hundred pounds. However, neither are babies born at 5'7" and one hundred pounds. No matter the physical size of a body, it has gone through a journey to get that way, and it bears the marks of that journey. Saville's emphasis that *fat* bodies take time and effort to achieve demonstrates her indoctrination into the discourse which assures us that thinness is the human body's natural state, and therefore need not be interrogated.

⁶⁷ Quoted in: Simon Schama, "Interview with Jenny Saville," in *Jenny Saville* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005): 124-129. Quote 124.

than expanding out towards the viewer. The overall palette of the image is paler than in previous works, with most of the body done in white. However, there are still grey and mauve undertones that suggest decay, while the deeper purple-red in the buttocks, shoulders, and especially the fingers, resembles the lividity of a corpse that has been flipped over. These tonalities, when combined with the back view, laxness and lack of animation in the pose, and head-on perspective, give the viewer the feeling that she is looking down at a corpse on a mortuary slab. Enhancing this feel are the marks inscribed into the paint across the figure's body. These appear to be the lines left by wearing overly tight garments (bra, underwear, and belt or pant waistline across the middle of the nude). It is as if a medical examiner has removed her clothes prior to an autopsy or embalming.

In all three of the images discussed thus far, as well as in *Branded* (see the following section) Saville actually gouges into the paint, across the bodies of her sitters, defacing them—and imaginatively, herself (remember that Saville uses her own body as a model for her paintings). This can be seen as a violent gesture, both physically and psychologically, if these paintings act as surrogates for Saville or the viewer. In which case, the imaginative violence done to the bodies on the canvases suggests an equally strong hatred for fat. Critics pick up on the anger of this gesture:

[Saville] describes the gouging of words into canvases it may have taken her as much as a year to complete as a form of artistic vandalism, defying the prescriptive patriarchal traditions of paint. But the effect carries disturbing echoes of self-mutilation, reminders that while the gaols are full of men expressing their frustration as violence or criminality, women tend to turn their destructive impulses inward.⁶⁸

Roberta Smith writes about *Brace*, *Fulcrum*, and *Hem*:

⁶⁸ “Blubbernauts.”

Saville has devised a kind of elaborate pictorial plate tectonics of shifting planes and strokes of paint that reveal her dead-weight bodies as hollow, painted shells. They are artistic cadavers being both dissected and reconstructed in a process that links different paintings or parts of paintings to photography, sculpture and abstraction, as well as suggesting darker analogies like surgery, deformity and torture.⁶⁹

Although the first author links the images to self-mutilation, the gesture also opens up to imply fat-hatred and self-hatred. And Smith, while not specifically addressing self-mutilation, certainly reads violence in the images; they are “cadavers” being “dissected,” with overtones of “surgery, deformity and torture.”

Although she never specifically discusses violence or self-mutilation, Saville herself has addressed the corpse-like quality of her nudes. Speaking about a Chaim Soutine painting of a beef carcass, Saville said, “This carcass I’ve looked at again and again. It’s always in my studio. I have it near me all the time when I’m painting.” She further discussed an image she made on a similar theme—a pig carcass. “I actually thought more about humans when I made the pig, and, when I’ve painted people, I’ve thought more about carcasses.”⁷⁰ Like Freud, Saville’s nudes engage Kristeva’s concept of the abject, as well as the doubly abject quality of the fat woman theorized by LeBesco. However, Saville’s nudes generally pose more actively than Freud’s (they tend to stand or sit upright, rather than lolling backwards or lying down) and also meet the viewer’s gaze more often than not, somewhat undermining a reading of the nudes as corpses. Saville’s compositions do not detract from reading the figures as diseased, however.

⁶⁹Roberta Smith, “Art in Review: Jenny Saville,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1999.

⁷⁰Quoted in Martin Gayford, “Artists on Art,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), December 30, 2000. As previously noted, the use of the carcass also recalls Francis Bacon’s use of the motif in his works. As for Saville, the carcass holds deeper associations for Bacon—he says, “I’ve always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouse and meat, and to me they belong very much to the whole thing of the Crucifixion...” Quoted in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975): 23.

Judith Batalion sees a potentially positive, feminist reading of Saville's defacement of her nudes. She writes:

The figure in *Branded* pinches her own skin, but likely branded the words into herself with fire or razor...Saville expose[s] the fact that self-mutilation is common and an issue for feminists. On the one hand self-mutilation seems masochistic and passive, but on the other, it is a means of control over one's body—a control that women still lack. The self-mutilator slashes the skin, or depletes its adipose tissues and thereby contains its pain.⁷¹

However, as with all of Saville's themes, this one is complex and holds potentially dangerous consequences. Although, as Batalion suggests, self-mutilation does offer control to the mutilator, and seems to operate as a way to trouble or thwart patriarchal control over the female body, like dieting (Batalion's other reference), self-mutilation ultimately serves to reify patriarchal control of the body. Both impulses—the impulse to literally carve one's flesh, and the impulse to carve away flesh through dieting—are ultimately gestures, not of self-control, but of acceptance and internalization of external standards. They are both rooted in hatred of the body, hatred which is derived from a patriarchal, anti-fat culture that insists that the female body be controlled, regulated, and forced to conform to stringent beauty standards.⁷² As such, self-mutilation serves less to re-establish female control over the body than to punish it for its failure to live up to those standards. Saville's imagined cutting into the canvases and the bodies of her figures suggests her discomfort with those bodies, and her need to release anxiety over the shape of those bodies and the disease and death they imply as well as to regain her own control over them.

⁷¹ Batalion, "Back to the Drawing Board," 103.

⁷² For more on the mechanisms by which we learn to police ourselves to meet standards imposed through outside sources, see Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). For more on the associations between fatness and self-hatred, see Chapter Four of this dissertation.

Branded and Contemporary Conflations of Fatness/Sickness

You see someone really huge and you think, "heart attack." You see a pregnant woman and you think, "life." Jenny Saville⁷³

One of the anxieties this mutilation of the painted figure helps to relieve is the fear of sickness and death. Examination of *Plan*, *Propped*, and *Trace* has demonstrated that Saville's nudes have injured, corpse-like surfaces. *Branded* (1992), fig. 2-8, helps locate her nudes within the context of contemporary medical discourses about the fat body. *Branded* depicts a standing female nude, centered in the canvas, in an ambiguous, grey space. However, a dark line that cuts behind the figure's hips suggests that the grey background is a wall, with this line as a pipe or picture rail.

Saville represents the figure from just above the pubis to the top of her head, which is slightly cropped by the canvas edge. Again, we see her from a low perspective, with her head tilted and looking down at the viewer, and her figure exaggerated by foreshortening. The nude is fat; her belly swells toward the viewer, and her slightly twisted pose causes wrinkled bulges to form on her right side. Her breasts hang down, large and pendulous, from shoulders that appear too narrow and fragile to support their weight. Her face puffs out into a double chin, which is demarcated on both ends with dark slashes of paint, and her collarbones are smoothed over by her fat. With her left hand, she grasps a fold of her lower stomach, pulling so hard that the flesh distorts and bruises.

Saville uses a very dark palette in this work. Areas of brown, grey, lilac, and darker purple completely mottle the figure, which suggest that her entire body is abraded and battered. A particularly dark purple swatch lies along her lower right stomach, which

⁷³ Quoted in Charles Darwent, "Big Really Does Mean Beautiful," *Independent*, April 16, 2000.

implies that perhaps the grasping gesture of her left hand is a repeated gesture—that is, that she has already squeezed her right side equally fiercely, and left a deep bruise behind. Words have been incised into the paint, and into her body. “Decorative” crosses her upper chest. Her right breast reads, “supportive,” her left, “irrational.” Above her belly button, the word “delicate” appears, while the flesh beside it bears the word “petite.”

The pose of the figure, as well as the words inscribed on her body, have rightly drawn comparison between *Branded* and the photographs of Jo Spence, in particular the image *Exiled* (fig. 2-9). Both Allison Rowley and Marsha Meskimmon have made this link to Spence’s photograph, which displays a nude Spence, garbed in a hospital gown, displaying a breast which has undergone a partial mastectomy, with the word “monster” written across her chest.⁷⁴ Although Meskimmon’s and Rowley’s arguments are primarily motivated by the recognition of formal similarities between the two images—the sense of confrontation with and defense against the spectator’s gaze, and the authors’ suppositions that both women inhabit grotesque bodies—Spence’s photograph also may be compared fruitfully to Saville’s painting because both are images about medical control over the body. Spence’s photograph foregrounds this issue; she not only displays the marks of medical control in her physical body (evidence of her mastectomy), she literally clothes herself in them (the hospital gown), and the mask visible on the right side of her face suggests the effects that medical intervention in women’s bodies has had on those women. Medical intervention denies women agency, and it corporealizes and dehumanizes them by focusing attention solely on the body.

⁷⁴ Marsha Meskimmon, “The Monstrous and the Grotesque,” *Make Magazine* 72 (October/November 1995): 6-12; Rowley, “On Viewing Three Paintings,” 88-109.

Witte reads *Branded* as an image that could be a picture of pregnancy, which violates cultural prescriptions: the pregnant body is open, not closed (it has been infiltrated by sperm and subsequently another entity); it is in a constant state of flux, rather than being stable, and it swells and violates boundaries, rather than being contained.⁷⁵ If the figure is read this way, it provides a level of medicalized discourse around this body; certainly pregnancy has recently been constructed as a medical condition requiring physician intervention at nearly every stage from conception to delivery.⁷⁶ This reading is plausible, but the pathologizing aspects of the image are more relevant to cultural discourses about fat.

In addition to comparing Saville to Spence, authors tend to draw comparisons between Saville's fat images, like *Branded*, and her images of transgender bodies, particularly *Matrix* (fig. 2-10), which depicts De LaGrace Volcano, a female to male transsexual whose masculine features—mustache, thinning hair—are contrasted against his fleshy, flushed, foregrounded pudendum.⁷⁷ The connections here are obvious; after all, both the fat and transgendered paintings address gender, and above all, marginalized and “other” bodies. However, both the images of fat women and the images of transgendered bodies fit into the larger theme of medicine and the body, which has preoccupied Saville from the 1992 painting *Cindy* (fig. 2-11) all the way up to *Atonement Studies (Panel 3)*, completed in 2005-06 (fig. 2-12). Although *Cindy* depicts a female face that fills a canvas and *Atonement Studies (Panel 3)* shows a full length male nude, both foreground not just a “wound” or “trauma” but medical intervention into the body.

⁷⁵ Witte, “Disgust and (Dis)embodiment,” 65-75.

⁷⁶ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 71-98.

⁷⁷ I chose the pronoun “he” and “his” here, as LaGrace Volcano considers his transition to enable a position of “mutant maleness.” Quoted in Judith Halberstam, “Transgender Images in Contemporary Visual Art,” *Make Magazine* 88 (June/August 2000): 37-38. Quote 37.

Cindy wears a butterfly bandage over her nose, which suggests that it has either been broken and repaired or that she has undergone rhinoplasty. In either case, *Cindy* has certainly been treated by a medical professional. A long wound runs down center of the figure's torso in *Atonement Studies (Panel 3)*, which a surgeon has either stitched or stapled closed. Saville certainly locates the figure in a hospitalized setting; his left wrist bears a bracelet like those patients wear for identification purposes, and a variety of tubes snake into his body (a drainage tube in his wound, an IV in his left arm, and a catheter in his penis).

In fact, Saville and her partner, artist Phil MacPhail, share an interest in the hospitalized human body. They joined a pathology group in 1996, and collect medical texts: images of 1950s cosmetic surgeries, 1980s liposuctions gone horribly awry, doctor's case studies. Both frequent hospital museums, and Saville gained access to an operating theater in order to observe cosmetic surgeries.⁷⁸ Medicalized images of the body litter Saville's studio, including one image labeled "elephantiasis" (figs.2-13 and 2-14) which looks suspiciously like several of the largest bodies in Saville's paintings, particularly *Hem* and *Strategy*.

Certainly the transgendered body, like that shown in *Matrix*, is transcribed by medical discourse. In her seminal text, *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler uses the example of the restrictions on sex reassignment surgery in the transsexual community to illuminate the ways in which the marriage of gender and sexuality can reinforce heteronormative social structures, as well as gender norms. Rather than complicating existing gender structures, transsexuals are often read as proof of the innateness of gender structures. To

⁷⁸ Henry, "To Paint the Body Eccentric,"; Kate Mikhail, "Ugliness Is in the Eye of the Beholder," *Independent*, July 7, 1998.

undergo a sex change operation, a transsexual must first “prove” her gender, then realign the sex of her body to match it, which requires her to behave in ways that conform to gender norms. The process of undergoing a sex reassignment surgery also requires transsexuals to subscribe to the idea that their condition is an abnormality, as opposed to the supposedly natural, biological, bodily coherence between sex and gender.⁷⁹

Surgical interventions practiced on the fat body operate in a similar way. In order to be eligible for bariatric surgery, the fat person is subjected to a series of examinations designed to prove that the fat body is “diseased” or pathological, thus reinforcing the normative thin body, although in the case of “super” or “morbid obesity,” the very size of the body provides as ample *prima facie* evidence of its pathology. Insurance requirements for the surgery only reinforce this “diseasing” of the fat body. Companies typically demand that the patient and her doctor provide evidence of medical conditions *caused by her obesity* which the surgery will alleviate (such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and sleep apnea).⁸⁰

But the fat body is subjected to these normalizing readings (as pathological and thus the proper domain of nature, rather than culture) every day. Elizabeth Grosz argues that through the process of socialization, we learn to attach certain culturally prescribed meanings and judgments to the aesthetic appearance of all bodies (including fat ones). She asserts that “[t]he body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into...”⁸¹ What we learn to read in the fat body is that it is the sick body. The press and popular culture inundate Westerners with the message that fat is not only unaesthetic, it is also inherently unhealthy. Sarah Kent writes:

⁷⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 57-101.

⁸⁰ Information obtained from an open seminar held by the Bariatric Center of Kansas City, October 2006.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York: Routledge, 1995): 34.

In present-day Britain obesity is more often a sign of poverty and malnourishment; of a diet of white bread, chips, sweets and pop. And it has links with heart disease. Jenny Saville lives in Glasgow, the city with the highest rate of heart disease in Britain, targeted for a Healthy City Programme in an attempt to raise consciousness and alter diet. Given this context and our culture's obsession with the body—especially with the health, fitness and ageing of female flesh—Saville's paintings of gargantuan women embody a complex range of meanings.⁸²

Kent seems to have absorbed the message that fat is unhealthy. After all, the Healthy City Programme she mentions could just as easily be applied to thin bodies, but Kent specifically associates it with Saville's "gargantuan" women. For Kent, fat itself is evidence of an unhealthy lifestyle (it is a sign of "malnourishment"). Demetrio Paparoni makes another link between fatness and illness in his essay about Saville, writing that "One of the effects of this [patriarchal] culture is the aversion that many women show toward themselves, known as female hysteria, which in some cases finds its outward expression in anorexia, bulimia, and obesity."⁸³ Here Paparoni both uses medical language ("obesity") and also includes fatness in a list of sicknesses.⁸⁴

Saville's interviews express her own absorption of this medical interpretation of the fat body. Although she has said, "the rhetoric used against obesity makes it sound far worse than alcohol or smoking, yet they can do you far more damage,"⁸⁵ the quote which opens this section reveals that she herself falls prey to the belief that fatness is a sign of illness. Moreover, in an interview with Simon Schama, she said:

There's such an element of time attached to a bigger body—the journey of getting to that scale, that physical bulk. We live in a time where that type of body is abhorrent. A body this size represents excess, lack of control,

⁸² Kent, *Shark Infested Waters*, 83. For more on medicine and the fat body, see the introduction to this dissertation.

⁸³ Paparoni, "Jenny Saville," 87.

⁸⁴ For more on the way that the term "obesity" constructs fatness as illness, see the introduction to this dissertation. Note also that some authors suggest that anorexia and bulimia are also cultural constructs and might even constitute an ordinary response to female gender norms—see Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.

⁸⁵ "Jenny Saville," *Scotland on Sunday*.

going beyond the boundary of what's socially acceptable. I wanted the paint itself to be a kind of obese, to have a diseased quality to the paint—an overabundance of paint on the surface.⁸⁶

Again, Saville suggests that she views the fat body as something that is unnatural, that requires time and concerted effort to achieve (in contrast to thinness, which is a natural state requiring no investment of time to attain). Moreover, she explicitly links obesity to disease in her discussion of the materiality of paint, exposing her absorption of medical messages conflating fatness and sickness. This discourse firmly links fatness with illness, both in the mind of Saville and in the minds of viewers and critics of her work. Thus the fat bodies in Saville's paintings provoke anxieties about sickness and death—anxieties which are embedded in the bruised and scarred quality of the painted bodies, and partially relieved by Saville's mutilating gesture of cutting into the surface of the nude and the paint itself.

***Closed Contact*, Saville's "Real" Body, and Fat as a Sign of Embodiment**

I'm not a size 10, but I'm not an enormous body. Jenny Saville⁸⁷

Because Saville has openly discussed using her own body as a model for her images of fat women and as the subject of a series of collaborative photographs with fashion photographer Glen Luchford (entitled *Closed Contact*, 1995-1996), her "real" body has become an integral part of the discourse surrounding her images. In the *Closed Contact* series, Saville pressed her nude body against a clear sheet of plexiglass, and Luchford photographed her from below. In some pictures, like fig. 2-15 (*Closed Contact*, no. 10) Saville's body is seen nearly full-length, while in others (like fig. 2-16,

⁸⁶ Quoted in Schama, "Interview with Jenny Saville," 127.

⁸⁷ Quoted in John Miller, "Tarred with a New Brush," *Daily Record*, February 28, 1995.

Closed Contact, no. 4) a close-up view of a smaller portion of the body fills the entire photographic frame.

These photographs share some remarkable similarities with her paintings. In the full-length photos, Saville floats in an ambiguous background (like her painted nudes), although in this case one that is more green than grey. She, like the painted nudes, often overflows the boundaries established by the frame of the photograph (particularly in close-up). Saville grasps, twists, and painfully manipulates her flesh, as in *Branded* and *Propped*. In fact, Saville emerged from her sessions with Luchford sporting deep, painful bruises, like those found on her painted bodies. Saville's flesh is distorted (as is the flesh of her nudes) by the pressure of the glass, so that it spreads or condenses, forming folds. This has the effect of making her body appear larger (think of the difference between the circumference of a ball of cookie dough, versus its circumference once pressed out into a sheet). In fig. 2-16, parts of her body become strange and unrecognizable; without easily identifiable features like the nipple, this image could just as easily read as an aerial landscape (not unlike the body in *Plan*).

Critics respond differently to the painted images based on Saville's body than they do to the photographic images of her body in the *Closed Contact* series. Authors who know Saville through her painted images often express surprise about her physical dimensions or appearance or emphasize her petiteness. Hunter Davies wrote about her, "She doesn't look the artist, more like a lower sixth-former, so young, so small, so conventionally dressed...at once there was a crowd around her disbelieving at first that such images could spring from this sweet, fresh-faced girl."⁸⁸ The author of a contemporaneous article writes that "Jenny Saville is 5ft 2in tall, with long hair and a

⁸⁸ Hunter Davies, "Interview with Jenny Saville," *Independent*, January 3, 1994.

vivid damson pout and a plumpness you notice mostly because she talks about it.”⁸⁹ Clare Henry describes her as “pretty, petite, and plump.”⁹⁰ The authors here seem to want to reassure themselves and the reader that Saville’s body is small (all three iterate her height, whether through actually naming it, calling her “petite” or by comparing her to a child) and that she is not fat like the women in her images. Davies calls her “small” and there is a repetition of the words “plump” or “petite” in other descriptions of Saville.

However, authors who view Saville through her *Closed Contact* photographs take Saville’s photographed body as her “real” body, and their comments about her display the same BIDS as the writing about *Plan*. Victor Lewis-Smith writes,

Jenny Saville’s work reminded me of those wags who photocopy their own buttocks at the office Christmas party, but she went the whole hog (and I mean hog)...She was only a millimetre short of being attractive, she worked with a fashion photographer and, although she railed against society’s “narrow idea of beauty”, we all knew what she was really doing: fulfilling her exhibitionistic fantasies while modestly draping herself in the intellectual respectability of feminism.⁹¹

Lewis-Smith seems to have accepted the “narrow idea of beauty” he claims that Saville rejects. Certainly, from the descriptions of Henry and Davies one would not expect Saville to be described as “a millimetre short of being attractive,” let alone as a “hog.” Holland Cotter describes the *Closed Contact Images* in nearly the same vein, writing, “Mr. Luchford has shot Ms. Saville’s sensationally corpulent torso...[they] turn a pucker-and-sag physique...into something nearly abstract.”⁹² He sees Saville not as “petite” but “sensationally corpulent,” and the term “pucker-and-sag” undermines Saville’s painful distortion of her body into a performance of native fatness.

⁸⁹ “Jenny Saville,” *Scotland on Sunday*.

⁹⁰ Henry, “Absolutely Flabulous.”

⁹¹ Victor Lewis-Smith, “Ugliness Is Only Skin Deep,” *Evening Standard*, March 24, 1998.

⁹² Holland Cotter, “Art in Review,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1996.

This interest in measuring Saville's own body against her painted images, the impulse to either distance her from her nudes or to fully identify her body with fatness, is one element in a strategy on the part of the authors to alleviate their own discomfort with fat. Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of the fat body is what it implies about the thin body. Unlike images of other marginalized bodies, fat bodies stir fears that the viewer, without constant effort to restrain and regulate her own size, could become exactly like the object of her revulsion. Thus the authors' insistence on either distancing Saville's physical body from or confusing it with her represented body.

However, Saville's physical body cannot fully bear either of these burdens. Saville's body, like everyone else's, is not a constant, fixed, stable entity. She has spoken openly about the changes in her weight, noting that she used to be much heavier (at the time she painted *Plan, Branded, Propped* and *Trace*). This can be seen in photographs of Saville from 1994 and ca. 2005 (figs. 2-17 and 2-18, respectively). Saville's real body is neither so far from the fat nudes she paints nor so close to her photographs as to fully reassure the viewer. And her fluctuating weight draws our attention to the artificiality of thinness as a natural state.

As Joyce L. Huff writes:

[The stigmatization of the fat body] serves to secure the boundaries of the normal; that is, the spectacle of the fat body confirms and consolidates the identity of the normal body...[bodies] constructed as fat are made to bear the burdens of embodiment—the uncertainties, flux, and grotesqueries of embodied existence. The “well-managed” body denies its own embodiment, assuming the role as ideal in opposition to the corpulent body. Corpulence thus enables and creates the “proper” body...But because all bodies contain some fat, the boundaries of the norm are never quite secure. Each individual body harbors the potential for corpulence.

Corpulence is thus a slippery stigma; the boundary between fat and thin is an anxious one.⁹³

Thus the following admission by Saville is prescient. She notes that she tries “to find bodies that manifest in their flesh something of our contemporary age. I’m drawn to bodies that emanate a sort of state of in-betweenness...”⁹⁴ The fat body is the ultimate example of this state of in-betweenness. Our bodies are constantly in a state of transition, creeping up and down the scale, and Saville’s own body realizes fears that if weight is unstable, we are constantly in danger of becoming fat.

However, it could be argued that Huff does not go far enough in her analysis. The implications of the “contagiousness,” if you will, of the fat body touch on even deeper-rooted fears about the nature of identity. Numerous authors suggest that in contemporary Western society, we understand identity as fixed, imagining a “real” self that is stable and unchanging.⁹⁵ An inherent element of this fixed identity is the belief in the Cartesian duality of mind and body; unfortunately, the body is subject to constant vagaries of aging and illness, which undermines that ideal. Moreover, as Huff points out, the fat body itself means embodiment, association with the physical realities of the body, and thus it cannot fulfill the “mind” portion of the Cartesian dichotomy. Saville has also hinted at this theme of embodiment in her interviews. Discussing a stint at Cincinnati University during her college career, Saville says she “was interested in the malls, where you saw lots of big women. Big white flesh in shorts and T-shirts. It was good to see because

⁹³ Joyce A. Huff, “A ‘Horror of Corpulence’: Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fat-Phobia,” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 39-59. Quote 52.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Schama, “Interview with Jenny Saville,” 124.

⁹⁵ See Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*; Grosz, *Space, Time, Perversion*; Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Murray, *‘Fat’ Female Body*; et al.

they had a physicality that I was interested in.”⁹⁶ By attributing this physicality to the fat body, Saville expresses the way in which cultural constructions of the fat body allow the thin body to become transparent, to stand for more than mere embodiment. If Saville’s images provoke discomfort in the viewer with the threat that the viewer’s body is changeable, that it must be constantly restricted and regulated in order to avoid avoirdupois, then Saville’s body carries the double threat that the viewer’s identity is also subject to flux, to change, to destabilization.

However, as Kathleen LeBesco points out, this very fear also has the possibility to imbue the bodies in Saville’s paintings with a positive, revolutionary potential. She sees the fat body as operating within Mary Douglas’s notion of pollution, and claims that dirt and fat “go hand in hand.”⁹⁷ According to Douglas, dirt is disorder, and the desire to control dirt is a way to exert control over our environment; LeBesco then sees the contemporary discourse constructed around fat as a way to rein in its excesses and reinforce social pressures.⁹⁸ Saville’s paintings, by exposing the malleability of the body, have the potential not merely to trigger anxieties about fatness and identity, but also to expose the unnatural, socially constructed nature of the underpinnings that support those anxieties.

⁹⁶Quoted in A. Olivia, “Jenny Saville,” *Belio Magazine*, April 14, 2004. Although it goes beyond the limits of this chapter, it is interesting to note too the link between American culture and fatness in the British imagination, a theme which is touched upon in other articles about Britain’s “obesity epidemic.” It is as if fatness is a visible sign of those traits of American culture that the British find distasteful—consumerism, a preference for convenience, etc. For more examples of this phenomenon, see also: Daniel Bates, “Poor Weather to Blame for Britain’s Obesity Epidemic, Scientists Say,” *Daily Mail*, July 14, 2008; Mark Steyn, “A Broadside in the War on Blubber,” *Telegraph Online*, January 6, 2004.

⁹⁷ LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 23.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Gender Norms, and the Fear of the Fat *Female* Body

*One of her many fans is comedy star Dawn French, who says that Jenny Saville's paintings speak out against the obsession for being skinny. "She seems to have touched on something which all women feel—a kind of tyranny of thinness," says Dawn.*⁹⁹

If Saville's paintings are located at the juncture of many fears about the body, it is significant that her subject is the *female* nude. Although many men suffer daily from body image issues and anti-fat prejudice, the female body bears special burdens in relation to anti-fat biases. It has been suggested elsewhere in this chapter that fatness reinforces understandings of the mind as something pure and separate from the body. This alignment of fatness with embodiment presents a double-bind to the fat *woman*, who by virtue of her sex always already bears the burden of embodiment in any dichotomy. Susan Bordo explains that, due to our formative experiences of the female body as caretaker, it becomes associated with the muck, the unpleasant limitations of flesh, while maleness is innocent, dignified, separated and distanced from the body. She writes:

The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be; distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death.¹⁰⁰

Bordo goes on to explain that Western understandings of the female body have even led women to be seen as responsible for the bodily responses of men, regardless of the women's conscious intentions. Thus, even when women are silent or actively say the opposite, their bodies can be seen as "speaking" a language of provocation. As late as

⁹⁹ Sergio Miller. "Meaty Issues," *Art Review* (London), 46 (April 1994):18-19.

¹⁰⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 5.

1991, a Georgia man was acquitted of rape charges because his victim had been wearing a miniskirt.¹⁰¹

The fat female body, therefore, defies societal prescriptions in two senses; because the female body itself is seen as dangerously embodied and polluting,¹⁰² and the fat body (as previously demonstrated) is also seen as dangerously embodied and polluting. It is no coincidence that those things that outwardly define the female body—the curves of breast and hip—are themselves adipose tissue, fatty deposits. It is also no coincidence that both anorexia and obesity, socially constructed as medically identified diseases, asexualize the female body at the same time that they hypersexualize it. Anorexia strips the body of fatty deposits that gender it female, which can cause the cessation of ovulation and menstruation. Yet the anorexic body has become the normative, sexualized body—glorified in film and on runways. The fat body, on the other hand, exaggerates the physical signs of sex—the breasts, the hips, the buttocks. Internally, fat cells store estrogen, increasing the presence of this hormone in the fat female body and leading to increased sexual drives in fat women.¹⁰³ Yet as Marcia Millman points out, “in our society, fat women are viewed as unfeminine, unattractive, masculine, out of the running. In a word, they are desexualized.”¹⁰⁴

Statistics on eating disorders and plastic surgery demonstrate that women feel the pressure to maintain normative body standards much more than men do. Despite the grave risks of death and complication that are linked to weight loss surgery, eighty to

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰² For more on pollution and the female body, see: Jana Evans Braziel, “Sex and Fat Chicks: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body,” in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Braziel Evans and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 231-256.

¹⁰³ Cecilia Hartley, “Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship,” in Braziel, *Bodies Out of Bounds*, 60-73.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 69.

ninety percent of patients undergoing the procedures are women. And the incidence of anorexia and bulimia is largely limited to females as well—between ninety and ninety-five percent of those suffering from the diseases are women.¹⁰⁵ And if, as previously discussed, the inability to identify the size of one’s own body correctly plagues women, the same problem occurs in men. But unlike women, who tend to overestimate the size of their bodies, men tend to underestimate the size of their own bodies.

For a BBC News story about mis-recognition of obesity in men, reporters stopped men on the street, weighed them, and informed them if they were overweight or obese. Every man that the reporters stopped took an argumentative stance with reporters. Typical comments were “Obese! Not even just overweight. That is a bit of a shock. I think it’s ridiculous...I think my weight is fine for my height.” “No way. I don’t agree with that—it’s crazy. I know I’m carrying a few extra pounds...but obese?...I’d have to lose three stone for the government to think I’m the right weight. That’s just stupid. I’d look ill and I probably would be ill.” “I know I’m carrying a little bit of extra weight, but I’m not obese. I think I am a fair weight for my height and build...I actually think [the governmental weight recommendation for a man of my size] is underweight for my height.” “I think that’s a bit harsh. I know I could do with losing some weight, but only a few pounds. I’d have to lose about two stone to get to what the government thinks is the ideal weight for me. It’s ridiculous, I would look ill, like a skeleton. I would not look healthy.”¹⁰⁶

All of these comments demonstrate the men’s understanding of their own bodies as fitting normative standards. Not only do they resist interpretations of their bodies as

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰⁶ BBC News Online Magazine, “Obesity,” October 12, 2006.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6040156.stm>

fat, but they also self-identify as normal so strongly that the label of “obese” makes them question not themselves, but medical and governmental standards for the body. They also perform a strategy that is the precise opposite of women’s desires to look like models and actresses. Rather than imagining that their bodies are too big as they are, they imagine that they would look sick and unhealthy if they achieved an “ideal” weight. These men show that body image standards are experienced quite differently by men than by women.

Conclusion

A lot of women out there look and feel like that, made to fear their own excess, taken in by the cult of exercise, the great quest to be thin. Jenny Saville¹⁰⁷

Saville’s images draw on internalized pressures felt by women and express pervasive fears about body size. Saville’s fat nudes trigger a cascade of anxieties about fatness in British culture, and touch on fears of lack of control over identity and body, fear of sickness and death, and fear of pollution. These paintings are complex and ambivalent, and have the potential to be read as undermining societal body norms, but also retain the ability to re-inscribe those norms. Any reading of these images as entirely celebratory misses the point as surely as a reading that interprets the images as purely condemnatory. The next chapter will explore images that are *meant* to be celebrations of the fat female body, and investigate whether or not these images (photographs by Joel-Peter Witkin and Leonard Nimoy, and a book by Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin) live up to their stated purpose.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in “Jenny Saville,” *Scotland on Sunday*.

Chapter Three: Contemporary American Culture, Fat, and Photographic Responses: Witkin, Edison, and Nimoy

Introduction

[T]here is no denying that America is a very fat country. One need only take a stroll through any airport or shopping mall to witness the ample size of our population. J. Eric Oliver¹

Americans have had a long and complex relationship with fat and the body. This chapter will insert the works of three contemporary photographers into the history of the fat body in the US, and discuss how their photographs of fat female bodies fit within larger cultural discourses about that body during their respective periods. The discourse surrounding Joel-Peter Witkin's images, made during the 1970s and 1980s, reinforces understandings of the fat body as other, as outsider, even as grotesque; yet the photographs themselves serve to normalize the fat body through the bizarre, macabre, and mutilated imagery that surrounds it. Laurie Toby Edison's photographs, part of a book incorporating writings by Deborah Notkin entitled *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes* (1994), resonate with the growing fat acceptance movement in their attempt to create fat-positive imagery. Ironically, the images themselves sometimes achieve the opposite of their intended function, and subtly reinforce anti-fat cultural biases in their content and compositions. Finally, Leonard Nimoy's *Full Body Project* (2007), both challenges prevalent conceptions of the fat body as morally deviant and sexually undesirable, and also reifies biases about fatness as abnormal, unusual, and unrepresentable.

¹ Eric J. Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006): 2.

Joel-Peter Witkin and the Obsession with Thinness

In the 1970s and 80s, as the fat body became increasingly stigmatized, Joel-Peter Witkin began to gain recognition for his photographs of attention-grabbing bodies, including the fat body. Witkin's project is more complex than the mere creation of a side-show catalogue, of course, and many aspects of his photographs receive scholarly attention. Anyone with a rudimentary background in art history will recognize references to, and out-and-out reworkings of, famous images. He visually quotes from the work of (among others): Sandro Boticelli, Peter Paul Rubens, Eugène Delacroix, Théodore Géricault, Gustave Courbet, Etienne-Jules Marey, Oscar Gustave Rejlander, Pablo Picasso, and Diane Arbus.² Scholars note Witkin's interest in death and transcendence, abjection and surrealism,³ and even trace his interest in the fin-de-siècle French poet Charles Baudelaire.⁴ In fact, Witkin's interests have been neatly catalogued by scholars, including his fascination with medical history, madmen, morgues, and especially with God.⁵ His overall objective is generally identified as a search for transcendence, an

² For a more comprehensive discussion of Witkin's references, see Van Deren Coke, *Joel-Peter Witkin: Forty Photographs* (San Francisco: Museum of Modern Art, 1985). This essay also deals with the erotic and fetishistic aspects of Witkin's work.

³ See Gus Blaisdell, afterword in *Joel-Peter Witkin: Gods of Earth and Heaven* (Pasadena: Twelvetreets Press, 1989); Germano Celant, *Witkin* (Zurich: Scalo, 1995); Alain D'Hooghe, "Grace and Compassion," introduction to *Joel-Peter Witkin: Oeuvres Récentes 1998-1999*, trans. Charles Penwarden (Paris: Baudoin Lebon, 2000); and Eugenia Parry, introduction to *Joel-Peter Witkin* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008). The association with abjection is cemented by a much cited incident from Witkin's personal history. He claims that as a six year old boy, he witnessed an automobile accident, and the severed head of a young girl rolled to a stop at his feet. He says, "I reached down to touch the face, to ask it—but before I did—someone carried me away...This...left its mark. Out of it grew my visual work...When I was sixteen, I... purchased a camera. I spent several days looking through the camera...then secretly came to know I wasn't holding a machine...I was holding HER FACE." Quoted in Joel-Peter Witkin, *The Bone House* (Sante Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 1998): n.p.

⁴ See Parry, introduction to *Joel-Peter Witkin*, n.p.

⁵ Witkin himself even curated an exhibition of this type of material, complete with catalogue entitled *Harm's Way: Lust and Madness, Murder and Mayhem: A Book of Photographs* (Sante Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 1994). It includes images of murdered corpses, medical subjects like a man with deformed feet and a woman with syphilis, pornographic material including S&M photographs from the Kinsey Collection, and psychiatric photos from Victorian England. He also edited an assortment of medical photographs from

attempt to find a higher power in the everyday (which perhaps explains the penchant for overwrought language in the description of Witkin's works).⁶ But above all else, those who write about Witkin scrutinize the bodies he depicts: the "rejected bodies" the "deformed, abnormal bodies" of his sitters, his "pariahs."⁷

Witkin's own discussion of the meaning and purpose of his project, as outlined in his graduate artist's statement as well as scholarly writings about his work, firmly locates the fat body as freakishly abnormal. In an "Afterword" for one of his monographs, Witkin catalogues his interests in a call for the types of models that interest him. He lists "physical prodigies of all kinds, pinheads...pre-op transsexuals...active or retired sideshow performers...people who live as comic book heroes...people with tails, horns, wings, fins, claws, reversed feet or hands, elephantine limbs..."⁸

Many authors demonstrate their interest in Witkin's sitters by incorporating lists of these types of freakish bodies, a tactic which causes each type of body to take on equal weight (so to speak). Here the fat body becomes undifferentiated from other marginalized, "abnormal" bodies, as in the words of Germano Celant, who lists "giantesses, midgets...the supero-bese [sic]...siamese twins and the elephant man."⁹ Eugenia Parry produces a similar roster, writing, "[Witkin] used to ride the New York

the Burns Archive; Joel-Peter Witkin, ed. *Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections from the Burns Archive* (Pasadena: Twelvetees Press, 1987).

⁶ See, for instance, Celant, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, and D'Hooghe, "Grace and Compassion." Again, Witkin's personal life opens his work up to these readings—he is the son of a Russian Jew and an Italian Catholic who split for largely religious reasons. For an example of the type of language characteristic of those who write about Witkin, see Celant or Blaisdell, afterword. Blaisdell writes, at the conclusion of his essay describing his feelings about viewing Witkin's photographs, "My body is a field of pain beyond the chronic. In my feelings worlds topple. I fake nothing. I have made myself—I am made—a way nobody can ever be. I am inhuman. My passions are directed against the will's anesthetizing powers. Implacable I long for the insatiable, the unquenched, the excruciating, the hellish, and the uninured. I am unrequitable..."

⁷ Alain D'Hooghe, introduction to *Joel-Peter Witkin: Oeuvres Récentes 1998-1999*, trans. Charles Penwarden (Paris: Baudouin Lebon, 2000).

⁸ Joel-Peter Witkin, afterword to *Joel-Peter Witkin: Photographs* (Pasadena: Twelvetees Press, 1985): n.p.

⁹ Germano Celant, *Joel-Peter Witkin*. (New York: Scalo, 1995): 15-16.

subways and try to extract from the passing hordes dwarfs, hermaphrodites, thalidomide and Aids [sic] victims, the pregnant or obese...freaks with huge penises or without hands.”¹⁰ Parry makes this equation of fatness and all other “abnormal” bodies even more explicit in another essay, as she writes about a photograph entitled *Alternatives for Muybridge* (1984).¹¹ It shows a pre-operative transsexual and a fat woman standing side by side in the same pose (a basic *contrapposto* with weight shifted to one leg and the figures’ right hands planted at the hip, elbows akimbo). Parry writes about the photograph:

Muybridge was famous for his studies of human and animal location. He even photographed an obese woman rising from a chair in order to capture the painful stages of her exertion. Witkin’s obese ‘alternate’ belonged to a ‘pride in being fat’ club. Her partner, a pre-op transsexual, is too lethargic for any motion study. Both are social outsiders, souls joined in limbo who will wait forever for the call to action.¹²

Parry’s language here displays the way that Witkin’s photographs appear to align neatly with contemporary ideas about the fat body. Muybridge, rather than being interested in all kinds of motion, is interested in the “painful...exertion” of the fat body; this meshes with contemporary understandings of the fat body as self-evidently ill; so ill that the mere act of standing up becomes both arduous and painful. Witkin’s model’s decision to join a “pride in being fat” club marks her size as a choice for Parry, as the transsexual’s body is a choice—a relatively new idea at the time Witkin composed this image, but well-absorbed into American culture at the time Parry wrote her description. Moreover, the two bodies depicted here fall so far outside the norm that they become a

¹⁰ Parry, introduction to *Joel-Peter Witkin* (2008), n.p.

¹¹ This image is illustrated in Eugenia Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin 55* (London: Phaidon, 2001): n.p.

¹² Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin 55*, n.p.

sort of anti-Adam and Eve for Parry, who imaginatively weds them as “souls joined in limbo.”

Sometimes authors single out the fat body, letting it stand alone, rather than subsuming it into a list of freaks. Van Deren Coke, speaking of Witkin’s need to shoot his images in private, writes, “Seclusion was important for the people he photographed were physically unusual, and could, while being photographed, attract a crowd. For instance, one of his [Virgin] Mary subjects was a 200-pound extra in porno films.”¹³ It is hard to imagine that out of all of Witkin’s subjects, a mere 200-pound woman presented the greatest shock value to his audience, but Coke’s decision to single her out certainly fits with the growing conviction that fat was the woman’s own fault, making it acceptable to ogle her in a way that might prove uncomfortable with the other sitters listed by Celant and Parry. Vicki Goldberg makes this clear in her discussion of another photographer’s works. In the course of discussing John Coplans’ pictures of his own nude and aging body, she notes that compared to Witkin’s “obese figures and amputees” Coplans’ body “could not match the voltage of [these] shocking discoveries...”¹⁴ Goldberg also de-naturalizes the fat body. For her, it constitutes a shocking discovery, not a prosaic encounter with an ordinary subject.

The way that critics locate the fat body in Witkin’s works fits with the understanding of the body during the years that Witkin photographed it. In the 1970s, Americans positioned fat at the nexus of a host of fears. Anxious about the effects of capitalism in the midst of a recession, fat seemed to visibly demonstrate the worst possibility—Americans floating through their lives, never expending an effort when a

¹³ Coke, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, 9.

¹⁴ Vicki Goldberg, “The Effects of Aging, Viewed Unblinkingly,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2000.

machine could do it for them, and consuming indiscriminately. A 1979 letter to *Newsweek* makes the link between fat (albeit metaphorical fat) and overconsumption explicit. The author, architectural historian Vincent Scully, writes,

Two life-styles are opposing each other...One is based in our cataclysmic, burn-it-up, crack-it-up, use-it, destroy-it dynamism...I hope we'll return to the kind of lifestyle...in tune with nature and the landscape...When it's hot, you open a window, you don't turn on the air-conditioning. These are our virtues. They have been *overlarded* with the *fat* and hysteria of consumerism...¹⁵

American culture seemed to travel down a destructive path. The American diet (high in processed sugar and saturated fat, leached of nutrients and rich in carcinogenic preservatives) was deadly, and an increasingly automated society would spawn weak, corrupted, sickly citizens. Fat killed, not just bodies, but spirits.¹⁶

The government and the medical community exacerbated these fears, embedding them in the newly developing health ethic. The Surgeon General published *Healthy People* in 1979, outlining new goals for the nation. Americans should now strive for disease prevention and an increased quality of life, and he advocated achieving or maintaining a lean body weight as the primary means of doing so. This document built on a 1976 study, written by the Surgeon General in conjunction with the department of Health, Education and Welfare, stressing that society's bad habits were causing early mortality. They estimated that half of the nation's deaths that year were attributable to unhealthy behavior or lifestyle. The study listed attaining a lean body as its top priority; only the cessation of smoking ranked as more pressing, and then only in the category of

¹⁵ Vincent Scully, "Can Less Be More?" *Newsweek*, November 19, 1979, 142. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Roberta Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989): 165-166.

cancer prevention. Of course, the notion that fatness was unnatural and also a choice (the same idea expressed by Parry and Coke) buttressed all of these ideas.

New studies linking diet to heart disease suggested that an individual determined her own weight and health. This framed the debate such that Americans chose their fat and bad health, rather than inheriting it. After all, the studies focused on “bad habits,” likening fat and cholesterol levels to smoking or drinking alcohol, rather than outside factors (like genetics).¹⁷ And by the end of the decade, dieters fully absorbed this lesson. A member of Overeaters Anonymous, interviewed for an article about dieting tips for the holidays, said, “If you slip, don’t let it be the beginning of a binge. *Choose* not to do it again.”¹⁸

Perhaps nothing reinforced the idea that fat was a choice more than the new field of behavioral modification (in the case of dieters, the principal goal was retraining adults about when and how to eat). By 1975, more than one hundred articles about this topic appeared in scholarly publications, reiterating the notion that fat people got fat only from gluttony and a sedentary lifestyle.¹⁹ It also escalated anxieties about food. Behavioral modification attempted to strip emotional, cultural, ritual, and sensual pleasure out of eating, in an effort to reduce it to a purely biological phenomenon. As a consequence, minute attention to eating habits and body weight was encouraged, and practitioners

¹⁷ Ibid., 175-177, 182-185.

¹⁸ Quoted in Sandy Rovner, “To Munch or Not to Munch,” *Washington Post*, December 14, 1979. Emphasis original.

¹⁹ Of course, behavioral modification was not the only new theory based on the premise that fat came from overeating and not exercising enough. For instance, Dr. Henry A. Jordan espoused a theory blaming fatness on overeating and lack of activity, behaviors inherited from our primitive ancestors. “Man,” he said, “is basically predisposed to eat, to consume food if it’s in our environment...” Quoted in Sandy Rovner, “May Your House Be Free of Tigers,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 1979. In the same article, Rovner notes that Jordan also, “believes we have a predisposition to conserve calories by being as inactive as we can.” Of course, the subtext here proposes the fat man as a kind of throwback to a more primitive era, unable to overcome his baser urges...linking the theory to a long line of others relating thinness and willpower.

frequently asked participants to keep detailed journals in which they planned their meals in advance, recording when and how much they ate and noting their emotional responses before and after. In essence, physicians and psychologists were encouraging Americans to emulate not only the thinking but also the behavior of those with eating disorders.²⁰

By the end of the decade, the lexicon of behavioral therapists permeated popular culture, not just the academic realm. Taking a cue from behavioral therapists, author Sandy Rovner advised holiday dieters not to “mistake fatigue (loneliness, anxiety, stress) for hunger.”²¹ Rose Freidland, a regional director for Weight Watchers, provided anecdotal evidence for the premises of the field in an article about behavioral therapy and weight loss, explaining how her daughter became obese: “When I was growing up, food was a sign of love.”²² The *Globe and Mail* went even further, not only describing behavioral modification for their readers, but also actually laying out diet plans and strategies from the therapy in an article entitled “The Consumer Game.”²³

Of course, Americans worried about more than capitalism, heart disease, and emotional eating. They also worried about their appearance, and they found fat unsightly. Writing about what would eventually come to be known as Body Image Distortion Syndrome (or the inability to accurately estimate actual body size), Sandy Rovner describes an imaginary anorexic²⁴ woman, and her imaginary fat counterpart, named Janet. “Janet looked at herself in the mirror, blinked her large blue eyes at herself and smiled...She weighed 250 pounds, but she saw a Farrah Fawcett-Majors twin smiling

²⁰ Laura Fraser, *Losing It: False Hopes and Fat Profits in the Diet Industry* (New York: Plume, 1998): 3, 114, 243; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 170-171.

²¹ Rovner, “To Munch or Not to Munch.”

²² Quoted in Sandy Bain, “The Food/Love Syndrome,” *Washington Post*, June 8, 1979.

²³ Ellen Roseman, “The Consumer Game,” *Globe and Mail*, January 25, 1979.

²⁴ This disease was relatively unknown in the 1970s. Even as late as 1978, it was called a “strange disease,” and news sources presumed their readers would be unfamiliar with it. See “New Warnings about Those ‘Easy Diets,’” *U.S. News and World Report*, July 10, 1978.

back at her...the Janets of the world...may never even try to lose weight because they don't see themselves as fat..."²⁵ Rovner finds Janet's situation as troubling as an anorexic's. She seems to be suggesting that a fat woman should not be smiling at herself in the mirror. If it is problematic that a fat woman "may never even try" to diet, it is logical to presume the reason is that a fat woman should recognize that fat is antithetical to attractiveness and correct her problem by losing weight. The depths of this presumption can be seen in the article's assumption that a fat woman must see a thin woman in the mirror in order to smile at herself. Rovner cannot imagine the possibility that a fat woman might enjoy her body just the way it is.

This preoccupation with fatness led to the prevalence of dieting books, products, and gimmicks. The decade witnessed the birth of the Scarsdale diet, which proved so popular that the food critic for the *Washington Post* even produced articles about eating out and still adhering to its rules.²⁶ It competed with the then-new Atkins diet, the grapefruit diet, Dr. Stillman's diet, and briefly with the "Last Chance" diet, proposed by Dr. Robert Linn, before the deaths of almost forty dieters led the FDA to intervene in the no-eating, liquid-protein-only fad.²⁷ These were supplemented by a number of snake-oil products, like the "Diet Conscience," a battery operated gizmo designed to insult the dieter when she opened her refrigerator,²⁸ and two different candy bars marked not in

²⁵ Sandy Rovner, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall," *Washington Post*, May 18, 1979.

²⁶ "Fishes without Loaves and Unforbidden Fruits," Richman on Restaurants, *Washington Post*, November 4, 1979.

²⁷ Marian Burros, "Lost (and Found) in Scarsdale," *Washington Post*, October 12, 1978; Marian Burros, "Slow and Steady Trims the Waist," *Washington Post*, September 28, 1978; Larry Kramer, "Doubts on Protein Deaths," *Washington Post*, December 24, 1977; "New Warnings about Those 'Easy Diets,'" *U.S. News and World Report*, July 10, 1978.

²⁸ Elizabeth Davis, "Fridge's Dare," *Washington Post*, December 31, 1978.

inches, but in calories.²⁹ In fact, by 1979, Americans spent ten billion dollars a year on weight loss.³⁰

Despite the neat alignment between the literature on Witkin and these developing anti-fat cultural biases, his photographs can actually be seen to undermine, rather than reinforce, discourse about the fat body. Compared to the hunchback, the little person, or the nude hermaphrodite, the fat body appears quite commonplace; in other words, Witkin's images visually normalize the fat body. As Witkin pictures it, there is nothing new or surprising about fatness itself. Witkin creates a land where a decapitated head kisses itself (*Le Baiser, New Mexico*, 1982), a dog's torso peels away to reveal a cascade of vegetables (*The Result of War: The Cornucopian Dog, New Mexico*, 1984), Botticelli's most famous Venus sprouts a penis (*Gods of Earth and Heaven Los Angeles*, 1988), the skeleton of a human merges with that of an ostrich to create a kind of human/bird amalgam (*Cupid and Centaur*, 1992) and flowers spring forth from a dismembered arm (*Anna Akhmatova*, 1999). Compared to these wonders, what shock lies in the fat body, which can be seen—albeit rarely nude, as in Witkin's photos—every day?

Even more, when the fat body does appear in Witkin's photographs, he surrounds it with such bizarre apparatus or transforms it so grotesquely that the viewer barely focuses on the body itself. Many examples of this phenomenon exist in Witkin's oeuvre, including *Mother and Child, New Mexico* (1979, fig. 3-1), *The Bird of Quevada, New Mexico* (1982, fig. 3-2), *Portrait of the Holocaust, New Mexico* (1982, fig. 3-3), *The Capitulation of France, New Mexico* (1982, fig. 3-4), *Sanitorium, New Mexico* (1983, fig.

²⁹ "An Array of Products for Christmas Shoppers," *U.S. News and World Report*, November 27, 1978; Elizabeth Davis, "Having Your Chocolate and Eating It Too," *Washington Post*, October 15, 1978.

³⁰ Burros, "Lost (and Found)."

3-5), *Portrait of Nan, New Mexico* (1984, fig. 3-6), *Blind Woman and her Blind Son* (1989, fig. 3-7), *Woman with Appendage* (1988, fig. 3-8), and so on.

Perhaps the least characteristic of these images is *Woman with Appendage*. In it, a fat model poses as in a nineteenth-century pornographic photograph. She wears striped stockings which end mid-thigh and a bejeweled mask which covers her eyes; her blonde hair flows loosely around her body. She sits, seen from just below the knee upwards, in front of a black, velvety curtain. The photograph, like all the others which will be discussed here, is black and white; but, like the pose itself, the image appears old-fashioned. The black is a rich velvety color associated more closely with the photographs of Felix Nadar than with the crisp blacks and cold whites of modern photographs.³¹ The old-fashioned quality of the image also inclines the viewer to more acceptance of the body type, reminding her of previous ideals for the female body, in which softness and amplitude could be sexy.

The tactile quality of the image, the model's gaze obscured by the mask, the lack of distractions in the background—all would seem to invite the viewer to dwell erotically on the sitter's large body, to linger over the fullness of her thighs, the amplitude of her belly. And yet Witkin undermines the impulse towards eroticization or fetishization. The mask, which blocks the model's gaze and presumptively leaves her open for perusal, presents a black void in the eye holes. These ebony pits suggest that perhaps the model has no eyes. If there is a sexuality or eroticism here, it is a dark sexuality, a macabre fantasy.

³¹ Indeed, this is precisely the effect for which Witkin strives in his images. Using enlargers, Witkin works over his negatives for hours, scratching and drawing on them. He places glass over the negative and paints on that glass with coffee, tea, eggs, and other substances. He aims for “[an] effect . . . not unlike that in the earliest examples of daguerreotype or calotype.” Quote from Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin* (2008), n.p.

This subtle disquiet which emanates from the model's face continues in the focus of the picture: her chest, centered in the photograph. Witkin subtly unravels the sexual potency of the image here by erasing the model's nipples and left arm. The arm may be hidden by her body, but its nearly complete absence (the only visible portion are two fingers that the model cups beneath her left breast), coupled with the way that her hair obscures her shoulder, suggests amputation. Her breasts fade into an undifferentiated blur at the tips; this, like the eyeless mask and missing arm, suggests that any abnormalities in this model are not weight related, but physical deformities. The final element in the photograph which detracts and distracts from the model's physical size is the center of her chest, between her breasts. Witkin places a fetus here, surrounded by a circular areola of drapery. The image depicts only the lower back, buttocks, and legs of the fetus, suggesting that the infant is perhaps growing out of her chest like an unfinished Siamese twin, perhaps burrowing through her ribs like a parasite, or perhaps wriggling free of her body, like the aliens in a Ridley Scott horror film.

Witkin achieves a similar effect with a more elaborate scene in *Blind Woman and Her Blind Son, New Mexico*. The two figures in this image, the titular mother and son, stand, once more, in front of a curtain—this time, the majority of the background is matte white, with hints of a richer, colored and textured fabric where it pools at the edges of the composition. Witkin photographs the figures full-length; even the floor is shown. Irregular objects with roughly spherical shapes (stones?) litter the floor, and the child stands on top of a rectangular item (a book? a box?).

This image, like *Woman with Appendage*, contains art historical references. The child is dressed as Cupid, with wings, a loin cloth, an arrow held aloft over his head, a

bow dangling from his other arm, and a strap suggesting a quiver crossing his chest. The mother then, reads as Venus, with her *contrapposto* pose and genitalia-obscuring drapery. Yet again, the pose and setting would seem to invite eroticization of the female form, to posit the mother figure as a modern day Venus intended for titillation. And yet, once again, Witkin challenges these assumptions by transforming the expected into the unsettled.

The macabre tone of the image begins with the child. He wears a mask which covers his entire face; its pitted surface, rich with scratches and runnels, suggests the face of a burn victim. Witkin's treatment of the image surface heightens the sense of mutilation. The photograph itself appears scratched, scarred, burned, and pitted. Disfiguring marks cross the bodies of both figures, and a diagonal block of scratch marks obscures an entire area on the right side of the photograph. The toes of the mother's right foot disappear, and the layered surface of the image makes it difficult to tell if they have been physically removed, or merely displaced by Witkin's mark making.

The attributes of the mother, however, intensify the disquieting nature of the imagery tenfold. Witkin once more obscures the eyes; the woman wears a blindfold, which completely denies the possibility of any challenging gaze from the woman. Yet the blindfold also serves to draw attention to the woman's facial hair. She sprouts a full beard and mustache. The coy drapery around her hips coupled with her adornment in jewelry (she wears bracelets and multiple necklaces) and her obviously feminine breasts titillate the viewer. But the titillation is unfulfilled. Witkin leaves the viewer asking the question—what's beneath the drapery? Is this a man? A woman? A hermaphrodite? A transsexual? By preventing the viewer from fully interrogating the mother's body, the

focus and erotic charge of the image shifts from the mother's fatness to her sexual identity. The charge of viewing the fat body unclothed is translated to an unfulfilled desire to completely know the woman's sex.

Portrait of Nan, New Mexico contains elements similar to both *Woman with Appendage* and *Blind Woman and Her Blind Son*. A single fat model sits in front of a small drapery. The plain walls of a room are visible behind her. Like the other sitters, her face is obscured, this time by a cardboard cutout in a skewed T shape, which begins in her lap and covers her face. A woman's painted visage sits where the model's should be, but the features are too large to be in scale. Now, instead of the figure's sex, it is her physiognomy that is simultaneously revealed and concealed, that tantalizes the viewer without answering her questions.

These questions are not resolved by Witkin's direct reference to Grant Wood's 1933 portrait of his sister, also titled *Portrait of Nan* (fig. 3-9). In fact, it is Wood's portrait that appears on the T-shaped cutout that Witkin's model holds. The quotation of Wood's painting only further complicates the photograph, because Witkin's intentions for this quotation are unclear. Is he paying homage to the Wood portrait? Is he constructing a parody? Is it Witkin's intention to draw parallels between his fleshy sitter and Wood's gaunt sister? If so, which woman benefits from this comparison?³²

Witkin's manipulation of the image disfigures the model, intensifying the morbid air of the picture. A garland-like doodle crosses her chest and extends onto both upper arms. The linear design seems simultaneously tattooed and scratched into her flesh. A series of amorphous black circles litter both the painted cutout of a woman and the body

³² Witkin may also be making a more obscure reference to an engraving (entitled *Bluebeard Tableau*) by Winslow Homer which appeared in an 1868 issue of *Harper's*, showing what appear to be women's decapitated heads. They seem to hang from hair twined around rope.

of the photographed woman. These circles suggest at once the polka-dotted fabric of the dress worn by Wood's sister, spilled ink or dribbled paint, moles metastasized into cancerous melanomas, the marks of hot metal brands, and excess nipples. Their shape is echoed and reinforced by the small apple the model holds in her right hand. These dots float on the surface of the sitter's skin, and frustrate the viewer with their refusal to resolve into a single meaning, to declare themselves malignant or benign. The atmosphere of mutilation, perhaps ritualized sexual mutilation, continues in the figure's hair. It is twisted into eight spikes and pinned against the wall in a suggestion of fetish or sadomasochistic sexual play. This arrangement heightens the tension of the image. The hair suggests pain, as it is strained and pulled taut from the woman's scalp. It locks her into place, as movement of her head would rip strands out by the roots.

Witkin also amplifies the enigmatic narrative of the image by including bizarre accoutrements. A tiny human skeleton floats along the right-hand edge of the photograph. The model cradles, not just a small apple, but some sort of denuded animal in her lap. Visual interrogation refuses to yield an identification of the animal. Is it a small dog, like a Chihuahua? A chicken stripped of its feathers (another reference to Wood's *Portrait of Nan*, where the sitter holds a chick)? A fetal pig, a sheep, or a deer? Like the dots splashed across her torso, the animal refuses to yield its identity to the viewer. The disquieting atmosphere of the image combined with its mysterious narrative distract from the size and shape of the woman's body. Compared to the strange pose, the inscrutable objects, and queer markings on her body, her size and shape become comfortingly commonplace.

Sanatorium, New Mexico shares the unsettling atmosphere of *Portrait of Nan, New Mexico*. A fat nude woman reclines in a nearly empty room, a swatch of drapery behind her. But here again, the focus remains on the macabre narrative. The woman wears a strange winged mask, and a tube is inserted in her mouth. The tube and reclining pose reference Orientalist pictures like Ingres' *Grand Odalisque* (1814). This reference suggests that perhaps the woman is smoking a hookah pipe, but following the path of the tubing, one can see that it loops through the body of a monkey, which is mounted on the wall. The tubing enters through the monkey's mouth, and exits through its rectum. The tube's meaning becomes polyvalent. Is this some sort of bizarre sexual apparatus? Is the woman being tortured, despite her relaxed pose? The clear plastic of the tubing also vaguely references hospital paraphernalia, making it seem as though the woman has been intubated. It is also possible that Witkin wants to reference Edward Weston's *Civilian Defense*, an equally enigmatic work (1942, fig. 3-10). In Weston's photograph, his wife reclines along a couch in pose that is similar to that of Witkin's model. Weston's wife wears a gas mask, and a spray of greenery decorates the foreground of the photograph. As with the Witkin piece, the Weston photograph refuses to yield a clear or coherent narrative.

Reading the Witkin image's narrative is further complicated by other mysterious elements. The model has one leg fully extended, with her pointed foot looped through a hanging cord or strap. Again, the reasons for this posture are elusive. It suggests sexual bondage, the stirrups of a gynecological exam, the pulling of a lever, and many other gestures. Behind that foot is a fantastical object. Its core is roughly cube-shaped, with regular rows of pointed cones extending outward. It looks vaguely like a post minimalist

sculpture, but a threatening one with its multiple points extruding like a reverse pincushion. As in the other images discussed here, the ambiguous narrative, the threatening apparatus, the bizarreness of the picture serve to make the body size of the sitter a non-issue; her shape recedes into the background compared to the other troubling elements of the photograph.³³

This same de-emphasis of the sitter's fatness can be found in other Witkin photographs. In *The Capitulation of France, New Mexico* (1982), a fat woman is attached through cords at her nipples to a child's back. He wears a grotesque mask; her upraised hands and her head have been defaced by Witkin. In *Portrait of the Holocaust, New Mexico* (1982), a fat woman reclines, wearing a mask. Behind her a picture of an angel is attached to the wall; in her hands she dangles a live, crying baby, and two fetuses or dolls. *The Bird of Quevada, New Mexico* (1982), depicts the torso of a fat woman with a pattern drawn across her upper face that reads as a lacy mask. Wings sprout from her back and her arms end above the elbow. Below her large breasts are two tiny bird's feet, as if she has been transformed into a modern-day harpy. In all three of these photographs, the narrative is unclear, but dark and macabre. There are signs of disfiguration, of trauma and pain. The body transforms in strange and unsettling ways. In all three images, the size of the body becomes incidental in the face of the fantastical imagery created by Witkin.

³³ Here are Witkin's own sentiments about this particular photograph: "The tubes indicate the transfer of fluids running from the monkey's mouth and genitalia to the human. The wings are bird wings and the mask is an old rubber mask turned inside out. I was reading some esoteric literature at the time about breathing in fumes and how such sensation affects us. We cannot see such sensations, but I wanted to indicate them. I put this very large woman, who reminded me of the full-bodied women in Maillol's or Lachaise's work, in a languid pose. There is for me in this situation a strange, terrible sense of being forced to view the events in rooms of asylums or places of torture. But most importantly, it is a depiction of an egoless being, a shaman in existence here and beyond." Quoted in Coke, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, 16.

As much as Witkin's images serve to normalize the fat body visually, it is typically their function as part of a group of abnormal and even freakish sitters that is emphasized in the discourse. Perhaps this is due to the growing stigma against the fat body in American culture; the more that the fat body becomes entrenched as abnormal and grotesque in society, the more that later viewers, scholars included, see the fat body in Witkin's images as abnormal and grotesque. The same sort of stigma that made it difficult for Sandy Rovner to believe a fat woman could find her own body attractive without recourse to imagining herself as thin also blinds contemporary scholars. And certainly, the stigma against the fat body has only continued to grow in the years since Witkin took these pictures.

Laurie Toby Edison, Debbie Notkin and Fat Fighting Back

The trends begun in the 1970s continued to influence American culture in the 1980s. The insurance companies still advocated for lower body weights, even as Met Life reversed its tendency toward ever lowering "ideal" body weights. Although a woman who was advised to weigh 108-116 at 5'4" in 1959 was now allowed to weigh between 114-127 (and the charts allowed a generous 13-pound weight gain for shorter women) the company was careful to stress that "it is better to be lean than to be plump, and wiser to weigh less than the average rather than more."³⁴

Moreover, Met Life's new standards met with considerable resistance. Respected medical journals continued to publish articles that suggested the unhealthy consequences

³⁴ Glen Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health* (Carlsbad, CA: Gürze Books, 2002): 50-51. Met Life quoted in Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*, 50. The charts were revised upward based on the rising average weight of policy holders as well as to make them fit better with mortality rates based on actuarial data: whether they were in fact more accurate is questionable. Met Life even stopped using the tables to determine policy rates. For more, see Gaessar and Seid.

of excess weight, and in 1985 the NIH convened a conference on the “Health Implications of Obesity” which contravened Met Life’s new tables.³⁵ The media coverage of the conference led to headlines such as “Obesity is ‘Killer Disease’ Affecting 34 Million Americans, NIH Reports,” and “Panel Finds Obesity a Major U.S. Killer.”³⁶

The public’s concerns about fat increased dramatically. According to Seid, between 1979 and 1980, only sixty articles were published on the topic of diet in America; in contrast, there were sixty-six articles on dieting published in January of 1980 *alone*. By 1984, there were 300 diet manuals on bookstore shelves. The cosmetic procedure of liposuction was introduced to the U.S. in 1982, and by 1984 55,000 liposuctions had been performed here; by 1986 the number had risen to 100,000. At the same time, more and more Americans began to subscribe to the exercise craze. An estimated twenty-five million Americans took up aerobics between 1981 and 1984, and by 1986 Reebok alone made sixty-five million dollars on aerobics shoes. Americans spent a total of three billion dollars just on athletic shoes in that year.³⁷

Food itself became increasingly suspect, as society began to succumb to an eating disordered mentality. The Food Marketing Institute noted that between 1983 and 1987, shoppers’ concerns about salt in their food increased twenty-two percent, concerns about fat in food rose seventy-eight percent, concerns about the number of calories in food jumped 133 percent, and concerns about cholesterol in food skyrocketed by 180

³⁵ Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*, 52.

³⁶ “Obesity is ‘Killer Disease’ Affecting 34 Million Americans, NIH Reports,” *Washington Post*, February 14, 1985; “Panel Finds Obesity a Major U.S. Killer,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1985.

³⁷ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 236. Researchers also continued to search out effective means of curing the obesity epidemic, trying everything from computers to reinforce good behavior (Paul Berg, “Computer Helps Dieters with Praise,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 1986) to experiments with rat and pig hormones (Jeremy Laurance, “If You’re Thinking of Being a Pig,” *Sunday Times (London)*, December 18, 1988).

percent.³⁸ Articles that explained the difference between “good” and “bad” fat, how to read labels and judge fat content, to reduce or eliminate fat in meals, etc., proliferated.³⁹ People began to believe that not only were certain foods inherently bad, but also that certain foods were “super foods.” This is not to suggest that people should not strive to attain an heart-healthy diet. The point here is that the persecution of certain foods, the conviction that *any* consumption of a certain type of food (cake, for instance) must be naughty, a guilty pleasure regardless of quantity or frequency, mirrors the thinking of the eating disordered and can ultimately cause more harm than benefit.⁴⁰

As in previous periods, not everyone accepted the societal beliefs about fat without question. In fact, as early as 1969, America had its own fat advocacy group. The organization NAAFA (the acronym originally stood for the National Association to Aid Fat Americans; it is currently used as shorthand for the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) was founded in that year by an electrical engineer who had witnessed the struggles of his fat wife and had struggled himself with the prejudices faced by an average sized man attracted to fat women.⁴¹ NAAFA’s stated goal is to “[end] size discrimination in all its forms...to build a society in which people of every size are accepted with dignity and equality in all aspects of life...through advocacy, public education, and support.”⁴² Since its inception, NAAFA has incorporated both social networking for fat people and also political activism, through letter-writing, protests, and

³⁸ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 238-239.

³⁹ “Cholesterol Counts,” *Newsweek*, January 19, 1981; Sarah Fritschner, “Trimming the Fat from Holiday Meals,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 1981; Moira Hodgson, “Taking the Fat out of Eating,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1982; “Saturated or Not?” *Hobart Mercury*, August 15, 1989; D. Williams, “Trimming off Fat,” *Telegraph*, June 4, 1986; and others.

⁴⁰ It can become part of a larger obsession with body size that measures weight as the sole standard of success for health, for instance.

⁴¹ Marcia Milman, *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1980): 4.

⁴² As found on their website, <http://www.naafaonline.com> (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, “Website Home Page,” accessed August 1, 2011).

outreach to news media (for instance, they recently intervened on behalf of actress Gabby Sidibe when Howard Stern commented on her weight).⁴³

NAAFA was not the sole voice speaking out against fat bias. Fat-positive groups formed in London,⁴⁴ and a few voices in academe and medicine spoke out about the prejudices fat people faced in their daily lives.⁴⁵ NAAFA, however, has its limitations. There are relatively few members, and those tend to be located in large metropolitan areas. And many people struggling with weight and its societal consequences may not have even heard of this organization. For instance, between the founding of NAAFA and January 1, 1990, the organization appeared in the *New York Times* only three times.⁴⁶

But NAAFA was not the only voice arguing against the anti-fat culture. It was in the 1980s that a number of books questioning society's bodily norms began to appear. Authors writing for major publications began to investigate women's negative attitudes toward their bodies,⁴⁷ and many expressed genuine concern over dieting in children.⁴⁸ Marcia Millman published *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America* in 1980, questioning what it was like to live as a fat woman in America. Hillel Schwartz's *Never*

⁴³ Kimberly Garrison, "Is Sidibe OK at Her Weight, or Obesity's Poster Girl?" *Philadelphia Daily News*, March 18, 2010.

⁴⁴ Margaret Harris, "A Fight Against Prejudice," *Sun Herald (Sydney)*, November 26, 1989; "Thin Time for the Fat Woman," *Herald (Sydney)*, March 19, 1989.

⁴⁵ Albert B. Crenshaw, "Fat People Face Job Discrimination," *Washington Post*, June 28, 1981; "Fated to Be Fat," *New York Times*, March 2, 1981; "Obese Are Victims of Bias," *Globe and Mail*, August 5, 1980.

⁴⁶ In an ad for a book entitled *Fat Pride: A Survival Handbook*, which appeared December 5, 1971; and in two articles. Judy Klemesrud, "There Are a Lot of People Willing to Believe Fat Is Beautiful..." *New York Times*, August 18, 1970; Lisbet Fisher, "Battling Bigotry on Obesity," *New York Times*, June 11, 1981. This is not to suggest that articles don't appear in other places, for instance twice in the same issue of the *Washington Post* ("Fat, They Say, 'Is Not a Four-Letter Word,'" *Washington Post*, March 4, 1980; "For Self-Esteem," *Washington Post*, March 4, 1980). But NAAFA never received a concentrated stream of national attention.

⁴⁷ Philip Clark, "There's a Body of Opinion," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 4, 1988; Barry Hailstone, "Changing the Shape of a '10'," *Advertiser*, November 18, 1986; Carol Krucoff, "Fear of Fat," *Washington Post*, June 6, 1984.

⁴⁸ Richard Cohen, "Why Do Children Go on Diets?" *Washington Post*, March 29, 1986; "Experts Say Twiggy's Skinny Looks Continuing," *Globe and Mail*, November 20, 1987; "Milk Loss Threat to Dieting Girls," *Telegraph*, December 10, 1987; Nadine Joseph and Jean Seligmann, "The Littlest Dieters," *Newsweek*, July 27, 1987; "Teenage Size Woes Surprise," *Herald*, October 14, 1988.

Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat appeared in 1986. Roberta Pollock Seid joined them with *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* in 1989. And there were others⁴⁹—and more to come.

Notkin and Edison—Discourse that Questions

Fat women are big; they are hard not to notice. Nevertheless, there is a particular way in which we don't see fat women. I never used to think much about the artistic possibilities of fat women's bodies. Laurie Toby Edison.⁵⁰

While it would be an overstatement to say that there was a unified counter-movement of bodily acceptance in the 1980s, or even that there is one today, certainly there were societal currents that questioned prevailing attitudes toward fatness. It is with these counter-currents that Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin's book, *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes* resonates. Debbie Notkin wrote and edited the text which accompanies Laurie Toby Edison's forty-one black-and-white photographs of fat nudes of varying ethnicities. Notkin also posed for seven of them.

Edison and Notkin knew each other from the professional and recreational system of science fiction fandom. Notkin (who is self-described as fat) and Edison (who is not) had a conversation revolving around a comment from a man in the science fiction community, which led them to form a series of panels about fat, feminism, and science fiction. Notkin describes their encounter this way:

A prominent (fat) man in [the science fiction] community had written a letter to a private-circulation magazine, explaining that he didn't go to

⁴⁹ Many of these books were directed specifically at eating disorders like anorexia (see Kim Chernin's collected works, the first of which was published in 1981, for example) but they nonetheless interrogated beauty and body standards in American society.

⁵⁰ Laurie Toby Edison, foreword to *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes*, ed. Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin (San Francisco: Books in Focus, 1994): 8.

nudist camps “not because I am afraid of getting an erection at an inappropriate time, but because of my terror of being confronted by a three-hundred-pound naked woman with an appendectomy scar.” I thought he was being cruel. I too believed that the woman he described would be ugly, by definition, but I was hurt just the same. Just because we’re ugly is no reason to be mean to us, I thought. “That’s *awful!*” Laurie said. “We have to do something about that.”...Before I knew it, she and I were organizing panel discussions at science fiction conventions, with fat women from the science fiction community as fellow panelists.⁵¹

This kind of personal revelation fits in with many contemporary narratives, especially those of NAAFA members.⁵² But Notkin and Edison took their disquiet further. Notkin began serving as a model for Edison’s jewelry, then as a model for her photographs. Edison wanted to turn the images into a book, a “trenchantly political, affordable book,”⁵³ and photographed more fat models. To raise money for the publication of *Women En Large*, the two produced a newsletter and held panels and slide shows across the country.⁵⁴ The resulting images were carefully selected to show a range of sizes, races, and activities, and incorporated suggestions from participants in the slide shows that helped fund the book’s publication. Notkin summarizes the project thusly:

Women En Large is not just a book, but a social change project that operates on several levels...Fat activism needs to take this one big step: fat is not just okay, it is a way of being beautiful...I wanted...[to] sell the book...just so more women can learn that they are fat and beautiful, powerful and strong, real and remarkable.⁵⁵

Like the NAAFA mixers and activist campaigns of the 1980s, *Women En Large* was produced with the specific goal of fat-empowerment.

⁵¹ Debbie Notkin, “Enlarging: The Personal Story,” in *Women En Large*, 108.

⁵² See Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*, for first-person narratives on this topic.

⁵³ Notkin, “Enlarging,” 110.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

In virtually the only extended discussion of *Women En Large*, Le'a Kent addresses the book. I say the book, rather than the images, because her essay focuses almost solely on the text, with no extended attention to any one image. Kent's critique of Notkin and Edison's project aims more at its conception than its execution. Kent argues that the driving force behind both the essay topics and the photographic depictions is a desire to contradict mainstream stereotypes about fatness:

Because fat women are often thought to be essentially "the same," Edison and Notkin strongly emphasize diversity...Because fat women are thought to eat all the time and never exercise, food is never shown or mentioned in the book and women are shown stretching and dancing. Because fat bodies are thought to be inherently perverse, the photos are 'not intended to be erotic.'⁵⁶

But Kent's main objection to *Women En Large* is what she sees as its argument for the "genetic immutability" of fatness.⁵⁷ For Kent, Notkin's reliance on the medical model for the body reinscribes the fat body as a symptom, not of gluttony but of genetics. Thus, for Kent, the book fails to overcome what she sees as the true root of fat-hatred, Cartesian dualism. As she writes, "the text downplays the fat body made visible in the photographs, in effect maintaining the mind/body split, maintaining the presentation of fat as symptom, and maintaining some of the mainstream erasure of the fat body."⁵⁸ While Kent's assessment of the text is accurate and illuminating, the images in the book deserve an equally careful scrutiny.

⁵⁶ Le'a Kent, "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women," in Braziel, *Bodies Out of Bounds*, 130-152. Quote, 139.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

Edison's Imagery

The photographs in *Women En Large* are all untitled, black-and-white shots (they will be referred to here by the sitter's name and the page number on which they appear in the book). The women are largely pictured alone, although there are some group photographs. As Kent points out, the fat body is frequently pictured doing things contrary to societal expectation. There are no photographs of the women eating (although two are set in a kitchen). Instead, the sitters are shown dancing, stretching, in a garden, on a beach, in the shower, even pregnant. A wide variety of body types and ethnicities are included, making a place for everyone in Notkin and Edison's fat-positive worldview (and circumventing the frequent debates about who is fat and who is not that tend to derail some fat-theorists and fat-activists).

Some of the sitters appear relaxed, at ease, and seem to dispel the myth that all fat women hate their bodies. The very first image which appears inside the book (11, figure 3-12) depicts a black sitter named P.D. She reclines atop a spotted blanket, propped up on her left arm, the right trailing along her thigh. P.D.'s body is loose and appears comfortably arranged; she meets the viewer's gaze and smiles widely. The reclining pose, the jewelry she wears (a bracelet and a necklace with pendant), and the bedding on which she lies draw immediate parallels to a long history of reclining female nudes, from Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) to Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and Matisse's *Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra* (1907), without referencing any of these directly.

This photograph therefore defies two of the prevailing conceptions of the fat body. The approachability of the model, the confidence and good-humor with which she meets the viewer's gaze, suggest a level of comfort with and satisfaction in her own body

which runs contrary to expectations for her. Far more familiar are sentiments like “I went through years of therapy but still didn’t come to terms with being fat,”⁵⁹ and “...I felt clumsy and huge. I felt that I would knock over furniture, bump into things, tip over chairs, not fit into VWs....I felt like I was taking over the whole room...I felt disgusting and like a slob.”⁶⁰ Moreover, despite Notkin and Edison’s stated intention to avoid eroticism, P.D.’s pose links her to images of women that are sexually desirable; one of the most pervasive myths about fat women is that they are inherently unattractive and asexual or that they sublimate their sexuality through overeating.⁶¹

Many of the group photographs included in the book also work to support the idea that fat women can be comfortable with their own bodies; moreover, the interactions belie the notion of the isolated, socially maladjusted fat person. In one image, Tracy Blackstone and Debbie Notkin (page 63, figure 3-12) face each other on a sofa. They are posed like bookends, so that Notkin’s stance (she is on the right) mirrors Blackstone’s, only reversed. Both have their knees tucked up, one arm along the back of the couch, and the other on the couch arm (there are minor differences—Notkin’s right arm rests on her thigh while Blackstone’s dangles off the couch arm, and so forth). Although neither looks at the viewer, the portrait does not seem voyeuristic or exploitative. The women are engaged with one another, Blackstone smiling, Notkin’s face casually relaxed. They form a closed circuit, an introspective mirror image of pleasure in their own bodies and in each other’s company.

⁵⁹ Rhetta Moskowitz, quoted in Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*, 15.

⁶⁰ From the unpublished autobiography of a woman named Ellin, Quoted in Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*.

⁶¹ For more on this topic, see Fraser, *Losing It*; Seid, *Never Too Thin*; Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*; Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000); Marilyn Wann, *FAT!SO? Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1998).

A second image showing Debbie Notkin, Chupoo Alafonté and Carol S. showering together (page 77, figure 3-13) captures the same atmosphere. The three women stand in similar poses in a loose circle, allowing the body to be seen from behind, in profile, and from the front. All three women are laughing, engaged with each other and seemingly unaware of the camera. This image works on a number of levels—the turned poses allow the body to be examined from all angles, creating a rhythm of repetition, yet also exploring the differences between the three bodies, a successful strategy employed by many artists from the Greeks onward in the form of the Three Graces (see, for instance, Botticelli's *Primavera* [c. 1482], Raphael's *Three Graces* [1500-1505], etc.). They seem to enjoy the pleasures of inhabiting their own bodies, the warmth of the spray, the soft texture of the soap that Carol S. applies to her shoulder. And, like Notkin and Blackstone in the previous image, the sitters create a warm and joyful figural loop that is complete with or without the viewer. The women here are comfortable, at home in their own bodies and enjoying their activities.

On the whole, however, the models tend to reinforce ideas about fat women's discomfort with their own bodies rather than to undermine those ideas, particularly the shots of single sitters.⁶² The problem tends to be less that the models look away from the viewer than that their postures suggests anxiety and discomfort. This issue becomes apparent in the photograph of model Ann West (page 13, figure 3-14) as she stands alone in her kitchen, in front of a hanging rack for pots. West's pose is not strictly vertical, because she props one elbow against a side table. The photograph is taken at an angle, a fact exaggerated by West's location in a corner and the rug beneath her feet, which

⁶² And single sitter portraits make up the majority of the book. Of the forty-one photographs in the book, only eight include more than one figure, and of these, six show only two people.

exacerbates the arrowed quality of the photograph. She stands in an almost classic *contrapposto* (not completely classic, because her weight rests not on her straight leg but on the side table that she leans against) in three-quarters view, and turns her face toward the camera. Her turning posture makes her appear to be leaning away from the viewer as if uncomfortable with the scrutiny, an effect heightened by the way that her fingers curl around the edge of the table, as if grasping for support. The overall impression given by the image is that West longs to straighten her bent leg and turn her body totally away from the camera and the gaze to which it is exposed. Her facial expression, though she meets the viewer's gaze, speaks to this discomfort. The left side of her mouth is slightly lifted in a nervous smirk, though the rest of her expression is relaxed, and her eyes seem vaguely unfocused, as if she feels too awkward to engage with the photographer fully.

Cynthia McQuillin's photograph (page 39, figure 3-15) shares the same nervous sensibility as Ann West's. McQuillin poses in an office. Behind her is a window covered in gauzy white curtains and a desk (topped by a variety of objects, among them a file folder tray, several plants, and a computer keyboard) with a plain metal chair tucked in. She is seated in a rolling chair, and once again photographed at an angle, rather than straight on. The mat designed to protect the carpeting from the weight of the chair on which she sits takes on the form of a slightly up-tilted diamond, rather than a square. McQuillin's pose is as awkward as the angle from which Edison shot her. Her legs are splayed open around the chair, but her body language is closed. She clasps a guitar in front of her torso and her whole body hunches into it; her shoulders huddle forward, and she tucks her chin under the edge of the instrument. Again, there is a sense of hiding from the camera, of closing off her body rather than displaying it. Furthermore, because

she ducks her head and her hair falls forward over her left eye, because she looks up at the camera from behind the guitar, because she smiles—but a closed-lipped smile—McQuillin’s expression reads as both coquettish and slightly fearful, as though she would prefer you not look at her, but if you do... could you please be kind?

The same partly turned away, defensive posture appears in many of the photographs in *Women En Large*, particularly in the images where the models look into the camera. Lani Ka’ahumanu (page 17) turns her body almost in profile, her arms wrapped protectively around her breasts. Rhylorien n’a Rose (page 51) stands behind a chair, her fingers clasping the back and a decorative finial. Edna Rivera (page 59) tucks herself into her arms and her raised leg, so that her entire body twists inward like a pretzel.

Moreover, Edison demonstrates a penchant for drawing unfortunate visual parallels between her models and the objects around them. Terry A. Garey poses with a ceramic gorilla (page 57, figure 3-16). The gorilla’s head tilts slightly toward her and its arms dangle slackly to its feet. Garey sits cross-legged, her head tilted toward the monkey (although her face is partially cut off by the edge of the photograph). Her arms are clasped loosely in her lap. Her posture echoes that of the monkey, reversed. The visual parallel between them suggests that she is animalistic, which plays into the stereotype that fat people have no control over their baser, animal urges. The use of the small gorilla next to the large woman also exaggerates Garey’s size. The juxtaposition of woman and gorilla draws to mind (but reverses) the trope of the massive primate with a small woman in his arms, exemplified by Fremiet’s *Gorilla Carrying off a Woman* (1887, fig. 3-17) or the various incarnations of King Kong. Similar visual parallels are drawn

between Bernadette Bosky (page 69) and a stuffed cow, its round black and white face echoed by the dark circle of her hair and the pale skin of her face.

Perhaps most disturbing, Cynthia McQuillin appears seated cross-legged, holding a human skull (page 61, figure 3-18). In the background behind her head sits an out-of-focus object which vaguely resembles a bleached cow skull. These items are perhaps meant as a reference to traditional *momento mori*. However, given the strong cultural associations between fatness and early mortality, and the serious expression on McQuillin's cocked head, the image reads less as a playful undermining of those associations than a serious contemplation of them.

It is difficult to determine whether to assign to the models or Edison herself the responsibility for the awkward attitudes exhibited by the sitters. Immersed in a culture that told them their bodies were shameful and grotesque, rather than a site of pride, power and pleasure, it seems reasonable that undercurrents of anxiety and shame would surface even in overtly fat-positive imagery. Remnants of these sentiments are equally like to appear in the personal statements of other fat activists from the era.⁶³ It also seems fitting to end the discussion of Edison's photographs with McQuillin's image, with its (conscious or unconscious) visual parallel between fat and early mortality. For the link between fat and death in the public consciousness, which had been growing stronger since the 1950s, would only be more firmly cemented in the decades to come.

⁶³ Again, see Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*.

Leonard Nimoy and the Ambivalence of Contemporary Culture

New Questions Asked, 1990-Today

By the 1990s, a new feature of fat phobia appeared. Men began to report pressures similar to those previously experienced mainly by women. Physicians announced increasing rates of male bulimia and other eating disorders, long the province of women only. The media directed at men reinforced these fears. By 1995, *Men's Health Magazine* was featuring a minimum of one diet article per issue, just like its female-directed counterparts, with an emphasis both on health and weight loss.⁶⁴

Perhaps men were responding to the increasingly moralizing quality of the diet industry. More than ever, fat was a sign of ethical failure, such that fat continues to be singled out over smoking and other known health problems, like cancer-causing tanning salons or speeding or drunk driving. To be sure, advertisements do warn about these ills, but the sheer volume of weight loss advertisements and admonishments still outnumbers other categories.⁶⁵ In recent years, even the fast food industry has hopped on the weight loss bandwagon in the hopes of subverting its image as the bastion of gluttony. Subway staked its claim to healthiness in a series of ads featuring customers who had lost large amounts of weight by eating their sandwiches (beginning in 2000), Kentucky Fried Chicken advertised itself as “Kentucky Grilled Chicken” in 2009, and Taco Bell instituted a massive ad campaign about their “drive through diet” in January 2010.

Certainly the medical industry continued to emphasize the links between fatness and illness in the minds of the public. In 1994, a coalition comprised of the American Cancer Society and former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, among others, urged then-

⁶⁴ Stearns, *Fat History*, 103-104.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 116-119.

President Clinton to declare obesity, “a national health crisis.”⁶⁶ The list of illnesses associated with obesity continued to expand, including:

insulin resistance, diabetes mellitus, hypertriglyceridemia, decreased levels of high-density lipoprotein cholesterol, and increased levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol...gallbladder disease and some forms of cancer, as well as sleep apnea, chronic hypoxia and hypercapnia, and degenerative joint disease. Obesity is an independent risk factor for death from coronary heart disease.⁶⁷

That the public takes the call to lose weight seriously is evidenced by the vast numbers of current dieters and the money spent on weight-loss programs, products, and equipment. On any given day, seventy million Americans are dieting to lose weight and another forty-five million to maintain their current weight; government statistics indicate that somewhere between eighty-eight and ninety-three percent of obese Americans are currently dieting.⁶⁸ This means that anywhere between thirty-three and forty percent of women and twenty to twenty-four percent of men are dieting at any moment.⁶⁹ This adds up to about fifty billion dollars per year spent by Americans in the pursuit of flat abs and firm thighs.⁷⁰ Moreover, a quick search for “diet” in the books section (only books—not DVD’s, CD’s, etc.) of amazon.com produces an astounding 54,987 results—everything from *The Full Plate Diet*, *The South Beach Diet*, *The Mediterranean Diet* and *You! On a Diet*, to *LL Cool J’s Platinum 360 Diet and Lifestyle*.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004): 29-30. Quote, 30.

⁶⁷ F.X. Pi-Sunyer. “Medical Hazards of Obesity,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 119, no. 7 (October 1, 1993): 2. See LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, chapter 2 and the introduction of this dissertation for a discussion of disease and obesity.

⁶⁸ Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 29.

⁶⁹ LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 31.

⁷⁰ Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 42.

⁷¹ Results from entering the word “diet” to the books search bar on www.amazon.com, Monday, May 24, 2010.

Yet despite the obvious failures of the American public to lose weight, the blame is placed on the fat individual. As cardiologist Dean Ornish explains, “most Americans know that they should eat less fat and exercise more, they just don’t do it.” Instead, “people are turning to food, alcohol, and other bad habits out of loneliness and despair.”⁷² That fat has become firmly entrenched in American culture as automatically guaranteeing bad health can be seen all over the popular media. In a recent version of an annual survey of America’s fittest and least-fit cities, Oklahoma City was declared the least fit (it had been in the bottom ten for a number of years). Several factors went into this determination, among them the city population’s disease rates, mortality, physical attributes (such as overall weight) and lifestyle (such as the ease of access to outdoor parks)—even how many people eat full servings of fruit and vegetables. Nevertheless, the mayor’s response to the news addressed obesity *specifically*; he said “I’m not saying we shouldn’t be last...There are issues here that are real that we’re not running away from. We have an obesity problem.”⁷³ And one of the first steps taken to remedy the city’s last place finish was the establishment of a website called *ThisCityIsGoingOnADiet.com*, setting a goal for inhabitants to lose one million pounds.⁷⁴ This displays the internalization of the belief that fat is, in and of itself, a major health risk, and that losing weight automatically guarantees better health.

In fact, so pervasive are these ideas that they constitute their own shorthand. On a recent episode of the cartoon *The Family Guy*, the baby (Stewie) is left at home alone,

⁷² Quoted in Melinda Beck, “Epidemic of Obesity,” *Newsweek*, August 1, 1994, 63.

⁷³ Quoted in David Whelan, “America’s Fittest Cities,” *Forbes*, May 24, 2010, <http://health.msn.com/fitness/articlepage.aspx?cp-documentid=100259541>1=31036>

⁷⁴ Whelan, “America’s Fittest Cities.”

and notes that the house is “emptier than James Gandolfini’s workout room.”⁷⁵ The scene then cuts to a cartoon version of the actor, who is disheveled, wearing a robe, slippers, boxers, and an undershirt from which his belly protrudes. He strolls by a workout room bedecked with cobwebs, eating a piece of cake, and never enters. The joke needs no further explanation; it turns on the assumption that fat people are slovenly, lazy, and eat “bad” foods to excess. Even in more restrained television shows, fat can become a symbol for a lack of moral fiber. On the program *Medium*, an episode called “Person of Interest” begins with a series of vignettes, showing terrible vices and their consequences. A child’s desire to eat a cupcake is equated with an ex-smoker’s desire for a cigarette; the outcome of both choices is disastrous. The child grows into a fat man, alone and friendless (as the narrator tells us) as he sits in his pajamas shoveling Hostess Sno Balls into his mouth; the once-again-smoker appears with an oxygen tank outside of a hospital.⁷⁶ Again, fat is perfect for the vignette—the audience immediately understands that fat people, like smokers, make the choice to be unhealthy, lack the willpower to moderate their eating, crave “bad” foods, and as in *Family Guy*, are slovenly and undesirable companions.

The presumption that the fat body is obviously undesirable finds its most open expression in the 2001 film *Shallow Hal*.⁷⁷ In it, the main character (Hal) dates only attractive women, dumping them if he finds a small imperfection. He is then cursed to see everyone’s inner beauty (rather than actual outward appearance), and falls in love with a 300-plus pound woman, whose “inner beauty” is represented by the willow-thin actress Gwyneth Paltrow. The film plays into every stereotype about the fat body

⁷⁵ “Baby Not on Board,” *Family Guy*, Twentieth Century Fox Television, November 2, 2008.

⁷⁶ “A Person of Interest,” *Medium*, CBS, February 16, 2009.

⁷⁷ *Shallow Hal*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2001.

(Paltrow eats copious amounts of junk food in nearly every scene, breaks furniture in multiple settings, and even performs a cannonball into a pool which sends a small child into a tree). But its most problematic aspect is that fat automatically prevents the body from being desirable. To be attractive, every fat person must release the “Gwyneth Paltrow” within. Imagine making a film in which this is the case for any other physical characteristic—short people *must* become tall, disabled people *must* overcome their disability, people of color *must* become white in order to be attractive—and imagine the public outcry which would, for good reason, follow.⁷⁸

This is not to say that there have been no public expressions of concern over the increasingly stringent body standards in society. Sentiments like those expressed by NAAFA have also begun to pervade the general consciousness. Several prominent actresses, trashed in the tabloids for their weight gains, have claimed to be happy with their bodies and disgusted with the media.⁷⁹ Recently, ex-model Iman expressed dismay over the growing emaciation of runway models.⁸⁰ And the Dove company began its “campaign for real beauty” in 2004, aiming to use average women as models and set up

⁷⁸ For more scholarly analysis of this film, see also LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, and Katherina R. Mendoza, “Seeing Through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal*,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds. (New York: New York UP, 2009): 280-288.

⁷⁹ Among them Tyra Banks, Jennifer Love Hewitt, and Camryn Manheim. Of course, their message of body acceptance is somewhat undermined by their quick weight loss afterwards. The same is true for long-standing plus-size advocates in Hollywood. Queen Latifah, for instance, became a spokeswoman for the Jenny Craig weight loss program, and Jennifer Hudson did the same for Weight Watchers. For more on this topic, see also: Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John, “The Roseanne Benedict Arnolds: How Fat Women Are Betrayed by Their Celebrity Icons,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 263-270

⁸⁰ Joanna Douglas. “Iman Thinks Models and Actresses Are Too Thin,” *Shine Magazine*, May 30, 2010, <http://shine.yahoo.com/channel/beauty/iman-thinks-models-and-actresses-are-too-thin-1403103/>

“self-esteem” camps for young girls, in an effort to stem low self-esteem and eating disorders among young women.⁸¹

It is virtually impossible to avoid other, fat-hating statements in the media. Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop stated on the news show *48 Hours* that “any parent who raises a fat child is raising a premature death,”⁸² while the general manager of the Weight Watchers Corporation argued that “obesity costs the nation more than one hundred billion dollars annually and causes the premature deaths of approximately 300,000 people each year.”⁸³ And according to Glen Gaesser, the media cited the phrase “obesity kills” more than 2,500 times between 1999 and 2004 alone.⁸⁴ Of course, these ideas have real-life effects that go far beyond mere media portrayals. Fat women are less likely to receive a higher education, and if they do, their parents are less likely to pay for it. The number of employees fired for failing to meet weight standards continues to grow; children have been taken away from their parents for weighing too much. One mother was even charged with child endangerment after the death of her morbidly obese daughter.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Their website can be viewed at: <http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com> or <http://www.dove.us/#/cfrb>; it should be noted, however, that all of these are campaigns to make *average* sized women feel comfortable with their bodies. None crosses the radical line and encourages *fat* women to feel comfortable with their bodies.

⁸² C. Everett Koop, Interview, *48 Hours*, CBS, November 16, 1995.

⁸³ Linda Webb Carilli, “Reshaping Standards,” Letters, *Newsweek*, May 12, 1997, 22.

⁸⁴ Statistic as given during a workshop at the University of Virginia, July 19, 2006.

⁸⁵ For an excellent summary of the legal repercussions of fatness, see Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000).

Leonard Nimoy and the Discourse of Fat Ambivalence

I've always been fascinated with the making of an image, the taking of an image.
Leonard Nimoy.⁸⁶

Leonard Nimoy is perhaps best known today for his portrayal of the character Mr. Spock in the television series *Star Trek* and the six films that followed its cancellation. However, Nimoy also works as a photographer, and he recently published a book titled *The Full Body Project*, in which he photographed fat members of a multiethnic performance group called “Big Burlesque,” who perform in a show entitled the “Fat-Bottom Revue.”⁸⁷ The book also includes photographs of the first fat model Nimoy ever photographed, a woman who approached him at seminar on his earlier work and asked if he would take her picture.⁸⁸

Nimoy’s photographic works differ in their genesis from those of either Joel-Peter Witkin or Laurie Toby Edison. In the introduction to the book, Nimoy describes both his earlier works and also the process of taking the photographs included in *The Full Body Project*. He writes:

For a number of years, I have been producing images of the female figure. I have worked with many professional models.... But, as has been pointed out to me... the women in these pictures often fell under the umbrella of a certain body type. I’ll call it a “classic” look, always within range of the current social consensus of what is beautiful.... The women as they appeared in my images were allotted no individual identity. They were hired and directed to help me express an idea... the pictures were not about them. They were illustrating a theme, a story I hoped to convey.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Quoted in “Moonlighting with Leonard Nimoy,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 21, 2007.

⁸⁷ Leonard Nimoy, *The Full Body Project* (New York: Five Ties Publishing, 2007): 11.

⁸⁸ Nicole Pasulka, “Monumental Inspiration,” *Toronto Star*, February 2, 2008.

⁸⁹ Nimoy, *Full Body Project*, 11. This quote, however, does have some troubling aspects. It suggests that, like Freud, Nimoy sees the fat body as mired in its own immanence, unable to take on an allegorical, metaphorical, or narrative context.

Nimoy's inspiration, at least originally, came from outside himself. His process for photographing the members of the Fat-Bottom Revue was different. After the images of his first fat model were exhibited, he noticed an "intense" interest in the photographs, in the model, and how and why he photographed her. He got in touch with the Big Burlesque, a group interested in size acceptance, which puts on burlesque shows for events ranging from children's birthday parties to stag parties.⁹⁰ When photographing them, Nimoy said he:

wanted these pictures to be more about them. These women are projecting an image that is entirely their own, originating in their own stories rather than in mine. Their self-esteem is strong....They will tell you that too many people suffer because the body they live in is not the body you find in fashion magazines. My process was simple, yet different from how I worked in the past....I asked them to be proud, which they took to easily, naturally....The women in these pages are proudly wearing their own skins. They accept and respect themselves, and I hope that my images convey that feeling to others.⁹¹

Nimoy thus proclaimed the intent of the project to be fat-positive from the start. He wanted to allow the sitters in his images a degree of subjectivity, of pride and pleasure that the fat body is typically denied in representation.⁹² *New York Times* author Natalie Angiers wrote the foreword for the book, and in it augmented the book's fat-positive message. Angiers describes the body's need for fat, saying things like, "The adipose stores that so abundantly fill these women's frames are neither randomly distributed nor amorphously shaped....Our fat tissue...has a logic all its own,"⁹³ and "Consider the

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 12.

⁹² For more on the topic of the erasure of the fat body in imagery, or its usage to reinforce the normative thin body, see Kent, "Fighting Abjection."

⁹³ Natalie Angiers, introduction to Nimoy, *The Full Body Project*, 6-7.

women of these pages to be a feast for the eyes.”⁹⁴ The book’s afterword, by Anne Wilkes Tucker, echoes this positive reading. She describes Nimoy’s photographs as “a new and provocative comment on this era’s definition of beauty” and his models as “just as self-assured and pleased with themselves as [Helmut] Newton’s leggy Amazons.”⁹⁵

The images have received attention entirely from the popular press, rather than academia (perhaps because Nimoy is best known as an actor, rather than an artist). What writing that does exist picks up on the fat-positive intentions of the book, with authors making statements like, “The Full Body Project [sic] recalls a rich history of zaftig women in art at the same time it reminds us of their current absence. Indeed, The Full Body Project [sic] could be read as a critique of the glamour machine that runs on size 2 supermodels,”⁹⁶ or “These women are not hiding beneath muumuus or waving from the bottom of the Grand Canyon à la Carnie Wilson in early Wilson Phillips videos. They are fleshy and proud, celebrating their girth, reveling in it,”⁹⁷ or more concisely describing Nimoy’s work as “a book dedicated to celebrating large body types.”⁹⁸

Yet Nimoy himself expresses more ambivalent feelings about the fat body in other places. Perhaps the ambivalence comes from the fact that he is a man, photographing nude female bodies, or because like Lucian Freud, Nimoy is significantly older than his subjects: born in 1931, he was already seventy-six years old at the time of *The Full Body Project*’s publication. Consequently, not only is it impossible for Nimoy

⁹⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁵ Anne Wilkes Tucker, afterword to Nimoy, *The Full Body Project*, 89-90.

⁹⁶ Pasulka, “Monumental Inspiration.”

⁹⁷ Abby Ellin, “Girth and Nudity, a Pictorial Mission,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2007.

⁹⁸ Ann Marie McQueen, “Where Does Fat Fit In?” *Toronto Sun*, June 26, 2007. This article doesn’t fully advocate for fat acceptance. McQueen also writes, “Sure, losing weight, exercising and eating right can and should be a goal.” Nor can other authors keep their distaste for the fat body totally concealed. *The Evening Standard* described the women’s bodies as “heavenly, or rather, heavy.” (“News in Brief.” *Evening Standard*, May 13, 2007). Carol Beggy and Mark Shanahan instead refer to the sitters as “meaty maidens” and “weighty women” (“Nimoy Is Livin’ Large,” *Boston Globe*, August 15, 2005).

to identify fully with the bodies of his subjects, but he was also mercifully unaware (or at least unthinking) about the types of prejudices and discriminations faced by fat people in American society, particularly fat women. He has even said about this series, “*I could have gone my whole life without paying much attention to the question of body image and what women are experiencing. This particular project has put me richly and intensely in touch with this cultural question of beauty. Women are being sold a concept of beauty.*”⁹⁹ He elsewhere said that because of the book, “I began to become conscious of this question of body size and body image in our culture. I became more aware of what we’re bombarded with in magazines, newspapers and television commercials.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, Nimoy approached his subjects from a distance, without an interior understanding of the bodies he photographed, without an emotional attachment to them.

Nevertheless, Nimoy clearly sympathizes with the women he photographed. A *New York Times* interviewer noted that a folder of news clippings about obesity sat on his coffee table as she interviewed him,¹⁰¹ and he has repeatedly cited the statistic that the average American woman weighs twenty-five percent more than the models used to sell clothes to her.¹⁰² However, Nimoy clearly harbors the kind of conflicted views about fatness fostered by American culture. Asked by interviewer Nicole Pasulka to respond to those who would say that the subjects of his photographs were unhealthy, he responded:

I’m concerned about the health issues, but there are mixed messages right now. It’s clear obesity has its dangers. Diabetes is a possibility. Heart

⁹⁹ Quoted in Pasulka “Monumental Inspiration.” Italics mine.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Pasulka, “Monumental Inspiration.”

¹⁰¹ Ellin, “Girth and Nudity.”

¹⁰² Nimoy mentions this in the introduction to *The Full Body Project*, and repeats the information in his interviews with Nick Thomas (“He Prospers. And Provokes.”) and Abby Ellin (“Girth and Nudity.”), and a podcast with Allen Steadham, which can be heard on youtube-- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxlSe_A17ZM. He refers to the pressures put on women by the fashion and diet industry in these interviews, as well as those conducted by Nicole Pasulka (“Monumental Inspiration.”) and the *Christian Science Monitor* (“Moonlighting with Leonard Nimoy.”)

trouble is a possibility. Knee problems from carrying the weight. But then again, there was a medical report that came out just a couple weeks ago saying people with additional poundage are less likely to get certain diseases.¹⁰³

Nimoy exhibits a typical understanding of the fat body as associated with illness and disease here, although he tempers his answer by suggesting that fatness might not be universally linked to death. More troubling is the end of his response:

Then there's the alternative question about anorexia and bulimia. Look, the fact is that young girls 12 and 13 are already becoming disenchanted with their bodies. They're looking in a mirror and struggling to achieve something that, for many of them, is unattainable. You're born with the body that you're born with and you can work and diet all you want and, for many women, it's still unlikely you'll attain the look that advertisers say you should.¹⁰⁴

Here, Nimoy evinces a problematic attitude. Rather than focusing on fat women, he turns his attention to the thin body, in particular the anorexic and bulimic body. Although these problems are inextricably linked to the same cultural attitudes about weight that trouble the fat body, his words suggest that his true sympathies lie with those who fall into the "normal" category (the women struggling to achieve the look promulgated by advertisers) and those who have succeeded in achieving society's most stringent standards for the female body, expurgating it of fat and even of food (the anorexic and bulimic).

Other quotes reveal Nimoy's absorption of conflicted attitudes toward fatness as well. Although he describes the women in his images as "beautiful...full-bodied, full-blooded human beings," in the same interview he admits that he does not find the fat body sexually attractive, fitting in with cultural narratives labeling the fat body as the

¹⁰³ Quoted in Pasulka, "Monumental Inspiration."

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

asexual body.¹⁰⁵ He also discusses his difficulty even formulating a way in which to image fatness. For Nimoy, merely representing the fat female is problematic. He says, about working with his first fat model, “The nudity wasn’t the problem. But I’d never worked with that kind of figure before. I didn’t quite know how to treat her. I didn’t want to do her some kind of injustice. I was concerned that I would present this person within the envelope of an art form.”¹⁰⁶

Despite his concern with doing the model justice, his words here suggest a disquieting mind-set toward his sitter. It is as though he has never encountered the fat body before, as if it is an undiscovered country for him to explore. It implies that for Nimoy, the fat body is inherently difficult to fit into the visual language of art, unlike the thin bodies of his customary models. This attitude appears again, as Nimoy talks about his process for working with the Fat-Bottom Revue. He says, “I thought, ‘Okay, I’ve got these women to shoot. Now, what would be interesting to do?’ I think the first impulse I had was the Herb Ritts photograph [of a group of international supermodels seated and cuddling], because that was so much about fashion models of a body size and shape that is sold as the ideal.”¹⁰⁷ Again, the message here is conflicted—there is the suggestion that the fat body in and of itself is not interesting and that Nimoy’s only recourse is to insert it into the narrative of the thin body.

Nimoy’s response to the photographs resulting from his first experience working with a fat body is equally ambiguous. He states that her body was “like a marble

¹⁰⁵ Ellin, “Girth and Nudity.”

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Ellin, “Girth and Nudity.”

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Pasulka, “Monumental Inspiration.” Incidentally, Nimoy’s version of the Ritts photograph became the cover of the book.

sculpture”¹⁰⁸ in the pictures. The description could be meant in an entirely positive way. However, given the clear distinction Nimoy makes elsewhere between this woman’s body and the “classic” bodies¹⁰⁹ of his typical models, the phrase becomes more suggestive. Instead of the elegant, lithe lines of classical sculpture that might be evoked by this turn of phrase, the words begin to bring to mind something ponderous, weighty, monumental, crude, blocky. And the ambiguities described here are expressed not just in Nimoy’s words, but also in his images.

Nimoy’s Photographs

The photographs in *The Full Body Project* are all black-and-white, and with the exception of the series taken of Nimoy’s first fat model, largely consist of group shots. Nimoy took photographs by Herb Ritts and Helmut Newton as his starting point,¹¹⁰ and references a number of other high art precedents, including Raphael’s *Three Graces* (1503-04), Henri Matisse’s *Dance* (1909) and Marcel Duchamp’s *Nu Descendant un Escalier* (1912).

Nimoy’s photographs are self-consciously artistic, and he consistently links them to fine art practices, whether through pose or setting. After his work on *Star Trek* and *Mission Impossible*, Nimoy returned to school at UCLA to study photography, becoming particularly interested in what he calls “concept photography.”¹¹¹ In fact, Nimoy has long engaged with the photographic process, including his own original photographs in

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Pasulka, “Monumental Inspiration.”

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in “Moonlighting with Leonard Nimoy.” See also Nimoy, *The Full Body Project*, 11.

¹¹⁰ Nimoy, *Full Body Project*, 12.

¹¹¹ “Moonlighting with Leonard Nimoy.”

multiple volumes of his poetry, including *You & I*,¹¹² *Will I Think of You?*¹¹³ and *We Are All Children Searching for Love*¹¹⁴ among others.

Nimoy's desire to be taken seriously as an artist (he mentions in several interviews that his work has been purchased by museums, as well as noting that some people have bought his images without knowing anything about Mr. Spock¹¹⁵) spills over into his sensibilities as a photographer. The women he photographs in *The Full Body Project* appear in a fine art context. The women of the Fat-Bottom Revue pose in front of drawings by Jenny Okun, and a sculpture (*Shangri La*) by Patty Chang. They descend a staircase in the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.¹¹⁶ As previously mentioned, they adopt compositions taken from Matisse, Duchamp, Ritts, Newton, and even Raphael. In fact, Nimoy's interest in *The Full Body Project* seems to stem as much from a desire for publicity for his artistic endeavors as from a genuine interest in the fat body.¹¹⁷

Whatever his intentions, Nimoy's photographs do serve to undermine some of the social conceptions of the fat body. Even more than Edison, Nimoy's sitters look relaxed and comfortable in their own bodies, perhaps due to his decision to utilize women from Big Burlesque. He chose to depict women who were performers, comfortable in front of the camera, with each other, and even nude in front of the camera. Both the foreword and afterword of the book pick up on this, mentioning the women's gaze as something special

¹¹² Leonard Nimoy, *You and I* (Millbrae, CA: Celestial Arts, 1973).

¹¹³ Leonard Nimoy, *Will I Think of You?* (Millbrae, CA: Celestial Arts, 1974).

¹¹⁴ Leonard Nimoy, *We Are All Children Searching for Love* (Boulder: Blue Mountain Arts, 1977).

¹¹⁵ See Nicole Pasulka, "Monumental Inspiration"; Jim Stotek, "Finding Nimoy," *Toronto Sun*, August 29, 2006; and Nick Thomas, "He Prospers. And Provokes," *Boston Globe*, October 21, 2007.

¹¹⁶ Nimoy, *The Full Body Project*, 93.

¹¹⁷ Especially when we recall that he was first approached by a fat model, and only called the Fat-Bottom Revue when those images received significant attention from his audience. He chose a controversial topic for the project immediately preceding *The Full Body Project* as well. That series of images, which can be seen in the book *Shekhina* (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2005) dealt with female sexuality and God, specifically within a Hebrew context.

about the images. Natalie Angiers writes about traditional artistic representations of the female nude, in which the figure does not meet the viewer's gaze, then goes on to say this about the women in Nimoy's pictures:

the women shown here do not avert their eyes, either from the camera or from each other. They look us straight in the face and ask that we do the same. Significantly, their gaze is not hostile or defiant...Nor is it campy or vampy or in the least bit embarrassed. Instead, it is the gaze of gimlet-eyed women who know perfectly well that they are on view and that their unclothed bodies are not the standard models of beauty...[they] politely but firmly demand that we begin our inspection at eye level, where the self is exposed and makes its humanness known. We get to know these women...we understand these women as individuals and already count them as friends, [so that] we see their bodies less personally, relieved of any object lessons or projections of our private pieties and fears.¹¹⁸

Anne Wilkes Tucker also comments on the direct gaze of the models. She writes, "Nimoy's subjects gaze directly at the camera... 'Yes, these women are naked, but they are clothed in their own strength.'"¹¹⁹

Beyond merely being assertive and meeting the viewer's gaze, the women seem to actively enjoy their bodies. The book even includes a series of pictures of the women surrounding a mirrored sculpture. They peer into its fragmented surfaces, seeming both to explore the art piece and also to seek out and take pleasure in their own reflections. They appear not only comfortable in their own bodies, but to savor inhabiting them and even looking at them (pages 44-47).

Also like Edison's photographs, Nimoy's group images convey a sense of warmth, sometimes to the point of tenderness. On pages sixteen and twenty-four (figures 3-19 and 3-20) of *The Full Body Project*, Nimoy focuses his lens on two figures together. On page 16, two models stand in front of an abstract drawing. The blonde model on the

¹¹⁸ Angiers, foreword to *The Full Body Project*, 6.

¹¹⁹ Tucker, afterword to *The Full Body Project*, 90.

left side has her back toward the camera, but turns slightly so that her face and her right breast appear in profile view. The brunette model on the right poses frontally, but turns her head to look at her compatriot, giving almost a total profile of her face. They stand so close together that their arms touch, forming a v in the center of the picture plane, and the blonde's breast nearly touches the brunette's arm. The image has a tactile quality, a sense of warm, soft flesh pressed against warm, soft flesh. There is something sensual and even tender about the moment that Nimoy has captured. The moment is also full of erotic potential; like Edison, and despite his own ambiguous statements on the topic, Nimoy's photograph imbues the fat body with erotic, even sexual, potential.

A similar mood permeates the photograph on page twenty-four of *The Full Body Project*. In this photo, two models are shown in an empty white room, photographed from just below the breasts up. The same blonde model used in the previous image stands on the left. She faces front, with her head turned to a full profile view as she looks at a brunette model. The brunette is turned almost in full profile to the camera, facing her blonde counterpart. Both models smile a little. The brunette model rests her hand lightly on the center of the blonde model's chest, slightly above and between her breasts. The two stand very close together—although the arm of the brunette hides most of their bodies. In the upper right of the background, two more models stand back to back, their heads tilted toward the camera. Once again, due to the lack of a direct gaze toward the camera, the nudity of the figures, and their close interaction, the image is vaguely voyeuristic or erotic. The gesture is sensual and tender, though it holds erotic potential, and the models' expressions are relaxed and affectionate. Here again, there is the sense

that the fat body can be an object of visual pleasure, of desire. The image is tactile, warm, and sensual.¹²⁰

Nimoy also incorporates many images of the fat body in motion, typically dancing (pages 33, 35, 37, 41, 50-53, 56). The images confound expectations about the fat body as unfit, heavy, immobile. Particularly in the image on page fifty-six (figure 3-21), which references Matisse's *Dance* (1909), the bodies seem light, buoyant. The spirit of the Matisse's linear figures uplifts the dancers as they hold hands and kick up their legs, some bearing weight only on their toes. Nimoy's references to Matisse and Raphael (page 10) seem to ask the viewer to re-evaluate contemporary beauty standards by reminding her of a time when those standards were different. Yet these images, and particularly those based on the fashion photographs of Herb Ritts and Helmut Newton (page 56, 62, and 63; figures 3-22, 3-23, and 3-24) also have the potential to reinforce stigmas against fatness. Ritts' cuddling supermodels and Newton's *Big Nudes* are very much about female perfection and ideal beauty.

Authors wax eloquent not just about the desirability of these photographers' images, but also about the bodies that appear in them. The language used to discuss Helmut Newton's women, in particular, is often fetishized in and of itself. Noemi Smolik describes Newton's women as "long, slender female bodies with full breasts, smooth backs, ruffled pubic hair, long thighs, and well-formed bottoms."¹²¹ She continues to wax rhapsodic about them for two full paragraphs—"the slender female bodies are repeatedly shown rising from high heeled shoes like long flower stalks...the slender,

¹²⁰ See chapter two for the pros and cons of sexualizing the fat body.

¹²¹ Noemi Smolik, "Overcoming the Other," in *The Best of Helmut Newton*, ed. Zdenek Felix (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1996): 7-8.

often athletic bodies...are enveloped less by clothes than by a sexual tension.”¹²² Sarah Mower deems them “impossibly perfect specimens,”¹²³ and Ennery Taramelli calls them “crystallized sex idols...[with] the charm of perfection, the transcendence of an idol....”¹²⁴ Newton’s photographs are also particularly associated with eroticism, fetishism, and voyeurism.¹²⁵

What then, does it mean to place the fat models in the poses of supermodels? Does this undermine the power of ideal beauty and make the viewer question why Ritts’ and Newton’s women were glorified and the Fat-Bottom Revue is not? Does it somehow mock the women for not achieving beauty norms, and reinforce those norms? Is it meant to be parody? Satire? Earnest? Sincere? What does it mean that the Newton *Big Nudes* were clothed in *haute couture* for one half of the diptych, and the Fat-Bottom Revue is clothed in burlesque-style lingerie? The images themselves are ambiguous and refuse to resolve into any clear-cut meaning. They hold the potential to reify beauty norms, but also hold the potential to undermine them, and how Nimoy’s photographs are interpreted depends on the viewer.

Less ambiguous are the series of nudes at the end of *The Full Body Project*, taken during Nimoy’s shoot with the fat model that approached him to take her photograph (pages 73, 74, 77, 78, 81, 82, 85; figures 3-25 and 3-26). She poses on a black drop cloth

¹²² Ibid., 8. Note Smolik’s emphasis through repeated use on the word “slender.”

¹²³ Sarah Mower, “The ‘King of Kink’ Made Naughty Fashionable,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2003.

¹²⁴ Ennery Taramelli, “Superficial Abysses of Eros,” in *Helmut Newton: New Images* (Bologna: Grafis, 1999). Of course, not all authors are so complimentary about Newton’s models. Estelle Jussim characterizes his ideal model as “the fashion mannequin, that bony, half-starved, essentially sexless artifact.” From “Starr Ockenga’s Nudes: Some Notes on the Genre,” *Massachusetts Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 96-108. Quote 98.

¹²⁵ See, for instance, Felix Zdenek, ed., *The Best of Helmut Newton* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1996); Michael Harrison, *Appearances: Fashion Photography Since 1945* (New York, Rizzoli, 1991); Manfred Heitung, ed. *Helmut Newton: Work* (London: Taschen, 2000); *Helmut Newton: New Images* (Bologna: Grafis, 1999); and others. Newton discusses these elements himself in short paragraphs in *Helmut Newton* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

in front of a black background, and drapes a black cloth over various parts of her anatomy in the series. If there is fetishization or eroticism here, it is the eroticism of looking at length at the forbidden, the taboo, the alien and unfamiliar. The lighting lovingly highlights every ripple and bump on the model's flesh; it deepens the shadows and creases of her stomach, her love handles, her cleavage. The textured surface and folds of her flesh are emphasized by the drop cloth and background—rather than being a uniform black, they show folds, creases, patterns like velvet which has been brushed by a hand—which echo the stippling of cellulite. Moreover, the model only once makes eye contact with the viewer; in every other shot her back is turned, her eyes are closed, or she looks off to the side.

While it is true that these images invite the viewer to take pleasure in the fat body at her leisure, undisturbed by interaction with the model, it is the same kind of pleasure that can be found in Lucian Freud's paintings. The viewer is distanced from the model; she is treated as strange territory, a vast new landscape to be visually interrogated. Difference is emphasized; otherness is obvious.

Conclusion

Over time, American attitudes toward fatness have become increasingly negative, and the standard for beauty has become increasingly stringent. All three of the photographers discussed in this chapter engaged with the cultural biases of the particular moment in which they worked. Within discursively linked fatness to abnormality, and it is this attitude that contemporary scholars continue to pick up on, despite the potential of his photographs to normalize the fat body. Edison's images attempt to provide a fat-

positive space, aligning with the growing backlash against beauty standards in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet prevailing attitudes about fat as a source of shame and discomfort snake through her images, and she references fatness's association with animality and death (whether as intentional parody, or subconscious impulse). Nimoy's photographs describe both societal ambiguity and his own ambivalence about the fat body. The women in them have erotic, sexual potential, and seem comfortable in their own bodies. Yet without the influence of the Big Burlesque models, his photographs seem to reinforce the freakish, other, even alien qualities ascribed to the fat body.

The final chapter of this dissertation will continue to address fat in contemporary photography through the lens of Laura Aguilar. It will ask what it means to photograph one's own fat body; what it means to possess not just a gendered fat body, but one that is marginalized by its race as well. And it will explore the added layer of desire—not just on behalf of the viewer, but on behalf of the photographer. For Aguilar not only lives in the body of a fat woman, but she also admires and sexually desires the bodies of fat women as well.

Chapter Four: Full(ly) Figuring the Body: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Fat in Laura Aguilar's Self-Portraits

Aguilar, *Stillness #27, 1999*

Is there any weapon with which to fight disquiet? Is there any remedy, the least homespun possible, with which to cure anxiety and unease? How can one recognize oneself within the diversity that is us? What is at the core of this single being that others see as me? Juan Antonio Álvarez Reyes¹

Two figures stand in the Texas desert (fig. 4-1). In the background, the dark shape of a low mountain range snakes across the horizon. Pale, gritty sand undulates in piles and divots across the foreground and middleground, the sand broken up only by scraggly clumps of vegetation. In roughly the center of the photograph, two interlocked women pose in profile. One leans forward, her feet firmly planted apart, left leg forward and slightly bent, right leg behind and braced straight down. Her upper body arcs forward, arms raised to cover her face, elbows bent. This arced figure, the artist Laura Aguilar herself, pulls on the other woman, lifting her feet off the ground. The two women stand back to back with bodies touching from shoulders to hips, hands clasped together.

Aguilar and her model form a study in contrasts. Aguilar's skin is dark, darker than anything else in the photograph except for the two women's hair. The model's skin is light, as light as the sandy ground on which they stand. Aguilar's body is fat. Her breast, seen in profile, and her stomach sag toward the ground, the sense of movement and gravity exaggerated by the darkly shadowed diagonal formed by a deep crease at her waist. Her belly dimples with cellulite, her breast deforms where it presses against that belly. The ample folds of her torso contrast with her own thin legs, and the taut body of the model stretched over Aguilar's back. The model's body forms one long line, interrupted only by the slight depression of her belly button and the

¹ Juan Antonio Álvarez Reyes, "El yo diverso," *La Caixa* (Barcelona: La Caixa Foundation, 1998): 4-11, 35-38. Quote 35. Translation La Caixa.

gentle swell of her small breast. Because the model so closely matches the western ideal for the female body, and also those female bodies traditionally seen nude in American landscape photography, (think, for instance, of the photographs of Edward Weston or the self-portraits of Anne Brigman) she draws attention to the ways in which Aguilar does *not* conform to that tradition, or come close to meeting that ideal.

The photograph does more, however, than merely present a visual dichotomy. It sets up visual rhymes between the two bodies. The overall pose of each figure roughly forms a C shape—the model's body facing up in the C, Aguilar's body facing down. Aguilar's raised arm forms a V, the model's an inverse V. The model's ribs ripple under her skin in a way that is analogous to the folds formed in Aguilar's stomach. The slackness in the model's leg muscles is offset by the firmness of her body, the looseness of Aguilar's belly offsets the tension in her calf and thigh muscles.

The image also draws parallels between the women's bodies and the landscape—not only in the way their different skin tones pick up the lightness of the sand and the darkness of the mountains, but also in terms of texture and form. The silhouette of Aguilar's back and her belly and breast roughly echo the forms of the hills in the distance, a relationship emphasized by the way that the folds of flesh swell in and out like the background hills. This visual relationship continues in the texture of the craggy mountain surfaces, which create a dialogue with the nook of her belly button and the uneven, dimpled surface of her stomach. The pallid verticals of Aguilar's model's legs respond to the pale uprights of the vegetation behind her, and the pools of light and shadow along the undulating sand relate to the highlights and shadows in the semicircular forms of her knee, hipbones, and shoulder joint. Aguilar's complex photograph resists simplistic interpretations of the fat body. Instead, it acts like a knot at the center of

contemporary issues of the body: each time the viewer attempts to untangle one thread, she finds it knotted to a different issue. Each time she thinks she has pulled free a single, concrete message, she finds she has instead created a new tangle.

The Play of Multiple Identities

Is lesbian art any and all art made by lesbians regardless of subject matter? Or just that which 'looks' lesbian? Who decides what looks lesbian? What role do stereotypes play as visual signifiers of gender, sexuality, and race? Who maintains these stereotypes?... While they have been articulated differently with each decade, these are the messy questions that will not go away. They are raised over and over by the artwork itself. Harmony Hammond²

Photographer Laura Aguilar's black-and-white gelatin prints negotiate the complex terrain of her identity. In our often dichotomous understanding of difference, she provides the ideal "other" to the normative American body. She is a woman, a Chicana, a lesbian, and she is fat, where the privileged American body is male, white, straight, and thin. This chapter will refer to Aguilar, a third-generation Mexican American on her father's side and Irish American on her mother's, as Chicana, despite the difficulties and slippages of ethnic and racial labels,³ because

² Harmony Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (New York: Rizzoli, 2000): 8.

³ There is, in the larger American culture, a particular slippage between the terms "Hispanic," "Mexican American," "Latino/a," and "Chicano/a." A particularized, socio-historical context (provided by Asta M. Kuusinen, "Shooting from the Wild Zone: A Study of the Chicana Art Photographers Laura Aguilar, Celia Álvarez Muñoz, Delilah Montoya, and Kathy Vargas," [Ph.D. diss., University of Helsinki: Helsinki, 2006]15-16), of each term reveals the following differences:

The U.S. Federal Government introduced *Hispanic* as a categorizing term, used on the U.S. Census (and other data recording forms) to refer to all people of Latin American descent living in the country. In more recent years, this term has been politicized, so that those who choose to refer to themselves by this term are seen as privileging themselves as being of Spanish descent while denying their *mestizo* (meaning a mixture of American Indian and European) heritage.

In the United States, *Latino/a* denotes all those from Mexico, Central America, or South America, as well as their descendants born in the U.S. Below the U.S./Mexico border, it is more appropriate to employ national designations, as *Latino/a* is seen as eliding these national differences. The term has recently been embraced by some as a way to express pan-Latin sentiment and political alliance. Kuusinen notes that in America, "the term is relatively neutral, often being the only ethnic identifier that can be used without the risk of offending someone, for it does not imply any specific political stand, status, region, or country of origin."

Mexican American, the largest Latin group in the U.S., describes those of Mexican descent, either born or raised from a young age in the United States. This designation also applies to those Mexican families already living in the Southwest when it was still a Mexican territory. This term is somewhat controversial, in that it openly

she self-identifies with this term. She has said, for instance, “I am a direct descendant of the Chicano movement of the 1960’s. Someone once said to me you are what you identify yourself to be. I am, among other things, a Chicana.”⁴

Aguilar’s photographic project opens itself to readings based on difference through her subject matter. In an early series entitled *Latina Lesbians* (1987-1990), she photographed educated, middle-class lesbians and lesbian couples in their homes. Her roughly contemporaneous series, the *Plush Pony*, dealt with working-class Chicana lesbians that frequented a Latina lesbian bar in East L.A. (from which the series’ name is taken). Her *Clothed/Unclothed* series (begun in 1990) incorporated straight, as well as lesbian and gay, families into her *oeuvre*, and added a new dimension—nudity. In these pendant pairs of photographs, families appear first clothed, and then unclothed, in similar poses. More recently, Aguilar produced several series of nude self-portraits in which she herself appears, either alone or with another naked woman, in a landscape setting. These series include *Nature Self-Portraits*, *Stillness*, *Motion*, and *Center*, all begun in the late 1990s.

indicates citizenship and even prioritizes it over other possible areas of identification, such as language or heritage, while at the same time enforcing the dichotomy between the unmarked “American” citizen (presumably a white person of European descent) and non-white citizens, who are always marked as different (African American, Japanese American, etc.).

Mexican is sometimes used interchangeably with *Mexican American*, although this practice is also problematic, as in the common parlance, *Mexican* connotes a variety of unsavory traits associated with the stereotype of the illegal immigrant.

Chicano/a was traditionally a pejorative term, and perhaps the most complex or even controversial of those discussed here. It was first adopted by a group of radical Mexican Americans in California in the 1960s, who wanted to reject Euro-American culture and embrace their Mexican and indigenous heritage. Because of the origins of the term, it is frequently associated with radical or leftist political views about immigration rights, bilingual education, rights for immigrant farm workers, etc. In California, Aguilar’s birthplace and home today (she was born in San Gabriel and now lives and works outside of L.A.), the term is used for all socio-economic levels of *Latinos*, from professionals to the working class.

⁴ Quoted in Laura Blaskiewicz, “Laura Aguilar,” in *Woman to Woman* (Century Cable Television, The Rock, CA: Kick Up Your Heels Productions, 1992), quoted in Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “Laying it Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar,” in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Mari Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998): 277-305. Quote 301.

The literature discussing Aguilar's photographs focuses on the way that her work addresses identity. However, critics pick apart the elements that constitute that identity, treating each separately. Although identity is not fixed or immutable, separating out the facets of Aguilar's identity ignores the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and fat cumulatively inflect the viewer's interpretation of her images, particularly her self-portraits. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, these separate elements do not merely converge in a body, but they mutually constitute one another.⁵ Race, gender, sexuality, and fat intertwine intimately, each modifying the next in turn, like a Möbius strip. This chapter will examine how Aguilar's images confront stereotypes about the fat, female body of color.

A Problematic Position

...Chicana family life severely constrains the Chicana's ability to define her life outside of its stifling gender and sexual prescriptions. As a number of Chicana feminist scholars have clearly documented, Chicano family life remains rigidly structured along patriarchal lines that privilege men over women and children. Any violation of these norms is undertaken at great personal risk because Chicanos draw upon the family to resist racism and the ravages of class inequality. Tomás Almaguer⁶

The difficulties of occupying a position as a woman, a Chicana, and a lesbian are well documented within the Chicana feminist movement, and can perhaps be best encapsulated by the statement made by the Chicana Caucus during the First Chicano Youth Conference of 1969. At a time when other feminist movements (especially in the white and black communities) openly voiced dissent and demanded equal rights, and in contrast to the rich history of Mexican women's political activism (dating back to the Mexican civil war), these women declared that "It

⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994): 19-20.

⁶ Tomás Almaguer, "Chicano Men," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 255-273; 265-66.

was the consensus of the group that the Chicana woman does not want to be liberated.”⁷ While it is important to note that Chicana feminism (like white feminism) was not a unified movement, this statement cuts to the heart of some of the difficulties faced by Chicana women (and Chicana lesbians, and Chicana feminists).

The Chicano political movement, which was an effort to gain social, economic, and political equality, hinged its discourse around the strength of the family, a family understood to be patriarchal in nature. Thus, from its inception, Chicana feminism was at odds with Chicano politics; to be a Chicana feminist, to question the role of the Chicana woman, inherently threatened the stability of the Chicano family, and, ultimately, *La Causa*.⁸ For Chicana lesbians, these difficulties were compounded by a sexuality that further threatened the structure of the patriarchal family.⁹ Yet Chicana feminists found themselves equally at odds with the popular feminist movement, at that time fronted by well-educated, middle-class, white women. Mainstream feminist strategies, while fighting male dominance, tended to repress or ignore historical, class, ethnic, racial, and sexual differences among women.¹⁰

⁷ Quoted in Sonia López, “The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement,” in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma García (New York: Routledge, 1997): 100-106; 103.

⁸ For more on this topic, see Alma García, ed. *Chicana Feminist Thought*. Particularly López, “Role of the Chicana”; Alma García, “Introduction,” 1-16; Anna Nieto Gómez, “Sexism in the Movimiento,” 97-100; and Cynthia Orozco, “Sexism in Chicano Studies and the Community,” 265-270. For a broader, less historically specific reading, see also Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999): 99-113; and Cherrie Moraga, “From a Long Line of Vendidas: Chicanas and Feminism,” in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986): 173-90.

⁹ See again Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Moraga, “From a Long Line of Vendidas.” See also Almaguer, “Chicano Men.” Almaguer discusses the difference in understandings about homosexuality in *Latino* culture. He argues that homosexuals are categorized not by the gender/sex of their partners (as in American labels—gay, lesbian, bisexual) but by the role they take on in those activities—*activo* or *pasivo*. Thus a gay man who takes the “anal-passive” role will be stigmatized more than a gay man who takes on the *activo* role. These understandings of sex based on gender roles can further complicate and stigmatize lesbians and gay men in Chicano culture.

¹⁰ The white-centered nature of early second wave feminism has been well documented. See, for instance: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 21-43; Alma García, “Chicana Feminists and White Feminists: Unresolved Conflicts,” in *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 97-113; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984): 1-15; bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005): 36-41; Aida Hurtado, “Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Reduction in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer

While progress has been made in the decades since 1969, and while not every Chicana woman, or even every Chicana lesbian, is a feminist, this example provides a useful way of thinking about the ways in which being a Chicana lesbian can be seen to threaten both white and Chicano culture. Aguilar's 1990 photographic triptych entitled *Three Eagles Flying* (fig. 4-2) deals in an overt way with the problematics of Chicana identity. In it, Aguilar stands between two unfurled, hanging flags—on the left, an American flag, and on the right, a Mexican flag. In the central panel, Aguilar appears with an American flag wrapped around her hips like a sarong, her face covered by the Mexican flag with the eagle located directly over her face. Her breasts are exposed, and a rope encircles her neck, crosses her torso diagonally, binds her hands in front of her body, and wraps around her at the waist and just below the hips.

Both Holland Cotter and Diana Emery Hulick discuss the politics of the work. In his review of an exhibition featuring the photograph, *Aztlán Today: The Chicano Postnation*, Cotter, in addition to describing the photo as “polemical” says: “...the artist sits with her hands bound, her lower body wrapped in a United States flag, her head hooded in a Mexican flag. She seems to be the helpless prisoner of two nationalities....”¹¹ Hulick's take is more sophisticated. She notes that:

Aguilar means eagle in Spanish so the title and photograph combine to form an ironic reference to eagles which are bound or hang, but certainly do not fly. Aguilar feels constrained and surrounded by these two cultures. In America she is looked down on because she is Chicana; in Mexico she is separated by her

1989): 833-855; Beatriz Pesquera, and Denise Segura, “There is No Going Back: Chicanas and Feminism,” in *Chicana Critical Issues*, 97-113.

As feminism has shifted its focus from a universalizing discourse about “woman” and “women” to a more inclusive viewpoint that values discussion about the differences among women and embraces multiple subject positions, Chicana feminists and Chicana lesbian feminists have found a space in the field. However, this does not negate the point I am driving at here—that Chicana lesbian women must negotiate their identities in a larger (white, heterosexual, patriarchal) society that remains hostile toward them, and also within a local society (heterosexual and patriarchal) that sees them as a threat.

¹¹ Holland Cotter, “Art Review: Loyal to Two Cultures, from Chicano Roots to a New Ambiguity,” *New York Times*, June 8, 2001.

relatively lighter skin color and her lack of fluent Spanish. Both cultures bind her and neither is fully accepting. She is caught between two worlds.¹²

Both authors accurately describe the way that Aguilar's image addresses the tensions of Chicano identity. Luz Calvo takes her reading of the image even further. She notes that the image "structures three distinct subject positions: that of being bound, that of putting the Chicana body in bondage, and that of watching the scene. In structuring a fantasy—one with sexual as well as political connotations—Aguilar's image invokes unconscious processes, inviting us...into a fantasy scenario...."¹³

Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano provides the most substantial reading of *Three Eagles Flying* in the Aguilar literature. She touches on race and lesbianism: "The U.S. flag binds the subject below the waist, suggesting a critique of the exclusionary constructions of lesbianism as white. On the other hand, her face is hidden...by a symbol of Mexican national identity, referencing the ideal mestizo body...."¹⁴ She also briefly addresses the size of Aguilar's body, writing, "the imposing size of the subject's body interrupts the binary *U.S./Mexico* to create the focal point of the composition as something more than either pole (I am the product of the conflict, but more than this)...."¹⁵ But none of these interpretations capture the complex interplay of imagery in Aguilar's work, which defies easy interpretation and raises more questions than it answers.

Calvo rightly describes the image as a "dream" and a "fantasy scenario."¹⁶ Her expansion of the image beyond nationality to discuss gender and sexuality is useful as well, but even in this realm her description remains somewhat cursory. Aguilar's photograph opens itself

¹² Diana Emery Hulick, "Laura Aguilar," *Latin American Art* 5 no. 3 (1993): 52-54.

¹³ Luz Calvo, "Laura Aguilar's *Three Eagles Flying*," in *Aztlán Hoy*, ed. Berta Sichel (Madrid: Consejería de Cultura, 2000): 90-91, 137. Quote 137.

¹⁴ Yarbrow-Bejarano, "Laying It Bare," 286.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁶ Calvo, "Laura Aguilar's *Three Eagles Flying*," 137.

to multiple interpretations without definitively privileging any of them—even in one simple gesture. For instance, Aguilar’s deployment of the flags invites a cultural reading, in addition to the political and sexual ones that Calvo notes. Aguilar’s bare chest and hooded head, with the eagle positioned over her face, reference the tradition of *Lucha libre* (a form of masked wrestling that originated in Mexico—fig. 4-3). The flags also suggest popular American culture: in 1990, a series of television advertisements ran, encouraging young people to “Rock the Vote.” The most memorable of these advertisements featured a semi-nude Madonna wrapped in the American flag (fig. 4-4).

In both of these cases, the ghostly presence of a more idealized body haunts Aguilar’s image. The *luchadero* represents the height of *machismo*—he is the athletic counterpoint to the head of the Chicano family. Although Aguilar references these wrestlers in her image, she denies herself the power that is theirs; the flag denies her ability to speak, the rope denies her ability to act. She casts herself as powerless and constrained, rather than active and empowered, calling for broader readings about the role of the fat lesbian in Chicano culture. The choice to mask her face with the Mexican, rather than American, flag also evokes a particularly gendered reading, which hints at the silence and complicity in patriarchal family life that the Chicano community once required of women in general, and lesbians in particular, lest they be labeled *Malinche*.¹⁷ The nod to the “Rock the Vote” ad allows Aguilar to comment further on race and

¹⁷ *Malinche* (or Doña Marina) was an Indian woman who facilitated the Spanish conquest of Mexico, acting as a translator and mistress to the Spaniards. She is widely interpreted in popular culture as a betrayer of her own kind. However, there is also a whole host of writings about her significance to Mexican culture—from her influence in defining gender roles to her reclamation as a feminist symbol. In addition to Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, see also: Norma Alcarón, “Chicana’s Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object,” in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990); Margarita Cota-Cárdenas, “Malinche’s Discourse,” in *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, ed. Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana Rivero (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993); Marvin Goldwert. “Mexican Machismo: The Flight from Femininity,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 72, no. 1 (1985):161-169; and Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove, 1961).

gender, by acting as foil to Madonna's (bleached) blond, blue-eyed, overtly sexualized pose. Where Madonna's arms cross coyly over her chest, teasing the viewer with her semi-nudity, Aguilar's hands are restrained in front of her body as though she is shackled. The focus of the "Rock the Vote" ad is Madonna's face and its come-hither expression, whereas Aguilar's image (and by extension, her identity) is dominated by her body. By invoking the image of Madonna in her work, Aguilar reminds us of the privileged half of the dichotomy for which her body provides the "other."

The American flag additionally links Aguilar's image to a whole host of art historical imagery involving the flag, most notably David Hammons' seminal series that addresses the then-contemporary civil rights movement. In his silkscreen and body print, *Pray for America* (1969) Hammons also appears wrapped in the flag. In a mixed media body print entitled *Injustice Case* (1970) he appears seated, hands bound. The print is layered on top of an American flag. The allusion to Hammons' work, particularly when coupled with the rope binding Aguilar's hands, inserts the triptych into the discourse on race and slavery in the United States.

While Calvo points out the sexual connotations of Aguilar's bound hands in the image, this gesture also opens itself to multiple readings. Without direct quotation, it references a whole host of art historical and popular imagery about slavery, like Hiram Powers' sculpture *The Greek Slave* (1844) or Edmonia Lewis's *Forever Free* (1867). *The Greek Slave* depicts a young Greek woman with an idealized body being sold into slavery by the Turks, her arms shackled together, her eyes downcast. *Forever Free*, a memorial to the Emancipation Proclamation, shows two former slaves; a kneeling woman with her arms raised and hands clasped (very much like Aguilar's in *Three Eagles Flying*), next to a standing man with a bare torso, his left hand still

chained by his broken shackle, the weighted ball once attached to those shackles now lying underneath his left foot. Aguilar's bound hands also call to mind abolitionist images, like the widely popular nineteenth-century works *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?* or its feminine counterpoint, *Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?* In this context, the bound hands evoke the specter of lynching, an all too familiar element of the United States' history with race.

By referencing these works, Aguilar's image takes on wide variety of political meanings. Because Aguilar inserts her own body (which is Chicana, rather than black) into this visual discourse, *Three Eagles Flying* broadens that discourse about race. Her photograph suggests the United States government's troubled history, not only with slavery, but also with Mexico. By layering these historical issues onto the image, Aguilar's commentary on current Chicana status within American society takes its place within a broader continuum. The viewer is reminded that America has long resisted including all people of color as equal citizens, not only Chicanas, and that America's resistance has often been brutally violent. But the connotations raised by the bondage fall equally on Mexico, a country that has its own brutal history of conquest of indigenous populations like the Aztecs.

Aguilar's choice to wrap her neck, body, and hands in rope additionally evokes a plethora of sexual practices, largely those considered deviant or perverse in American popular culture. The rope and covering of her face bring to mind S/M bondage, while the loops around her neck allude to the practice of autoerotic asphyxiation. Practitioners of these sexualities are silenced in American culture as effectively as Aguilar is silenced in this image. Aguilar's use of bondage imagery also allows *Three Eagles Flying* to be read as commentary on lesbianism, which is likewise seen as deviant by many elements of society. The gesture blurs the line between

lesbianism (which Gayle Rubin argues is a “major area of contest”) and sadomasochism (which she calls outright “bad” sex: sex that is socially constructed as abnormal, unnatural and sick).¹⁸

Aguilar’s difficult image can be read in multiple ways. It can seem to label both lesbianism and S/M as unproblematically deviant, practices that fall fully outside the norm. It can contrast the more radical behavior of S/M against lesbianism, thus normalizing Aguilar’s own sexuality by “other”-ing S/M. It can call into question the arbitrary distinctions made between different sexual practices, implying that no sex is natural, but that all sexual behavior is culturally constructed. The image can also suggest a raced reading of Aguilar’s lesbian body, which is constrained and silenced by patriarchal Chicano culture as well as white American culture.

But what all the interpretations of this image ignore is the way that the physical dimensions of Aguilar’s body inflect all of the above readings. The American flag becomes a symbol of America’s international reputation as the fattest nation in the world.¹⁹ The fat body is popularly conceived as asexual; to put it in bondage becomes a doubly radical gesture. It can be interpreted as a suggestion that the fat body can be desirable; it can equally be seen to inscribe fat into the lexicon of perversion and depravity associated with alternative sexualities. That is, it can be seen as putting sexual attraction to the fat body firmly in the fetish category where it is assumed to belong (hence the underground cultures associated with fat sexuality, like practitioners of bondage or S/M, “Chubby Chasers,” “Fat Admirers,” and others who sexually desire fat men/women have their own, separate, web and dating sites segregated from their “normal”-sized counterparts). Once associated with fatness, the flag obscuring Aguilar’s features changes meaning again; now it can be read as a reference to the common practice in news media

¹⁸ Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 3-44:14.

¹⁹ See, for instance, British anxieties that they are approaching a level of fat close to America’s. For an overt link, see: Mark Steyn, “A Broadside in the War on Blubber,” *Telegraph*, June 1, 2004.

of using stock footage of bodies of fat people, their faces blurred or out of frame, as background for new stories about “obesity.” It can also be seen as a commentary on the link in American culture between race and fat.

Figuring in the Forgotten: Fat and Race in America

*Bodies such as [fat Chicano author Oscar Zeta] Acosta’s seemed to create problems...because they raised visible questions about power and where it originated: was it in fat or in color? Neither [the fat power nor the brown power] movement seemed to be capable of dealing with [these] issues simultaneously...Marcia Chamberlain*²⁰

As the criticism of *Three Eagles Flying* indicates, critics writing about Laura Aguilar’s images tend to view her photographs through one lens at a time. They address her race, or her lesbianism, or her fatness. They fail to acknowledge the way that fat inflects these identities, as these identities change cultural readings of fat. In American culture, fat and skin color are ideologically linked. Paul Campos points out one of the ironies of the relationship between race and obesity—both of these terms are cultural constructs.²¹ The idea that race defines a discrete and quantifiable set of characteristics has a lengthy history in Western culture. However, recent scholarship challenges this idea,²² as does the miscegenation of the American population, just

²⁰ Marcia Chamberlain, “Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*: A Fat Man’s Recipe for Chicano Revolution,” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 91-110. Quote 103.

²¹ Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America’s Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004): 82-83.

²² For more information on the origins of scientific racism, see: Michael D. Biddiss, *Father of Racist Ideology: The Social and Political Thought of Count Gobineau* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1970); Thomas Carlyle, “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question,” *Fraser’s Magazine*, 40 (February 1849): 670-679; Rachel Caspari, “From Types to Populations: A Century of Race, Physical Anthropology, and the American Anthropological Association,” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 105 no. 1 (March 2003): 65-76; William H. Tucker, *The Funding of Scientific Racism: Wickliffe Draper and the Pioneer Fund* (Illinois: Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 2002).

For more on race as a social or political construct, see: William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Eric R. Wolf, “Perilous Ideas: Race, Culture, People,” *Current Anthropology* 35 no. 1 (February 1994): 1-12.

like a variety of scholars challenge the notion that “obesity” is a meaningful term for medical diagnosis.²³ Aguilar herself demonstrates the permeability of race as a category for analysis in this respect, with her mixed heritage. Her Mexican-American ancestry marries both European and indigenous populations; yet somehow many Americans consider this a distinct racial group, different from whiteness and also from Native Americanness. And Aguilar further confounds a simple understanding of race because this already mixed Chicana heritage becomes even more opaque by virtue of her Irish-American mother.

Perhaps not coincidentally, fat and race are linked both statistically and in the popular imagination. Since 1973, the National Center for Health Statistics has confirmed that the highest rates for obesity are found among the poor and racial minorities (two populations that also continually overlap in this country).²⁴ According to the NIH, currently about fifty percent of black women and forty-three percent of Hispanic women are obese, as compared to only thirty-three percent of white women; for men, the difference is less extreme, with thirty-seven percent of black men and thirty-four percent of Hispanic men considered obese, as compared to thirty-two percent of white men.²⁵ This interest in dividing obesity statistics by race and the emphasis on the relative thinness of Caucasians is symptomatic of the racial fears that underlie the hysteria about obesity. Among other reasons to question the import of this focus on race, as Campos points out, is the fact that this statistical link is not necessarily causal—i.e., it is not automatically

For more on the falsity of race as a biological category, see: Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Richard Cooper, “A Note on the Biologic Concept of Race and its Application in Epidemiologic Research,” *American Heart Journal* 108, no. 3 (September 1984):715-723; Richard Cooper and Richard David, “The Biological Concept of Race and its Application to Public Health and Epidemiology,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 11, no. 1(1986): 97-116; Halford H. Fairchild, “Scientific Racism: The Cloak of Objectivity,” *Journal of Social Issues* 47 no. 3(April 14, 1991): 101-115; Alan H. Goodman, “Why Genes Don’t Count (for Racial Differences in Health),” *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no. 11(2000): 1699-1702; Eugenia Shanklin, *Anthropology and Race* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994).

²³ For more on this topic, see the introduction of this dissertation.

²⁴ Roberta Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989), 226.

²⁵ Weight-Control Information Network, “Overweight and Obesity Statistics,” last accessed December 14, 2010. <http://www.nidk.nih.gov/statistics/index.htm>

causally linked to genetic factors in the non-white population, but is more likely linked to socio-economic factors. He writes, “slimness in America tends to correlate with wealth and privilege, it also tends to correlate with whiteness, and especially upper-class whiteness....”²⁶

If thinness is linked conceptually to whiteness and socio-economic status today, then fatness must be linked to the opposite. Maud Ellmann points out part of the source of this conflation—the way that the link between fat, race, and poverty at once underwrites and undermines modern myths about progress and identity. She writes:

...the fat woman, particularly if she is nonwhite and working-class, has come to embody everything the prosperous must disavow: imperialism, exploitation, surplus value, maternity, morality, abjection, and unloveliness. Heavier with projections than with flesh, she siphons off this guilt, desire, and denial, leaving her idealized counterpart behind: the kind of woman that one sees on billboards, sleek and streamlined like the cars that she is often used to advertise, bathed in the radiance of the commodity.²⁷

The fat body, especially the raced fat body, plays into a whole host of fears, which makes it the ideal scapegoat for many different segments of society, as J. Eric Oliver points out. He elucidates the way that the raced fat body taps into “the racial and economic anxieties of America’s middle class.”²⁸ He continues:

One reason Americans so readily accept that obesity must be a major problem is because obesity is associated with those at the bottom end of America’s social ladder. Thus, if obesity is growing, it surely must be a sign of American decline. Indeed, it is precisely because it is such a powerful symbol that obesity has been adopted by so many different groups. Among conservatives, it is evidence of the growing moral degeneration of America: the fact that...we are moving farther away from the Anglo-Protestant tradition....Among liberals, obesity represents the increasing power of international corporations and food companies making us heavy against our will. Among whites, it taps into latent racial fears that come with America’s growing ethnic diversity—the growth of obesity parallels the

²⁶ Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 81. Paul Emsberger argues that fatness actually causes downward socio-economic mobility, rather than the reverse. See Paul Emsberger, “Does Social Class Explain the Connection between Weight and Health?” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York UP, 2009), 25-36.

²⁷ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artist: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

²⁸ Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 77.

increasing numbers of Latinos and African Americans relative to a shrinking white minority....²⁹

And Paul Campos illuminates the ways in which the repulsion towards fat and fear about race become entwined in media discussions of fat.

Campos provides an extensive analysis of a March 2000 article in *Harper's* magazine, entitled "Let Them Eat Fat," by Greg Critser. Critser's article underscores the ways in which fat and race are linked in the American consciousness. He writes, "Although open around the clock, the Winchell's near my house doesn't get rolling until seven in the morning, the Spanish-language talk shows frothing in the background....Inside, Mami placates Miguelito with a giant apple fritter....Viewed through the lens of obesity, as I am inclined to do, the scene is not so *feliz*."³⁰ Campos notes the way that obesity allows a socially acceptable outlet for Critser to vent his (not so latent) racism.

His focus on the ethnicity of all these Mayan doñas and peripatetic black kids and doughnut-crazed Mexicans has nothing whatsoever to do with the phenomenon of upper-class white people being revolted by the sight of fat, working-class, non-white persons, possibly of extra-national provenance, gorging themselves like animals in a viscerally disgusting...bacchanal of forbidden treats. Oh no. He is merely sounding the alarm, in a desperate attempt to save these hopelessly simple people from themselves....³¹

There are other examples of the links in the American public mind between race, fat, and fear: a link among race, class, fat, and moral decrepitude. One such example is the 2009 film *Precious*, in which both the title character (played by Gabby Sidibe) and her mother (played by comedienne Mo'Nique) are fat. However, the narrative marries fat to abject poverty and physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse. That is, fat stands not as an independent physical characteristic, but as a signifier for a host of negative (and presumably causal) traits. There is

²⁹ Ibid., 77.

³⁰ Quoted in Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 64.

³¹ Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 64.

also a tradition of deflecting racial issues into fat jokes in television programs aimed at black viewers, like the sitcom *What's Happening!!* (1976-79), a tradition that continues in current sitcoms like Tyler Perry's *House of Perry*, a show populated by fat, black characters. As Jerry Mosher notes, "In its 'color blind' approach to comedy, *What's Happening!!*'s frequent fat jokes offers an instructive example of how Hollywood employs one marginalized group to unwittingly repress another...."³²

However, the very fact that sitcoms populated by fat characters existed and continue to exist hints at the possibilities for resistance to thinness as the norm among black and Latino cultures. Sitcoms aimed at white viewers sometimes have fat characters, even fat main characters (*King of Queens*, for example) but to see a fat white body on either the large or small screen is still a rare occurrence. This potential for resistance to conformity can also be seen in the (slightly) wider variety of body types exhibited by successful women of color in the media. Magazines and films present Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek as sex symbols from the Latino community, and Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé as sex symbols from the black community.³³ However, it is important to note that all of these women have bodies that are still slim, despite their rounder rears and more ample chests, and their shapes remain out of reach for the vast majority of women. Despite this fact, these women's physiques still play into racial stereotypes; they are admired because they have flat stomachs coupled with larger breasts and/or derrieres, features long associated with women of color and which play into raced fantasies that women of color are more sexually uninhibited and voracious than their white counterparts, as in the

³² Jerry Mosher, "Setting Free the Bears: Refiguring Fat Men on Television," in Braziel, *Bodies Out of Bounds*, 166-196: 175.

³³ For a reading of the potentially positive implications of these figures, particularly Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé, see Wendy A. Burns-Ardolin, "Jiggle in My Walk: the Iconic Power of the 'Big Butt' in American Pop Culture," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 271-279.

stereotype of the “Latin lover.”³⁴ Moreover, for every celebrity of color who deviates slightly from the über-thin ideal, more can be found to reinforce it (think of Latinas Giselle Bündchen and Penelope Cruz, for instance; or Halle Berry, Naomi Campbell, and Iman).

Susan Bordo points out the ways in which this resistance to (white) American beauty norms faces a host of social pressures. Advertising for beauty products aimed at non-white populations frequently encourages women of color to change their looks in ways that minimize their racial difference, from hair straightening products to colored contacts designed to lighten or even make eyes blue. These products are part of a larger socio-historical context that values whiteness and asks women of color to conform to white standards of beauty.³⁵ Likewise, as Roberta Seid notes, the pressure for women of color to become thin is rooted in more than just racism. It also has socio-economic consequences. She writes:

These groups frantically pursued slimness not just to be beautiful but also because slenderness indeed had become the crucial insignia of social status and of Americanization. The identification between richness and body weight was embedded in the national psyche. A well-bred person had to be slender, for a fat body was an uncivilized body. And, as long as the faith prevailed that people could control their body size, slenderness seemed a pre-eminently democratic value....³⁶

The compulsion to conform to the normative body type can be seen in the growing prevalence of famous women of color who lose weight and often receive financial compensation as a result. Comedienne Whoopi Goldberg advertised for Slimfast for a year before losing the position due to controversial jokes she made aimed at then-President George W. Bush in 2004.

³⁴ For more on the conflation of race, fat, and sexual display, see Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 223-261. See also Bordo’s discussion of the intersection of race and sexuality in the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill trial; Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 8-11; Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

³⁵ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 245-275.

³⁶ Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 226.

After losing twenty pounds, Queen Latifah (a long-time advocate of positive body image for fat women of color) signed on as the spokeswoman for Jenny Craig, staying in that role from 2008-2009. In 2009, singer and actress Jennifer Hudson became the face of Weight Watchers. But perhaps the best example of the attention directed at the bodies of fat women of color is Oprah. Despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that Oprah is one of the most powerful and influential figures of the past twenty-five years, her body and its continually changing size is always scrutinized as newsworthy, and jokes about her weight are staples of comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *The Soup*.³⁷

Although, as suggested above, non-white fat bodies provide an outlet for latent racism in a general way, Kathleen LeBesco and Julia McCrossin elucidate the ways in which the fat Latino body is particularly threatening. These two authors argue that fat Latino bodies disrupt the category of Americanness in a way that fat black bodies do not. LeBesco notes that thinness is an American imperative, a way of disciplining the body and demonstrating good citizenship. The “failed” citizen often inhabits a Latino body, presumed to be unwilling or unable to make “healthy” food choices, through ignorance, poverty, or culture. Thus, for LeBesco, anti-fatness campaigns can be interpreted as a new form of eugenics.³⁸ McCrossin uses this idea to interpret fat, male, Latino bodies in Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and convincingly argues that the fat male Latino represents American fears, not only about miscegenation, but also about borders and nationality. The hybrid Latino body threatens the purity of the white body, constantly serving as a reminder that race is fluid, at the same time that it threatens American

³⁷ For information on the medical community’s pressure on non-white communities to conform to white body standards, see Bianca D.M. Wilson, “Widening the Dialogue to Narrow the Gap in Health Disparities: Approaches to Fat Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Health Promotion,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 54-64.

³⁸ Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004). See also Kathleen LeBesco. “Quest for a Cause: The Fat Gene, the Gay Gene, and the New Eugenics,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 65-74.

nationality by demonstrating that America's boundaries and borders are permeable and equally fluid, thus "undermin[ing] the hegemonic discourse of European supremacy."³⁹ As McCrossin puts it, "the excesses of flesh and desire inscribed on [fat, male, Latino bodies in Cather's novel] upend any kind of stability and threaten the inflexible rules of race and citizenship in the...U.S."⁴⁰

But as always, Aguilar's multivalent identity further complicates this issue of nationalism. Within nationalist discourse, woman serves as a marker of communal identity, because she represents the boundary lines of "home" and "family." Deniz Kayindoti explains the links between "woman," "home," "family," and "nation," by noting that "nationalism describes its object using either the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, *patria*) or home (*heimat*) in order to denote something to which one is 'naturally' tied...The association of women with the private domain reinforces the merging of nation/community with the selfless mother/devout wife."⁴¹ Nationalism utilizes nostalgia, evoking a communal past with an authentic communal identity to maintain its agenda of modernization, and women's bodies "become crucial to nationalist discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction of national collectivities, but as the very embodiment of this nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition."⁴² Moreover, because woman is the bedrock of national identity, she must be heterosexual, both to fulfill the imperative of biological reproduction in the state's interest, and also because a heteronormative sexuality helps to secure the identity of gendered colonial and bourgeois subjects. That is, "good citizenship" depends on the family as a reproductive unit

³⁹ Julia McCrossin, "The Fat of the (Border)land: Food, Flesh, and Hispanic Masculinity in Willa Cather's *Death Comes to the Archbishop*," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 241-249. Quote 247.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴¹ Deniz Kayindoti, "Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 376-391. Quote 382.

⁴² Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion," in *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. Robert J. Cober and Stephen Valocchi (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003): 206-219. Quote 207.

which preserves the stability of gender roles and hierarchies. As Gayatri Gopani explains, “Thus, within a nationalist logic where women embody the past and that past is figured as heterosexual, the nonheterosexual female in particular is multiply excluded from the terms of national belonging and ‘good citizenship.’”⁴³

Within this larger discourse about race, sexuality, and body size, Aguilar’s multiple identities act upon one another like a feedback loop, continually magnifying and multiplying her “other”ness. Aguilar is excluded from “good citizenship” on a multitude of grounds: lesbianism, fatness and race. Each of her identities inflects the other, preventing easy absorption into any one category and allowing productive resistance to normalizing categories like “woman” or “citizen.”

Full (Figured) Circle: A Return to *Stillness* #27

‘Normal’ is a subjective experience by which lives are often defined. The images captured through my lens express the possibilities that exist when one learns to accept the person within and fully integrates that with the external images others perceive. I attempt to portray self-acceptance, hopefully expanding the viewer’s capacity for understanding and acceptance. Laura Aguilar⁴⁴

Aguilar’s *Stillness* #27 is a multivalent image that requires a variety of readings, by reinforcing race and body norms even as it undermines them. By placing her own fat, Chicana body in contrast to the idealized white body understood to be the normalized body in this culture, she seems to “other” herself and further inscribe the thin white body as the ideal body. Yet by visually associating both those bodies with the landscape that surrounds them, she suggests that both bodies are as natural as that landscape. At the same time, the association between the nude

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *Artistas Chicanas: a Symposium on the Experience and Expression of Chicana Artists* (Santa Barbara, CA: University of California, 1991).

female and the landscape inserts the photograph into a long history of images of the female nude by male artists, intended for scrutiny as a sexual object. Yet as Amelia Jones points out, in her discussion of *Nude No. 7* (1996),

[Aguilar] solicits the male gaze, and yet, pressing her flesh into the curves of the landscape, she resists the penetratory effects of the gaze. She is flesh [as the mountains] are flesh, all dancing across our visual plane as 'other' but stymieing the unidirectionality of our grasping gazes. Not only does the female body here become a sign of our own thwarted desires, but it becomes materially other as landscape....⁴⁵

Aguilar's body invites a sexualizing gaze at the same time that it resists that gaze. Aguilar's photograph further removes itself from conventional heterosexual viewing practices by upending conventions of two nude women shown together. Rather than exposing erotic areas of the body, they are concealed, as Aguilar's body curls in on itself like a fist. As Laura Cottingham notes, "The occasional appearance of another nude woman with her... further removes her iconography from an assumption of female sexual performance for men. Naked, and with nature, Aguilar wants to be with women."⁴⁶

The contradictory readings by critics of Aguilar's imagery attest to the density of her photographs. They become a kind of litmus test for the viewer. One author sees "...the flip side of the anorexic model. Obesity is a disorder of equal magnitude and disruption...[Aguilar's] may be a body as distorted and suffering (in terms of health) as the over-thin model, but it is her body...."⁴⁷ She describes Aguilar as abnormal and sick. Yet another writer sees that "[t]he bodies in Aguilar's work are probably more 'normal' than what is depicted in fashion magazines and by placing them in outdoor surroundings with bulky boulders and sagging tree branches, she also

⁴⁵ Amelia Jones, "Performing the Other as Self: Cindy Sherman and Laura Aguilar Pose the Subject," in *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005): 69-102; 92-93.

⁴⁶ Laura Cottingham, "Laura Aguilar," in *Laura Aguilar 99.2* (San Antonio, TX: ArtPace, 1999): n.p.

⁴⁷ Ann Marie Rousseau, "The Empress Has no Clothes," *A.M. Rousseau Art Photography* (website), accessed August 1, 2011. <http://www.amrousseau.com/articles/photometro10.html>

shows them to be completely natural.”⁴⁸ That is, by looking at the same images, the authors arrive at wildly different conclusions.

Critics also vary in the degree of their appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of Aguilar’s body. For Shelley Armitage, Aguilar’s body is so far outside the norm that it fails to register as human. She writes:

The enormous form of Aguilar’s body in the natural landscape takes on another meaning altogether. Our eyes are so accustomed to the idealized female figure that at first the forms do not even register as figures. The fleshy curves of her body seem like abstraction, more reminiscent of Edward Weston’s bell peppers than of an actual woman. Aguilar’s figure, posed next to a boulder or draped over a stone, with her face hidden or turned away, becomes part of the landscape itself and is not always recognizable at first glance.⁴⁹

Alice di Certo interprets her body as “in spite of its differences, in harmony with the world.”⁵⁰ Harmony Hammond also sees the potential for aesthetic appeal in Aguilar’s form, writing that by “[d]epicting a range in shape and body size, she queers and colors the tradition of the fine-art nude, extending the boundaries of what is ‘beautiful.’”⁵¹ Yet it is not surprising that despite their potential to undermine conventional ideals of the body, Aguilar’s images are most consistently re-inscribed as the “other” by critics. The majority of them take pains to enforce the abnormality of her body, even as they seem to celebrate her images. Her body is described as “over-abundan[t],”⁵² “mountainously corpulent,”⁵³ “unconventional,”⁵⁴ “obese, perhaps even grotesque,”⁵⁵ and “decidedly not erotic.”⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Dan R. Goddard, “The Human Body as a Part of Nature,” *San Antonio Express-News*, October 12, 2003.

⁴⁹ Shelley Armitage, “Personal Ecologies,” in *Passing through, Settling in: Contemporary Photographs of the Desert* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, 2006): 44-45.

⁵⁰ Alice di Certo, “The Unconventional Photographic Self-Portraits of John Coplans, Carla Williams, and Laura Aguilar,” (master’s thesis, Georgia State University: Atlanta, 2006): 61-62.

⁵¹ Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 85.

⁵² di Certo, “Unconventional Self-Portraits,” 65-66.

⁵³ “Art Guide,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2003.

⁵⁴ Cottingham, “Laura Aguilar,” n.p.

⁵⁵ Bill Smith. “The Natural: Laura Aguilar in the Flesh,” accessed July 1, 2011.

<http://www.billsmithonline.com/redbarn/>

Stillness #27 continually folds in on itself, much like Aguilar's body in the image. The photograph seems to reinforce norms of sexuality, race, and body size, yet the association of Aguilar and the model's body with the landscape behind them simultaneously naturalizes the form that is also "othered." Her image sexualizes the fat body by showing it naked with another model who embodies the American cultural ideal, yet Aguilar denies that sexuality by turning the figures back to back and closing off the erogenous zones from the viewer's eyes. It invites the male gaze by presenting two nude women, yet denies the gaze by figuring sexuality as woman-centered. The image figures fat as natural, yet asks for a kind of eroticized scrutiny of the fat body, by comparing it to the landscape around it. Aguilar's complex photograph thus puts the fat body into the discourse surrounding race, sexuality, gender, and fat in American culture. The image continually reaffirms and then denies that discourse, never allowing the viewer to settle into a comfortable position.

Aguilar's other outdoor self-portraits operate with similar strategies. *Nude, No. 7* (1996, fig. 4-6) shows Aguilar seated, from behind. She sits in the background of the image; three rocks occupy the foreground. The earth around the four of them is sandy and barren. Aguilar's shape, like those of the rocks, is roughly pyramidal. Both the rocks in the foreground and the lines in the soil around her reinforce the geometric shape of her body. Additionally, the lines in the soil also converge into a triangle, albeit one whose apex crests beyond the frame of the photograph. The play of light and surface across the craggy surface of the rocks echoes the play of light across the uneven surface of Aguilar's body.

Here again, Aguilar inserts the female nude into a landscape, and finds visual rhymes between that shape and nature. This seems to open the photograph to the idea that the fat body,

⁵⁶ April K. Vasher-Dean, "The Art of Ana Mendieta and Laura Aguilar Examined through the Theories of Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Coco Fusco and the Virtues of Feminist Spirituality" (master's thesis, California State University: Northridge, CA, 2005): 39.

the lesbian body, are natural and normative. And yet, at the same time, Aguilar undercuts the typical associations between the female body and landscape. Rather than emphasizing lush fertility, the landscape looks as desolate as the surface of the moon. The identification of Aguilar's body with the rocks also exaggerates the monumentality of her form and suggests a parallel between her body, its solidity and heft, and the heaviness of those rocks. It would seem to reinforce stereotypes about the fat body as immobile, as "mountainously corpulent."⁵⁷

Yet the photograph, like *Stillness #27*, defies expectations about female nudes and sexuality. Again, rather than presenting the sexualized areas of her body for the viewer's delectation, Aguilar literally turns her back on the viewer. Aguilar's self-portrait also confounds race. Without a white model to serve as counterpoint, Aguilar is the palest thing in the image. What the audience "knows" about the Chicana body fades away in the black-and-white photo, making visible the fluidity of racial categories. At the same time that the paleness of Aguilar's body suggests the difficulty of reading race on the body, it can suggest the difficulty of living in such a multivalent body. As Yarbo-Bejarano notes, "Aguilar is too dark for white America; but perhaps also too light/white (with her half-Irish mother) in a Chicano or Mexican context."⁵⁸

Aguilar's multi-image self-portrait series demonstrates equal mutability of meaning. In *Don't Tell Her Art Can't Hurt* (1993), fig. 4-6, Aguilar appears in four images that are combined into one larger mural. A hand-written text accompanies each of the images, and the series of images flows into a narrative structured like a written page; i.e. it looks as if it is intended to be read from left to right, and then from top to bottom.

In the upper left, Aguilar stands in the middleground of the photograph, shot from the waist up. She wears a t-shirt, which features a graphic design that has also been divided into four

⁵⁷ "Art Guide."

⁵⁸ Yarbro-Bejarano, "Laying It Bare," 286.

parts. Below this image, the text reads, “The t-shirt said ART can’t hurt you, she knew better. Her problem was she placed value on it. She believed in it too much. She wanted to believe that it was hers to have, to own.”

The top right image shows Aguilar, still dressed in the same t-shirt, but now much closer to the surface of the picture plane. With her right hand she holds a gun up to her face, the barrel pointing skyward. The gun and her hand partially obscure the right-hand side of her face. The text underneath this panel reads, “You learn you’re not the one that they want to talk about pride. They decide who we were supposed to be and taught us to be it.”

In the two lower images, Aguilar is nude, still located close to the surface of the picture plane and shot at about bust-length (like the top right image). In both of these panels, she holds the gun, but now places it in her mouth. In the left image, Aguilar looks at the viewer, in the right image, she looks down at the gun. Her hands shift slightly between the left and right image; combined with the change in her focus, this suggests that she is getting ready to pull the trigger. The text beneath the left image reads, “If you’re a person of color and take pride in yourself and your culture, you use your art to give a voice, to show the positive. So how do the bridges get built if the doors are closed to your voice and your vision?” The text beneath the right image reads, “So don’t tell her art can’t hurt, she knows better. The believing can pull at one’s soul. So much that one wants to give up.”

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano notes that the “contrast between clothed and unclothed heightens the tension between the self-targeted violence and an undercurrent of potentially outward-turned threat, rejection, or violence.... Aguilar channels her rage and frustration at an exclusionary art establishment in an image of suicidal depression.”⁵⁹ She also points out the alienation of Aguilar’s text, which is written in the second and third, rather than first, person.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 290.

But Yarbro-Bejarano discusses both of Aguilar's gestures—the distancing text, the self-violence of her gesture—largely in respect to race, with little discussion of lesbianism and none regarding fatness.

Aguilar's decision to reference suicide by placing the gun in her mouth, rather than to the side of her head, can be read as reference to stereotypes of fatness, particularly in regard to oral fixations. In one colloquialism, suicide by firearm is referred to as “eating your gun,” and the location of the gun in Aguilar's image foregrounds this idea. The insertion of the phallic barrel in her mouth also alludes to the sexual act of fellatio, an allusion strengthened by the way that Aguilar strips to nudity in the frames that show the gun in her mouth. Susan Bordo illuminates the associations between women, food, and sexual desire in her book, *Unbearable Weight*. Bordo contrasts the differing societal attitudes about men and food to the attitudes toward women and food, as demonstrated by popular advertising and film. Men are expected and encouraged to have hearty appetites: as in “Hungry Man Dinners,” or the usage of NFL players to advertise Campbell's “Chunky” soup. Sexual hunger, associated with eating in both men and women, is also a positive thing for men. Bordo describes taglines from multiple ads featuring men in which this link is positively viewed, as in the following lyrics from the jingle in a Pillsbury ad showing a man eating baked goods. “I'm thinking about you the whole day through. I've got a passion for you.”⁶⁰

Women, on the other hand, must be encouraged to keep their eating in check. Food, for women, represents a dangerous temptation that must be kept under control. Transgression in this area is “floridly sexualized, as an act of ‘cheating.’”⁶¹ In cultural attitudes toward women, terror and loathing permeate the merger of hunger and sexuality, because women's hunger and

⁶⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 105-112; Pillsbury ad Quoted on 111.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

sexuality threaten to steal from or deplete men's bodies and souls. Bordo illustrates this point both with advertisements and examples of narratives in which independent women with strong sexual appetites are punished by madness, death, or disgrace (such as *Fatal Attraction* or *Dangerous Liaisons*).⁶² This theme continues in more recent films, like *A Perfect Murder*, *In the Cut*, *Obsessed*, or *Unfaithful*.

To expand beyond Bordo's analysis, Marcia Millman describes the particular resonance that the association between food and sexuality has for fat women. Fat women are always already presumed to have an oral fixation (witness the standard presumption that fat women compulsively binge, which Millman herself demonstrates). For fat women, the link between food and sexuality demonstrates not a healthy sexuality, but a "forbidden, excessive, degraded, or distorted sexuality."⁶³ Oral fixations are popularly conceived of as demonstrating both an unfulfilled desire for sex or love (and as the fat woman self-evidently has a large oral fixation, she must have a large appetite for sex and love) and also promiscuity. Millman shows how the fat woman is simultaneously (and contradictorily) constructed as both hyper-sexualized and asexualized—she is perceived as starving for love, and also as an inappropriate object for sexual desire.⁶⁴

Don't Tell Her Art Can't Hurt touches on these associations between fat women and voracious physical and sexual desire. Yet Aguilar's image transforms the fulfillment of these hungers from an act of self-feeding into an act of self-violence, adding yet more connotations. The violence of the gesture suggests popular associations between fatness and self-harm or even passive suicide, as in the common phrase "eating oneself to death." The threat of suicide also

⁶² Ibid., 112-117.

⁶³ Marcia Millman, *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1976): 168.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 168-193. For a discussion of the intersection between fat women, food, sex, and pornography, see Don Kulick, "Porn," in *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, Don Kulick and Anne Meneley, eds. (New York: Penguin, 2005): 77-92.

plays into beliefs that *all* fat people are unhappy and self-loathing (a stereotype perpetuated in advertisements for weight loss products in the testimonial sections, and in interviews of contestants on shows like *The Biggest Loser*⁶⁵). The unfortunate truth is that this is more than just a stereotype. Self-hatred and self-blame *are* major consequences of both fat prejudice and homophobia. Because society equates both behaviors with immorality and perceives both to be a choice, many fat people and many queer people blame themselves for their own marginalization or believe they deserve it. This is one reason that so many activists embrace the search for a fat or a gay gene, which would remove the stigma of choice from homosexuality and fatness.⁶⁶

Aguilar herself expresses feelings of self-directed anger in some of her interviews. She has said:

Voluptuous is a kind way to put it, but really I'm fat. I am not saying I like being this way. I have always felt a lot of anger about my size. My work is a way of coming to terms with my body, with learning to be comfortable with who you are. I have lost some weight, but I would like to lose more. Unfortunately, it's something that all women struggle with. We can't all be a size zero. I'm trying to be really honest about accepting my body.⁶⁷

Aguilar's use of the gun does not have to be interpreted as a sign of violence against herself alone. The gun represents more than just suicide because Aguilar directs it not only at herself, but also toward the sky. In the top right frame, as Yarbrow-Bejarano points out, her gesture with the gun is more ambiguous. Aguilar's pose implies that she might turn the gun outward, creating a potential for violence directed externally, rather than internally. Additionally, if the viewer reverses the narrative of the images (if she reads them from right to left and from

⁶⁵Examples of this phenomenon are ubiquitous in our culture—for one example, see the testimonial of Debra M. from the Nutrisystem website. She writes, "I'm simply happy to be *happy* again...Since I've lost the weight, I just feel so much better. It's hard to really emphasize how much Nutrisystem means to me. It completely changed the way I feel about myself, and really the way I feel about life in general. I had gotten to a point where I was so frustrated and unhappy about how I had lost control of my weight that I began to be upset with other aspects of my life." NutriSystem Corporation, "Success Stories: Debra M.," last accessed August 1, 2011.

http://www.nutrisystem.com/jsps_hmr/success_stories/success_story.jsp?id=27600389&weightLoss=20
For more on the ways that society at large, and more particularly medicine, force the fat person to conform to this stereotype, see Chapter Two of this dissertation.

⁶⁶For more on this topic, see LeBesco *Revolting Bodies?* and "Quest for a Cause."

⁶⁷Aguilar, Quoted in Goddard, "Human Body."

bottom to top, e.g.) then the whole scenario becomes one of danger and threat. The final frame in this sequence (showing Aguilar clothed and in the middleground—top left) now transforms from neutrality to danger. The final image in this scenario cuts off Aguilar’s hands—the viewer cannot be certain that they are empty. Aguilar may still clutch the gun, and her next move may be to raise it and shoot at the viewer. The meaning of the image thus turns on the direction in which it is read.

The text beneath the photographs also inflects their meaning. Aguilar’s decision to write in the second and third person, rather than the first, helps to universalize her message. Thus, where the photographs are particular to *Aguilar*, to her body and her experiences, the text suggests the viewer shares her feelings of rage. But like all of Aguilar’s images, the distancing tactic used in the text also opens itself up to another reading. It evokes the common experience fat women have of disassociating from their bodies, of living from the “neck up,” as Millman calls it.⁶⁸ Like the other elements of the photograph, the text refuses to signify one thing, but opens itself to multiple interpretations.

Laura Aguilar’s self-portraits are, on the surface, very simple and easily digestible photographs. Yet the smallest of choices—the use of the American flag, the juxtaposition of two models, the insertion of a gun into a mouth—opens Aguilar’s images out, exposing layer after layer of meaning and alternative readings. Her complex images insert the fat, lesbian, Chicana body into discourse on the meaning of gender, race, sexuality, and body size in American culture. Yet her self-portraits refuse to essentialize that body, to privilege any one meaning for that body. Instead, they provide multivalent references, never allowing the viewer to settle comfortably in front of them, forcing her to question the way we read information from and onto the body, and to question what her own body is saying.

⁶⁸ Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*, 195.

Conclusion, or: Why We Shouldn't Trim the Fat from Art History

It is my hope that this dissertation has provided a new way of looking at images of the fat female nude in art. The artists that produce these works do not operate in a vacuum; cultural attitudes mark their artistic production, and their works influence culture in their turn. The impulse among many authors to situate the fat body as carnivalesque or grotesque demonstrates the pervasiveness of negative Western ideas about fatness. To be grotesque or carnivalesque, the fat body must be understood as excessive, as challenging the norms and spilling over the appropriate boundaries of the body. But who established those boundaries, and what is a normative body? These are the questions that I hope I have asked.

Some readers may ask themselves why it is necessary to think about fat in a fine art context, rather than within the realm of popular culture. I believe that the pervasive fat hatred in our culture is so entrenched that many people, even scholars whose work I respect and admire, can demonstrate it in their own writing without even realizing it.¹ The premises that fat theory questions (that thinness is normative; that fat is inherently unattractive and unhealthy) are so firmly entrenched that they seem unshakable, unquestionable, and obviously true. For this reason, I consider it necessary to question them in every context, from magazine advertisements to fine art photography, from medicine to friends' posts on facebook.

Anti-fat attitudes damage people's lives. They hurt fat women, who face discrimination in educational and employment opportunities, in social and romantic

¹ See, for instance, Sander L. Gilman, *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008): 123-124. Gilman's description of people watching in New Orleans drips with disdain and even revulsion for the fat people he sees passing by.

interactions, and often even from their families. Anti-fat attitudes hurt thin women, many of whom fear that they are or will become fat, and subject themselves to needless mental anguish or even physical starvation. Anti-fat attitudes hurt us all, when we feel revulsion for our own bodies or the bodies of the women we see around us.

It is for this reason that I have purposely avoided a discussion of my own body in the introduction and body of this dissertation. Many authors feel compelled to outline their own relationship to weight in their works—either to assure the reader that they are not fat, or to reassure her that they are and they have firsthand experience with fat discrimination.² So here is my disclaimer. I am fat. I am very fat. I am the kind of fat that even most fat theorists will dismiss out of hand as unhealthy.³ The history of my relationship with my body is a long and antagonistic one, filled with self-hatred and all the attendant battle scars—years of dieting begun in early childhood, a brief flirtation with anorexia (which ironically, I remember as one of the happiest periods in my life), painful treatment at the hands of strangers, friends, and family members, and so on. Perhaps some of my experiences are unusual, but I think that overall, my shame and pain is more common than it is unique. Being fat does not give me a special window into Western attitudes about the body. It does not place me in a privileged location to speak about the body. Anti-fat prejudice affects everyone in different ways, and even women who adhere to idealized body norms can suffer on its account, and gain benefit from the work that fat activists and fat theorists are doing; because even I can still feel ambivalent

² See, for instance: Shelley Bovey, *The Forbidden Body: Why Being Fat Is Not a Sin* (London: Pandora, 1994); Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004); Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981); Richard Klein, *Eat Fat* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); et al.

³ See introduction, footnote 19.

about my body, repulsed by it, and embarrassed to commit what should be an objective and neutral fact (my weight) to writing.

With all of that being said, where do I see this line of inquiry going? Because this dissertation represents the first sustained foray of fat theory into art history, there is a wide field of inquiry open to scholars. For example, I find the way that “America” and “fat” are becoming interchangeable in the European imagination intriguing. I would like to explore in a more nuanced way how a tangled web of related concepts—America, fat, capitalism, imperialism, greed, overconsumption, etc.—resonate in British readings of Jenny Saville and Lucian Freud. Beyond the artists discussed in this dissertation, I am fascinated by the issue of food and its relationship to what I see as America’s cultural eating disorder. As with anorexics and bulimics, it has become commonplace for people of all ages, races, and genders to divide food into “good” and “bad” categories and attach emotional significance to their everyday eating habits. I believe this has fascinating implications for artists who use food in their works: artists like Janine Antoni, Cindy Sherman, and Vik Muniz. I think fat theory also makes a useful tool for rethinking images of women that meet the standards of beauty for our society, like those found in Rineke Dijkstra’s photography.

Some scholars seem to believe that fat theory is a one-trick pony.⁴ If that is the case, it is a big pony with a very good trick. I believe that fat theory can be a useful tool for many fields, and I believe that it can provide a very helpful lens with which to examine the social and historical context of images of the female body. I hope that it has

⁴ See, for instance, Alison Rowley’s dismissive attitude toward what she calls “fattism.” Alison Rowley, “On Viewing Three Paintings by Jenny Saville: Rethinking a Feminist Practice of Painting,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996): 88-109.

proven helpful in this dissertation, and I hope that this dissertation can, in turn, prove helpful to other scholars working with images of the body.

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