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SKIN DEEP: THE ELUSIVE APHRODITE

by

AMY FIX

(Under the Direction of Patricia Carter)

ABSTRACT

“Skin Deep: The Elusive Aphrodite” explores women’s body image issues influenced by a variety of sources, with the most common culprit being mass media's portrayal of “beautiful” women in current American culture. The artworks in this series create a dialogue with the viewer about varying definitions of women’s beauty by using a variety of women as models for either hand-made paper body casts, or for large-scale, emotionally-charged, representational portraits. The concept of ideal beauty is alluded to by the Venus or Aphrodite-inspired positions within the portraits, while the detrimental effects of the pursuit of an often-unattainable image of perfection are revealed through expressive paint applications or symbolic patterns that appear within the composition. Juxtaposed to the paintings and sculptural body casts is an army of uniform, golden cast paper mannequins, marching oppressively towards the viewer, their artificial bodies threatening to inevitably consume their individual, unique body types.

INDEX WORDS: Self-image, Ideal Beauty

SKIN DEEP: THE ELUSIVE APHRODITE

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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SKIN DEEP: THE ELUSIVE APHRODITE

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May 2012

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Linda and Mike, Sr. for their high standards which always have pushed me to succeed, to my brother, Mike, Jr., for continuing to provide an open ear and supportive shoulder, and to my fiancé, Mac, for acting as a springboard for me to solidify ideas and for all of his patience, love, and support.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A woman enters the room. Her complexion is blotchy, and her hair is undone. She sits down, and spot lights turn on, illuminating her. The beautification process begins. Makeup is professionally applied, her hair is styled, and hair extensions seem to complete her look. The cameras snap. The image of the woman finds itself in digital image-altering software, where the neck's height is elongated, and its width is shrunk down, the eyes are enlarged, the brow is lowered, and the face is thinned. The screen zooms out, and the woman's altered face is on a billboard, selling make-up. The woman has become a model. "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted," states the video, "Evolution," presented by Dove[®] as part of their Real Beauty Campaign (Figure 1.1). The campaign began in 2004 in response to findings from "The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report." The report confirmed that the "definition of beauty had become limiting and unattainable" and found that "only 2% of women around the world would describe themselves as beautiful" ("The Dove[®] Campaign," 2012).

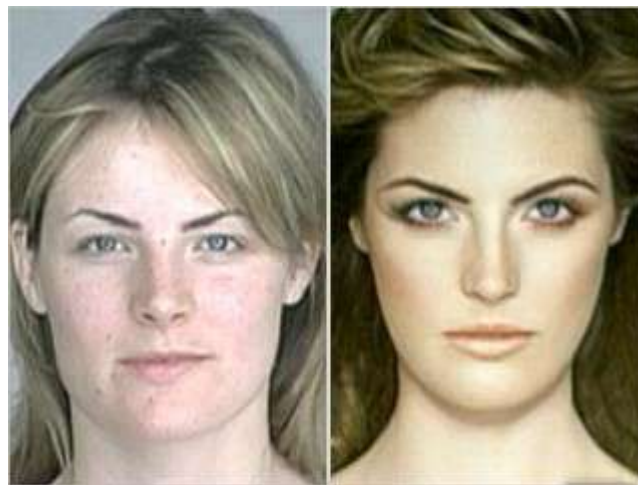


Figure 1.1: Dove[®] Real Beauty Campaign "Evolution"
Before and After photo.

The repercussions of a singular western notion of ideal beauty are discussed in “The Skinny Sweepstakes.” The author, Hara Estroff Marano, addressed women’s need for perfection, stating that “in a culture of plenty where the young are pressured to succeed even before birth, the achievement package has come to include, especially for girls, a ‘perfect’ body” (2008, p.90). In the same article, Marano cites ideas presented by Courtney Martin, the author of “Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters,” stating:

A whole generation of young women was told that they could be anything. What they heard was slightly different; "We have to be everything." And that's terrifying. The pre-college emphasis on achievement leads them "to compose the self as perfect, with a perfect resume and a perfect body," since they were socialized to believe they can look any way they want if they just try hard enough. Unfortunately, it's hard to create a sustainable self image without a sense of self.

The pursuit of perfection is always self-consuming, and it locks young women into a vicious cycle. The struggle to achieve so much in so many different areas overwhelms them with anxiety, and anxiety generates constant comparison, which only makes them see themselves more negatively, which pressures them to try harder. (2008, p.95)

This constant pursuit of perfection leads to a severe sense of shame in imperfection, which then leads many women of all ages to cover up or fix what is imperfect. The need to be free from imperfections is actually linked to a need to be viewed as normal, as observed in Debra L. Gimlin’s essay, “Cosmetic Surgery: Paying for Your Beauty.” Gimlin states that women “alter their bodies for their own satisfaction,” as opposed to pleasing someone else, “in effect utilizing such procedures to create what they consider a normal appearance, one that reflects a normal self” (2004, p.103). In other words, women identify their socially constructed perceptions of imperfection within themselves as inhibiting factors towards normalcy.

Like Dove[®], my artwork challenges a singular notion of beauty, and like “The

Skinny Sweepstakes,” it exposes the destructive impact the pursuit of an unattainable ideal can have on women. By interviewing individual women on their relationships with their bodies, painting large-scale emotional portraits in response to these interviews, and creating casts from these women and mannequins that reflect the limited representation of women in media juxtaposed to the reality of diverse body types, “Skin Deep: The Elusive Aphrodite” provides an aesthetic exploration of the prominence of body image issues in women’s lives. The connection to beauty is solidified through the integration of the Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, into the series, confirming for the viewer that the work is about relationships to beauty. In each painting, the women interviewed are positioned to reference previous artist’s representations of Aphrodite; the goddess represents the divine, with her beauty out of human reach. While the representations of Aphrodite, which reflect societal ideals, have evolved, the beauty she portrays has always been unattainable. Judy Chicago, in Women and Art: Contested Territory, interprets the integration of goddess imagery in contemporary art as follows:

The definition and the image of the divine are crucial in the formation of self-image; if women are not allowed the possibility of being seen in the image and likeness of God, they cannot avoid being considered (or considering themselves) lesser beings. Thus the focus of contemporary art upon images of the goddess can be understood as a part of effort to reclaim the lost biblical concept of equality in the eyes of God (1999, p.20).

While approaching this subject, it cannot be ignored that my art finds a home within the third wave feminism. I have researched and been influenced by feminist thought and artworks, including Judy Chicago, Jenny Saville, and Cindy Sherman. Even in “The Media and Body Image,” the authors, Barrie Gunter and Maggie Wykes, argue that, “thin is a feminist issue because it is symptomatic of a context within which power works to construct very particular models of acceptable femininity in a range of discourses such as

the family, the law, religion, and, most systematically, covertly and invasively, the media” (2005, p.10). While many of the battles previous feminists have fought are not addressed within my series, it is important to note that there are:

differences existing between the feminist art of today and that of the past...younger, cosmopolitan women artists may or may not be overt in their critique of patriarchy and the subordination of women by national policies or religious traditions. Our understanding of feminist art is more flexible and open than that of the past. The binaries -oppressor/victim, good woman/bad man, pure/impure, beautiful/ugly, active/passive - are not the point of feminist art today...Ambiguity, androgyny, self-consciousness, both formal and psychic, are necessary in the challenge to thought and practice that constitutes feminist art production (“Global Feminisms,” 2007, p.11).

Part 1: The Interview

It was important to capture the diverse experiences and challenges women have had while pursuing a physical ideal, showing that regardless of body type, the feeling of insecurity and dissatisfaction are common. Instead of creating work from my limited view point, I interviewed five different women, providing the audience with a more universal experience. This experience reveals that women’s pursuit of one ideal body image has different effects varying with body type and personal history, but almost all effects are negative.

The women who participated in this series ranged in size from underweight to obese. The lightest individual weighed 115 pounds and the heaviest weighed 243 pounds, and the women's ages fell between 22 to 36-years-old. This weight and age range allowed for me to explore how deeply body image affects young adults with varying body sizes. These women have come from different socio-economic backgrounds and have experienced pressure to change their bodies from different people in their lives and through the mass portrayal of our contemporary ideal beauty through media. All five are

Caucasian females located in south Georgia, showing one of many group's views on bodily beauty.

The women answered questions into a microphone hooked to a computer, which then recorded the interviews. These interviews informed the marks, color, values, physical exaggerations, and symbolism behind each piece. Key words or quotes were used from each conversation to create titles for the corresponding paintings. In the interviews, I asked a series of questions, including:

- What do you love about your body and why?
- What would you change and why?
- Do you have any negative experiences that display how you and/or others perceive your body? Is there any iconography you associate with this memory?
- Do you have any positive experiences that display how you and/or others perceive your body? Is there any iconography you associate with this memory?
- Overall, how do you feel about your body?

I reminded the models at the beginning of the interview that although the questions ask for positive and negative experiences, it is essential that the interview reflects their own stories. If the model could not readily think of a positive or negative story, then she was not to include one, since such a story may not be an important aspect of her experience. The purpose of each question was to discover the relative strength of each model's love or hatred for her body. While this objective is not quantitative, I did uncover the overall relationship these women had with their bodies, and the information was clear enough to provide direction for the series of paintings.

I found that the models were intimidated by the process, feeling awkward as they

spoke into a microphone. The women heavily evaluated what they said before and during the interview. Often they revealed far more personal information when they were not speaking into the microphone. Conversations about sex, fertility, comfort, and self-worth often followed our discussions. Realizing the value of these conversations, I requested and received permission to use all information, including the dialogue that followed the interviews, in the pieces. The models were assured that their testimonies, which were revealing, painful, and very personal, would be kept anonymous, and that even their families wouldn't immediately be aware of the story behind each cast and painting. At the same time, I felt that the stories the models told me really developed their individual characters, and added to the issue at hand. I tried to intersperse aspects of their experiences within the pieces through inclusions in the paper casts and through imagery in the paintings, without specifically illustrating their story. The resulting imagery, while relating directly to their testimony and while identifiable to the actual model, can be read as somewhat coded or ambiguous for the audience. Thus, the individuality of the persons is truly asserted, the depth of their bodily experience is present, and the overall message of bodily difference and beauty doesn't become overly convoluted.

While the interviews informed the content of the series, and visual clues are in each painting to relate to each woman's story which helps maintain the individuality of each piece, the viewer should walk away with the idea that the art shows the damaged relationships these women have with their bodies, further indicating a larger societal problem where body image issues are rampant among the female population.

Part 2: The Paintings

For the paintings, the models were asked to position themselves as a canonized

artist's representations of Aphrodite, or the Roman equivalent, Venus, including poses found in Botticelli and Alexandre Cabanel's depictions of the "Birth of Venus" (Figures 3.4 and 3.10 respectively), Diego Velazquez's odalisque-inspired "Rokeby Venus" (Figure 3.7), the prehistoric "Venus of Willendorf" (Figure 3.2) or even the ancient Greek statue "Venus De Milo" (Figure 3.12). I provided a list of these representations of the goddess, and the model chose poses that were either the most attractive to her or that showed most accurately how the model felt about her body. They were then photographed imitating the position selected, and the photographs were used to create painted portraits. I chose to work from photographs instead of live models because of the amount of time it took to create each painting exceeded each model's time volunteered.

The models mimicked famous paintings or sculptures of Venus to not only bring to mind the evolution of the ideal beauty, but also to place the model as the goddess of beauty, bringing forward the question, "Do I find this body type beautiful or attractive?" In addition, the canvas focuses on the areas the models perceived as major concerns, which often were the women's torsos. The torso can be read as "classical," reminding the viewer of the current state of broken statues from Greece and Rome. Since the Renaissance, any fragment from the ancient cultures have been prized, and "gradually the torso established itself as a viable artistic entity," (Chicago, 1999, p.140). By using the torso, the reference to a broken body as complete begins to relate to the physical and psychological fatigue that may be encountered as one attempts to push their own body towards the contemporary ideal beauty. One may also view the erosion or deconstruction of the body, or torso, as commentary on the attrition of women's self-perception in pursuit of the aging and evolving, unobtainable archetype.

While the paintings are meant to question society's standards for attractiveness, they also serve as portraits, reflecting the model's emotions, history, and personality through color, marks, and patterning. The large scale of these portraits signifies the space the model's imagine they are consuming, as well of the prominence of their image concerns in daily life. Presenting these paintings as portraits reinforces the individuality within each image, informing the viewer that the paintings are of real people who struggle with body image daily.

Part 3: The Body Molds and Paper Casts

The interviews confirmed a common, negative relationship between women with different body types and their body image, which were portrayed in the paintings. It is important to show the varying body types, not only to help confirm the dynamic amount each body truly varies from American society's misguided perception of normal, showing real bodies that the viewer is hardly ever exposed to, but also to reinforce my own view that each body is truly beautiful. This approach to the paper casts provides the positive outlook the paintings in this series do not.

The models, while looking in a mirror, positioned themselves in a comfortable, twisting or bending position, choosing what physical attributes to portray, and which to hide. When we were satisfied with the position chosen, based on our aesthetic tastes, I made a plaster mold from the model. As the molds hardened, I made a 100% cotton paper pulp for each individual, dyed each batch a different pastel color, and selected potpourri, dried flowers, or shells, referencing the mythological birth of Venus¹, as well as Botticelli's

¹ "Venus (Aphrodite), the goddess of love and beauty, was the daughter of Jupiter and Dione. Others say that Venus sprang from the foam of the sea. The zephyr wafted her along the waves to the Isle of Cyprus, where she was received and attired by the Seasons, and then led to the assembly of the gods" (Bulfinch, 1973, p.17).

painting, "The Birth of Venus," to be included in the paper mold. I chose soft pastels to create a warm, comforting feeling with the viewer, as opposed to bold hot colors that obviously have direct aggressive content. I pulled individual sheets of pastel paper with a deckle and mold, and layered them together inside of the plaster cast, pressing where the edges of the paper sheets overlapped. Depending on humidity, the molds took between 12 to 36 hours to dry. They were then removed from the mold, encased in clear encaustic medium for more of a fleshy look, and for added stability, and were prepared for hanging (Figures 1.2 - 1.4).

The molds pulled from the models' casts are the same corresponding size and shape of each model's body. By having the paper casts mimic the average woman's height, I confront the viewer with real women's bodies, which the viewer may find relatable to her own. The paper casts do not use the interview to inform their content like the paintings in the series do. Instead they rely on realism created from the impression of the body, and the pastels to create a gentle, accepting tone to the pieces. Each piece is treated as an individual with different colors and patterning, as well as shape, but conveys the same message of beauty and acceptance. By confronting the viewer with the body molds, the reality of physical difference has the potential to be jarring, since the artificial ideal is what the viewers are more than likely accustomed to seeing.



Figure 1.2: Paper Casts from “Look, Don’t Touch/Touch, Don’t Look.”



Figure 1.3: Paper Cast from “It’s Internal.”



Figure 1.4: Paper Cast from “In the Medicine Cabinet.”



Figure 1.5: “Mannequin Soldier” from “Mannequin Army.”

In stark contrast with the model's representational paper casts is a series of mannequin paper casts, titled "Mannequin Army," made from a manufactured retail display unit, coated in gold paint and covered with expressive marks and small intimate patterning. Each "Mannequin Soldier," (Figure 1.5) has subtle differences in paint application and patterning, but reads as a unified part of an overall unit. The mannequins hang from the ceiling, at shoulder height, in four rows, imitating an army platoon in number and placement, marching oppressively toward the individual model's paper casts, threatening to overtake the bodies.

The casts are golden, gaudy, and obviously artificial body types. By making them gold, I summon notions of golden ideals, gold as currency, and gold as jewelry. They are obviously decorative and machine made, not coming from a thin woman's body cast, but instead represent the mind of fashion designers, commercial artists, advertising agencies and manufacturers, much like today's perception of the ideal body type (Wykes, 2005, p.48).

I attempted to make the casts seductive through the color and patterning, but simultaneously make them inaccessible, hanging them beside the viewer, within reach, but unmovable and tantalizingly unattainable. I chose to create multiple casts, using repetition to reference the amount the artificial, ideal body visually bombards women in television, movies, advertisements, and magazines. With this repetition, we begin to expect ourselves to follow the pattern we see. The number of mannequins is the approximate number of soldiers in a platoon, making these mannequins a destructive army set out to destroy. The minimal damage of the artificial physical ideal these mannequins represent is lowered self-confidence and self-esteem. The horrifying damage this singular

notion of beauty has influenced includes eating disorders and death, often experienced by teenage girls (Wykes, 2005, p.10).

As one reflects on the Dove® real beauty campaign discussed earlier, it becomes clear that the artificial body type surrounds women through magazines, television advertisements, and movie covers. In addition to the altered appearance created through digital imaging software and make-up, many models, and even more actresses, undergo plastic surgery, furthering the distance from natural appearance to the ideal beauty. The message sent through these altered images becomes beauty can be bought, through these clothes, with this make-up, or with this procedure (Wykes, 2005, p.48). The side effect of this marketing ploy is that women feel deficient and that they are failing at beautiful.

Part 4: Personal History

I witnessed many young women's struggles with their perceived physical inadequacies as I worked at a dress shop during prom season. I heard many teenage girls complain about specific "imperfections." One girl in particular tried on dresses in an unlit dressing room, with no mirror. Her family chose dresses and delivered them to her, joined her in the dressing room, and offered either approval or disapproval. She refused to leave the room, either because she did not want other girls to judge her in a dress, or because she did not want to compare herself to other girls. Eventually she chose a dress she never saw on herself. Her mother explained to me that her daughter naturally was insecure, that this was to be expected for a "girl of her size," implying that her daughter was overweight. In reality she was tall, with broad shoulders, but nowhere near an unhealthy weight. I found the mother's enabling attitude towards this extreme physical shyness somewhat destructive and highly unsettling.

As I have relayed this story, colleagues seemed to empathize with both the mother and the girl. They agreed if the girl did not like her body, she should fix it, and that the mother was trying to deal with her daughter's perceived weight issue the best way she could. This led to conversations in which my female peers told their own stories that reflected their insecurities. Several wanted breast enhancements, others wanted to lose weight, and some complained about their short, stubby legs. One in particular who had actually modeled exclaimed that she always has hated her body. I realized through this discussion that discomfort in our own skin was common, and I was not excluded.

The girl in the dress shop, the servers, and I all wanted our bras to be C-Cups, our tummies to be flat and tight, our butts round and firm, our legs long, and our weight ranging between 115 - 125 pounds. I am not convinced that our physical insecurities get better with age, either. Even when looking to my mother and other female role models, I see them continuously dye their hair to conceal the grays, use a face cream to restore their skin's youth, stress about excess weight, diet, exercise when they can, and dress to conceal perceived "imperfections." My mother specifically dreams of face lifts, tummy tucks, and a boob job to restore previous perkiness, all age corrections many of her peers have already undergone. Women may have gotten better at coping with insecurities as they age, but they also encounter new ones. Underneath all of the coping and reasoning, they may still be frustrated with the continued existence of their old imperfections.

Even after experiencing the prominence of bodily insecurity in myself and the women around me, I had not fully decided to create artwork on body image. It took reflecting on my past work to discover the direction for this series. I often used myself as a model for positioning the figure, but always "perfected" the resulting image by shrinking

the width of the figure, reshaping the breasts, and when exposed, replacing my stomach with an image of a toned midsection that I would pull from the Internet. I realized that I was altering my image and hiding my imperfections, and I contemplated reversing this action. This resulted in a series where I moved away from using myself as a model but still am creating work that relates to myself. I retained each different model's body type instead of altering it to fit into a perceived ideal, and I have rejected the overwhelming desire to hide imperfections; instead, I am putting them on display.

CHAPTER 2: INFLUENCES

My work has been influenced by other artists in two ways: One, providing me the freedom to create whatever I choose, and two, with compositional elements and content that related back to beauty, the body, and portraiture.

Part 1: Indirect Influences

KAY SAGE

As I viewed other artists' works, I discovered elements in their art that I value and would like to see in my own work. For example, I discovered from Kay Sage's painting "Le Passage," (Figure 2.1) that I enjoy figurative works that evoke emotion. She used mostly yellow ochre mixed with violet to create neutral colors that conveyed a spacious, empty-feeling self-portrait. Sage's body only consumes approximately a third of the painting, as she sits on barren rocks, her unclothed back vulnerably exposed to the viewer. The image immediately conveys isolation, emptiness, and absolute depression. From viewing, or feeling, Sage's painting, I realized that I wanted to create more than realistic drawings concerned with pure observation. I wanted emotional impact. The paintings in this series consequently utilize emotion as they express ideas about women's relationships

with their bodies, and all are painted expressively, with the marks and colors dictated by the emotions I want to convey.



Figure 2.1: Kay Sage “Le Passage.” Oil on Canvas, 1956.

KATHE KOLLWITZ

An earlier 20th century artist, Kathe Kollwitz, also inspired me with her emotional drawings and prints. In “Woman with Dead Child,” (Figure 2.2) she selectively uses shadow and line to create an effective composition without focusing on detailed anatomy. She presents the mother, hulked over, clasping her dead child in a dramatic, emotional movement. From viewing her work, I began to think about how value application, line work, composition, and mark-making begin to create an expressive image. In the painting “Black: Let's Play the Game,” (Figure 3.1) I approached the subject with areas of heavy

shadow, using value to enhance the content of the painting. The stomach and most of the breasts fall into shadow, and signify the model's desire to remove or hide these problem areas by cladding herself in slimming black clothing. In contrast, her legs are the smallest part of her body, and hence are the only part of her body she enjoys seeing. With that in mind, I painted her legs with a lighter value and warmer hue to enhance their visibility. I've also used line work in the piece, describing an azalea pattern that occurs and outlining the left hand, using contour variation to provide diverse mark-making.



Figure 2.2: Kathe Kollwitz, "Mother and Dead Child," 1903.

EDVARD MUNCH

As I further explored expressionistic art, I found Edvard Munch's paintings like his "Self-Portrait in Hell" (Figure 2.3) exciting. His painting uses mark-making like Kollwitz, and expressive color, informing me of mood or atmosphere. The color was not used to describe space and objects; instead it emanated from the figure. Munch uses wavy marks and a hot color scheme with strongly contrasting values to create himself and hell. He paints himself with intense yellows and oranges mixed with grungy black paint as opposed to traditional mixed and subdued flesh colors, reflecting the heat and intensity of his surroundings. The rough, undisguised outline that wraps around his head, the choice of colors, and the wavy marks in his environment create a tortured self-portrait that explores Munch's own place in life mentally, not physically.



Figure 2.3: Edvard Munch, "Self-Portrait in Hell," Oil on Canvas, 1903.

After viewing his work, I gave myself permission to change the color of flesh and

to think of the ground and mark making as the figure's state of mind, or aura, instead of an actual representational space. None of the paintings in "Skin Deep: The Elusive Aphrodite" waste paint on flesh colors; instead they take every opportunity, including the figure's surrounding space, to use color, mark-making, and value to express content and emotion.

Part 2: Direct Influences

ALICE NEEL

I began working on this series as I reflected on my own psychological struggle with my physical appearance, and although the issue of body image through media is a fairly universal one, I realized early on that I was approaching my paintings as individual portraits, exploring each woman's independent approaches and responses to the issue. Realizing these are portraits, delving deeper than a surface resemblance, I looked to Alice Neel's paintings for direction. Neel wanted to capture relationships and personality through her non-idealized paintings.

In "Cindy Nesmer and Chuck" (Figure 2.4) Neel captured the marital relationship between the two sitters, while maintaining their own individuality. The wife leans forward, concealing part of her nudity as well as her husband's, as she places one hand under his hand, resting on his knee. Her other hand drapes across her lap, as her hip and the side of her stomach are exposed. Her knees lean towards her husband, whose legs are crossed, showing slight discomfort, as he leans back against the couch and towards his wife. His loose hand protectively wraps around her waist, his wedding band displayed. The two only consume half of the couch in the painting, showing their physical and emotional closeness. While their closeness is clear, by making eye contact with the

painter, as opposed with each other, their independence is also noted.

Cindy Nesmer, the wife in the picture, described the experience, stating that she and her husband showed up for their portrait dressed up. Her husband in particular wanted to look dignified. Neel decided that the painting would be more interesting if her sitters were nude, a request they originally refused. Eventually Neel convinced them to disrobe, but never suggested a pose. The two leaned in together naturally. Neel knew that by taking the couple out of their comfort zone, they would reveal more of themselves, beyond their physicality, to her, creating an interesting true portrait of their relationship instead of the couple's reserved outward projection of how they wanted to be seen. She also knew to let them position themselves, so that their individuality was maintained ("Alice Neel," 2000, p.68 - 69).

I recognized the importance of letting the model choose her own pose, much like Neel's work demonstrates, but I also felt it essential that the models continue to visually relate to Venus or Aphrodite. My solution was to let the models choose their pose from a large bank of Venus images, including Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," and "Venus de Milo." The poses chosen by the models worked very well with the content provided by the model's testimonies. For example, in "Look, Don't Touch/ Touch, Don't Look" the model chose Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," yet there were subtle differences between herself and the original painting. She held her head high, her chest was proudly forward. Simultaneously she chose a pose where she did hide parts of her body behind her hands, showing a desire not to truly reveal herself. Also, I found it interesting that she felt that her hands were too large, with fingers too long and strong to be feminine. The fact that she chose a pose where she used an insecure part of her body to conceal other parts of her

body suggested a deeper insecurity and discomfort. She also found the pose beautiful, which illustrates her desire to be viewed as beautiful and confident.



Figure 2.4: Alice Neel, “Cindy Nesmer and Chuck,” Oil on canvas, 1975.

KEHINDE WILEY

Patterning is used in “Black: Let’s Play the Game,” and occasionally appears in the mannequin army. I looked to Kehinde Wiley’s use of patterning that interacts with the figure in his artwork for direction. Wiley uses a single pattern that changes in value and plays with space. Instead of sitting behind or acting as clothing that wraps around his figures, his patterns move from background to foreground, often floating on top of the portraits he creates. In “Nelson Silva Eaflanzino, Jr.” (Figure 2.5) the artist portrays a strong, confident, black male looking directly at the viewer. Eaflanzino is surrounded by a floral pattern that sneaks over his shoulders and floats in front of him, becoming both the

background and foreground, as well as creating eye movement. The gentle flower pattern is brightly colored and seems to be whimsically floating, playing with space. Wiley could be showing this man's inner strength and beauty, or he could be contrasting gender and race associations regarding aggressive stereotypes with a delicacy represented by the flowers.



Figure 2.5: Kehinde Wiley, “Nelson Silva Eaflanzino, Jr.” Oil on canvas, 2009.

I employed an ambiguous space like “Nelson Silva Eaflanzino Jr.” in “Black: Let's Play the Game,” (see figure) using a screen-printed pattern of azaleas that I drew to contrast with the large woman's figure. While the female gender is associated with beauty, delicacy, and fertility, the size of the figure does not fit the western ideal female body type, removing her from the beauty and fertile sexuality that the flower symbolizes.

DO-HO SUH

Do-Ho Suh's sculptures use many small pieces to construct a larger, unified whole. “High school Uni-Form” (Figure 2.6) and “Some/One” (Figure 2.7) address how he

experienced a loss of identity through militaristic schooling and joining the army. I have witnessed and experienced a loss of identity as myself and other women try to fit into one body type and often try to present a self-image, which includes the way we act, that we believe is desirable to the opposite sex. While there are strong women who maintain their individuality, often many others do not. I created an army of paper mannequins, all identical in shape and color, side by side as one platoon. These repeated forms represent the women we are told we should be, and that some of us try to become. I turned to “Uni-Form” as I debated on whether or not to make all of my mannequins exactly the same, or if I should allow for subtle differences in the casts. His uniforms are all identical, but are still visually interesting. However, the contrast between the white collars and the black coats, as well as between the shining gold buttons and the matt uniforms, created rhythm and visual interest. My mannequins do not have the contrast he had, which allowed for me to determine that it would be better for the mannequins to have subtle differences but still read similarly enough to fit into one unit.

“Some/One” is an armor suit made of dog tags that fill an entire room as they splay onto the floor. Suh made the inside of his dog tag suit hollow and reflective, with an open back. This allowed for the viewers to see themselves as part of the suit, instead of separate from it, forcing interaction and contemplation. I chose to use a combination of matt and reflective surfaces on my mannequins, believing that the viewer may also catch a glimpse of themselves in the mannequins’ reflection, thus comparing their own physic to the ideal.



Figure 2.6: Do Ho-Suh, “High School Uni-Form,” 1997.



Figure 2.7: Do Ho-Suh, “Some-One,” 2001.



Figure 2.8: Do Ho-Suh, "Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home" 1999.



Figure 2.9: Cai Guo-Qiang, "Head On," 2006.

CAI GUO-QIANG

The mannequins also were inspired by Cai Guo-Qiang's installation piece, "Head On" (Figure 2.9). A series of wolves, constructed from sheepskin, are depicted running on the ground, leaping into the air, colliding with a glass wall, and collapsing on the floor. Author Ariane Griogteit interprets "Head On," determining that the piece is about identity and self-destruction, much like a film sharing the same title (Grigoteit, 2007, p.13). While the wolves' stances and expressions are somewhat different, they all read as a unified pack, with individuality being unimportant. The pack attempts to destroy the glass wall, but instead, the pack is destroyed by it. Similar themes are important in my mannequin army. I want the viewer to witness the unimportance of individuality in society today and the self-destruction that occurs as women attempt to shed their own physical individuality. The paper casts hang, objectified like meat, from the ceiling, hollow, and with various sized holes, like the holes found in leaves that are being eaten away.

As I thought about how to hang my three-dimensional work, I looked at both Do Ho Suh and Cai Guo-Qiang. I knew that Guo-Qiang's "Head On" and Suh's "Seoul Home" (Figure 2.8) both were suspended in the air by non-obtrusive clear wires, leaving the visual emphasis on the floating artwork instead of the supports. I believed that it is important that my army hangs, weightless and thin, as opposed to being a grounded, or realistic, ideal. The comparison to meat hanging in a butcher shop is encouraged, since the media's treatment of the ideal is objectifying. In "Body Image: The Media Lies," the author describes this objectification, stating that women's bodies are picked apart and scrutinized in the media, especially tabloids and magazines with headlines like, "What He's Really

Thinking When He Sees You Naked,” and Star Magazine’s, “70 Best and Worst Beach Bodies.” The body is dissected, examined, verbally or mentally butchered, and sorted through for the best pieces of meat.

ELIZABETH MENGES

As I was developing the ideas behind “Skin Deep: The Elusive Aphrodite,” I found Elizabeth Menges’ painting, “Relentless Self-Examination” (Figure 2.10). She realistically portrayed herself, in underwear, three times from three different angles, like a woman would examine herself in a three-way mirror, searching for her imperfections. This painting was not about how she perceived herself, but instead, it was about showing herself as truthfully as possible. Her decision to include imperfections informed me that this was a real woman, not the young, un-aging, ultra-thin women seen on television, in magazines, or on the Internet.

I realized that I did not want to use exact realism in my paintings, since Menge's was already challenging the expectation of women to constantly pursue an ideal beauty by showing herself, unaltered, with hair pulled back and frizzy, and wearing no make-up. I wanted to go deeper into the issue, not only refusing to idealize women, but also revealing the individual psychological effects of the pursuit of an idealized body. At the same time, I did want an element of realism to carry through, to inform the viewer that these are real women, who deal with their “imperfections” in different ways. With this in mind I maintained the resemblance to the model in the paintings. I also decided that it would be beneficial to have the body molds accompanying the paintings, reinforcing the reality of these varying body types.

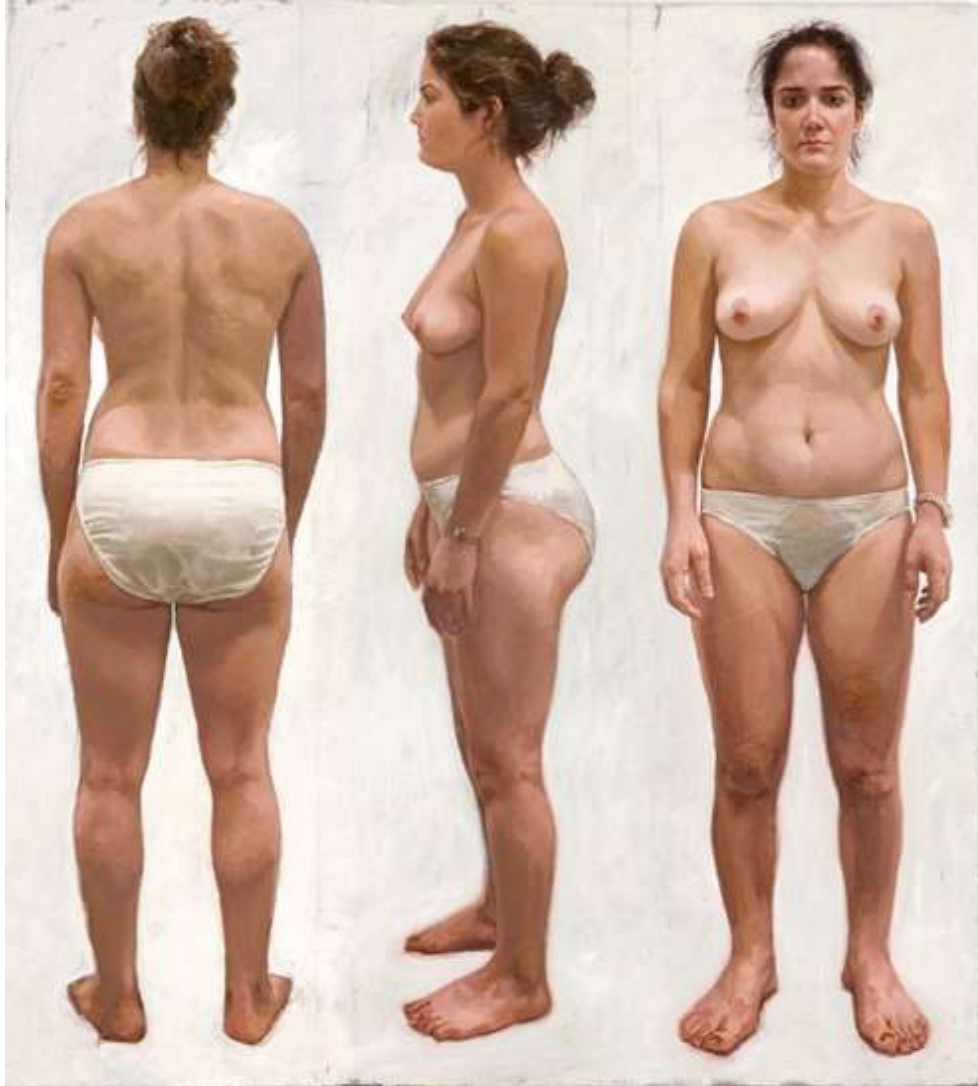


Figure 2.10: Elizabeth Menges, “Relentless Self-Examination,” Oil on canvas, 2007.

ANNE HARRIS

Anne Harris is my most recent influence. “Portrait (Second Angel)” (Figure 2.11) depicts an un-idealized body in a beautiful way. In “Portrait (Second Angel)” the figure is full-bodied, her distorted face coming forward, with dark circles around her eyes. The figure is painted with a warm orange hue and is surrounded by a glowing aura that overtakes her body in areas that recede. She effectively makes the figure and aura glow by placing them against a bluish-grey background. In “Anne Harris: They Start With Me,”

Jonathan Goodman with Art in America explained that Harris is not a comfortable, secure person, and that is where her paintings begin. The author also states:

Harris insists that it is up to viewers to bring their own meanings to the work: "They are never wrong," she states. If her paintings are, in her own mind, "mesmerizing, hypnotic, emotionally complicated, and difficult" she has done her job (Seed, 2011).



Figure 2.11: Anne Harris "Portrait (Second Angel)," Oil on linen, 2007.

My own interpretations of her paintings involve physical discomfort and insecurity. She struggles with her own body image, often distorting her own perceptions of herself, viewing her body in an altered, unreal state. As she fights to cope with her body image and view herself as beautiful, she struggles with revealing herself, wanting to conceal her perceived and exaggerated imperfections.

By exaggerating imperfections the psychological size or prominence of those imperfections is displayed. In “Black: Let’s Play the Game,” the model requested another body cast and portrait after she lost weight. After discussing it, we arrived at the conclusion that the size she was in the first painting reflected how large she was and how she still does view herself. In “Look Don’t Touch/Touch Don’t Look,” the hands are exaggerated to not only exaggerate the gesture of concealing herself, but also to show the size the sitter imagined her hands to be. I’ve also allowed for areas of the body to become lost, with the model’s imperfections lightly outlined, showing that the model’s focus on her beauty is not as clear as her focus is on what is preventing her from appearing ideal.

CINDY SHERMAN

Cindy Sherman explores identity and how it is constructed in her “Untitled Film Stills” (Figure 2.12) from the late seventies and early eighties and “Thematic: Characters and Identity” (Figure 2.13) from 2008. She presents the reality of role playing in daily life, posing as characters depicting different, sometimes conflicting, components of femininity. She masks herself with make-up and different wigs, creating new personalities with each new outfit and hairdo. These different “women” presented together as a series informs the viewers that makeup, clothing, and hair influence the way women are received, such as professional, innocent, sexual, and motherly, all roles women

feel the pressure to fill. Other female artists struggled with their multiple roles, including the ones depicted by Sherman. Eva Hesse, a sculptural artist, stated in her journal, “I cannot be so many things...I cannot be something for everyone....Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady, all these things. I cannot even be myself or know who I am” (Chadwick, 2002, p.339).

Because the artist reappears in literally every photograph of her major series that do not use mannequins, the work is viewed as self-portraiture, and the artist is seen trying to create distance between herself and the viewer through sexist disguises. Cultural feminism theorist, Michelle Meagher, calls for Cindy Sherman to cast aside her disguises in her paper, “Would the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up, Encounters Between Cindy Sherman and Feminist Art Theory.” The calls for Cindy Sherman to take off the wig, to reveal herself, and to stop wearing a mask of femininity are frequent. The desire to find the person behind the performance, or worse, to claim Sherman desires to be her performed characters, is discussed in detail in “Images of “Woman”: The Photography of Cindy Sherman” by Judith Williamson. Williamson quotes critic Waldemar Januszczak, who stated, “You see her as she sees herself, a small, scrawny girl from Buffalo, a mousey blond who dreams of becoming a peroxide starlet. Her wigs don’t always fit and her bra has to be padded...Behind her Marilyn Monroe character you finally find Cindy Sherman” (Williamson, 1983, p.456). Confronted with a woman performing as if in film, Januszczak provides a shallow, uninformed interpretation of her work. He does not ask why she performs in her artwork, or how her performance may be interpreted, but instead plays out his own dismissive dialogue, establishing that Sherman is nothing more than a woman-child playing pretend.

Some viewers became inflamed by Sherman's presentation of "woman" as vulnerable, sexual, and obvious recipients of the male gaze, claiming that there are "enough images of women as sexual objects, passive, doll-like, all tarted up." Williamson explains the viewer's rage, stating that, "Because the viewer is forced into complicity with the way these 'women' are constructed: you recognize the styles, the 'films', the 'stars', and at that moment you recognize the picture, your reading is the picture. In a way, it is innocent, you are guilty" (Williamson, 1983, p.454). Because Sherman presents an unaltered, true view of women's performances as sexual, desirable or objectified females, her artwork resides in a borderline state that embraces some elements of feminism, but not all.



Figure 2.12: Cindy Sherman, "Untitled Film Still #3," 1977.



Figure 2.13: Cindy Sherman, “Untitled #477,” 2008.

Like Sherman, my work does not reverse the reality of contemporary society’s objectification of women or women’s own internalized self-objectification. I have placed my models in poses from historical artworks’ representations of Venus, which are laden with the male gaze, are intended to be viewed as sexual, and often become difficult to look at because of how heavily seeped in sexuality they really are. I wanted to have a historical connection in this series to remind the viewer of the evolution of the ideal beauty, which

made me decide to retain the poses. I chose not to disguise the sexual nature of the poses, reflecting on the fact that these women are picking themselves apart as they try to model themselves after societal ideals, and that even these societal ideals are sexualized objects meant to showcase items that define success, including a moderately sculpted body with large breasts, expensive clothing and jewelry, and shiny, flowing, perfectly sculpted hair. My decision was reinforced by Sherman's work.

JENNY SAVILLE

Jenny Saville confronts the viewer with large paintings of the body, moving from topographical maps of the body that relate to the marks plastic surgeons make before surgery, through transgender portraits, to paintings of mutilated faces. I find her painting "Passage" (Figure 2.14) to be especially enlightening. She chose a subject between genders, a contemporary subject that didn't exist a few decades ago, and focused on a literal passage from gender to gender, starting with the penis, foreshortening the stomach and breasts, and arriving at a seductive face, with slanted eyes and full lips. She used mark making to sculpt the body in a limited palette of light browns and blues. She allows her marks to fall apart into rich layers of color and texture, and to unify at a distance, creating a fully developed, working image.

Looking at her mark-making alone, I have learned a lot. I began to push my own marks further and harder, as opposed to blending them, in "Black: Let's Play The Game." As I continued to explore mark-making, I allowed myself to combine aggressive, undisguised marks with blended marks, creating hard and soft edges, and sometimes allowing for edges to disappear, such as in "Look, Don't Touch/ Touch, Don't Look."

In her early painting, "Plan" (Figure 2.15) Saville portrays a woman, modeled after

herself, again foreshortened, whose body consumes the majority of a 9' x 7' canvas. The mark-making is less aggressive, and more descriptive, and the color scheme utilizes complimentary blues and oranges. The skin shows translucency and the face shows an expression between disheartenment and disgust. I automatically assume she is displeased by her body, a scale under her feet, or by the viewer, who looks up to make eye contact with the face. The body is lined with marks, like a topographical map. In "Plan: Large Woman or Large Canvas? A confusion of Size with Scale," by Alison Rowely, Saville explained that the lines are the marks plastic surgeons place on the body before they perform liposuction.

Alison Rowely's article explores the reception and confusion of the size of woman with the scale of the painting in "Plan." Critics shared a similar sentiment, voiced by William Packer who stated, "Her canvases are very large, conventionally so, but that she should impose upon them out-size images of the figure that are often too big for them, is rather less expected. That these images should then be positively outrageous - fat, bloated, distorted female nudes, scratched and scrawled with slogans and graffiti, gleefully flouting all cannons of taste and decency - only compounds the visual shock" (Rowely, 1996, p.393).

Saville denies painting "fat, bloated" women. Instead, she states that she is, "painting women who've been made to think they're big and disgusting, who imagine their thighs go on forever." While the physicality of her paint and the realism in her fleshy hues seem to create a replica of a living, breathing woman, she really is exploring a psychological space.

Saville's artwork informed me that the size of a painting can convey more than

feelings of intimacy or confrontation. It can have deeper, psychological content. Additionally, showing thighs that “go on forever,” consuming one-third of the painting, informed me that the presentation of the figure can carry as much content as the figure’s color.



Figure 2.14: Jenny Saville, “Passage,” Oil on canvas, 2004.



Figure 2.15: Jenny Saville “Plan,” Oil on canvas, 1993.

CHAPTER 3: PRESENTATION OF WORKS BY THE ARTIST

BLACK: LET’S PLAY THE GAME

The first painting in the “Skin Deep” series is “Black: Let’s Play the Game” (Figure 3.1). The painting is 96” tall and 54” wide. The figure takes over two-thirds of the painting, being a clear focal point, with the ambiguous ground acting as her own aura, as

opposed to an actual space. She is cropped off under her head and above her ankles, and is portrayed in a “Venus of Willendorf” inspired pose (Figure 3.2). Even with limbs intact, I still wanted each of the models to act as the objectified torsos that Edward-Lucie Smith described in Women and Art: Contested Territory. Smith describes the torso, stating that it is “deprived of head and limbs-that is, of the power of either thinking or acting” (Chicago, 1999, p.140). The women in this series compare themselves to an idealized and objectified beauty; they desire to become the objectified woman. They recognize the male gaze as a confirmation of their progress in their pursuit of the physical ideal. Objectification does not compose these women’s entirety though and is subdued through intense colors, active marks, and patterning.

There were several reasons the “Venus of Willendorf” pose was chosen. The first was because of the physical similarity between the model and the Venus. Both possess a voluptuous body precariously positioned on small, unsupportive legs. A second reason was because of what Venus symbolizes. The “Venus of Willendorf” that the model was referencing was created between 24,000 and 22,000 BCE, and the motive for her creation is highly debated. One theory is that she served as a fertility or earth goddess, gaining the alternate title “Terra Madre.” The figure was also covered with red ochre pigment, indicating that menstruation was viewed as a life-giving agent, or so suggests art historian, Christopher L.C.E.Witcombe (2000). Edward-Lucie Smith further interprets the potential symbolism behind the figure, stating that, “her rounded belly suggests she may be pregnant- whose characteristics emphasize her power to give birth, her power to nourish the infant once it is born, and her power to survive famine because of her surplus body fat. In other words, she creates, she nurtures, and she endures” (Chicago, 1999, p.20). The

model encountered a series of health problems a few years ago, which influenced her weight gain and left her infertile. By placing her in a fertility goddess's pose, I have commented on her experience with medication and her desire for fertility, another component that has led to her bodily dissatisfaction. The third and final reason was to indicate that her body type was once considered beautiful in a very different culture and time, which sharply contrasts with the contemporary image of beauty.

In the painting I knew I had to do more than simply add colors to the negative space that pushed against the figure. I wanted the atmosphere to be murky, instead of intense, but I also wanted it to activate the eye. With this in mind, I decided to use patterning to encourage eye movement in the piece, as well as act like a symbol that adds to the context of the piece. I screen printed a hand-drawn azalea pattern repeatedly through the ground, and at points with low contrast, I let the pattern fall across the figure. I used a variety of colors in the spaces, paying attention to how much I wanted the color and value contrast to show or hide the pattern. After stepping back from the painting, I still wanted some patterns to come forward a little more. I went back in and hand-painted areas on top of the prints. I chose azaleas for the pattern because there is a relationship between the flowers and the "Venus of Willendorf." Flowers in general are considered beautiful and are representative of fertility, and in Asian culture, Azaleas are a specific symbol for fertility. The choice of this symbol and the model's pose tie back to her weight-gaining experience after medication and her desire to have children, despite her diagnosis, as she reaches closer to her mid-thirties.



Figure 3.1: Amy Fix, "Black: Let's Play the Game," Acrylic on canvas, 2012.



Figure 3.2: "Venus of Willendorf" 24-22,000 B.C.E.

Her body is voluminous, immediately drawing attention to her insecurity, but falls quickly into darkness, referring to her desire to hide or conceal her imperfections. Her right arm (the arm to the viewers' left) falls into a more expressive mark-making, that relates physically to the azalea patterning and the loose marks composing her legs. By placing the lighter line work in the arm, the rest of the body's volume and darkness becomes more visible through the contrast, and the entire piece becomes more unified by compositionally balancing that type of marking.

The model is painted in cool, deep blues, reds, and greens, and warm pinks and oranges. The majority of the image is in the cool, darker color range, which helps the viewer identify that the model is not happy with her body. She finds herself in a loathsome state, and continues to try to improve her body as much as she can, never satisfied with who she is today. There is an inner pain portrayed with a dark, obscured red under painting, and there is an overall sense of disgust and emptiness that I tried to convey with the murky patterned ground, the heavy texture on the heavier parts of her body, and the cool color wrapping around her in descriptive marks. During the interview, she talked about how her operation left her "moon-faced," how hard it was to get her face back down to looking like herself again, the pain of looking at photographs of herself, and how they look so different than when she looks in the mirror, and how important it is for her to wear black, since it is considered slimming. One especially emotional part of the interview for her was when she described the sensation of looking at a picture of herself with her voice cracking, "When taking a photo or something, it's like, let's play the game, let's count how many chins _____ has." Simultaneously, she can not exist in a complete state of self-loathing. She finds herself content with the state of her small, muscular legs. She

stated, “The thing I like most about my body are my legs, because no matter how big I get, my legs stay small, my legs are pretty much the same” (Model #1, personal communication, June 26, 2011). This was the only part of the interview in which she reverted to her happy, outgoing personality. Because of this interaction, I felt it essential to convey the comfort that her legs give her. I managed to do this by placing vigorous, energetic marks and bright warm colors into the legs, balanced by subtle warm glazing in other small areas of the painting. Logically, this should have worked against the content of the painting, but instead shows the complexity of this model's self-image and does not negate the rest of the painting.

For her body cast, I chose to put her most hated imperfection on display, focusing the mold on her stomach and breasts. Through the pastel color and the backlighting of the cast, I have shown an acceptance and love for the body, despite its differences. I have tried to take something she and society deems unattractive and show the beauty that exists beyond a superficial exterior.

LOOK DON'T TOUCH/TOUCH DON'T LOOK

The second painting, “Look don't touch/Touch, don't look” (Figure 3.3), identifies an alternate source of pain and empowerment, the model's sexuality. The model leans against a wall, gazing confidently at the viewer, as she insecurely places her hands and arms across her breasts and over her pubic area. During the interview, the model did identify physical attributes that she enjoyed and disliked, but she kept herself distant from the issue. Often she negated her admitted insecurities with statements like, “I have to remind myself that I'm not a model, that I'm not airbrushed, and that I like the way I am” (Model # 2, personal communication, June 1, 2011). These statements came across as

impersonal, letting me know that she was telling me, or the microphone, what she thought I wanted to hear. Despite this, there were comments that I did use from her testimony in the painting, including our conversation about her lack of curves and “man-hands.” She stated, “For me, it’s not about being skinny; it’s about not having curves. Sometimes I feel like I’m a child, like I’m not a woman.” She then referenced an experience where a co-worker commented on her appearance, saying that she had “the body of a 10-year-old boy” (Model # 2, personal communication, June 1, 2011).

I used that conversation to highlight what she perceived as imperfect, lightly outlining and using intense colors to direct the eyes to her breasts, hands, hips, and even her “large” forehead, which crops off the page. Her face’s structure is exaggerated in the painting, with strong, angular shapes that are traditionally masculine. Also the size of her hands was enlarged and inaccuracy in their shape was allowed to inform the viewer that her hands aren’t viewed by the model as correct. One hand, covering her pelvis, stretches the fingers out, allowing for the pinky to drop between the thighs, which has a subtle phallic appearance. In contrast, the areas of her body that she was content with were allowed to fall into the background with soft edges, low contrast, and overlapping marks.

A lot of the content in the painting was created from a conversation following the interview. As she talked, I realized that the questions I had asked her did not relate as well to her own self-image issues. While she did compare herself to media's ideal, she also found her physical validation and self-perceived beauty from the men she interacted with. The male co-worker who commented on her appearance left her self-conscious, but her insecurity stems from deeper sources, such as interaction with male family members and through feelings of inadequacy created when comparing herself to media’s representation

of beautiful.

The model exudes self-confidence, power, and vitality, but she talked about being insecure, timid, and self-conscious. The model's contrasting confidence and insecurity were highlighted in the painting through being positioned in Sandro Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" (Figure 3.4) pose, where the Venus modestly holds her hands across her body, hiding herself, while simultaneously returning the viewer's gaze, recognizing and enjoying being the object of the viewer's attention. I presented my model with her chest up, confidently, also making eye contact, but I've painted the eyes out of focus, relating back to her personal experiences and sexual insecurity. Instead of sadness, the model felt pain, anger, and resentment. Already a bold and passionate personality, it was fitting to paint her in intense reds, oranges, and yellows.

She also struggled with her lack of volume, the opposite of the first model in "Black: Let's Play the Game." In some areas, I allowed for her body to start rounding out, but mostly, I attempted to place her on the canvas in bold aggressive strokes, which flattened parts of her out. The Botticelli painting becomes even more relevant to this painting as I discovered that "The Birth of Venus" references the Hellenistic representation of the love goddess, Astarte (Figure 3.5). Both Botticelli's Venus and the Astarte figure possess the broad hips that my model desires (Chicago, 1999, p.26).

I have taken her most insecure parts and rendered them carefully and pushed the rest of her body into the background, mirroring how one can start to only see her imperfections, and lose sight of what makes her beautiful. The fading in and out of the background also reinforces the relationship to the concealment of her insecurity through an act of self-confidence. Pink and blue pastels emerge from behind, and in areas, take over

the bold colors, revealing her struggle.



Figure 3.3: Amy Fix “Look, Don’t Touch/Touch, Don’t Look,” Acrylic on canvas, 2012.



Figure 3.4: Sandro Botticelli "Birth of Venus," Tempera on canvas, 1485.



Figure 3.5: "Astarte," Louvre, Paris.

For her mold, I captured her shoulders down to one knee. I asked her to arch her back which further emphasized her small breasts, and to twist, giving her a curvy form, something she resented not having. The resulting cast is a contrapposto pose in high relief, pressing against the wall in some areas, while allowing for other areas to pull away from the wall, creating interesting shapes with the negative space. The paper pulp used for the cast is a soft pink, with white seashells dispersed throughout.

IT'S INTERNAL

The next painting (Figure 3.6) shows a young woman in an Odalisque pose, her back presented to the viewer. The woman and ground are painted in a simple violet monochromatic color scheme. She is constructed of careful brushstrokes that construct her shape and the values that create her volume. The ground however, is constructed of broad brushstrokes, circling her, creating eye movement throughout the piece. A third layer of marks cut across the painting, obscuring parts of her face and body, hiding her away.

The pose and textured marks refer to Diego Velazquez's "The Rokeby Venus" (Figure 3.7), where Venus poses in front of a mirror, held up by Cupid. The image, and the overall pose depicts a superficial concern with appearance and a false confidence, and for the viewer evokes feelings of disgust at the depicted woman-object coated in sexuality and removed from individuality. Deciding to solidify the connection to "The Rokeby Venus," I placed marks across the canvas, much like suffragette Mary Richardson placed violent gashes into the famous painting's canvas (Figure 3.8).



Figure 3.6: Amy Fix “It’s Internal,” Acrylic on canvas, 2012.



Figure 3.7: Diego Velazquez "The Rokeby Venus," Oil on canvas, 1651.

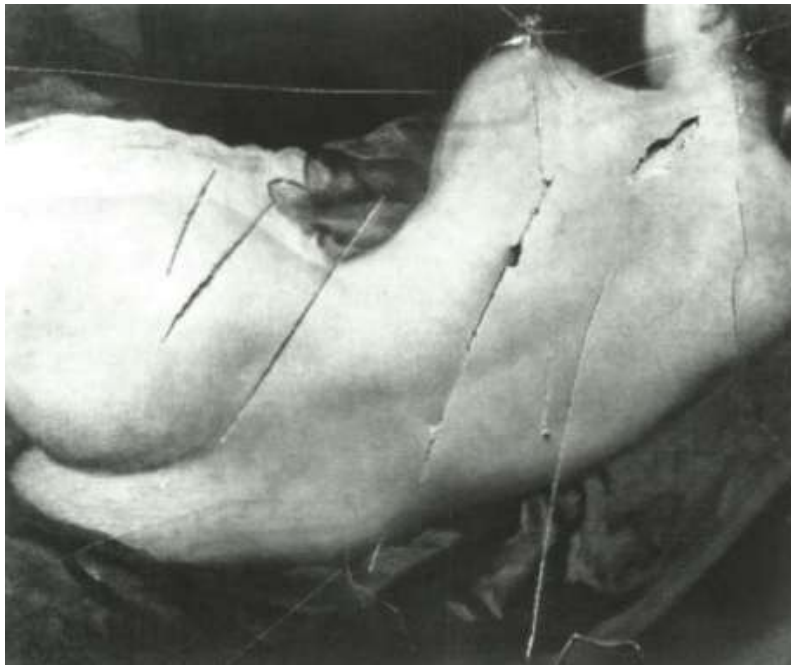


Figure 3.8: Damage by Mary Richardson to Diego Velazquez's "The Rokeby Venus," Oil on canvas, 1651.

The marks do more than tie this painting to history and remind the viewer of the evolution of the ideal beauty. The marks in conjunction with a pose that only shows her back coupled with her modest underwear obscure the woman presented, hiding her identity and revealing her insecurity. The exposed back hides her torso and essentially feminine parts, and shows vulnerability. The marks are also violent, showing aggression as they deface the figure, commenting on the model's own desire to conceal her true self. This desire was revealed in her interview, where she presented herself as confident and happy with her figure initially, only talking negatively about her own body and her need to hide it with baggy clothes and a "tom-boy" personality when discussing her past. At a few points in the interview, she let her guard down, and would reveal her inner struggle, revolving around leg length and breast size. She quickly would try to denounce, or conceal the comments that revealed her true insecure feelings, by stating things like, "I've learned how to dress for my body, like the starlets do, you know, to wear clothes that emphasize the right things, like how I wear heels to make my legs look longer...After going to Vegas, and those guys complimented me on my legs, I've realized how good I look in heels, and I've learned to like them" (Model # 3, personal communication, September 5, 2011). Not only did she validate her physical self-worth and self-esteem through the male gaze, she also left off, and discussed with me in a later, unrelated conversation, how "stumpy" she felt when she did not wear her platform heels.

The words security and insecurity reoccurred throughout her testimony as she made contradictory statements. As she discussed her past, she brought it into present tense, blurring the time frame in which her insecurity exists or existed, by stating, "A lot of my friends were bigger girls, and they couldn't understand, and I was like, just because a girl's

small doesn't mean she doesn't have insecurities, because I have MAJOR insecurities.” Later, within the same sentence she began vacillate between security and insecurity, proclaiming “I'm incredibly insecure with my body and have absolutely no reason to be. I think the older I get, the more secure I get, which makes me incredibly happy, and sad, because it's like you're wasting time being insecure when you can be flaunting it.” It was the combination of these statements juxtaposed to this last statement that helped me notice and evaluate an inner conflict. She said, “Things have been the best for me because I've become so secure with my body. Like I really love my belly button, you know, because it's so small. People tried to take that away from me, mocking it. I know that's a weird thing to love, your belly button, but I look at other people with big ones or outies and I'm glad. Not that those are bad things” (Model # 3, personal communication, September 5, 2011).

To reinforce the feeling of insecurity in the painting I used a monochromatic color scheme and chose a cold, dioxyzine violet to convey coldness and distance. Violet is the most recessive color, which comments on the model's desire to bury her insecurity deeply within herself. She even provides the location of her insecurity, stating, “It's not just the physical that's the way I look at myself, because physically I think I'm fine. I think it's the internal” (Model # 3, personal communication, September 5, 2011).

It was odd and revealing to compare this interview to the interview for “Black: Let's Play the Game.” In “Black” the model finds herself distant from the ideal and highly unhappy with her body. Yet her sense of identity is strong, and her body becomes somewhat disconnected from sense of self. For “It's Internal” the model finds herself physically close to the ideal, and because of that proximity, she clings to her appearance

more so than any of the other models. Because she ties her self-confidence to her self-worth and to the attainment of the ideal beauty, she is most vulnerable. Her fragility is emphasized by the fact that a casual compliment deeply resides for her. Like the canvas she resides in, or a lens she could be viewed through, she can most easily be ripped or shattered by a perceived failure to meet or to adhere to ideal beauty.

ZERO

The fourth painting (Figure 3.9) of the series is a woman reclining with her back arched as she floats in an ambiguous space. The figure appears translucent in areas, and is close in value and cold color temperature to the furthestmost space in the painting. As the figure approaches the foreground of the painting, the colors change temperature, becoming warmer as the model becomes more solid. The large, bottom section of the painting is hot in temperature and rough in mark-making. This visually relates to the rough mark-making throughout the body and to the linear warm marks outlining her stomach and rib-cage. Simultaneously, white paint intrudes from the background onto her stomach, breaking up the space, and helping identify the focal point of the painting, as the rest of her body starts to fade away into cold icy blues. The stomach is where cold and hot meet and unify, giving context for the highly contrasting color temperatures. It becomes clear that these extremes relate to her midsection and to food consumption.

Currently the model secretly struggles with binge eating and her history of anorexia nervosa. She is seeking balance between eating too much and not eating at all, searching for a healthy physical and mental state, while admitting that she has not achieved this yet. She moves between consumption extremes, as the painting moves through extremes in temperature. She talked about the scrutiny she experiences from family and from her own

self and about the nervousness she and they feel when she experiences weight loss. As she told me about her experiences with this illness, she described the sensation of feeling like her body and food consumption was a public spectacle for those aware of her condition. She felt like she could not hide, that her privacy ceased when she had to be hospitalized for her disease. I felt that the translucency of areas of her body and the exposed pose reflected her described sensation of unwelcome openness and the resulting discomfort, while her arm rests across her face in an attempt to obscure herself.

The pose is modeled after Alexandre Cabanel's "The Birth of Venus" (Figure 3.10). He uses the mythology of the goddess as a reason to paint an idealized, highly sexual nude female. Late nineteenth century French writer, Emile Zola commented on the painting, stating, "The goddess, drowned in a river of milk, resembles a delicious courtesan, not made of flesh and bone - that would be indecent - but of a sort of pink and white marzipan" (Alexandre). The figure is a woman of the painter's dreams, not resting in reality. Like Cabanel's Venus, my model also envisions a future where she is the ideal woman with a physique her family can approve of. She explained that her grandmother triggered her anorexia when she was fourteen. Her grandmother would pull her aside to discuss her weight, informing her that she, the grandmother, was the same height as the model at fourteen, and that they had the same build. With this in mind, she should be the same size, size zero, that her grandmother was when she got married. (Model # 4, personal communication, September 26, 2011). The message was clear from her grandmother, and to a lesser degree from the movie stars, that her body was not good enough. She wanted and wants to be the contemporary ideal.



Figure 3.9: Amy Fix “Zero,” Acrylic on canvas, 2012.



Figure 3.10: Alexandre Cabanel “The Birth of Venus,” Oil on canvas, 1875.

IN THE MEDICINE CABINET

The final painting in the series (Figure 3.11) is dark, with muted blue and yellow walls pushing against a high contrast black and white figure, which twists in contrapposto as she steps towards the viewer. The pose references “Venus de Milo” (Figure 3.12), a Hellenistic Greek sculpture found in fragmented pieces on the island of Melos (Astier 2001). Her torso is emphasized with the sharply contrasting achromatic color scheme, again establishing that this painting is not about the model’s ability to act or think, but instead is about her sexuality. The emphasis in this area also points the eye directly to the model’s perceived imperfections.

She struggled with her torso area, feeling that it was too short, and overall disproportionate, to be beautiful. While she feels that her body is not ideal in contemporary society, it is the antiquated ideal of an ancient society, reinforcing the viewer’s awareness of the evolution of beauty. The model described her relationship with her body, stating:

It’s funny, because, um, I tell myself that I’m perfect with my body the way it is, but at the same time I can’t fit into clothes that I could fit into last year, and I’m, like, freaking out because I can’t wear these. At one time I was taking Phentermine, which is an appetite suppressant...and I still have another bottle, and I really, really want to take it, but I know it’s really bad for me, and I know I shouldn’t, that I should work out and be healthy, but I want a quick fix, and I want to be perfect by just taking something real quick, but I don’t know. I’ll honestly probably do it. But that shows how I feel, even though I say that I feel fine about my body, that shows how I feel anyway. I obviously don’t feel too great about it (Model # 5, personal communication, October 20, 2011).



Figure 3.11: Amy Fix “In the Medicine Cabinet,” Acrylic on canvas, 2012.



Figure 3.12: "Venus De Milo," 100 BCE.

The model also described factors in her life that helped her feel okay with her body and factors that worsened her self-image. She gave the example of her mother, who offered to “buy one breast, if [she] would buy the other.” Her mother also makes it a habit to comment on the model’s clothing, pointing out when something is “too tight,” when a stomach roll is not hidden, and expecting her daughter to be the same shape as herself, much like the previous model’s grandmother. This model, instead of aiming to be a size zero, had the “luxury” of aiming for a size two in her early teens, the same size of her mother on her wedding day. On a positive note, the model did say that her boyfriend was supportive and embraced her body, helping her come closer to accepting how she looks (Model # 5, personal communication, October 20, 2011). Like others, this model seeks and finds approval in the male gaze instead of defining those parameters herself.

When the model posed, I had her position herself in front of the medicine cabinet, a place where she keeps her extra bottle of Phentermine. The mirror creates a dialogue in which the viewer witnesses the model looking at herself, contemplating her own beauty. Often Aphrodite paintings portray the goddess admiring herself in a handheld mirror. In contemporary society, this is where people evaluate their physical appearance, measuring their physical success or failure. Although the painting has become more abstract, the content of the mirror is maintained through the title.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

After interviewing the women, I have created work beyond figure studies and illustrations of perceived imperfections. Through personal interaction, knowledge of these women’s histories, and a repeated study of their statements with interpretation of their words, I have created portraits of these women and their relationships with their

bodies. The bodily dissatisfaction expressed by these women indicates a larger societal issue that impacts women's perceptions of their own bodies and their self-esteem.

Rampant eating disorders in Western society, the extremely profitable dieting market, involving weight loss pills, diet plans, and meal replacement items, and the increasingly common everyday and celebrity presence of plastic surgery are symptomatic of a society that places a huge emphasis on appearance through media and distorted family values. This societal image is damaging, with the most harm equal to death through starvation, comparable to a very slow suicide. It is "frequently socially disabling and even at the level of least harm, inhibiting and damaging to self-esteem for many young women" (Wykes, 2005, p.10).

The series effectively creates a dialogue of female beauty by grouping these portraits, which are negative and unhappy, under the title "Skin Deep: The Elusive Aphrodite," and by emphasizing physical "flaws" the models identified within themselves. The series could be strengthened by showing further diversity within the selection of models. The grouping does reflect me, funneling down to my individual self, and the pursuit of perfection is an issue central to all aspects of my life (job pursuits, school, health, and even dating). It seems only natural to start a dialogue on my need for perfection and move outwards. Thus, as I continue, I would like to study and create a dialogue that explores other diverse groups, including women of differing weights and heights, and people of diverse ethnicities, ages, and genders. As I continue my studies, I will continue to recognize the possibility that the same concerns are not central to each and every group of people, in the same way I have recognized that body image concerns differ from individual to individual. The series presents a very narrow sampling of our population,

and by diversifying, I can explore more fully the social context this issue resides within and its limits.

I look forward to creating more paintings and body casts, and I anticipate moving in an installation-based direction where the two can begin to merge. Sound, text, and patterning will be further explored while my paintings will continue to develop conceptually, aesthetically, and technically as I pursue a mastery of the medium. I will continue my research on body image, continue exploring new ways to present this new information, and continue the feminist research that has advanced this series through subject and content.

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