THE CONSTRUCTED BODY

by

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Date
As a twenty-four year old Caucasian female living in the United States, I grew up seeing tabloids in the grocery store check-out line that condemned Britney Spears for the cellulite on her thighs, sitting next to an airbrushed and impossibly Photoshopped Jennifer Aniston on a women’s fashion magazine cover. Watching television, I saw car commercials that featured more of a model’s cleavage than the SUV they were advertising. Walking through a department store, I saw mannequins so thin that the store clerks had to pin the size 0 dresses in the back to make them not sag on the forms. Growing up in the US, I was inundated with imagery of the idealized female body by the media, which made me very aware of the 'thin aesthetic.'

Yet I also grew up with a down to earth mother who read me stories of strong women that never needed a prince to rescue them. I grew up wearing sensible shoes, and selecting clothing based on comfort before style. We did not succumb to trends or the fashionable color of the season. Having grown up exposed to the unrealistic expectations of the female form in the United States, I was not immune to it’s overwhelming imagery or the stigma against fat. However, I was exposed to a very grounded sense of female power and intelligence that had nothing to do with appearance. It is this experience that has led me to make my current work.

Women’s Magazines

The female body is constantly being manipulated to resemble the ideal, thin female figure. Music videos, magazines, and television advertisements use Photoshop to reduce frizzy hair, remove freckles and wrinkles, and even elongate legs and cinch wastes. Photoshopping has become an industry standard, and it is next to impossible to find an image of a model or actress that has not been altered.

It is important to address the topic of the unrealistic images that women in the US are inundated with, and the easiest way is to take a look at women’s magazines. The average woman in
the US is 5’4” and a size 12. A study done by researchers at the University of Missouri states that the female standard in these magazines in a woman who is a size 4 in the hips, size 2 in the waste, and a size 10 in the bust, which is “thinner than the average woman and genetically impossible for most women to attain.” The same study also found that most young women begin to hate themselves more than they already do after just one to three minutes of perusing a women’s magazine (Nelson, *Airbrushed Nation*).

The implications of such unrealistic bodies in these publications and the subsequent self-hatred of the readers are fad diets and eating disorders. Forty-five percent of women are always on a diet, so fad diet advertisements is a successful way of selling magazines. Statistics show that the average American begins and fails four diets per year, with only one out of every 100 people permanently keeping of their lost weight. Breaking a diet leads to stress and discouragement, which are the primary reasons diets fail. However, since magazines are constantly promoting a new diet and images of unrealistically thin bodies, American women find themselves caught in a constant cycle of failed diets and unattainable body image goals. This results in a culture of low self-esteem and, often, unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders (Nelson).

Perhaps one of the most significant and frustrating displays of a woman altering her body was when Oprah Winfrey lost weight to be the 150 pounds that Anna Wintour, editor of *Vogue* magazine, required in order for her to be on the cover in 1998. A woman who has built her career around empowering women and creating female self-worth lost weight to achieve an unrealistic body image, that she herself admitted she could never maintain, in order to appear on the cover of a magazine (Nelson).

While airbrushing and photoshopping images has become the norm in magazines and advertisements, a couple of celebrities and magazines have made efforts to celebrate women for
their natural, authentic beauty. *MORE* published a magazine in 2002 with an airbrushed photo of Jamie Lee Curtis on the cover, but the photos of her within the article showed her without makeup or having been photoshopped, per her request. Then in 2005, Aisha Tyler was featured in an issue of *Glamour* showing before and after photos of the retouch to emphasize just how much photo-shopping has become the norm. Reflecting on the article, Aisha stated, “So the next time you see some model or actress with perfect skin, thighs like reeds, and eyes like shimmering pools...remember: it’s all a big load of digital crap” (Nelson). Instances like these, while heartening, are not common, and have done little to alter the onslaught of unrealistic images that the average American female sees daily.

In addition to the photoshopping and airbrushing that goes on in the media, it is increasingly common for both celebrities and normal people to actively modify their body via plastic surgery. According to the 2013 Plastic Surgery Statistics Report by the American Society of Plastic Surgery, there were 15.1 million cosmetic procedures performed in the US. That includes 221,000 nose reshaping surgeries, 200,000 liposuctions, and 133,000 facelifts, and 290,000 breast augmentations, which has been the top cosmetic surgical procedure since 2006 (www.plasticsurgery.org). Either with a click of a button or out-patient surgery, individuals have the power to correct each perceived imperfection. We no longer see the natural imperfections that are inherent in people, and are what make them unique and beautiful.

**Stigma of Fat**

Images of the idealized female body explain part of why the ‘thin aesthetic’ developed, but there are a couple of different theories as to why the stigma of fat developed in the United States. Some historians and anthropologists believe that contemporary society’s current aversion towards fat is largely due to the work of 19th century dietary reformers. William Banting and Sylvester
Graham are two such dietary reformers, who created the idea that excess flesh is undesirable and the cause of a personal failing (Czerniawski, *Fashioning Fat*).

Other historians believe that the fear of fat is due to social status, rather than health. Today in the United States, women that are able to spend time and money purely focusing on the way their bodies look are in stark contrast with the women that choose their food out of necessity and cost. Eating organically and exercising regularly are expensive luxuries, which created the association that a thin, toned body is one of high social standing, whereas a curvier build might belong to a less affluent woman (Czerniawski).

In addition to the idea that fat is something to be feared and the correlation between thinness and wealth and status, the insurance industry has also driven the way in which we contextualize weight. In order to determine a person’s health, a doctor might calculate their body mass index to see if their weight is healthy in relation to their height and age. Yet categories such as ‘normal,’ ‘overweight,’ and ‘obese’ are subject to change and are largely driven by the insurance industry. While the standard for health is a more concrete idea presented by health care professionals, the categories that might define a person as obese are more subjective, and are dictated by the insurance companies that may want to deny life insurance due to the deceased’s weight (Czerniawski).

**Universal Fat**

Yet it is important to point out that, while there is a very strong stigma and fear of fat in the United States, this is not universal, or necessarily true of the entirety of the US. In some countries, like Mauritania, daughters are force fed by their mothers in order to have fat bodies that will attract a husband. While fat is feared within American caucasian society, a curvier body is often coveted within the African American community. The hip-hop community even developed the
word 'phat,' to use in place of 'fat,' to describe the sexy, curvy form that they desire. The idea of fat has different meanings within different cultures and countries (Czerniawski).

Fat Aesthetic

In her book “Fashioning Fat: Inside Plus-Size Modeling,” sociologist Amanda M. Czerniawski describes her research on beautiful fat people in which she became a plus-sized model in New York City. She describes the experience that most women have with their body as being one that is 'disembodied.' Their brain and their self are perceived as being removed from their body. The fat woman feels as though her body is something that is working against her, a foreign object that is separate from her personality and acts as a distraction from her true self. The effort to bring the self and the body together, is often linked to conforming to unrealistic cultural ideals. While a thinner woman might feel comfortable in her culturally accepted body, a fat woman's body becomes an object that is resented, created a greater divide between the self and the body (Czerniawski).

Czerniawski became a plus-sized model in order to research the disembodiment within fat women. Scholars within the field of fat studies are attempting to encourage women to reclaim their own embodiment in a form of protest against the stigma against fat. However, according to the fat activist and communications scholar Kathleen LeBoesco, a liberated plus-sized woman would emphasize her beautiful fat body without relying on thin aesthetics. However, this is problematic because according to cultural theorist Samantha Murray, “fat politics still privileges the thin body and attempts to imitate it. As fat girls, we still want to know what it is to be thin, even if we do not want to alter our fat.” While reversing the accepted aesthetic, women are still being judged on how they appear (Czerniawski).
The Constructed Body

*My Pleasingly Plump* series draws attention to and confronts the stigma of fat within the United States. These dresses seek to lessen the distance women imagine between their self, and their bodies. While I cannot force women to exist in a state of embodiment with their own physical forms, this work attempts to distinguish the fear of fat that prevents embodiment within fat women. I create a proposition for women in which they either wish to have or can appreciate their own voluptuous breasts and bellies.

The way in which artists depict the female body is indicative of what the female's purpose was during that time period. For example, between 30,000 and 20,000 BCE, many Venus sculptures were created by cultures across modern day Europe; each culture depicted female with little definition on their heads and faces, but with very accentuated breasts, bellies, hips, and genitalia. The Venus of Willendorf, found in modern day Germany, is an example of one such sculpture with no facial features but exaggerated breasts and belly. The Venus figure epitomizes fertility and procreation, which was the most important aspect of females during that time.

My dresses function like the Venuses did, in that they hyperbolize the breasts and bellies of the women wearing them. Rather than having little or no information on the face, however, my pieces are completed when worn. My constructed figure is activated by the woman wearing it, the way in which she holds it's curves. At the MFA Thesis Show at the Atlanta Decorative Arts Center, *Pleasingly Plump 1–3* are displayed on mannequins, with photographs of them being worn by women. These pieces are activated by the wearer, so it is so important that the viewer see them on a body, even if it is in a photo. At the MFA Thesis Show at the Georgia Museum of Art, the work was worn by a model at the opening, and then hung from a wire body armature from the ceiling. While it was supported as though there was a figure inside, the viewer is able to see the negative space within the form, and potentially imagine what it would be like to wear it.
In order to create this body of work, I am developing my own material with which to build my forms. In order to achieve a precise skin tone, I hand-dye the silk fabric that I will later use to construct the forms. Each piece is made up of between eight to twelve yards of fabric, and I create subtle shifts in color within one piece to create a natural look. Once I have dyed my fabric, I then paint a thin layer of diluted silicone on to the silk to generate a fabric that has the weight and jiggle to simulate fatty skin. The yards and yards of weighty silicone and fabric become draped and folded breasts and bellies that consume the female underneath. These beautiful and corpulent forms combat the idea posed by 19th century dietary reformers that excess flesh is undesirable. The dresses lure in both thin and fat women alike, tempting women of all shapes and sizes to flaunt this additional 'flesh.'

Not only does the silicone create a material that visually represents fat, but it also has ties to body modification. Silicone is used in 72% of breast augmentation surgeries, as a way to create larger, firmer breasts. It is also used to reconstruct the cheeks, chin, jaw, and butt, or to enhance the male chest, calves, or biceps (www.plasticsurgery.org). Silicone is a material that has a long history of being used for cosmetic body modification, but rather than using it to enhance the conventional body parts, I am using silicone to create ample bellies and back fat.

Due to being constantly overwhelmed with images of the idealized body and the 'thin aesthetic,' many women are left feeling unhappy with their bodies. The intention of this work is to embrace breasts, lumps, bellies, curves, and hips. The dresses are lined with silk to allow them to glide onto the wearer and make her feel sexy and beautiful. The weight and jiggle of each form is reminiscent of fat, but still aches to be touched by both wearer and viewer alike. These dresses are a celebration of the voluptuous female form and, as such, act as a step towards the diminishing of the stigma of fat in the US and acceptance of all female figures.
Bibliography


Pleasibly Plump 1, hand-dyed silk, silicone, polyfiber, 2015

Pleasibly Plump 2, hand-dyed silk, silicone, polyfiber, 2015
Pleasingly Plump 3, hand-dyed silk, silicone, polyfiber, 2015

Install of Pleasingly Plump 1-3, Atlanta Decorative Arts Center
Pleasingly Plump 4, hand-dyed silk, silicone, polyfiber, 2015
Georgia Museum of Art