Self / Conscious

Master of Fine Arts Thesis Research and Exhibition
by Lindsey Guile

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I. Introduction

We live in a world that surrounds us with images. These visual representations serve as a driving force in the way that contemporary society constructs subjectivity. Often these images have an effect on our perceptions, shaping the world around us, and manipulates the standards of normal. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way that body image is constructed. There is a huge gap between the reality of our own bodies and the image to which we aspire to. (Biber 50) For both men and women, unrealistic standards of masculinity and femininity are not only crafted by images but the stereotypes that are romanticized within the media, often in ways that are detrimental to the individuals sense of self worth. My artistic process looks at the very personal ways in which that external pressure is turned inwards, and encourages a reconnection with and re-contextualization of one's self.

II. Construction

The study of how body image is perpetuated often is one of the gaze and in the recognition not only of ourselves. This kind of mimetic learning is further explained by Lacan and his theory of the “mirror stage”, the critical stage for the development of subjectivity. Prior to the mirror-stage there is no understanding of the limits of the individual body, not that there is necessarily anything external to it. The many surfaces that the child touches-the parent's skin, clothing, carpet-are all felt to be part of continuous, uninterrupted, limitless being, so amorphous and open-ended that it cannot be compared to anything as located, specific and defined as self-hood (Mansfield 41). All of this begins to change in the mirror-stage. Now, for some reason, the child starts to see an image of itself from outside of itself, perhaps in a mirror, perhaps reflected in an adult's eyeball, perhaps by suddenly recognizing some
similarity with a playmate. To Lacan, the mirror stage manufacturers for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality. The mirror stage establishes the ego as fundamentally dependent upon external objects (Mansfield 42).

One could argue that the images in the magazines and in other media also work as a mirror. In reality insecurity and self-consciousness is a very real effect of seeing perfect bodies wherever we look. Where this differs from the Mirror Phase is that what is seen is not a reflection of ourselves, but a reflection of manufactured desire. Now, we all know that the advertisements are photo-edited, and perhaps the discussion of the effects of the media could be seen as trite, but one must acknowledge the cause in order to examine the more personal effects.

We learn to see ourselves as others see us, in terms of social standards. Self image develops through social interactions (Hesse-Biber p58). Often what causes a problem is that each girl comes to realize that she shares a category with others labeled “girl”. Once same gender groups are formed other processes come into play (started in childhood), such as the dynamics of group loyalty, stereotyping of the other groups, and teasing individuals who try to violate patterns of separation (Thorne 60). Girls are unable to move away from certain social structures because they are unavoidable. As we get older, people go along with the imposition of gender norms because the weight of morality as well as immediate social pressure forces them (Lorber 23). It is difficult to deviate from ideals of conventional gender roles, specifically femininity. In social interaction through out their lives, individuals see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain gender order. (Lorber 32)

Feminine value is determined by the roles a woman fills in society, and even to a degree how successful she is within particular categories. In order to be successful in life the expectation is that women must meet an unattainable ideal of what it means to be a woman, and in the end what these concepts lead to is a life of waiting and dissatisfaction.
A dominant force in modern society, capitalism in its early form relied on external control of women's bodies, but over time this control has become more internal through self-imposed body practices and rituals (Hesse-Biber 38). Whereas a hundred years ago women may have put on a corset or have their feet bound (in both instances causing extreme physical pain) what we are seeing today is quieter. In talking with many of the participants in my project, many of them discussed unhealthy relationships with food (either presently or in the past). My own experiences closely resemble those of the participants in the project, where destructive habits had very real adverse effects on my physical health. So although I was not wearing a corset, I was, and am, bound.

Body comparisons are a way of measuring, measuring against other women but also against the ideal. More often then not, the failure to 'measure up' sometimes leads to strong feelings of self hatred. Women's bodies become cultural artifacts, continually molded by history and culture. Subjected to such pressures, the natural body gets lost, a causality and reflection of the power-play within society (Hesse-Biber 45). Often, when women make strong advances in society, the culture at large tells that for them to be truly powerful they must decrease their physical presence within the world. Or the world does it for them. I always wonder what would happen if the diet and beauty industry collapsed. If no one worried about counting calories anymore, or how to get rid of wrinkles. I know a majority of my thoughts each and every day are centered on making sure that I am consuming the correct amount of calories determined by my free phone app and in the mornings carving out time to do my make up. Imagine the things we could do if policing our bodies to fit into some ambiguous mold wasn't first on our mind. To a much lesser degree we see this idea of women's bodies as cultural signifiers in the ways in which strong and independent women such as Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama are defined. Rarely do we hear a news story that doesn't discuss Mrs. Obama's wardrobe, upper arms, or hair. During the 2008 Presidential Election Mrs. Clinton was regularly maligned by pundits for her pants-suits. These are both highly educated women in positions of power and a majority of the discussion surrounding isn't about how intelligent, driven, and strong they are. In Naomi Wolf's book “The Beauty
Myth, How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women she states:

“In drawing attention to the physical characteristics of women leaders, they can be dismissed as either too pretty or too ugly. The net effect is to prevent women's identification with the issues. If the public woman is stigmatized as too “pretty” she is a threat, a rival—or simply not serious; if derided as too “ugly”, one risks tarring themselves with the same brush by identifying oneself with her agenda.” (Wolf 69)

III. Cause and Effect

All of this, I feel, leads to a disconnect with our own bodies. It is as if we are looking in the mirror at another person. One who should be thinner, prettier, taller, shorter, curvier, sometimes the exact opposite of what we look like. We look at her and judge, and when we remember that it is our own reflection looking back, the dissatisfaction becomes intensely personal. Susan Bordo mentions in Unbearable Weight (57) that ‘...due to this, most women in our culture, then, are disordered when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort within our own bodies.’ My exploration into the politics of the feminine body are not solely rooted in acknowledging the dysfunction, but in the many ways in which it can be subverted.

A majority of my interest, both personally and artistically, is in the struggle to remain true to one's self amongst all of the glossy magazine pages and billboard-sized ads of perfection. It's not easy, and it is reflected in the fact that when I reached out via micro-blogging formats (such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr) there were many women out there who identified with my story and were open to sharing their own. As someone who is both taller (at 5’11”) and heavier then the average American woman (size 16/18) I have always been acutely aware that I take up way more physical space then is deemed appropriate by contemporary feminine social constructs. Comments about my weight and physical appearance, and how to improve it, is a regular occurrence through both visual and verbal means. Not that long ago I was told “You know, if you lost seventy pounds you could be pretty!” Could be. Obviously, to this person, I wasn't anywhere close to that now and as if “pretty” is the
ultimate complement. What most of these people do not know, and because of my size do not expect, is that for most of my life I have struggled with not only with severe body dis-morphia, but that I am one of the eight million Americans who live daily with an eating disorder. So, by initializing a conversation with people both verbally and through visual art my intention is to build a community through hope.

IV. Visual Exploration

As an artist making work about the female body, many of the questions I ask can be intensely personal. The women I work from, what are their relationships with their bodies? How much are they willing to share with me? What do they see when they look in the mirror? How do they feel about their bodies? What experiences have lead them to the place of self-awareness that they are now? Many of these answers might be something the volunteers who I work with aren't willing to answer, or aren't ready to just yet. And some of the answers are ones that are not verbalized, but instead felt. The installation of my Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, entitled *Self / Conscious* features ten pieces that combine elements of painting, performance, and digital photography. Through micro-blogging as well as word-of-mouth I begin by asking volunteers into my studio. While not all of the women I have worked from deal with body image to the degree that I do, all have discussed the negative ways in which they see their bodies. My request was simple, for them to paint either their face and/or body with tempera paint, encouraging them to create their own self portrait. Through many discussion with my collaborators I have discovered that dissatisfaction often lead to a lack of contact with their own body. A main aspect of this series is to encourage women to re-contextualize their own body experience through art. Rather then having me, as the artist, create a portrait, asking these women to paint themselves it allows them control over their own image. They can paint whatever they choose (or choose not to), but it also means that they reestablish a physical connection with their own body. I
photograph my volunteers as they cover themselves with paint. Later in editing the image I lift the paint away and what remains is a record of touch, where their hands moved over themselves and have left a residue of paint. This is a reflection of the process that the individual went through, the care they had in the creation of their own self portrait. When I tried the process myself the paint on my body felt like war paint. I felt powerful, not at all self conscious.

In the Dorsky Museum of art my Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition highlights eight pieces from this series. A mixture of portraits and body compositions, all focus on each participants expressivity. No mark or movement is duplicated. Some women traced the curves along their bodies while others scratched through the pain the flesh beneath. Completely mono-chromatic, the choice to work from the variations from black to white is something that has always been a part of my work. For me, simple is always the most effective, and so much can be said with so little. Upon closer inspection the audience can see nuance of color in the darkest of areas, hints of blues and violets, that help convey a sense of emotion, connection, and flesh.

In Self / Conscious #2 the woman sought to create the illusion of stretch marks, something she doesn't have and wants, a representation of a fullness so revered in her Cuban family. Across the space, Self / Conscious #8 shows the moment when another participant runs her hands up her body, touching from her thighs up to her breasts in one movement. The paint sits beautifully on and between the fleshy parts of her stomach, accentuating the heaviness of her body, while also lending a sense of beauty through line, shape, and texture. The implied surface quality, almost begs the viewer to move our hands along with her. Self / Conscious #1 is the first image created in the series. The marks here are less elegant and stronger in the application of medium. A portrait, her head is tipped back with eyes closed. Pride, attitude, and conflict are just a few of the emotions I wanted to convey to the viewer as the model for this particular image. Each piece in the show, to me, tells a story. Each movement is a sentence, a record of our history. The viewer many not be able to read each and every piece exactly, but my intention is that they will connect at a deeper level with the work.
Hung simply from the top of the pieces, many of the images move slightly with the air around them, the movement lending the works an extra sense of life beyond the paper and ink. The impact in the space is simple, clean, and arresting.

V. Conclusion

Intimate and private, the exploration of each body is more than just an external experience. As the artist my role is to not only give an honest depiction of each person but to also care for each image. The goal is not to look for acceptance from the viewers (either for my artwork or as one of the models) but rather to embrace a greater sense of self through art. To learn own the space of the paper, and hopefully our space in life, without anxiety and without apology.

“The solution is to accept that the only person you have to please is yourself. Indulge your instincts, wear what you love, and embrace your natural self. As tired as it sounds, self-acceptance has to come from within. You simply cannot look to the wider world for a perpetual stream of affirmation. It won’t be there. And life is too short to hate yourself.

~Crystal Renn (‘Hungry’ 222)
VI. Works Cited


VII. Artist Statement

This current series of work examines the ways in which body image and self image are felt. In contemporary media the focus is on the construction of these issues, my work explores the more intimate aspect of the ways in which we see ourselves. Beyond just visible, I also focus on physical interaction with one's self as a signifier for self worth.

My art work explores the intimate contact of physical interaction. Beyond the sexual nature of touch, the focus is on discovery, acknowledgment, embodiment and eventually ownership. I ask each person involved to close their eyes and just feel, to shut out the pressures of a society dominated by commodity. To own one's self image without apology is powerful and more often than not - scary.

A riff on self-portraiture, the individuals I work with re-contextualize their own personal subjectivity. They are the architects of their own image, the artist. In a world dominated by cell phone camera 'selfies', this allows participants to highlight, downplay, and craft their own visual representation. My artistic practice embraces drawing, painting, performance, and digital photography, and the result is two-fold. Captured through photography, the pieces are a record of the interaction, where often the expressivity of the paint becomes a reflection of that person. The other aspect of my work is one of social activism through collaboration. Every time someone is brave enough to discuss their story either through verbal, visual, or written storytelling it not only helps them become stronger, but also helps others. The intention is for my practice to serve as a conduit for that conversation.
VIII. Images

*Self / Conscious #1*. Archival Inkjet Print. 36” x 36”. 2014
Self / Conscious #2. Archival Inkjet Print. 40" x 24". 2014
Self / Conscious #3. Archival Inkjet Print. 51” x 36”. 2014
Self / Conscious #5. Archival Inkjet Print. 45” x 26”. 2014
Self / Conscious #6. Archival Inkjet Print. 60” x 32”. 2014
Self/Conscious #7. Archival Inkjet Print. 50” x 28 1/4”. 2014
Self / Conscious #8. Archival Inkjet Print. 53” x 36”. 2014
Self / Conscious MFA Thesis Exhibition Card

Self / Conscious

Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition
New work by
Lindsey Guile

Exhibition Dates:
May 16-20, 2014

Opening Reception:
Friday, May 16, 2014
7:30pm - 9:30pm

Gallery Hours:
Friday - Tuesday, 11am to 5pm

Location: Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
Alice and Horace Chandler & North Galleries,
1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, New York 12561
Museum Telephone Number: 845-257-3844
Museum website: www.newpaltz.edu/museum

www.lindseyguile.com