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Perceptions of Beauty, and Their Cost

By AILEEN JACOBSON

A dress stretched so tightly on a rack that it could not fit even the skinniest of women is the first piece a visitor is likely to spot upon entering the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery at State University of New York College at Old Westbury. Called “Thinner Than You,” it is one of the works in an art exhibition, “Body Conscious,” that explores women’s concerns about their size and weight, including dieting, obesity and eating disorders.

“I think it is a really important, necessary topic,” said Emily L. Newman, 31, the curator of the exhibition, speaking on the phone from her home in Texas, where she is an assistant professor of art history at Texas A&M University-Commerce. “I want it to be provocative. I want it to be unsettling and in your face, a look at what we are doing to our young women.”



An image from “Thirty-Two Kilos,” a Photoshopped series by Ivonne Thein.

Credit Courtesy of Ivonne Thein

The exhibition, which encompasses 22 pieces by nine artists, grew out of Dr. Newman’s doctoral thesis. She earned her Ph.D. in 2012 from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. For her thesis, she said, she started with an interest in “the media perception of body image” and thought, “Why not look at the way artists look at it?”

She found many examples. “In the 1960s, with the rise of the women’s liberation movement, it became more acceptable to address these issues in public,” she said. She didn’t think about an exhibition, however, until she had lunch in Texas with Hyewon Yi, the director of the Wallace gallery, during the summer of 2013. They knew each other from graduate school.

Dr. Yi, 39, said she knew about her colleague’s thesis topic and pressed for more details. “I had an idea of how great it would be to turn this dissertation research project into an exhibition, which the student body and larger audiences would like,” she said on the phone from South Korea, where she was traveling last month. The images are accessible, Dr. Yi said, and the issues compelling.

Jerimah Kelliehan, a visual arts major at Old Westbury who is an intern at the gallery, agreed. “It’s something a lot of women can relate to,” she said. “Society has a perception of beauty, and a lot of people are struggling with it.”

The piece she likes best, she said, is a series of photographs titled “Thirty-Two Kilos,” on a lower level of the gallery. The six large-scale prints show painfully slender women — their images Photoshopped to look as if they weighed 32 kilos, or around 70 pounds — in the kinds of absurdly angular poses that fashion models sometimes use. Though Ms. Kelliehan knew from a brochure available at the gallery that the images were computer-manipulated by the artist, Ivonne Thein, to make the women look even thinner than in real life, the pictures still evoked for her the relationship among fashion, body weight and the

low self-esteem that is shared by many of her friends, she said. The women's clothes, Dr. Newman noted in the brochure, are made of bandages, accentuating the unhealthiness of their slight figures.

Another medical theme emerges in "Trophies," a 1995 piece by Beth B, a New York artist and filmmaker. This one shows two rib cages, made with wax, inside a starkly lit display case. The rib cages look like specimens in a natural-history museum, Dr. Newman said in an interview, and show how women altered their bodies by wearing corsets. "We're doing the same thing today," she said. "But today we don't call them corsets. We call them Spanx."

She said that she found "Thinner Than You," made in 1990 by Maureen Connor of net stretched over a dress rack, "really powerful."

"It forces you to think about when is enough," she added. "We're always trying to be thinner than the next person."

Dr. Newman said she likes that Ms. Thein's photographs of the extremely thin women can be seen behind the sculpture, even though they are on a lower level, reachable via a ramp.

"No Way Out," another sculpture by Ms. Connor, is also on that lower level. This one, made of a net bodysuit stretched over a stainless armature with rubber straps, displays a more extreme posture, barely discernible as human. "In the '90s, women wore bodysuits made of lingerie, trying to be sexy," Dr. Newman said. "But this one is so stretched out it is about to break. I like that tension."

Another artist who also has two pieces shown on different gallery levels is Laia Abril. Ms. Abril shot "A Bad Day," a 2011 video of a bulimic woman who talked about vomiting (and cutting herself), and also made "Thinspiration Fanzine," a compilation of images from websites that promote anorexia, called "pro-ana." Visitors can leaf through the 46 pages of the "fanzine," printed in 2012 in an edition of 500, to see close-ups of skeletal bodies and phrases like "If you are not thin you are not attractive" and "I like to tell myself I'm allergic to food."

Nearby is another artwork filled with both images and text, only these words are more considered. Faith Ringgold, well-known for her story quilts, tells about losing 100 pounds, regaining them, and then trying to lose 30 again, in "Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt," from 1988. It is part of a series, Dr. Newman said, in which "she really addresses dieting and how painful and frustrating it is, how our bodies don't want to do what we want them to."



A photograph by Ariane Lopez-Huici conjuring zaftig pride.
Credit Courtesy of Ariane Lopez-Huici

Like the other pieces in the exhibition, Dr. Newman said, Ms. Ringgold's story quilt is on loan — in this case, from Ms. Ringgold's gallery, ACA Galleries in New York. In general, she said, "This is not the kind of artwork that sells." Toward the end of her narrative, Ms. Ringgold repeats the word "tomorrow" three times, then adds, "I'll lose it tomorrow."

"Ideal Individual," a complex video, takes up an entire wall of the gallery's lowest level. It comes from a project lasting from 1999 to 2001 in which Liesbeth and Angelique Raeven, twins from the Netherlands who go by the name L.A. Raeven, auditioned dozens of women after posting advertisements saying they sought characteristics like "unusual food and drink habits," "loss of hair" and "infantile appearance." (A related film will be shown on March 26.)

Though most of the art is about women trying to be thin, two groups of photographs, both taken by Ariane Lopez-Huici (who will speak at the gallery on April 2), show nude women who are obese — and appear to take pride in their size. "They take credit for their bodies, with a sense of confidence," Dr. Newman said.

If the exhibition has the effect she wants, said Ms. Newman (who will give a lecture at the gallery on April 10), it "can open a lot of doors for discussion and, hopefully, healing."

"Body Conscious" continues through April 10 at the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, Campus Center, SUNY College at Old Westbury, Route 107, noon to 5 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and by appointment. Information: (516) 876-2709 or oldwestbury.edu.