

## The Female Image in Contemporary Art

Numerous contemporary artists, particularly female artists, have at key moments in their careers chosen to examine the issue of female image. Many of the artists have incorporated their own bodies into their work, at times leading to certain contradictions that deserve discussion. That is, as they choose to diet or to display their eating disorders through their artworks, they may appear complicit in the very syndromes that they are ostensibly critiquing. In choosing to investigate or document extreme examples of thin and fat women, or in chronicling anorexic and bulimic bodies, or just exploring the female image in general, these artists generally raise questions concerning societal pressures on the healthy female.

For example, one poignant work in the show is Eleanor Antin's series of black and white photographs of herself taken in 1972 over a period of 37 days titled *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*. The photographs portray Antin posing nude while on a restrictive diet as a way to demonstrate pressures of society to meet specific standards of beauty. The work *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* by Jana Sterbak also addresses issues concerning women, fashion, consumption, and the body. The equation of women with meat and the notion that "you are what you wear" are common ideas in Western society. In the United States, statistics have pointed to a growing number of young women with eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa (referred to in the title), because their body types do not match the prevailing fashion or "look" sported by the tall, thin models populating the media. Vanessa Beecroft, on the other hand, identifies the female image as the essential context for her specific research and invents a specific expressive form, examining questions and obsessions related to the body, beauty and identity. Her work represents a radical turning point in the history of performance art and openly addresses controversial subjects pertaining to contemporary culture, such as the examination of stereotypes, anxiety about multiplicity and the violence of the culture of the image. Maureen Conner's sculptural piece, *Thinner Than You*, 1990 evokes an image of female body, depicting clothing as a mediator between the body and a culture that perpetuates women as sexual objects & thinness as a highly valued characteristic of female body. Ashley Zelinskie's digital video *Femanon* is one of the more contemporary works, inspired by and placed back into the internet. The idea first stemmed from asking general questions about art and beauty posted on Yahoo Answers and Omegle. To get an idea of what the audience thought to be beautiful lead to a critic on physical beauty and body image. Based on data extracted from users a average beauty prep time was revealed. This video has a ten hour run time of in which the artist applies makeup in slow motion. This exaggerated act represents the average amount of time the average Yahoo Answer spends achieving "beauty" in a given month.

Each one of these works represents, in some way, the effects that the media, visual culture, and/or contemporary society have on female sense of self. The artists deal with the ideal image of beauty; The image of female beauty in fashion and media, created by the dominant western society. People are losing their identity and don't see the beauty of their own image anymore. In fact, people admire the western ideal and start to dislike their own identity. By addressing these issues, the artists are calling attention to the female image in general, and raising questions and concerns about societal pressures on the healthy female.

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