

Desired: The Norm of Imperfection

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Flesh, cellulite, pock marks, dimpled hills, lumpy and bumpy, envelops our bodies. The images of flesh in art history have typically shown imperfections of the material body. For example, the Paleolithic statue *Woman of Willendorf* stands on tiptoes with her bulbous and dangling breasts. Her immense rotund body can be interpreted as ugly by contemporary standards, but in context it reflects the beauty of endurance, fertility, stability, and strength. The *Woman of Willendorf* serves as the impetus for a series of works I created from 2010-2011. In this series, I focused on analyzing the fetishized areas of the female figure in art history: breasts and buttocks. I selected these body parts due to the proclivity of ample flesh on these regions; the rendering of flesh would be a major facet of these artworks. A secondary reason to make these anatomical areas the focus of this series is their propensity to be more than just round; they were curled, globose, oval and pear-shaped forms. Round is synonymous with voluptuous or fat; therefore, round can be beautiful or ugly. An analysis of these body parts would raise questions about arbitrary notions of beauty and contradictory norms for the female image across time. My presentation will focus on specific artists, variable approaches to the figure, and the juxtaposition of artists from different time periods. Did the candid eye of these artists echo society's impositions on body image? Or, did these artists reimagine the female form to suit their individual artistic pursuits? Alongside these considerations, there are symbolic cultural associations to the breasts and buttocks. The breast is both nurturing and life-giving, and a point of sexual pleasure. (Yalom, 1997) The size and shape of the buttocks reflect the body's sturdy constitution to endure pregnancy, yet the buttocks have also been eroticized by mass media. The breasts and buttocks in my artwork are forms of beauty that communicate to the viewer in a provocative language about sexism, ageism, eroticism, and maternity. The female form is continually shown flawed throughout art history; perhaps 'imperfection is the norm' versus the stereotypical image of unblemished skin. As an artist I wanted to delve into the appearance of flesh and to examine my own history of depicting the female figure. The following represents my research into beauty and ugliness in tandem to the visual portrayal of the female image in Western art history.

I will briefly outline the origins of the imperfect female image with select works from Paleolithic to Baroque. In Paleolithic art there are many small statuettes of women which echo the *Woman of Willendorf's* emphasis on exaggerated breasts and buttocks of the female form. The *Woman holding a bison horn* from Laussel and the *Woman from Dolní Veštonice* both show plump women. Since these works were created before the written word, there are no definitive explanations for the corpulent appearance of the female form. Most art historians agree the representation demonstrates the physique needed for survival and they hypothesize fatness was most likely an admirable physical trait in early cultures. (Lucie-Smith, 1972) In 1600 BCE the *Snake Goddess* from the palace of Knossos is shown with protrusive globular breasts and a narrow waist. Her attire is thought to be typical of the Minoan period; the fashionable open bodice emphasizes her sexuality and the maternal

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significance of the breast. (Yalom, 1997) Even classical civilizations produced works with the female flawed and imperfect. *Old Woman* and *Middle-Aged Flavin Woman* reveals signs of the aging process with drooping breasts, sagging, and puffy facial features. While the Republican period used artworks such as these to symbolize virtue and respectability, the Greeks' Hellenistic period was recording the diversity of the people in their city and varying levels of society. (Stokstad and Cothren, 2011) From the Middle Ages to the Baroque period, there are three phases in the evolution of the ugly woman as a theme; initially the old woman becomes a symbol for physical and moral decay while the young woman symbolizes beauty and purity. (Eco, 2007)

*'But during the Renaissance female ugliness became the subject of lampoons containing ironic praise of models that did not conform to the dominant aesthetic canons. In the Baroque period, however, we finally come to a positive reassessment of female imperfections as elements of attraction.'* (Eco, 2007)

It is the latter statement about female imperfections as elements of attraction which would eventually impact my own artwork and research. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century Hans Baldung Grien produced *Allegory* which portrayed a woman with high set breasts and a distended belly. This particular body type illustrated by the Northern Renaissance artist may reflect the ideal female figure of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but to the contemporary eye, the female image is flawed in its distorted proportions. The School of Fontainebleau artists represented the erotic ideal female nude with long limbs, small head, pert breasts and a gently swelling stomach. (Lucie-Smith, 1972) The most famous portrait coming from the School of Fontainebleau is the painting of Gabrielle d'Estrées with the Duchesse de Villars where one woman is seen tweaking the other's nipple. In this artwork the female figure has a sense of plasticity to it and the breasts have a Barbie-like appearance. In Northern Renaissance the artworks reflect a specific female image with wide hips, high set breasts, and distended bellies; on the other hand, artists in the Baroque period will depict a heavy set female form with a fleshy backside, wide hips, and a masculine torso. A woman's imperfections were described as elements of interest, sometimes as sensual stimuli in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. (Eco, 2007) Peter Paul Rubens exemplifies the best example of the preceding statement with his rendering of feminine flesh in such works as *The Three Graces*. The s-curves of the buttocks in Rubens' works are sensual, yet the massive thighs portray a sense of strength and stability. Tints of honeycomb yellows mingle with soft peach tones to describe an uneven and rolling terrain across the buttocks. Are the women in Rubens' paintings ugly with their rotund bodies, twisted forms and folds of flesh? The complexity of the forms and Rubens' handling of paint creates beauty out of the seemingly blemished material body. The preceding remarks are simply an introduction to the imperfection of the female image seen in art history prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century; however, my focus of study centered on specific artists from the next four centuries.

Two 18<sup>th</sup> century artists analyzed, François Boucher and Gustave Courbet, created paintings with a devilish eye for scandalous sensuality. The artworks

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by Gustave Courbet which I studied are *The Woman in the Waves* and *Woman with a Parrot*. In both works the breasts have an upward movement due to the posture of the female figure. The paintings communicate a heightened sensuality because of the discernment each woman conveys for her own body. In *The Woman in the Waves*, Courbet uses varying hues of rose, purple and blue-green on the right breast; the nipple seems sore and the breast overall has an unnatural look. I incorporated aspects of Courbet artwork into my own paintings: touches of arbitrary color, poses reflecting movement and mood, and a contrived visual appearance. François Boucher is known for paintings in which his model is positioned flat on her abdomen revealing her ample backside: *Mademoiselle O'Murphy* and *Brown Odalisque*. The posterior is the focal point; it is centrally placed with the entire figure at a sharp diagonal cutting across the picture plane. I would emulate Boucher's compositions. In *Shake Your Hips Like Battleships*, the bottoms are placed at angles creating diagonal directional forces. Unlike Rubens' treatment of the female posterior, Boucher opts to create elegant, pink-tinged, feminine buttocks. There is a distinct difference in how each artist treats the topography of the derrière; neither artist strives for an idealized treatment of the figure. Two contemporary artists, Lucian Freud and Eric Fischl, address the idea of beauty/ugliness in the depiction of the female image. My visceral response to Freud's 'big Sue' paintings caused me to make connections back to those primordial images of women like *Woman of Willendorf*. I was intrigued by the manner in which the breasts spread out; their shapes slowly crept across an armchair or a bed sheet in such a compelling and expansive manner. Two paintings, *Flora with Blue Toe Nails* and *Standing by the Rags*, are notable for the complex interrelationship of arrangement and form. The nude models are not posed in a faux attractive manner like erect air-brushed pinup models, but instead are shown in natural poses of reclination or upright position. Freud paints flesh with ferocity; he is exploring the truth of appearance. He skillfully builds up skin tones to suggest gossamer skin. Due to the difference of their models' body types, there is a departure in Freud and Fischl's depiction of the figure. Fischl's subjects are the toned, athletic women of suburbia. In *The Beginning of the End*, Fischl paints a picture of an angular, flat, dismissive backside. Instead of conveying sensuality, the buttocks in Fischl's paintings are standoffish and untouchable. At first glance they appear to be our contemporary notion of the ideal, yet the angular brushwork which delineates between sun-kissed skin and pearly white flesh creates awkward divisions across the skin that skews away from standard beauty. In *But...Fischl* I appropriate buttocks from Eric Fischl's paintings and place them in a grid arrangement. Cropping leads to the negation of previous associations; the buttocks take on new personas. Two women artists whose depiction of the figure advanced my premise regarding the norm of imperfection are Jenny Saville and Lisa Yuskavage. They have developed unique perspectives on translating the female form. In works like *Branded* and *Plan*, Jenny Saville presents the viewer with unusual viewpoints of the figure; it is a vast expanse

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of flesh spreading out like a balloon and inhabiting a claustrophobic picture plane. Jenny Saville stated in an interview: the contour lines on the subject's body refer to the markings traced onto plastic surgery patients prior to liposuction. (Sylvester, 2005) Saville had an interest in the phenomenon of plastic surgery; a practice that is intended to "beautify" or "normalize" people according to a socially constructed myth of how a person should look. (Holmes, 2003) Her focus in the early 90s, the paintings of large women, is reminiscent of Lucien Freud paintings of 'big Sue'. Like her predecessor, Saville pays minute detail to the rendering of flesh. The purples, blues and greens integrated into the peach flesh tones express the discomfort of one's own growing skin. There is an overall droopiness to the form caused by Father Time's slight-of-hand trick with gravity. In an interview with David Sylvester in 1994 for the Independent, Saville spoke about beauty.

*'I don't think there is anything wrong with beauty. It's just what women think is beautiful can be different. And there can be a beauty in individualism. If there is a wart or a scar, this can be beautiful, in a sense, when you paint it. It's part of your identity, Individual things are seeping out, leaking out.'* (Sylvester, 1994)

Paying homage to Saville and her predecessor Lucien Freud, I painted *Undesired* in 2010. The manner in which each describes the breast form is reiterated in my depiction of a large globular mass of boobs dangling from a tiny woman's torso. Due to the high placement of the image on the picture plane, there is an emphasis on the forces of gravity. The discoloration across the breast forms imparts a sense of tightly stretched bruised skin. As I worked on these artworks, the comparative studies in my sketchbook-- of the artists I researched-- grew important. I juxtaposed Saville's works to Yuskavage in my notations. While Jenny Saville dealt with body image in her artwork via those early paintings of large women, Lisa Yuskavage painted hypersexualized women whose fetishized body parts were the images from a sixteen year olds' wet dream. Upon initial consideration, Yuskavage's rendering of breasts and buttocks seemed pseudo-Playboy flawless, but upon re-evaluating works like *Pie Face* I found the perfection to be a scary exaggeration of the bunny playmate. The women in Yuskavage's world have the honey-blonde hair and tan lines of a twenty year old despite sporting pendulous breasts of a fifty year old. In some works there is a noticeable discrepancy between the proportion of the breasts, waist and buttocks. The viewer becomes booby trapped in a Jessica Rabbit fantasy. The hypersexuality of her works with languid women touching their own bodies with self-awareness titillates audiences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century much like Boucher's erotic 'bottom' paintings aroused imaginations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Lisa-Lisa and Jenny Jam* was painted with deference to Lisa Yuskavage and Jenny Saville. Appropriating breasts from their paintings, I juxtapose the verticality of Yuskavage's breasts with the horizontal spread of Saville's breasts. The massive forms dominate the space and stand on their own as expressive shapes. The preceding analysis touches upon just some of the artists who served as an inspiration for this series of artworks.

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Research of the female image in Western art history served as a catalyst for my own self-reflection. I began to retrospectively look at my approach to depicting the human figure; how did it evolve and transform over the last two decades? The thematic focus on feminism, gender issues and body image remains constant regardless of the variable modes I utilize to address the human form. My referential sources for the human figure are multifarious; I have employed images from books/magazines, hired models, and even used my own body. Sometimes the only available model is oneself. Modeling for myself eventually led to working as a model for art classes and individual artists; I would continue to model, out of circumstantial need and convenience, for ten years. I am not the only artist who has incorporated her own form into artistic production; Jenny Saville used her own body in paintings. In an interview with David Sylvester about the painting *Plan*, she said the following:

*"The head is mine. In fact, this painting is really based on me. I use me all the time because it's really reliable, you're there all the time. I like the idea of using yourself because it takes you into the work. I don't like the idea of just being the person looking. I want to be the person. Because women have been so involved in being the subject-object, it's quite important to take that on board and not be just the person looking and examining. You're the artist but you're also the model. I want it to be a consistent exchange all the time."*

The consequence of working as an artist's model, I developed an acute sensitivity about my body image and its resultant reflection on canvas, paper, or in a camera's lens. Two works I produced in 2010 are *24* and *44*. They present images of my breasts at ages twenty-four and forty-four, respectively. The breasts are placed in the picture plane within a grid. The breasts from age 24 are round and firm, yet cropped in unusual ways. In some, the manner in which they are trimmed gives the breasts a silicone-appearance, yet in others the forms appear misshapen as if the result of partial mastectomies. Despite being shown in pairs, the breasts are disconnected. The painting titled *44* presents to the viewer crowded, dangling and bulbous breasts. They are not shown in pairs, yet they communicate a sense of familiarity due to overlapping and proximity. The breasts bustle, hustle and jostle each other for space. The breasts are shown out of context; the appendages are isolated on a white ground. Does this visual arrangement impact any fetish relationships and sexual thoughts associated with breasts? Does the composition accentuate their sexuality or provide for an open-ended interpretation of form? What influence does cultural norms have on body image? The paintings, *24* and *44*, depict imperfect body parts. Like my predecessors who worked with the figure, I am painting the imperfect human form.

As I created this series of artworks, I contemplated the significance of these body parts-- the breasts and the buttocks-- in our society. What was their relationship to body image? In my sketchbook, my initial hastily written notation as a possible idea for a series of works reads *T & A in art history*. There was a certain amount of facetiousness in my hand-written comment; I was indeed utilizing a patriarchal colloquialism loaded with cultural history.

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*The body – what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend the body- is a medium of culture. The body, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. (Bordo, 1993)*

The breast has taken on different meanings and roles: sacred, domestic, political and erotic. The theme of the sacred breast is reflected in *Beautiful Artemis of Ephesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> century and Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Madonna del Latte* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In Lorenzetti's painting the breast is cupped by the Christ child in both hands; he turns to look at the viewer. There is no sense of eroticism since the Madonna is fully clothed and the breast appears to be unnaturally attached to her body. The scene suggests holiness attached to a maternal act. Veneration of the breast, in early religions and Christianity, correlates to its symbolism as the substance of life and representation of fertility. (Yalom, 1997) In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the breast manifests as a domestic character in the Netherlands. 'The true mother was the one who nursed her babe. More than any other factor, maternal nursing was – the hallmark of a pious mother.' (Yalom, 1997) The subject of the domestic breast is evidenced in the paintings of Pieter de Hooch such as *Nursing Mother*. This painting is a quiet reflective moment of domesticity in a middle-class home. We peek into a clean and well-ordered household to see a woman performing a motherly service: breast-feeding. The domestic sphere of the home was the principle location of nurturing, instruction, and character-building. The breast was considered the fount of religious and moral edification. (Yalom, 1997) It was the good mother's role to supervise the upbringing of respectable, patriotic young men and women for the country. The view of the breast as a political icon begins to develop in the 18th century in the French court of Louis XV. (Yalom, 1997) The breast makes a prominent appearance in Eugene Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People*. Liberty strides forward over fallen men; her robust figure holds high the French flag. We are viewing the bosomy incarnation of the French Republic, named Marianne, who reveals her breasts to inspire political feelings of nationalism. (Yalom, 1997) The action of uncovering the breast conveys daring, dynamism, and defiance; likewise, these are the same type of adjectives a country in conflict desires to reflect in political propaganda. The breast becomes a symbol for freedom. Notwithstanding the lofty allusions associated with the breast, the sexual nature of the form cannot be ignored. The eroticization of the breast occurred during the Renaissance; it is at this time certain conventions of offering up the breasts for the intent of male arousal and pleasure occurred in Western civilization. (Yalom, 1997) Laws regulating attire, the fashion set by the kings' courts, and the increase of literature which paid homage to the erotic breast are all societal factors which coincide at this time to promote an eroticization of the breast. (Yalom, 1997) Artworks like Raphael's *La Fornarina* exhibit titillating imagery: a woman with exposed breasts. In *La Fornarina*, the central

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subject shows a fairly blatant suggestion of sexual possibility through her hand gestures. Her right hand lightly lifts up her left breast; the index finger rests below the nipple. (Naves, 2005) *La Fornarina* shows a woman comfortable in her own body, moreover, her blandishment of the breasts coaxes the male viewer to look twice. The eroticization of the breast would lead to its continued revelation in subsequent literature, graphic arts, and fine art works. Alongside the breast, the buttocks also convey socio-cultural symbolism. The ideal *derrière* varies according to geographic location, cultural preferences and time period. Symbolic connotations of the buttocks relate back to fertility, eroticization and aesthetics. The visual appearance of a woman's backside is thought to be a sign of her youth and fertility. The growing roundness of her buttocks indicates she has reached the age of maturity to bear children; wide bottoms and hips would be the desirable figurative attributes for procreation. Fertility is conveyed in Paleolithic statues. Fetishization of the buttocks occurred as a result of its proximity to the genitals and its historic and evolutionary associations with female fecundity. (Taylor, 2008) *Hustle and Cuss* incorporates various buttocks from art history juxtaposed with my own. The bottoms in my painting are cumuliform and shapely but they do not convey fertility; instead they bear witness to the aesthetics of beauty and ugliness. Frontal views, three-quarters views, and profiles of the buttocks are shown in a loose grid formation. While one or two of the bottoms presented are 'ideal', overall these forms are rotund with dimpled flesh and crevices of cellulite. In a couple of them, the physique of the buttock evolves into phallic imagery while others turn and twist in space. Are these the fat-bottomed girls that make the rockin' world go round? (May, 1978) In 2011, I created paintings which allude to the work *Sleep* by Gustave Courbert. His painting displays the engagement of intertwined forms with an emphasis on the woman's backside. In *Got to Move* and *Hit'em Up Style*, buttocks are paired up in oddly configured compositions. *Hit'em Up Style* shows two bottoms topside; their abstracted forms morph into priapic shapes. Diagonally stacked bottoms in *Got To Move* convey the sensuality of moving flesh. Both paintings emphasize the gluteal cleft through contrasting value and textures. These works may be perceived as demonstrations of the imperfect form since the strange compositional arrangements produce ugly visualizations of the buttocks; however, there is a sense of beauty in the multi-layered depiction of flesh. The aesthetics of the buttock and the erotic nature of it go hand-in-hand. The term *steatopygia* describes the full-figured buttocks and thighs of African women; an especially prominent genetic characteristic of the Khoi-Khoi peoples of Southern Africa. (Taylor, 2008) The inflammatory term, *steatopygia*, was utilized by Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to make negative comments about the bodies of African women and subsequently attach words like ugly and deviant to it. In the same century, an African slave named Sarah Baartman became an unwilling freak show entertainer because of her large buttocks. (Taylor, 2008) In a case of fashion mimicking African racial characteristics, the bustle was added to the skirt of the European woman's dress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This addition to the

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back of the dress created the illusion of a bigger *derrière*. In today's society an ample backside has positive connotations. Robert Crumb has paid homage to the full-figured bottom in his comic books with such characters as Lenore Goldberg and the Devil Girl. She strolls through his *Hup* series, the Devil Girl, carrying a substantial butt on massive thighs, set upon rock-hard calves. (The Guardian, 2005) Popular media has fueled our obsession with bodacious bottoms through the fashionable thong, the corrective Brazilian butt lift and the decorative tramp-stamp tattoo. The breast and the buttocks are laden with sociohistorical references in tandem with cultural meanings both in the past and today.

*'Good butts, good asses, ooh they are different, they are everything. You want to stick it out, make it visible everywhere you go, particularly on the street, "Hi, baby." We begin practicing when we're young, like driving lessons, backing them up, turning them around, shining them up (tss!) for display.'* (Enslar, *Carmen* 27) Good buttocks and breasts have been on display in art history since the beginning of time; the three graces have been backing them up, twisting it around and shining them up for exhibition. Good is not synonymous with perfect. Today, forms of mass media still continue to give voice to this topic. The supposedly defective female form is discussed in contemporary literary works like *The Good Body* by Eve Enslar and *Real Women Have Curves* by Josefina Lopez. Television has embraced the subject of female body image, however superficially, with shows like *Ugly Betty* and *Drop Dead Diva*. Recent art exhibitions, from *Disparities & Deformations: Our Grotesque* curated by Robert Storr to *Corpus: Works by Jason Horowitz*, have explored the correlation of beauty/ugliness in the human figure. What is it about the imperfect material of a woman's body that appeals to us? Like many of the artists I was inspired by and have mentioned in my presentation, I have a strong interest in the rendering of flesh. The depiction of flesh is not merely about accuracy for color and form, but it is about having an eye for the bump -- and the lump-- and the chunk of blemished flesh. The rendering of flesh is beautiful when it captures the multi-layered web of an irregular surface; the human figure is not a homogeneity of pink. The shapes in the blemished figure hold more visceral intrigue than ideal heart-shaped bottoms or perky full breasts. I have approached the rendering of shapes in my artwork with an honest eye like my predecessors. The series of works I produced display shapes which droop uncompromisingly, spread with the advancement of age and twist into folds of melancholy skin. The flawed physical body of woman is bombarded with issues surrounding the sociocultural practice of promoting the unblemished body type. Within this modern ideology there are plastic possibilities offered to reach that elusive state of beauty. Art history reflects perspectives on reality; there are no statues of women with breast reductions or liposuction bottoms in paintings. The imperfections seen in the female figure across art history support the notion of a counter-tradition in which what we truly desire to see is ourselves and, we are imperfect creatures.

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