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The Reconciliation of Fatness and Beauty in Art:  
An Activist Manifesto

Jamie Zeffery

Art 525: Senior Art History Seminar

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Art, at its essence, is a projection of how we see the world or how we want the world to see us. When creating artistic depictions of women, we tend to sweep all the “ugly” under the proverbial rug, choosing instead to create images that are "beautiful" or pleasing to the eye by using conventional methods such as creating harmony through symmetry. Anything outside of these methods is not considered as aesthetically pleasing, and because of this, representations of beauty and fatness in art are often believed to be mutually exclusive. The standard of beauty, as it has been historically represented in society and in art, has taught us that fat is ugly. Rather than embrace fatness, like we do beauty, we are taught instead to fear and ridicule the subject. Fatness is rarely portrayed and those portrayals are considered obscene or funny, rarely, if ever, beautiful. On the other hand, if pleasure *is* represented by a fat image, it is considered as a fetish. Thus it is very hard for some to find beauty in an image of fatness because of the negative connotations associated with it. Artists who choose to delineate from orthodox methods of determining and enjoying beauty are attempting to bring a conversation of change to the forefront by making images that reconcile both fatness and beauty. These artists are celebrating their own unique perceptions of beauty by showing the general population that it is possible to consider fatness beautiful.

It may seem counterintuitive to use the word “fat,” in an essay that is promoting body acceptance, because it holds an inordinate amount of power and is stigmatized in our culture. “Fat” is a derogatory term, often used as a weapon, wielded against fat people to marginalize them and encourage differentiation. Nonetheless, I specifically chose to use “fat” instead of “corpulent,” “over-weight,” “plus-size”, or “curvy” because I am taking back its power and using it on my own terms. Fat people exist - it is a reality. Yet, somehow we (and yes, I’m including myself in this) are still marginalized for being

ourselves. Such discrimination has been witnessed and endured throughout history in the form of racism, sexism, and homophobia. People have been treated less-than for simply being who they are - for simply *existing*. The only difference is that size-ism is the last accepted form of discrimination and therefore the next hurdle to overcome in the name of equality in our society. The idea that there is beauty to be found in anti-proportional aesthetics is a lesson which has never been taught, especially to younger generations. This is a lesson that is needed now, more than ever, due to the amount of hatred filling the channels of social media.

Substantia Jones, photographer and founder of the body-positive campaign known as the Adipositivity Project, has created numerous images that exemplify my point. Among the many images she has captured, Jones's 2010 photograph for her project represents the reconciliation of both fatness and beauty. She makes images containing fat women and men in a state of happiness and serenity in an effort to widen the standards of beauty. What is most notable about her body of work is that her images are deliberately devoid of negativity. Her subjects do not appear insecure or ashamed of their bodies. They are not self-deprecating. They are only representing their fat selves, at peace and content with their beauty. Jones is depicting real life and real bodies, rather than creating an unattainable image that we are all made to believe we should strive for. By putting these images out there she is showing all women, and men for that matter, that there is no "right" way to look.

Jones's method is not necessarily a new way of depicting women. Perhaps the most famous historical example in the arts is Peter Paul Rubens's paintings of plump women, well-known as "Rubenesque women." But I would like to clarify that the kind of women I am talking about are not plump, *they are fat*, and there is a difference –

particularly more folds of skin and the appearance of cellulite. In paintings such as *Venus in the Mirror* (1614), I believe that Rubens's intent was to depict fleshy women in a manner that was pleasing to the eye. He does this successfully within the generally accepted techniques for portraying beautiful women. He portrays them with smooth, delicate skin and graceful curves. They are tall and long-limbed, with readily visible muscles. Jones's representation of the fat woman in her 2010 photograph partially embodies two of these characteristics. Her figure has curves, the gracefulness of which could be debated, and she also has smooth, delicate skin; however, she is not without cellulite. The figure is on the cusp of being identified as beautiful, but she is just shy of attaining it. This "close, but no cigar" attitude is all too familiar. I have heard the comment, "you're pretty... for a big girl" more times than I can count, and it is the best back-handed compliment that has ever been doled out to me. The implication is that I have potential for beauty, but until I am no longer "big" I will never be truly beautiful. It seems that once you pass a certain size, beauty is not an option.

The word "fat" is often used with malicious intent: so much so that when anything is designated as "fat," it is immediately perceived as bad. The way that fatness is visually portrayed often coincides with this- sometimes it is represented as slovenly or repulsive, and other times, it is depicted as humorous, although funny at the subjects' expense. So, how is Jones's image considered as beautiful? In essence, she is depicting fatness, but for once it is without veils of negativity. There is no over-whelming characteristic indicating how her depiction ought to be interpreted. The photograph of her figure is not fat and funny nor fat and grotesque. Her figure is *just* fat, which makes room for the presence of beauty as well. The foundation for beauty has been established by the formal characteristics of Jones's image. The lighting is soft and pleasing. The subject's face

remains outside the frame - the presence of which could further instigate negative judgment. She appears comfortable and at ease. She is appealing in part because she is in proportion to the frame; she exists in her own space. There is nothing with which to compare her. Jones's figurative image is the embodiment of a landscape - a bodyscape. As you follow the contours of her body and its graceful curves, the eye picks up patterns and rhythms, from the hills and valleys that flow from her breast to her hip. Jones's body evokes sensuality. Beauty could be found here, if given the chance to overcome the stigma that fatness evokes.

Many depictions of bigger women are not portrayed in the same facet as that of thinner bodies, further denying them the chance to be enjoyed on their own. Whether it is the artists' intent to further perpetuate negative connotations or the subconscious projections of the viewer, there are many reasons why fatness has not been given a chance to be beautiful. However, in order to support the argument that fatness can be characterized as such, we must first know what beauty is and why it is so important to us. We must also understand what fat and ugly means, and how they are perceived. Beauty can be defined as something that is pleasing, which will inevitably vary from person to person. But there is a general consensus in the Western psyche that when it comes to women, there are certain traits that are inherent to our constructions of beauty. Today in Western culture, the women whose images we are inundated with on a daily basis are believed to embody these traits. Beautiful women are tall and slender, with smooth, cellulite-free skin. They are generally of a fairer complexion with long, glossy hair. Their faces are symmetrical, and free of wrinkles or acne. Their bodies are proportional, with ample breasts, a flat belly, and a round behind. Any woman who does not possess these traits has a distinct disadvantage.

Biologically speaking, the point of life is to procreate. We are genetically wired to do so, and our success is measured by our reproduction rates that can be traced historically to Darwin's theory of natural selection.<sup>1</sup> In 1864, sociologist Herbert Spencer used the phrase "survival of the fittest" as the social counterpart to Darwin's theory.<sup>2</sup> Here "fittest" is not used literally, but rather is defined by our reproductive success. Following this line of reason, if women are not visually and therefore physically attractive to a male, we cannot leave a living legacy, which ultimately means we have no value in the heteronormative order. Our worth is seemingly entirely dependent upon whether or not men want us. Art critic John Berger elaborates on this concept in *Ways of Seeing* asserting that "ultimately how she appears to men is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another."<sup>3</sup> If a man subscribes to the typical standards of beauty, then it would stand to reason that any woman who is not "beautiful" is not desirable and is therefore not valuable. Feeling worthless and ugly can wreak havoc on anyone's self-confidence, but especially a fat woman who deals with an onslaught of negativity daily. Being beautiful and sexy is possible for any body type. Making sure that this message is heard is important, if for no other reason than improving one's emotional well-being. Yet ugliness seems to be par for the course when it comes to women's perceptions of themselves.

Traditionally, ugliness is thought to be the absence or opposite of beauty. But if

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, "Natural Selection" in *On the Origin of Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000)

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology* (NY: D.Appleton and Company, 1898).444.

<sup>3</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting, 1973).46.

we subscribe to Mark Cousins's definition, then ugliness is not aesthetic at all.

Rather, ugliness may be defined as a reaction to the susceptible collapse in meaning between the other and the self. One's recoil to that which separates the self and the other, as defined by the philosopher Julia Kristeva, aligns with Cousins's idea that the abject is "radically excluded and," as Kristeva notes, "draws [me] toward the place where meaning collapses."<sup>4</sup> Within the Western cultural framework, it is a kind of excess and an obstacle that ultimately stands in the way of desire. Since fatness is not normally depicted as desirable, it is easy to see how fatness and ugliness are inextricably linked. Refusing to acquiesce to the cultural pressures of conformity, fat people deviated from idealized beauty. There is no place for us; we are outliers and therefore ugly. Not all ugliness is fat, but all fatness is ugly. Today, fat people are thought to be unlovable and "un-fuckable" and are therefore shunned. This is a departure from how fatness was once received. As Rubens demonstrates, fatness was historically associated with power, happiness, and pleasure. There was a time when being bigger was a sign of wealth. Kings were painted with plump, rosy cheeks and bulging bellies to show just how much they could afford to eat and not perform manual labor. Of course, they were a minority at the time. Now that more people can afford food, being skinny and food-deprived is all the rage. Currently, fatness is still associated with abundance, even excess. But, there is still a perceived pleasure: the pure joy of being able to do anything and eat whatever one wants. The idea that there is pleasure to be had as a fat person is maddening to a perpetually dieting woman. Fat is no longer a good thing – self-sacrifice is.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Cousins, "The Ugly" in *Beauty: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Dave Beech (London: Whitechapel, 2009). 145-151.

The depiction of a nude woman is not taboo, but this particular image by Jones could be perceived as perverse simply because she is nude *and* fat. What is worse, if you find pleasure in the depiction you are labeled as having a fetish, which is routinely kept behind closed doors for fear of the inevitable judgment. While conducting research for this essay I was carrying around images, books, and articles everywhere I went, hoping to catch a spare moment to read them. While at work one day, my coworker caught a glimpse of a painting by the late Lucian Freud titled *Benefits Supervisor Resting* (1994) depicting a woman named Sue Tilley reclining in the nude on a floral print couch. My coworker did a double take and giggled a bit to herself. As I gave her the side-eye, I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt and reminded myself that I see nude bodies every day in art, which may not be the case in her field of study.

She then said, “well, that is *quite* a picture.” A bit irked, I replied, “It’s a painting, but yes, it is... And it just sold for over 50 million dollars.”

Jaw gaping, eyes bulging, she exclaimed, “well, *someone* sure has a fetish!”

Whether or not the buyer has a fetish is none of my business, but it sure made me think. Why is it that this image invokes that kind of instant, judgmental reaction? I took a long look at her, trying to make sense of it all. I flipped back through my mental Rolodex and tried to recall details about my coworker to better understand her reaction. This woman is somewhat slender with an ample bottom half. She is by no means fat. I know she is perpetually on a diet. She has mentioned she has competitions with her mother to see who can lose the most weight. She once (somewhat proudly) shared a story about how she ridiculed her sister for being over-weight to the degree that her sister developed an eating disorder. While I suppose I should not be too surprised at her reaction, she is not the only one who feels this way since this is in fact very common.

Normally when we see a depiction of a woman, especially a nude woman, she is likely considered beautiful, even erotic, and without question she is subjected to the Male Gaze as introduced by Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.<sup>5</sup> But, when that same woman is over-weight (and therefore ugly) does the depiction avert the Male Gaze? It would seem so, since finding erotic pleasure in such a woman is considered gross or obscene. If a heterosexual male does not avert his Gaze toward the fat female nude, is it a hidden gaze that nobody else can see? He who finds pleasure is ostracized and ridiculed for having a fetish. Many women perpetuate this attitude because they feel devalued for not being the object of a man's desire.

The mental stigma of fatness as repulsion has long been ingrained in our society, which is why Freud's painting is so important. His painting revealed a different audience reception. Freud did not choose a stereotypically beautiful woman to depict but at the same time, he did not appear to flatter or embellish the body of his subject. The beauty in this painting comes from the way he treated the fat body on the canvas. Freud luxuriated in her flesh, layering on paint, resulting in luscious textures. He depicted the fat subject with a beauty that he had already found in the fat figure, despite the fact that those like my coworker think the buyer of this painting has a fetish. The eye of the beholder who bought the \$56,165,000 painting proposes a different kind of taste. Continuing to create images of nude fat women allows us to conceptualize them in a different context. It is an important step in subverting negative perceptions of fatness.

Plus-size model Tess Holliday, formerly Tess Munster, is the newest addition to MILK modeling agency in the United Kingdom. Signed in January of 2015, Holliday is

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen*, Vol.16, No.3 (1975).

the first woman of her size, a UK 22, to work as a professional model at a modeling agency. She was also the cover girl of the June 1, 2015 issue of *People Magazine*. But she has received a huge amount of backlash for being a poor role model. Despite those who lash out against her, spewing hateful rhetoric on social media, Holliday is promoting self-acceptance and self-love of the body. She even started her own hashtag movement: *#effyourbeautystandards*. I do not agree that she is a poor example for younger generations. Perhaps she is not a “fit” woman, but she is happy and healthy and loved. Our society values fitness more than happiness. Regardless of naysayers, Holliday is a key warrior in this body revolution that I am promoting. She is affecting change by continually putting her image out there as a fat woman who can also be viewed as beautiful. But what makes her beautiful is the confidence that demonstrates how *she* believes herself to be beautiful.

Mrs. Holliday is not the only one who finds herself beautiful. She would not have much of a career if she did. We are beginning to see a shift in the mainstream media. And although the focus has not yet moved away from rail-thin models, the lens is widening, permitting more representations of beauty into the slot. This shift can be seen with notoriously fat actress Gabourey Sidibe, who played a part in a sex scene in the November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015 episode of the popular show *Empire*. The fat-shaming backlash was instant, however this is a win, no matter how mad some may be. A fat woman had a sex scene on prime time TV with a man who was *not* fat, but rather fit. I applaud the makers of *Empire* and Ms. Sidibe herself because this artistic choice was truly an act of bravery, the likes of which we do not see often enough, although they have certainly opened the doors for more.

The famous nineteenth-century French writer Stendhal once said that “beauty is nothing other than the promise of happiness.”<sup>6</sup> Beauty has power attached to it because being beautiful means we, as women, are valued and therefore have purpose. Being valued implies that we will be happy. But beyond reproduction, beauty is powerful because it is something that is possessed by a minority of women. If everyone looked the same, these traits would no longer be important. The irksome part is that these traits we find so beautiful are genetic happenstance (barring plastic surgery). It is simply the luck of the draw that women are endowed with such aesthetic qualities as large breasts and slender thighs. Yet we bow down to this artificial power, despite the gamble of genetics. We are taught to hate ourselves for who we are, for characteristics that in some respects are beyond our control. Instead we place physical attributes that are few and far between on a pedestal. We fear anything that may keep us from being beautiful and desirable, which would be ugliness and by extension, fatness. Because it is feared, it is hated. Allowing someone else to be fat is seemingly as bad as being fat ourselves. Beyond that, if a fat woman dared to be fat *and* happy, one ought to prepare for battle. This act of happiness somehow devalues all the work, suffering, and sacrifice other women have made to fit the mold. It is this imbalance of body currency that instills competition between women.

Make no mistake, it is most certainly a competition. But it does not have to be that way. It is the perception we have of ourselves in comparison to other women that feeds this rivalry. However, if we understand and accept that beauty can be found in many places, we need not fight for one idea of happiness. The success of positive body-

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<sup>6</sup> Stendhal, “La beauté n’est que la promesse du bonheur” (Marie-Henri Beyle), *De L’Amour XVII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 58–59.

image relies on society taking a stand against body-bias and instead promoting happiness, love, and health, whatever shape or form that might be. Yes, it is survival of the fittest, but the struggle to survive is not what it used to. The woman in Jones's photograph may not have the perfect body, but she is happy with it and content enough to show it to the world. This act of bravery is laudable - not the act of posing nude, but the act of loving herself.

As human beings we have the power to alter our own perceptions of the world based on experience. Artists have the unique power of influence, especially of the perception of others' through the-visual portrayals of the diverse selves in the world. Since fatness is purportedly more acceptable in the art world than in the real world, art can be a beneficial and powerful tool for creating change. If we decide for ourselves what is beautiful, rather than conforming to social norms, we can work towards equality. If we depict fat as just fat, *sans* negative characteristics, we can end the perpetuation of negative connotations regarding fatness and give others a fighting chance at being accepted. We can be free from the bonds and structures of beauty - the bonds that determine whether or not *we* are beautiful. Once people see more representations of beauty, fatness can become legitimized and popularized. It is not easy to sway the opinion of someone who subscribes to the mainstream ideals of beauty, but leading by example is the best way to do it. We cannot stop others from filling the channels of social media with unattainable standards of beauty but we can at least contribute some attainable ones to balance them out. Ultimately we cannot take away the power beauty itself holds, but we can continue the conversation about widening the standards of beauty.