ABSTRACT

Reflections of Difference

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May 2013

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"Reflections of Difference" is an installation intended to explore and express the issues of women dealing with their body image. To create this thesis I have incorporated scientific data, personal interviews with my sister, influences by other artists, and my own personal insights. The artwork created for this thesis is meant to bring about awareness of body dissatisfaction regardless of weight status, leading to a conversation and the positive effects of healing that this dialog could bring.

REFLECTIONS OF DIFFERENCE

A Report of Creative Thesis

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East Carolina University

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Sally L. Sutton

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DEDICATION

To my sister Barbara Jane Debenham, for your brave honesty, patience, understanding, and support of this thesis, and most importantly throughout my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my husband, Edward Colmery Sutton Jr., for his patience and support, and for helping me to bring this thesis to fruition. I am grateful to my friends that have listened to me and given me calming words, and the faculty of the East Carolina University's School of Art and Design for challenging me and believing in me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES viii

INTRODUCTION 1

OBESITY AND BODY IMAGE DISSTISFACTION 2

Prevalence of obesity 2

Causes of obesity 2

Consequences of obesity 3

Body image dissatisfaction 5

Summary 5

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES 7

Summary 10

REFLECTIONS OF DIFFERENCE 11

ATTAINING THE IDEAL 13

Want 15

Perception 18

Illusion 21

Acceptance? 24

CONVERSATION 30

CONCLUSION 33

REFERENCES 34

LIST OF PLATES

1. Attaining the Ideal (Front view of the installation 12

2. Attaining the Ideal: Childhood 14

3. Attaining the Ideal: Want (Barbara) 16

4. Attaining the Ideal: Want (Twiggy) 16

5. Attaining the Ideal: Want (Barbara) 16

6. Attaining the Ideal: Want (Sally) 17

7. Attaining the Ideal: Want (Twiggy) 17

8. Attaining the Ideal: Want (Sally) 17

9. Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Barbara) 19

10. Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Barbara) 19

11. Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Barbara) 19

12. Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Sally) 20

13. Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Sally) 20

14. Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Sally) 20

15. Attaining the Ideal: Illusion (Barbara) 22

16. Attaining the Ideal: Illusion (Barbara) 22

17. Attaining the Ideal: Illusion (Barbara) 22

18. Attaining the Ideal: Illusion (Sally) 23

19. Attaining the Ideal: Illusion (Sally) 23

20. Attaining the Ideal: Illusion (Sally) 23

21. Attaining the Ideal: Acceptance? (Barbara) 25

22. Attaining the Ideal: Acceptance? (Sally) 26

23. Attaining the Ideal: Acceptance? 28

24. Attaining the Ideal: Acceptance? 29

25. Conversation 31

INTRODUCTION

This thesis entitled *Reflections of Difference* explores the emotional and psychological struggles of two sisters, dealing with body image issues, united in a common goal to start a conversation about weight status and body image acceptance. My sister Barbara has been obese most of her life, and has suffered the stigmatization and discrimination that often accompanies obesity. In comparison, I have a distorted view of my body even though I am a normal weight. In my work, I use a visual narrative to reveal personal insights into my perception of our respective body shapes, through a multimedia installation.

I gathered data relating to the social, psychological, and physiological effects on women who are either overweight or unhappy with their body image. Obese individuals reported receiving inappropriate comments from doctors, social avoidance and mistreatment, depression, self-esteem issues and job discrimination. (1, 2) Statistics also show that 80% of women feel frustration and dissatisfaction with their body image. (3) I have drawn upon a scientific foundation and the application of painting and mixed media processes to visually depict body image dissatisfaction among women using my sister and myself as the focus.

OBESITY AND BODY IMAGE DISSATISFACTION

This section introduces scientific statistics, which is not exhaustive, but provides a foundation that supports this thesis. Topics discussed are: prevalence of obesity, causes of obesity, consequences of obesity, and body image dissatisfaction.

Prevalence of obesity

Is obesity a problem? On an international scale, the three countries with the highest prevalence of obesity are the United States (31%), Mexico (24%), and the United Kingdom (22%). (4) A study done by the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) showed that the United States prevalence of overweight and obese adults has increased from 56% in 1988 to a staggering 68% in 2008. (4) When examining the prevalence of overweight individuals, the rates vary by sex and race, where African Americans are more overweight than Caucasians. (4) Further, women have a higher obesity rate compared to men. (5)

Overweight is defined as when an individual has a high weight-to-height ratio, and is also explained by excessive fat present in the body. If a person is obese, a high percentage of body weight is from fat. The definition of obesity in adults is often translated through the use of the body mass index (BMI) and is calculated by taking the individual's body weight divided by the square of his or her height. Overweight is defined as a BMI greater than or equal to 25.0 kg/m^2, and an adult is considered obese when their BMI is greater than or equal to 30.0 kg/m^2. (5)

Causes of obesity

Obesity is a complex problem and is caused by both genetic and non-genetic factors. Non-genetic factors that people can control include energy balance, physical inactivity, eating high fat foods and overconsumption of food. We can choose to increase our activity, and choose

what and how much food we put into our bodies. Harder to control factors are genetics and the effects of medications. (6)

While there are many different physiological mechanisms (genetics, neurological, hormonal) influencing a person's weight gain and weight loss, three of the main hormonal players included leptin, ghrelin, and cholecystokinin. Leptin is a hormone that controls both appetite and energy expenditure and can help with long-term weight regulation. (7) Obese people have higher leptin levels than non-obese. (7) Ghrelin is a hormone that is secreted by the stomach and duodenum and impacts hunger levels. When ghrelin levels are high a person becomes hungry. (7) Weight loss has been shown to increase ghrelin, so studies examining how to suppress ghrelin levels are important for obesity control. Cholecystokinin is a protein secreted by the duodenum and impacts gastric emptying, so high levels of cholecystokinin will result in reduced food intake. (7)

Are there genes responsible for obesity? The Human Genome Project addresses this in part. The 13-year project was completed in 2003 and identified every gene in humans. The research has found 430 genes and obese gene markers or chromosomes related to obesity; however, the relationship between genes and obesity is still being understood. (6) Obesity is a complex disease, which develops as a result of factors that an individual can control, but also because of genetic predisposition, and the influence of the environment on a person's physiology.

Consequences of obesity

Obesity is positively related with mortality, as BMI increases the risk for mortality also increases. (4) Many chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, depression, and stroke are positively related with obesity. (4) Obesity is not only

positively related with physiological consequences, but is also associated with economic, social, and psychological consequences.

The negative stigma associated with being overweight or obese can encompass many aspects of a person's life. "Of the many conditions that are stigmatized in this culture including racial membership and physical handicaps, it has been suggested that the stigma associated with being overweight or obese may be the most debilitating and harmful." (1) This quote compares the detrimental effects of this stigma on a person in relation to other types of stigmas.

Alienation by coworkers, employers, friends, strangers, and spouses can be very distressful. Often an overweight or obese person is characterized as ugly, stupid, mean, sloppy, lazy, dishonest, worried, sad, self-indulgent, unlikable, and emotionally impaired. A study done by Brownell and Puhl (2) on bias and discrimination against obese people, found that negative attitudes toward obese people are prevalent in health care employees, teachers and parents. In addition, the employment potential of an obese person (especially women) is negatively affected where 33% of obese individuals reported experiencing job discrimination. This discrimination, in turn negatively affects their socioeconomic status. (1)

In a study focusing on weight stigmatization, 98%, experienced nasty comments from family. (1) Further, 97%, encountered physical barriers, such as, chairs being too small. Inappropriate comments from doctors were experienced by 89.1% of the respondents, and 55.8% of the group experienced avoidance and exclusion from social and family groups. (1) Obese individuals who experience stigmatization reported having depression, body image, self-esteem, and other psychiatric symptoms, in the mild to moderate clinical range. In addition, women reported more body image dissatisfaction and depression than men. (1)

Body image dissatisfaction

Obese individuals are not the only ones who could have body image dissatisfaction. It has been estimated that 80% of women are dissatisfied with their bodies. (3) The degree of body dissatisfaction is often measured as the discrepancy or difference between self-perceived real and ideal body size. (8) Women who have a normal body weight can have a distorted view of their image (often larger than reality). It is as if you are seeing your reflection in a carnival mirror, you see parts of your body pulled and stretched to create distortion.

A study supports that women experience more body dissatisfaction than do men. (8) With the barrage of ultra-thin images in our culture and media it is difficult for women to feel that their bodies are acceptable in our society. A majority of women will never meet the cultural ideal of the ultra-thin shape because only 2% of American women are as thin as the fashion models. (3) The average American woman's height is 5'4" and weighs 140 pounds whereas the average American model is 5'11" and weighs 117 pounds. (3) There is frustration with many women because of the emphasis on achieving the ideal, an overly thin and toned shape, is not obtainable. (9). As a result, there is a preoccupation with what women see as the ideal aesthetic, and this leads to inappropriate weight loss practices such as excessive dieting and exercise, and plastic surgery. (9)

Summary

Sixty percent of adults living in the United States are either overweight or obese. (4) Obesity is caused by many factors (controllable and uncontrollable) working together and resulting in significant health consequences. Not only are there medical consequences related with obesity, but also obese individuals experience discrimination in settings that range from the medical community, the family environment, and the work environment. Obesity has been

related with body dissatisfaction especially among women; however, body dissatisfaction has also been reported among normal weight women. This body dissatisfaction can lead to unsafe weight loss practices regardless of the person's weight status.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Due to the complexity of obesity it was important to include scientific information to help lay the foundation for the direction of the work exhibited. It is equally important to place my work within the context of contemporary art and a larger global picture. There are numerous artists whose work focuses on women and their identities related to societal pressures regarding body image.

Renowned American painter Alice Neel is known for her portraits of family and friends. Of particular interest to me is the painfully honest self-portrait that she painted when she was 80 years old. (10) In this portrait, she took ownership of a devalued and desexualized body by painting herself naked, flabby, and frail. (See Figure 1) (10)

Fig. 1: Alice Neel Self Portrait (1980) Oil on canvas 53 ¼" x 39 ¾" National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (10)

Her self-portrait represented a rebellion against the male-dominated art world. Jeremy Lewison in *Alice Neel Painted Truths* writes: "Very few precedents for naked female self-portraits exist". (10) Alice Neel was truly an innovator, and not afraid to take on challenges and speak her mind.

Jenny Saville is an internationally known artist who uses her own body and others' to call attention to social and cultural expectations relating to the "ideal" body. Saville's work often uses a larger-than-life scale, and positions bodies so that the naked subject confronts the viewer. One example of this style is shown in Saville's work entitled *Branded*, (See Figure 2) where she uses her own body as a model but exaggerates the size and imperfection to show us flesh that is branded with words such as 'supportive' and 'delicate'. (11)

Fig 2: Jenny Saville *Branded* (1992) Oil and mixed media on canvas 82 ½" x 70 ½" (11)

New Zealand artist Robyn George's work focuses on issues related to societal pressures on women to achieve an unrealistic body weight. In her thesis entitled *On being formed: a self-reflexive view of the subjective body,* she "investigates and contests appearance politics as they relate to the overweight, aging, female body." (12) In her work *Adiposity Audit* (See Figure 3), George kept track of her weight gains and losses for ten years and converted that information into a sculpture installation. The installation consisted of a room of white rectangular boxes with yellow and white lard shapes sitting on each of the boxes representing the pounds of fat she lost or gained. (12)

Fig. 3: Robyn George, *Adiposity audit 2000-2010*, Photographs of performance installation (February 7, 2011) Photographer: Jane Wilcox (12)

North Carolina artist Rachel Herrick's work focuses on the stigma, discrimination, and dehumanization of overweight people. In her thesis titled *The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS),* she created a pseudo animal, "a creature that lived outside human culture, but was of concern to humans," and called this creature the "North American Obeast" (See Figure 4). (13) This body of work related to her "exasperation with the identity [she] felt being culturally ascribed to [her] as a fat woman." (13)

Both Herrick and George chose to create an installation using sculpted forms to portray their concept. They also presented their work as a timeline: Herrick with the evolving "Obeast" in an anthropological format, and George demonstrating her weight loss over a period of time using three-dimensional symbolism of her weight loss.

Fig 4: Rachel Herrick's *The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS*), (2011) Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland Maine (13)

Summary

This section references contemporary and influential artists that have a kinship with my thesis concept of women and body image dissatisfaction. These artists challenge society's view of women and body image on a global scale, and question the perception between different bodies and cultural biased.

REFLECTIONS OF DIFFERENCE

My early research and artwork was devoted exclusively to Barbara and obesity. But through my research I became aware of an artist, Rachael Herrick, whose work explored the issues of obesity and fat bias. I arranged an interview to discuss her work. Through our discussion Rachael Herrick helped me to realize that even though my sister and I share a common bond, we have very different body types in which we identify. My sister Barbara struggles with her own weight issues, but Rachael Herrick forced me to realize that I also have my own body image dissatisfaction. She suggested that I acknowledge the existence of my own fat bias, and try to get in touch with my own body issues. (R. Herrick, MFA, oral communication, January 2012) This meeting became a pivotal point and changed the direction of my thesis to include myself.

Reflections of Difference is comprised of two pieces that are intended to create a space for a dialog centered on the struggles associated with body dissatisfaction. *Attaining the Ideal* is an installation that is comprised of sixteen panels of silk organza hung vertically from the ceiling. Printed on each fabric panel is a life-size image of Barbara and/or myself. This piece represents a timeline of events, influences, and our perceived body image over a span of 50 years. (See PLATE 1) The second piece, *Conversation* is a painting. It is a two-panel painting of Barbara and myself in a conversation. Accompanying this piece is an audio of a conversation between Barbara and myself talking about obesity, body image, and perceptions.

PLATE 1: *Attaining the Ideal*, Front View of the Installation, 22’ x 32’

ATTAINING THE IDEAL

Upon entering the installation, the viewer will see an image of Barbara and myself as young girls. (See PLATE 2) This photo represents the beginning of our journey. We were carefree children and did not think about the shape or size of our bodies. Barbara and I talked about this as a time when we were in our "child bodies," and later in adolescence, how we both longed for the days when we never thought about how we looked. We had a very simple agenda for our life: to just play and have fun with no worries.

Once the viewer moves beyond the first panel, he or she enters a space that contains the rest of the fabric panels. (See PLATE 1) This area is divided into four sections in the following order: Want, Perception, Illusion, and Acceptance. In each section, there are separate images of Barbara and myself presented across the space from each other as if we are viewing each other from across the room. The left side of the space holds the sections that relate to me (Sally) and the right side of the space is dedicated to imagery about Barbara.

Plate 2: *Attaining the Ideal: Childhood,* 84” x 40”,
Mixed Media on Silk

Want

The first section titled *Want* consists of four silk panels. Printed on one of these panels is a drawing of Barbara as a teenager. Printed on the opposing silk panel is a drawing of myself as a slightly younger teenager. Imposed on top of the drawing of Barbara there is a photograph of her face as a teen. Similarly, I have imposed a drawn portrait of myself as a teenager on my panel. As Alice Neel presented herself naked in her Self-Portrait, (10) I chose to present my sister and myself naked in order to expose our perceived flaws with an honest depiction of our bodies. Duplicate images of the '60s fashion icon Twiggy are hung behind each of the full body portraits. As the viewer looks through the front layer to the second panels, the images merge as viewers see Barbara's and my naked body with Twiggy boldly showing through. (See PLATES 3-8) As teenagers, both Barbara and I thought that the "ideal" female body should look like Twiggy's body and we both tried our best to attain the goal of looking like her.

In the 1960s to early '70s, Barbara and I wanted to be able to wear the latest fashions. I was slim and Barbara was overweight, both of our bodies were not as "boyish" as what fashion required at the time. We both wanted to fit in and were caught up in striving for perfection. We even used to carry around calorie counting books. Taking a severe approach, I would only consume a total of 1,000 calories per day. This was a very extreme diet for a teen that stood 5'6" and weighed around 100 pounds. This behavior reflected the culture, place, and time my sister and I were living in. We wanted to meet cultural expectations, which proved unhealthy, resulting in anxiety, and a feeling of failure for not meeting standards of "ideal" beauty.

PLATE 3: *Attaining the Ideal: Want* (Barbara) (2 merged panels) 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on silk

PLATE 4: *Attaining the Ideal: Want* (Twiggy) 84” x 40”, Photo on silk (15)

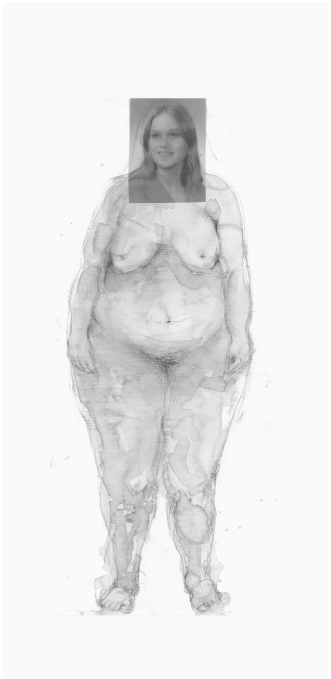

PLATE 5: *Attaining the Ideal: Want* (Barbara), 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

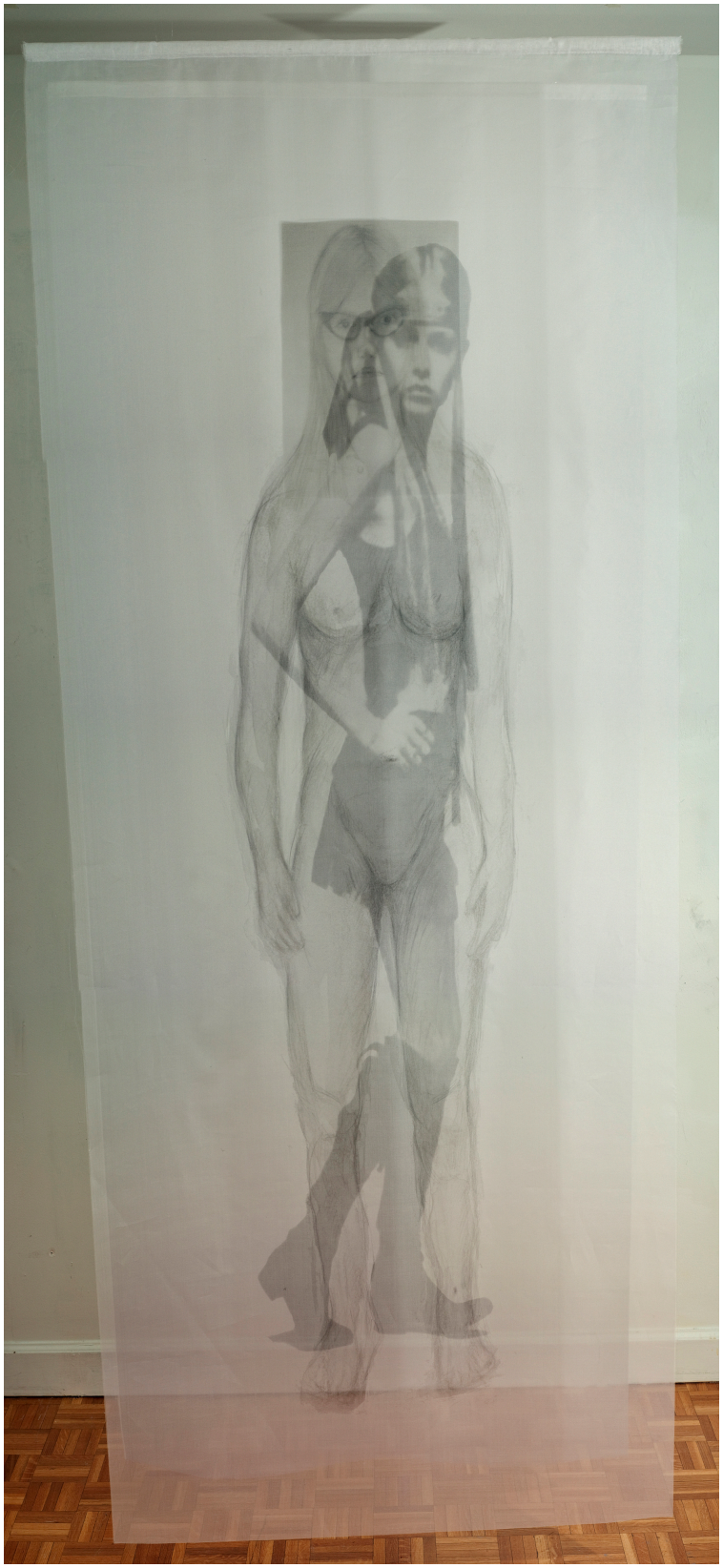

PLATE 6: *Attaining the Ideal: Want* (Sally) (2 merged panels),
84" x 40", Mixed Media on Silk

PLATE 7: *Attaining the Ideal: Want*
(Twiggy), 84"x40", Photo on silk (15)

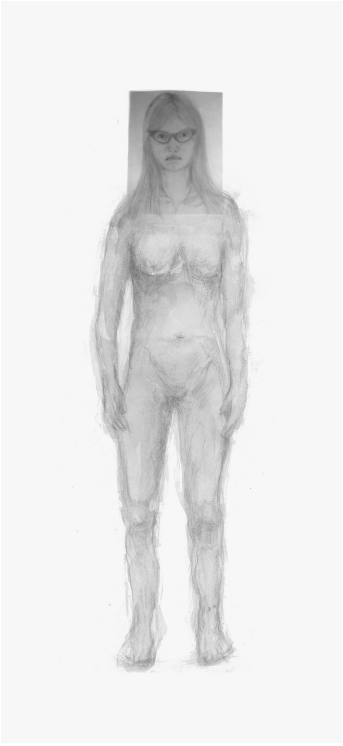

PLATE 8: Attaining the Ideal: Want (Sally),
84"x40", Mixed Media on silk

Perception

In the *Perception* section, printed on the panel of Barbara is a drawing of her as a young adult, and again she is naked. (See PLATE 10) Printed on a second panel, suspended directly behind the first, is the same drawing of Barbara, now with a hippo head attached. (See PLATE 11) When Barbara and I were young we watched Disney's *Fantasia* and she commented that she felt like one of the dancing hippos that looked ridiculous in a tutu. (16) She carried this perception of herself into adulthood. The two panels represent Barbara internalizing the self-image of a hippo-like body providing the viewer an image of her perception. (See PLATES 9,10 & 11)

On the panel representing myself, is a drawing of my naked body as a young adult. (See Plate 13) Printed on the second panel, seen through the first, is a drawing of myself naked that represents my distorted view of my body. (See PLATE 12 & 14) This panel shows that I view parts of my body: breasts, belly, and legs as being inaccurately perceived as larger and misshapen.

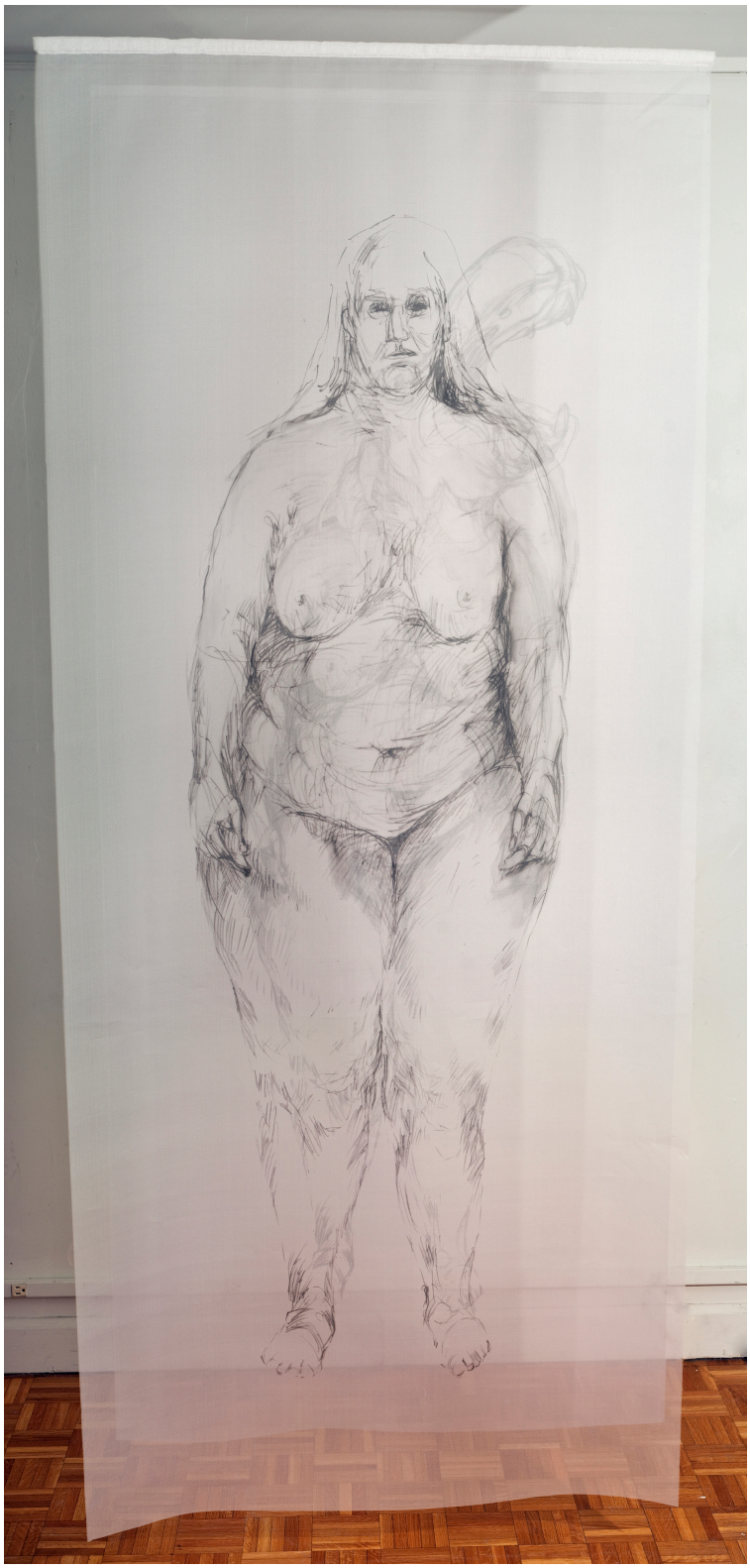

PLATE 9: Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Barbara) (2 merged panels), 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on silk

PLATE 10: Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Barbara), 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

Plate 11: Attaining the Ideal: Perception (Barbara), 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

PLATE 12: Perception (Sally) (2 merged silk panels), 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

PLATE 13: Perception,(Sally), 84” x 40” , mixed media on Silk

PLATE 14: Perception (Sally), 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

Illusion

The fabric panels for Barbara in the *Illusion* section begin with a drawing of Barbara's body when she was a methamphetamine or "crank" addict, and had lost a lot of weight. Imposed on top of the drawing is a photographic portrait of Barbara taken during the time she was addicted to drugs. (See PLATE 16) In this photograph, Barbara appears happy and healthy. The truth is seen in the panel behind where we see a drawing of a meth pipe and a silhouette of a large woman's body. (See PLATE 17) The illusion is of a happy, healthy woman, but the reality was that she was a drug addict, her dependence on food replaced by methamphetamine. She continued to use "crank" for 12 years and after a couple of years she gained 70 pounds and returned to a size 20. Her body became immune to the effects of the methamphetamine. Her appetite returned, and she was eating more and still doing methamphetamine to keep from withdrawal, but it was not keeping her thin any more. It was a vicious cycle. (See PLATE 15)

On the front panel representing myself is a drawing of my body at a healthy weight. (See PLATE 19) The second panel is a drawing of my body with the word "exercise" obsessively written. (See PLATE 20) When looking through the two panels the words are not clearly seen until closer inspection. (See PLATE 18) As an adult, I was still not happy with my body and would exercise to a point of extreme exhaustion in hopes of making myself thinner and to achieve perfection. Exercise became an addiction for me.

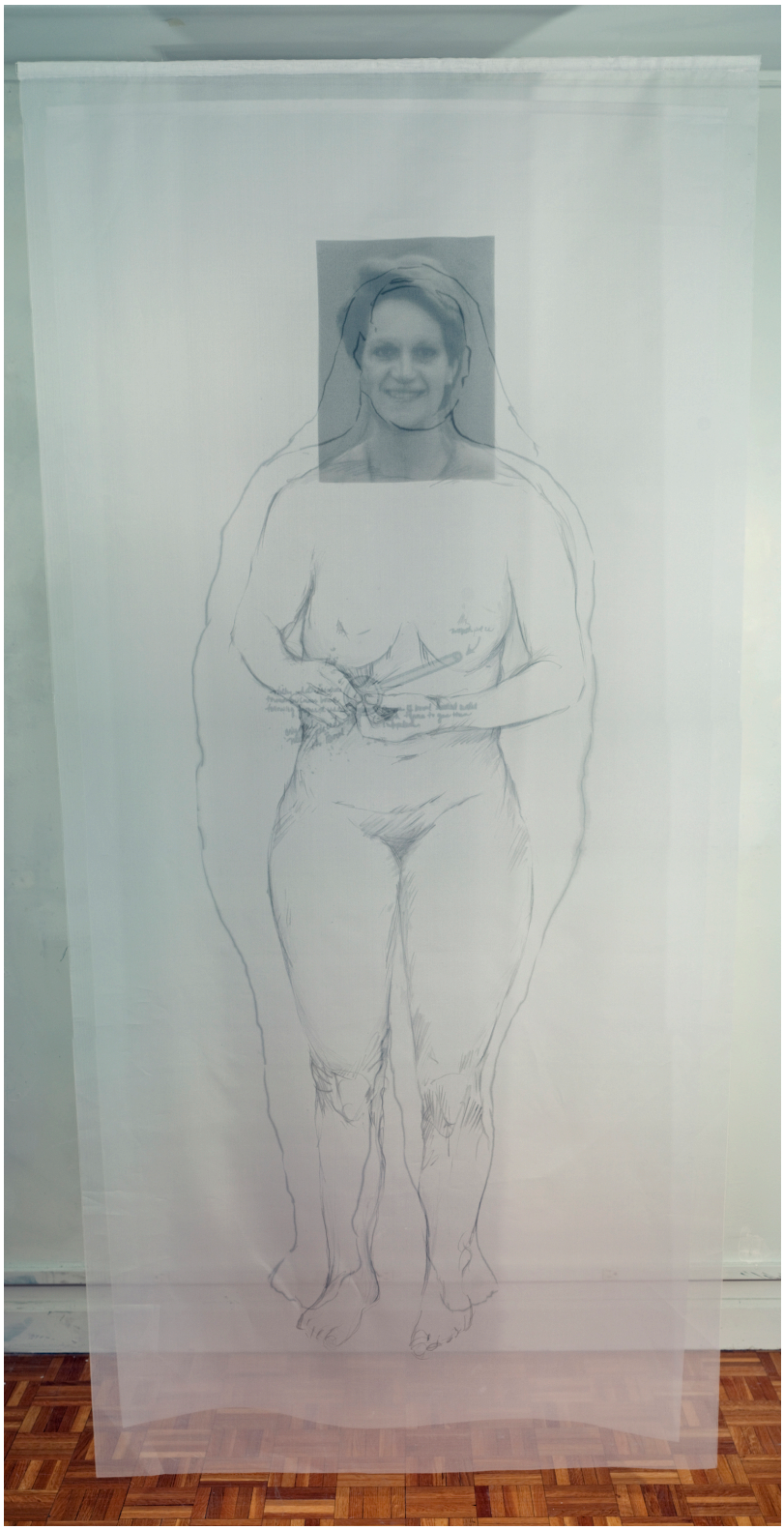

PLATE 15: Illusion (Barbara) (2 merged panels), 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

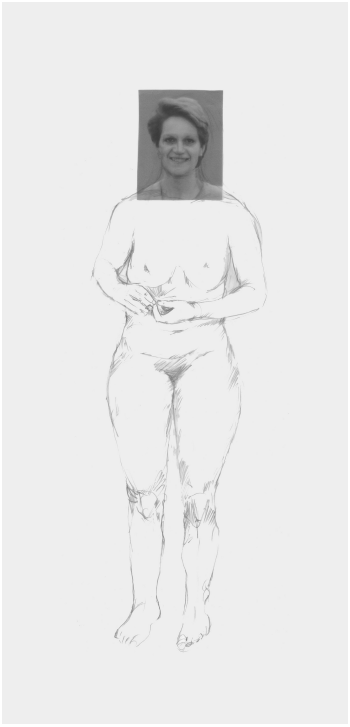

PLATE 16: Illusion (Barbara) 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

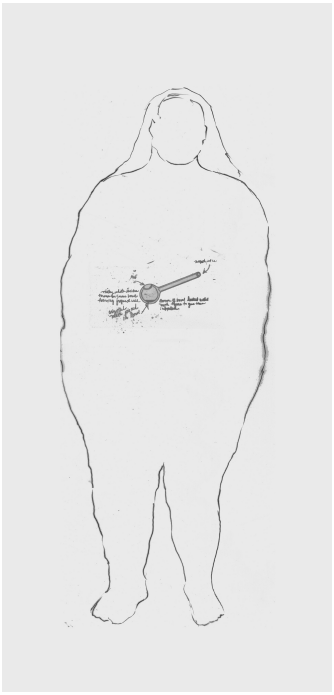

PLATE 17: Illusion (Barbara) , 84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

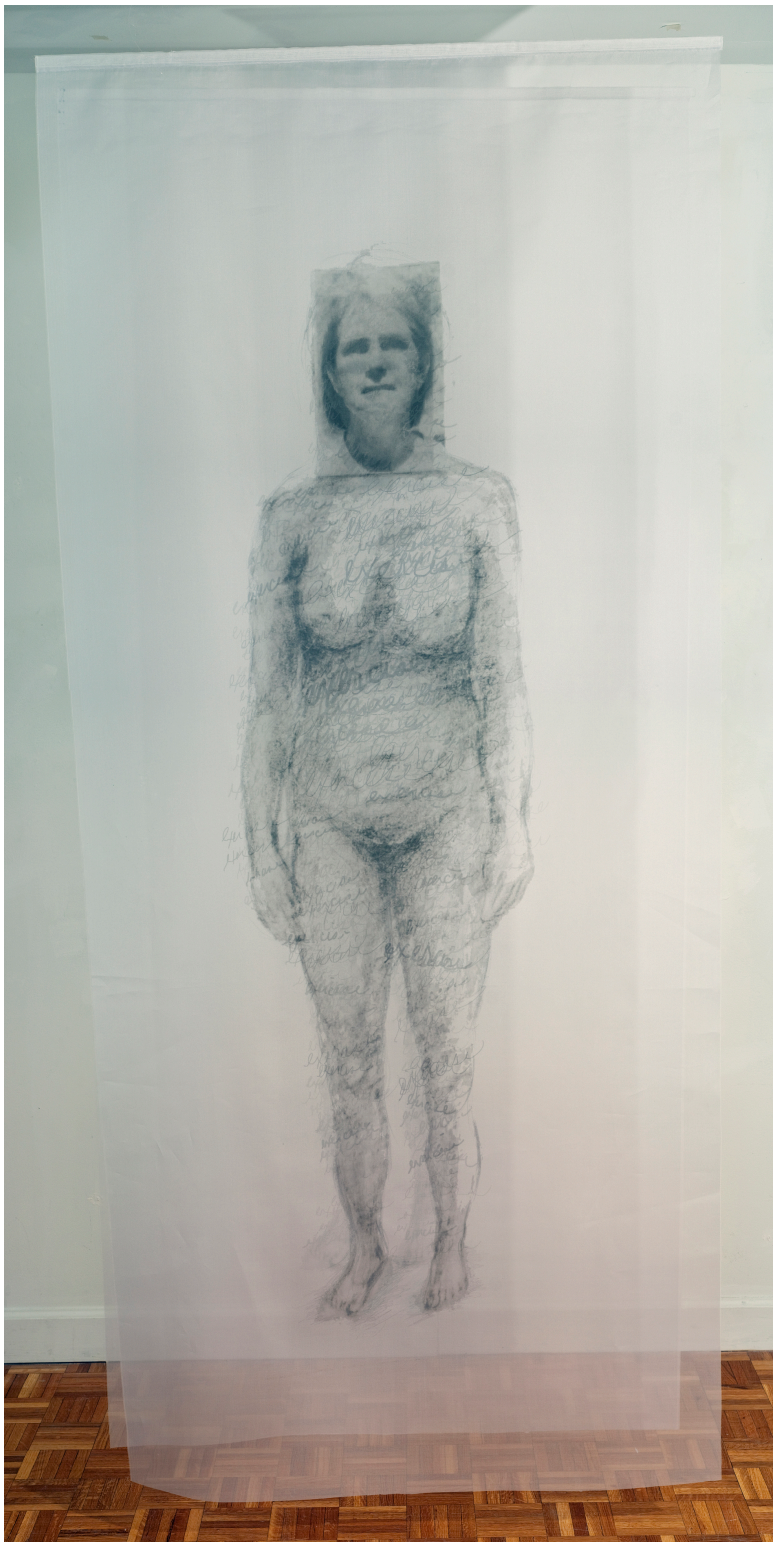

PLATE 18: Illusion (Sally) (2 merged panels), 84” x 40”, mixed media on silk,

PLATE 19: Illusion (Sally) ,84” x 40”, Mixed Media on Silk

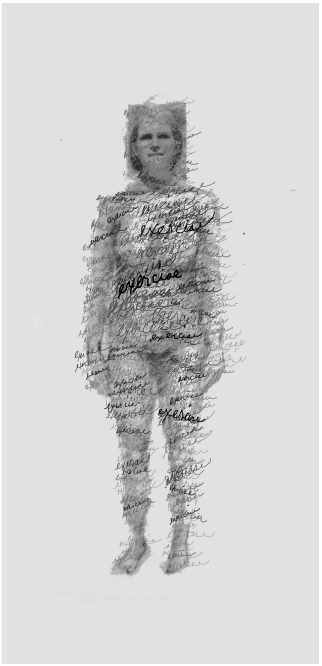

PLATE 20: Illusion (Sally) , 84” x 40” Mixed Media on Silk

Acceptance?

In the panel that represents Barbara in the *Acceptance?* section, I have drawn her naked body and imposed a recent photograph on top of her face. (See PLATE 21) The expression on her face is calm. This photograph is cropped from the double portrait of Barbara and myself used in the final panel of the installation. (See PLATE 23)

The single panel that represents me is a drawing of the distorted view I have of my body. (See PLATE 22) I still have a fairly slim body, but I am not happy with my imperfections. I have drawn my body with large breasts and exaggerated the size of my belly. I have imposed a recent photograph of me cropped from the same double portrait in the final panel. (See PLATE 23) I appear happy in this photo, yet it is a façade. I am still not ready to give up my youth and want to obtain that "ideal" body from an earlier point in time. In comparison to me, Barbara is more accepting of her body image at this stage in her life. Perhaps the reason is related to our collaboration and discussions for this thesis, or perhaps it is related to her more accepting personality. Whatever the reason, Barbara is happier and more content with herself.

PLATE 21: Acceptance? (Barbara), 84” x 40”, Mixed media on silk

Plate 22: Acceptance? (Sally), 84” x 40”, mixed media on silk

Included in the section *Acceptance?* is a third panel of Barbara and myself that aligns with the *Childhood* panel (See PLATE 2) in the front of the installation. (See PLATE 23) This final silk panel is printed with the color photograph of Barbara and me sitting on her porch in Bakersfield, California after our "conversation". (See page 41) This printed panel also has a paper panel that hangs directly behind the translucent silk panel. (See PLATE 24) When printing on silk organza a removable paper backing with a waxy surface on one side is adhered to the fabric to give it the stability to go through the printer. All of the silk organza panels had this paper adhered to it. I saved the imprinted color image because the ink on it started dripping when I hung it up to dry, resulting in another color version that was a little distorted and had a painterly effect. For me, this paper panel represents Barbara and I growing old, and the distortion is intended to suggest my still unresolved image perception.

PLATE 23: *Acceptance?* 84” x 40”, Photo on Silk

PLATE 24: Acceptance?, (2 merged panels) , 84” x 40”, Photo on silk and paper

CONVERSATION

To complement the time line portrayed in *Attaining the Ideal*, I used a recorded conversation between Barbara and myself. In this recording we discuss how we see ourselves, how we see each other, and also how we believe others see us. This 3-hour compilation of recorded dialogue is played in part on a seven-minute loop during the exhibition. The aural aspect gives the viewer an insight into our relationship. The painting entitled *Conversation* is a visual representation of our conversation using a traditional gestural oil painting technique on canvas.

Conversation is a 6' x 10' diptych consisting of two 6' x 5' canvases. On one canvas I painted my sister Barbara seated in her favorite chair, on the other canvas I painted myself seated in a chair that is comfortable for me. (See PLATE 25) We are facing each other engaged in a conversation. I am leaning forward as if to listen and contemplate what Barbara has to say, and she is looking slightly away from me as if she were considering what I'm saying with some reticence. Barbara's chair is larger and comfortable for her size. Her demeanor is quiet and reserved. She is an obese woman, so her canvas is filled with her body and chair, her foot spilling out into my canvas suggesting an intimacy between us. This intimacy represents our connection as two people that share and discuss life.

PLATE 25: *Conversation,* 120*"* x 72", Oil on canvas

I used a process of building up the surface on the canvas with layers of paint. Over many months, I contemplated my conversation about body image with Barbara. As the layers changed, the image shifted. Through this process my thoughts changed, giving me time to better understand my relationship with Barbara. I now see myself as the aggressive party in the conversation and that I held some anger towards her. The anger was related to my frustration with her not changing her body. I could not understand why she would not work hard to be slim and healthy. I was judging her and may have had the intention of changing her. Yet, she may be the one that has a healthier self-acceptance, where I am still struggling with the way I see myself. My thesis work helped me to accept and realize my own fat bias and to reflect on my own prejudices about overweight people, and to acknowledge my extreme self-criticism.

CONCLUSION

Body image has become a major issue in our culture. Women are sometimes pushed to extremes to attain the "ideal" body, yet the truth is over 60% of the population is overweight or obese. I began this body of work determined to be an advocate for Barbara and bring attention to her struggles with obesity in a world of people that judge and stereotype overweight women. But the research forced me to reevaluate my intentions and to acknowledge the existence of my own fat bias, as well as the need to address my own body issues. Through my investigation into the scientific aspects of obesity, the recorded conversations with Barbara, and the resulting body of work, I obtained an awareness that has helped me to see things in a more accepting way. My result is *Reflections of Difference.*

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