

IN MY BODY

by

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As a fat woman navigating the complexities of modern society, I am constantly confronted with societal expectations and perceptions of beauty. With this body of work, I wanted to explore the idea of how I feel about myself living in a fat body and how that has affected my mental state. This thesis explores the emotional terrain of living as a fat woman, focusing on the intersection of societal beauty standards, size, and identity. Through a series of ten ceramic sculptures depicting figures in various emotional states, I delve into the complexities of body image and self-perception. Through this body of work, I hope to encourage people to rethink their preconceived notions about body image and encourage greater acceptance of different body types.

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by

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Introduction

In the society that we live in, there are idealized images of beauty that are perpetuated by media, fashion, and pop culture. These idealized images often marginalize people who do not conform to these standards. As a fat woman navigating the complexities of societal beauty norms, I confront the dichotomy between how others see me and how I see myself. It was important to me to capture both the good and the bad feelings because that is the reality. My goal was not to glamorize but to show the truth that I and many other women feel.

I am looking at ways in which social beauty standards intersect with size and identity, shaping the perceptions and experiences of fat women. Through a series of ten ceramic sculptures depicting nude figures in various emotional states, I offer a visual exploration of the internal landscape of the fat female body. While I was making this body of work, I started by asking myself a few questions that helped inform my work. What does it feel like to live in a fat body? How do I even know how I feel about my own body without the influence of societal ideals? Am I frustrated with myself for not conforming to these standards or am I frustrated with the standards? Central to this inquiry is the juxtaposition between external societal expectations and internal self-perception.

Social Beauty Standards

The beauty standards established by society can be narrow and unrealistic, often favoring certain physical attributes while excluding those who do not fit the ideal mold. Unfortunately, fat women experience discrimination, stigma, and prejudice based on their size. The media, fashion industry, advertising, and even healthcare systems actively promote thinness as the sole standard for beauty and health, amplifying the message. As a result, fat women are often subject to hurtful comments, ridicule, and stereotyping that reinforce harmful prejudices, portraying them as lacking self-control, lazy, unattractive, or unhealthy.

This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem among women who do not conform to these ideals. The fashion industry has also historically neglected the needs and preferences of larger-sized people, offering limited options in clothing styles and sizes for women. This lack of representation can contribute to feelings of invisibility and exclusion, which leads to frustration.

As the world becomes increasingly aware of the need for inclusivity and diversity, we see a rise in movements that challenge traditional beauty standards. Body positivity and fat acceptance are two movements that celebrate all body types, including those of larger women. They seek to counteract negative attitudes towards weight, promote self-love and acceptance, and demand equal representation for people of all sizes. I want to emphasize that my thesis is not solely focused on promoting body positivity, but rather body neutrality. This is a concept that encourages people to detach their self-worth and identity from their physical appearance. Instead of striving to love or hate their body, those practicing body neutrality aim to adopt a neutral and accepting attitude towards themselves. It is important to remember that it is okay to have mixed

feelings about your body; nobody feels positive all the time. Body positivity can be problematic in that it is often fragile and based on social media. Seeing other women celebrate their bodies on social media can be inspiring, but it is important to remember that everyone's journey is different.



Plate 1: *Bat Wings*, Ceramic 2023

Bat Wings

For this piece, I wanted to create something less serious. It is essential that not just the flaws are being pointed out in such a negative way. I wanted there to be something more positive and playful. The sculpture is of a figure standing on one leg with her other leg bent and resting on her knee. She has her arms up and out while her hands are squishing her cheeks together. I liked the idea of showing off these fat arms in a light that is not negative but neutral. This position shows her strength; in this stance, she is strong enough to hold herself up, but also, the way that she is squishing her cheeks together makes it a little bit less serious. This piece is lighthearted while still being very vulnerable. It is important to me to depict a fat woman who seems more comfortable in her own body.

Within this exhibition, most of the emotions and feelings around a fat body are pessimistic. We have standards of beauty that we feel like we need to fall within, but it is important to feel comfortable within your own body no matter what size you are. The impact of not feeling comfortable in your own skin can be profound, affecting mental health and overall well-being. I have been exploring the concept of self-acceptance and being comfortable in your body for a while now trying to figure out where I find those things. Finding spaces where I feel comfortable, like my apartment, studio, or car, has made me realize that, more often than not, I feel out of place in most public settings. When I am alone, no one can judge me but me. Being around people I know will not judge my body also helps, as well as spending time listening to other fat people talking about fat acceptance movements and how they find comfort and confidence. Through this sculpture, I aim to convey the message of finding comfort in vulnerability, focusing on showcasing arms and other areas that are often deemed undesirable.



Plate 2: *Sometimes It's Okay*, Ceramic 2024

Sometimes It's Okay

I continue with the idea of feeling comfortable in this sculpture. It depicts a nude figure lying down on her side with her eyes closed and her hands tucked under her head. The figure exudes a sense of serenity, conveying the idea of self-acceptance and comfort within one's own body. My personal feelings toward my own body are complex and multifaceted. It is important to acknowledge that these feelings can coexist without promoting either body positivity or negativity. It is essential to find a neutral ground when examining and evaluating one's own body. Taking a step back from your own biases and realizing that maybe you only feel such negativity about your body because you have been told over and over that it is bad. The pressure

to conform to societal ideals of beauty can lead to self-loathing. Striving for neutrality and acceptance is a difficult but important journey.

On social media, it is difficult to reconcile those feelings of seeing a bunch of thin women preach body positivity. As someone in a larger body, am I also supposed to be a part of this movement or do these ideas even apply to me? On one hand, it is inspiring to see women promoting self-love and acceptance regardless of their size. However, it can be so disheartening to see some influencers or celebrities, like Remi Bader and Kelly Osbourne, who were once celebrated for their size, now promoting weight loss drugs and turning against the very movement they once championed.

Fatphobia

Recently, I have noticed several public figures who previously had larger bodies taking weight loss medications such as Ozempic or Mounjaro. This trend has also extended to influencers in the fat and plus-size community. Some of these individuals have now begun to criticize those who are overweight despite previously preaching body positivity. While I appreciate that body weight is personal, it is difficult to reconcile the inconsistency between their original message of self-love and their current behavior.

The commodification of weight loss and the diet industry's relentless pursuit of profit only exacerbate feelings of frustration. The constant pressure to conform through restrictive diets, grueling exercise regimens, and invasive procedures perpetuates a cycle of self-doubt and self-loathing. Despite the promise of change and acceptance, I and many women find ourselves trapped in a perpetual cycle of striving for an unattainable ideal, only to be met with disappointment.



Plate 3: *Why Am I Like This?* Ceramic 2023

Why Am I Like This?

Navigating the complexities of society can often make frustration an unwelcome companion. I felt angry at my body after trying to shop for clothes. Trying to find clothes that I like as a fat person is so frustratingly difficult. Being unable to go to the mall or store and find clothes in my size or style is disheartening. Even shopping online is difficult. This is not just a problem that I have; so many women have difficulty finding clothes that they fit in. In the United States, sizes 14 and above are considered plus size, meaning you must shop in a different size

range than the typical 'straight sizes' (Nguyen). At least 68% of women in the US are size 14 or above as of a 2016 study; however, only 19% of women's clothing sold in 2021 were plus-sized (Waldow).



Plate 4: *Why Am I Like This? Detail*, Ceramic 2023

Everyone can also relate to the experience of looking at yourself in the mirror and pinching your flesh. Unhappy with the way your body looks. That is what I was trying to capture in this piece. It is not just about clothes not fitting, but a frustration with the lack of options just because I am in a bigger body. I am frustrated that there are these unobtainable body ideals that I know I will simply never achieve. My body is quite literally someone's worst nightmare.

Fat women face constant scrutiny and judgment in various aspects of life. Whether it be in casual encounters in public spaces, professional settings, or even within personal relationships, the specter of fatphobia looms large. This constant scrutiny takes the form of comments, stares, and microaggressions and serves as a constant reminder of one's perceived deviation from the norm. Mainstream depictions often reduce fat women to comedic relief, sidekicks, or cautionary tales, denying them the full spectrum of humanity and complexity afforded to their thinner counterparts. The absence of relatable role models and positive portrayals further perpetuates feelings of invisibility and inadequacy. Frustration also arises from the systemic barriers and discrimination that fat women encounter in various domains of life. The pervasive belief that fatness is synonymous with laziness, lack of discipline, or poor health serves as a justification for unequal treatment. It denies fat women the agency to define their own experiences and worth.



Plate 5: *A Cry of Anger, A Scream of Frustration*, Ceramic 2023

A Cry of Anger, A Scream of Frustration

This piece explores my frustration with my body image due to societal pressures and expectations, as well as my own internal fatphobia. Despite efforts to change my appearance, I feel stuck and disappointed in myself. This internalized fatphobia can be a source of frustration, as can the pressure placed on me by society to conform to standards of beauty. I am angry at

society for trying to tell me what I should look like and how I should feel about myself. Angry that I feel not good enough or unworthy just because of how my body looks. I am angry that it is difficult to find clothes that fit. There is also so much shame involved when you are fat. Shame in the way that your body looks to other people, shame around eating, shame in taking up space. Being fat is seen as a personal failing that can only be redeemed by thinness.

Body Image

Body image is the perception, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs people have about their own bodies. It encompasses how people see themselves when they look in the mirror, how they feel about their body size, shape, and weight, and the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction they experience regarding their physical appearance. Outside influences often shape an individual's perception of beauty, attractiveness, and worthiness and can lead to unrealistic or unattainable ideals that contribute to body dissatisfaction.

Our society's emphasis on thinness can have damaging effects on people's body image. This can contribute to the development of disordered eating behaviors, such as restrictive dieting or binge eating. External influences do not solely determine body image; it is also shaped by internal factors like self-esteem, self-acceptance, and mental health. People with poor body image can really struggle with low self-esteem, negative self-talk, and a heightened sense of self-consciousness. This can impact their relationships, social interactions, and overall well-being.



Plate 6: *Are We Really Connected?* Ceramic 2023

Are We Really Connected?

"Are We Really Connected?" is about the feeling of your inside and outside self. The face you show to the world vs the one you keep to yourself. I find that for a long time, my two selves have been disconnected, and only recently have they come together. I started this piece with the idea of having a real body vs an emotional body or an internal vs an external body. Similar to how you may feel about yourself vs how you physically look. This piece depicts one standing figure who is clutching her left hand to her chest and extending a pointed hand to the second

figure. The figure has her head turned and is gazing at the other figure. The second figure is in an almost fetal position, curled towards the first figure with her hands tucked into her chest. This is a depiction of the outside perspective looking at the inside perspective. The first figure on the left represents the real or outside figure. The first figure wishes that she could be more like herself on the outside, which is why she is gazing at the second figure and pointing. The second figure on the right is representative of the inside or emotional body. The second figure feels protective of herself and her emotions and feels like it is not necessarily safe to be fully herself on the outside. She is protecting herself from outside judgment and scrutiny. This is something that everyone can relate to, wanting to protect their feelings and ideas from other people but also wanting to be authentic to yourself. The emotional body represents how I feel when I am alone with myself, and the real body represents how I feel when I am around people. When I am alone, I feel more comfortable in my own skin. I am able to feel a stronger connection to my true self, but I also feel very protective of being my true self.

This duo is also a representation of the feeling of being hyper-visible and invisible. Hypervisibility is when certain people or groups are excessively scrutinized, objectified, or stereotyped based on visible characteristics such as race, gender, or body size (Gailey). In this case, hypervisibility often manifests as scrutiny and judgment as fat bodies become the subject of public discourse and cultural obsession. Despite being hyper-visible in specific contexts, fat women are also rendered invisible in others. Mainstream media and the fashion industry frequently exclude or marginalize fat women, celebrating thinness as the ideal while rarely representing fat bodies in positive or empowering ways. Reading and hearing about others' experiences of being fat has been such an interesting experience; I feel like I relate so much, and

I somehow never realized that no one around me talks about being fat with any positivity or kindness.



Plate 7: *Promise to Myself*, Ceramic 2023

Promise to Myself

The concept of promise to myself is about how even though I sometimes have a hard time accepting my body image, I am okay with how I look. I invite the viewer to do the same. Living in a bigger body is not a curse. I accept myself as I am and I am allowed to feel frustrated and angry, but I am also allowed to feel okay and confident. All of these things can be true at the same time.



Plate 8: *Just A Pinch, A Little Squeeze, and Handful*, Ceramic 2024

Just A Pinch, A Little Squeeze, and Handful

I wanted to explore our interactions with our bodies and how that touch can look. I made these pillowy forms that represent the negative and positive interactions of pinching body fat.

They progress from a soft pinch to a gentler squeeze and then to a more aggressive grasp. This was an exploration of how these pinches can be more hypercritical and negative to something gentler.

The way that we interact with our body depending on the way that we feel in that moment varies. Sometimes, that touch can be soft and gentle, an inspection of how that flesh feels. However, sometimes that touch can be so critical and angry, grabbing onto the skin and wondering why there is so much. Learning to be kind to yourself and forgiving of your bodies flaws is important. It can be vulnerable to change just the way you interact with yourself, to push away all of the negativity that you have been taught your whole life, and to figure out what you really think of yourself. This thesis work is like a journal entry to my younger self; you do not have to hate your body just because it does not fit the current acceptable ideal. You need to step back from the ideas that were shoved down your throat your whole life and analyze what you really feel. Women have a different standard of beauty when they learn to step away from social pressures and ideals. When you do not conform to the mainstream ideas of what beauty is, you can learn to step back and understand that not everyone sees beauty the same way.

Conclusion

This thesis represents a significant step in my journey towards self-expression and acceptance. Talking about my experience living in a fat body almost seemed irrelevant or not important enough. Throughout the entire process, I have had many people tell me how they relate, even if they do not live in a body my size. This made me realize that it is important and that I am not the only one who feels this way. I am proud of the work that I have done, but I do not think that I am at the end of this story. Through these sculptures and the emotions they convey, I have sought to shed light on the complexities of body image, self-acceptance, and fatphobia. While the journey has been challenging, it has also been empowering to confront these issues head-on and to share my perspective with others. This work serves as a reminder that everyone's journey towards self-acceptance is unique, but by challenging harmful norms and embracing vulnerability, we can move towards a more inclusive and compassionate society.

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Appendix A – Inspirations

I am looking at artists like Christina Cordova and Kelly Garrett Rathbone and Jamie Bates in the Ceramics world. There are not a lot of ceramic artists making figurative work to begin with and there are even less of those people making work depicting larger bodied people. I am looking at Christina Cordova in the way her figures emote and their body language. The way she sculpts, her figures are always so powerful and the way she portrays the facial expressions are subtle. Kelly Garret Rathbone's figurative work is so elegant; the way she sculpts the faces give make her work instantly recognizable. I really enjoy the way she sculpts hands and feet, with so much emotion and movement. Jamie Bates' does a lot of self-portraiture and her surface treatments in her figurative work are not always glazed. I appreciate that her surfaces because other ceramic artists often look down on that. I am also looking at Jenny Saville's paintings and the way that she portrays fat bodies.

Appendix B – Installation





