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MEDIATED

An Investigation of Print Media's Impact on Self

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BFA Thesis | Painting concentration | Second major in art history | Minor in psychology
Washington University in St. Louis | Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
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Abstract

In the 21st Century print media is often overlooked for the masses of images available at everyone's fingertips on the internet. This thesis is an exploration of the ways in which those original forms of mass produced images, specifically fashion/ beauty magazines and newspapers, alter one's sense of self. The magazines have a proven negative effect on women consumers who internalize the singular thin beauty ideal persisted in this media. A similar internalization happens with the constant viewing of news papers, creating a sense of shared cultural memory. The Artist takes an in depth look at how these ideas have manifested in her work, and the process of altering her practice from two separate interests in painting and collage into a mixed media exploration of media's lasting impact on our contemporary population.

I. Media Effects: Magazines and Women's Beauty Ideals

Although the millennial generation immediately thinks social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Foursquare, Twitter, Pinterest, etc. – when they hear the word “media,” the mainstream vehicles for mass produced images that women around my age grew up with was far from the realm of modern technology. Think Seventeen Magazine, Teen Vogue, even cosmopolitan, if you were lucky enough to sneak it past your parents. Those magazines were the fashion and beauty bibles for girls coming of age. They told us how to dress, act, and groom ourselves to stay up with the latest trends, acting as the original newsfeed scroll. Little did we know that we were being taken advantage of by the marketing world. It wasn't an issue of being directly offensive, in most cases, to young girls, but rather an issue of the cumulative effect that a constant consumption of the trends being depicted have on women, young and old. The women's fashion industry in particular promotes a conception of beautiful bodies as extremely thin. Even after numerous studies have proven the negative effects of mass consumption of a thin beauty ideal on women's conception of their own body image, their mood, degrees of self- objectification, their anxiety levels, and their overall dissatisfaction with their body (Harper 655), the fashion industry and larger media outlets alike have failed to make change towards promoting a more body positive outlook in their publications.

When considering the evidence of the effects of singular body type depictions in publications on grown women, it is hard not to think about the detrimental consequences this construction has on younger women, specifically those in adolescence who are trying to understand the constant changes going on with their bodies and how they are viewed in society. A study published in 2013 explored this very notion within a clinical setting, comparing results from 2 different group studies that look at the effects of media on young adult's conception

of healthy bodies. The results “reflect an understanding that only pretty and thin female adolescents are deemed “healthy” and are appreciated,” (Spur 29). I personally had a similar understanding of what a healthy female body was as I hit puberty and started to lose my baby weight that had caused me so much anxiety and bullying. In an ideal universe the beauty industry would take these results to heart, understanding that their depictions of a singular body type have lasting effects on women of all age’s mental and physical well being. Personally the pressure to conform to societal beauty standards has hindered my mental and physical health since I was a young girl. And even though I can count on one hand the number of women I know who actually fit a model’s body type, their overwhelming presence in the media engrained an unhealthy set of norms in my head. We as a society need to spend less time promoting only those bodies, and more time learning to accept and celebrate the myriad of bodies that exist in the world. So I started on my personal journey of learning to love all bodies by first learning to love my own.

II. On Display

My large scale nude self portrait, collaged canvases, and mixed media sculptures are the final products of a two-year interrogation of my own form. In my previous *Self Reflection* paintings, I approached studying my body through looking at the beauty found in overlapping the contours of my curves. These paintings resulted in an almost seek-and-find composition where the focus was on finding beauty



Self Reflection 2, 2017, Oil on canvas, 42"x 68"



Mirrored Study 2, 2018, Fashion/beauty magazines, acrylic, oil, India ink, charcoal and mirror on canvas, 72" x 36"

in the abstractions created by overlapping my contours in different positions. These studies were a great entry point into my explorations as I began to truly love the interactions between the curves in these large scale abstractions. What they were missing, though, was a nod to the societal conventions that had me doubting my body in the first place – beauty ideals as depicted in mass media.

As my interest in this area of study continued to grow, I looked for ways to merge the two sides of my practice: media collages and body positive depictions of females. After many explorations and iterations in various mediums and sizes, I realized that I needed to show the world what I see

when I strip down to nothing, the bare skin that covers the layers of fat, muscle and bone that the beauty industry has deemed so important to who I am. So I cut up a canvas that was roughly the size of the full body



The Beautiful Ones series #1C, 2014, Acrylic, transfers and color pencil on paper, 5' x 3.5'

mirror hanging next to my closet, prepped and primed it with a wash of ink that traced those curves I had grown to love, and began collaging *Mirrored Study 1* and 2.

The process was incredibly therapeutic: I sat on the ground of my studio surrounded by piles of magazines geared towards women – Vogue, InStyle, US Weekly, Cosmopolitan, Teen Vogue, Seventeen Magazine, New Beauty, just to name a few – and began my revenge. As each page fought against the friction of the tear bar as it was torn into strips, reduced into piles upon piles of different color

groupings, I couldn't help but feel like I was finally taking a stand against the industry that had ripped my self confidence into shreds for years. Where the beauty industry tore me down to an almost irreparable state, I repurposed their weapons of mass destruction into a beautiful interior space, looking to Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Mickalene Thomas for inspiration on merging collaged spaces and painted portraits. Those pages no longer had control over me, but their faint presence in the color-blocked background in the collage spoke to their constant influence on what I see in the reflection.

On top of the hundreds of shredded pages I carved out my own reflection. Or, rather, a variation of my own reflection in colors that spoke to a celebration of my whole self rather than just my flesh. The pinks, blues, yellows and greens began to create a mass of scribbles that resembled my roundness; their layered aesthetic spoke to my complex notion of self that has formed while combatting the world of media frenzy that surrounds me. I am not just a malleable piece of meat that can be altered at the will of the beauty industry, but rather an accumulation of twenty-two years of education, creativity, compassion and uniqueness that a flesh form does not do justice. These layers of charcoal scribbles, loose strokes of oil paint, and drips of india ink created a stark relationship between what I have constructed as ideal beauty in myself, and what the media has constructed as ideal beauty, echoed in the rigid rectangular strips of magazine pages that built the surrounding walls.

At this stage the pieces represented 2 forms of bodies: my understanding of self and the ideal female body promoted by the beauty industry. They were still missing the final form that has influenced my understanding of self, the third body, the viewer. In the works the viewer manifests itself in the reflection of the onlooker in the mosaicked mirror border, but this facet of the work speaks to the larger societal onlooker, those who judge based off of looks, who continue to persist the notion of one beauty ideal in America, who reduce others who don't fulfill those requirements to lesser value. Although us women sometimes fall victim to this societal construct, we often play into it as we continue to contort ourselves with waist trainers, plastic surgery, makeup, horribly uncomfortable high heels and undergarments. And men aren't innocent bystanders either. In continuing to treat certain women with more respect, or give special treatment based off of physical

appearance, men urge on the beauty industry that beats us down. Even larger than that they urge us to put our looks before anything else and belittle us to physical objects rather than complex organisms.

The mirrored border functions to implicate the viewer. To make them feel uncomfortable when having to stare at themselves in relationship to a life-size depiction of a nude woman while finding little moments where the magazine text continues their contour onto the canvas. To both urge them to understand the role they play in constructing these beauty ideals, but also to help them catch glimpses of their body in comparison to mine, implicating them as the subject as well. These pieces serve to make everyone question the norms put



Detail of *Mirrored Study 2*, 2018, Fashion/beauty magazines, acrylic, oil, India ink, charcoal and mirror on canvas, 72" x 36"

forth in a patriarchal society. In their most successful state, they come off as just another large scale nude oil painting of a woman until viewed up-close, when the viewer begins to question their role as onlooker.

New Beauty, a title taken from a clip of exposed magazine text in the composition, approaches implicating the viewer in a less direct manner. A

woman at on her cell phone walking past a large window that peaks into a private interior space. Once entering past the implied window display, the repeated lines of the flesh toned strips of magazines, arranged as a nod to the wood floors of a domestic interior, lead you back to the main figure: the reflection of a woman crouched in

her bra and underwear taking a selfie in a free standing mirror. Yet without the backside of said woman painted squatting in front of her repeated form, I here engage the audience to act as the subject.

These aforementioned works were a leap towards the culmination of all my studies: A mixed media aesthetic that bridges my explorations of the female form and interest in dynamic spatial arrangements. With the freedom to now use the magazines not for their imagery, but rather for their vibrant and glossy colors, I had the momentum to broaden my research beyond the impact of the fashion industry's print media on women, and dive into one of the oldest and most consumed forms of print media, the newspapers (The Pew Research Center).

III. Media Effects: The Newspapers

The letter press allowed for mass dissemination of images even before photographs were widely available and reproduced. Before these two society-changing inventions merged in the platform of the news papers, cartoons and other etches were printed to illustrate the goings-on of the world, making stereotypes and other large generalizations widely available, originally in the form of political cartoons. Then enters the sudden boom of photography. "Transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade," (Benjamin 232) Walter Benjamin comments on the rise of the camera. Where the etchings left a distance between the reader and the news events from around the world, the newspapers brought the images right to your front door. The world's most intriguing events were delivered to the comfort of your home. This original form of mass media is now on its last leg, and yet, these papers are still platforms that host a suite of curated images everyday. My research has taken a look at these often arbitrarily chosen photos, bringing to light the overwhelming nature of consuming mass amounts of gripping images.

Upon reading a newspaper most people are first drawn in by the gripping headlines and images on the front page. But what makes an image worthy of front page status? Peter Meusburger theorizes about the elitist nature of this selection process involved in the production of newspapers. Unfortunately, in order to be widely distributed and have access to news world wide, majority of newspaper corporations are large scale and run by elite figures. In leaving the decision of what news is headlines material to an individual, or small group of individuals, the news corporations give way to their biases influencing what makes the cut. "Hegemonic elites have the power to restrict counter-memories; to manipulate cultural institutions, exhibitions, and media; and to control the access to archives and the distribution of monuments and rituals in public space. They therefore frequently try to elevate their subjective narratives to the level of public or "official" memories that supersede local and personal memories," (Meusburger 51). Meusburger is getting at the selection process that I find so intriguing. Aside from being elitist in nature of having a say over what news we are privy to, the selection process that creates these cultural memories in the newspapers often leaves viewers with a skewed perception of entire cultures. In my own practice I have cut up hundreds of papers, and in them there are many trends that lend themselves to being publishable. Protests, natural disasters, mass killings, political upheaval, are just a few of the threads I have found persistently in each issue. In depicting other cultures only by their negative news headlines, the newspapers are not only furthering the othering of these cultures, but they also are giving people around the world a sense of attachment to these people, places and events. For instance, do you remember where you were when you heard about the 9/11 terrorist attack, or the death of JFK, or when the first man walked on the moon? And if you answered yes, I'm sure you have an image floating in your head of the towers crashing into plumes of smoke, Jackie and John F. Kennedy sitting on the back of a convertible, or the

American flag stuck into the moon. I wasn't even alive for two of those events, but the I can see the images clear as day. This experience is the phenomena of cultural memory as its disseminated in the newspapers. People from far away can create false associations or connections to events or people in far off destinations.

IV. Overwhelmed

The newspapers, although highly curated, are an interesting look at what was deemed necessary to publish on a certain day. The *Fake News* collage series explores the overwhelming quality of the range of images published in newspapers. The small scale of each piece speaks to the materiality of the newspaper prints themselves. As the scale invites the viewer in, it allows for closer examination of these images, and the narratives that are created when they are taken out of the context of their specific news stories and put in conversation with each other. In decontextualizing the masses of images in an individual newspaper from a



single day, I was able to use *Fake News* as a platform to depict just that: the fictional narratives that arise when these images are in the context of each other rather than the context of their specific news stories.

Suddenly Donald Trump is giving a speech in a nut store on the moon where Fidel Castro just so happens to be lounging. They

Tuesday, November 28, 2017; Acrylic and newspaper on wood panel, 6" x 6"

are the ultimate exploration of the range of images, or lack there of, in a single day's edition of the New York Times.

As I have continued this ritualistic practice of picking up the newspaper in the morning, cutting out majority of the images (yet another selection process in and of itself), and collaging



them together, I have turned to the muralists of the Works Project Administration, specifically looking to Ben Shahn for techniques In

Ben Shahn, Detail from *New Jersey Homestead Mural*, 1936, 12' x 45'

transitioning between scenes. Shahn used architecture as his main tool for moving through time and space. In a single mural he could have Einstein immigrating to America while commenting on our incarceration system. In



my own small scale collages I take advantage of this technique, using acrylic paint to extend columns, windows, sidewalks, and whatever other architecture jumps out at me from that day in order to move from one scene to another. In doing so I am able to transition between space and time while also creating a sense of deep and dynamic space.

V. Accumulation and Culmination



Detail of *The Times*, 2018, Acrylic, oil, fashion/beauty magazines, newspaper images, graphite and charcoal on canvas, 6' x 8'

I know it doesn't seem like I've really answered one of the main questions of this investigation: How can I merge the two disparate aspects of my art practice into one? *Fake News* is a great documentation of the dying print media of the newspaper, but does it really get at the overwhelming quality of consuming that many

images? I wasn't sure either, so I made my final piece of the *Mediated* collection: *The Times*. This 6' x 8' mixed media composition is truly the culmination of all of this investigation. The composition consists of a dynamic space of both interiors and exteriors, public and private. The Figures sitting in the domestic setting are both shielded by different forms of print media: the newspaper and a book. Although the human reading the paper seems to be intrigued, upon closer examination you can see that there are no images or text, but rather scribbles across the page. Similarly, the book's title is illegible, not that the reader is even interested as she

sleeps with the book open and resting on her face. These figures were there to represent the sentiment of both curiosity and excessive stimulation when consuming mass produced images.

As the two figures sit cozy in their domestic space, the world around them is bustling. To the left of the interior, walled off by a brick entry way collaged with strips of ripped up magazines, the viewer is projected back into a frenzy of deep space occupied by protestors and an eager crowd listening to a press conference. The implication of the combination of such charged imagery up against a quiet domestic setting alludes to the construction of cultural memory. People read to stay informed and to educate themselves on both history and current events. But in doing so they inevitably are creating a false sense of connection to these people, places and events based solely off of their curated knowledge.

Conclusion

This essay is not an attempt to radicalize the fashion and newspaper industries, for it is going to take far more than one young artist to take on that change. It is, much like my art itself, an attempt to ask you to look harder. To recognize the impact that normalization in the media has on an individual. Whether the newspapers are persisting in their depiction of heteronormative nuclear families, far left or right politics, and selecting which horrific world events to report based off of our proximity, or the fashion industry shooting down diverse images of beauty in their singular depiction of beauty, the media is effecting both a sense of self and body image along with a sense of a universal collective and global beauty ideals. These highly disseminated forms of print are the physical remnants of how main stream media shapes society, our views and ideals. I ask you to implicate yourself more often. Step back and consider your role in this circle of manipulation.

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