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**EXAMINING THE STIGMATIZATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONSEQUENCES OF THE OVERWEIGHT BODY WITH ART, "B(EATS)
BEING THERE"**

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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BODY DISSATISFACTION

Author Priscilla Sisseem best summarizes society's reaction to a person of size: "Every culture has its own nightmare...in American society, being larger than the normative expectation is a nightmare."¹ As obesity becomes an epidemic, affecting adults and children, the nightmare is evident. However, the idealized body is in opposition with the average American's expanding waistline since "the standard for attractiveness is thin and fit."² Being overweight can increase health risks and shortened life span. However, the stigma and prejudices placed on overweight people is distressing and the associated feelings of shame, isolation, restriction and lack of fulfillment are detrimental.

Body dissatisfaction affects both genders however there is more concentration on the plight of women. Research states "the fact that women are judged more by their appearance than men creates a greater concern for thinness."³ According to the objectification theory, which aims to explain women's body image disturbance, Western women "are socialized to consider themselves based on how they appear physically."⁴ Consequently, a woman's self-worth and self-identity are dependent on their body size, big or small. This notion is reinforced through the mass media, family members and peers.

Yet, why has the body of size become so stigmatized in modern society? People believe weight is a condition that can be controlled:

"It is commonly believed that one can personally control his or her weight through discipline and willpower...this may explain why overweight individuals tend to be evaluated more negatively than individuals who are not believed to have personal control over their stigmatizing characteristics."⁵

¹ Priscilla Sisseem and Maria Heckert Durann. "Acceptable The Way That I Am: The Impact of Labeling Women of Size." Humboldt Journal of Social Relations Vol. 28, Issue 1, 2004: 155.

² Kelly D. Brownell, Rebecca M. Puhl, Marlene B. Shwartz, and Leslie Rudd. Weight Bias: Nature, Consequences, and Remedies. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 165.

³ Natasha Milkewicz, "Dismantling the Heterogeneity of Obesity: Psychosocial Experiences of the Obese" (Ph.D. dissertation, Virginia Consortium for Professional Psychology, 2000). P. 5.

⁴ Brownell, 48.

⁵ Kelly E. Friedman, Simona K. Reichmann, Philip R. Costanzo, Arnaldo Zelli, Jamile A. Ashmore and Gerard J. Musante. "Weight Stigmatization and Ideological Beliefs: Relation to Psychological Functioning in Obese Adults." Obesity Research Vol. 13, No. 5, May 2005: 909.

Defining one's weight, as a controllable trait is further embedded with the endorsement of the Protestant Ethic.⁶ Those who fail to keep a normative size are thought to have fallen victim to their own laziness, self-indulgence and their lack of self-discipline. As a result, the rejection of overweight women is not seen as prejudice, but rather a negative consequence for someone else's lack of accountability.⁷ It has been discovered that "genetics determines whether obesity can occur, but environment determines the extent. Hence body shape is malleable to some extent, but certainly not to the degree the public expects."⁸[9] Heavy people can control their appearance by making educated food choices, limiting portion size and getting into a regular exercise routine. This lifestyle change is difficult to maintain and those who try often fail. This high failure rate perpetuates and reinforces the negative view thin people have of overweight women. What exactly is the result of society's negative attitudes toward overweight women? How is a woman's self-esteem and self-worth shaped by weight stigmatization and prejudices?

DISCHARGE OF EMOTION THROUGH ART

Catharsis: The discharge of emotion through art, as tragedy and sculpture.

Stepping briefly into a time machine, I go to the seminal point in which the tragedy occurs. The year is 1994 and it's lunchtime for Mrs. Stark's second grade. Rainy day has impeded the usual schedule and the students are instructed to head to the library to finish recess. I hurry to grab a seat since seating availability is low. As I pull out a chair from a small round table, about to sit down, I overhear my "friend" Melissa say, "I don't want Neena to sit there." Being the timid second grader that I was, I quietly walk away to find another chair. I put on a brave face for the rest of the day, but her hurtful words have left an indelible mark. I tearfully retell the story to my mother as she comforts me and gives me advice if a similar situation were to occur "Next time she says 'I don't want Neena to sit there' ask her for the receipt because she doesn't own the chair." However, for my 7-year-old self, I am unable to feel anything but unlikable and misshapen. I vividly remember the hurtful words, as it was representative of what it felt like to be different and unwanted by my peers and explains the origins of my low self-esteem due to my body size.

⁶ Brownell, 168.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Milkewicz, 25.

Beverly Hills, CA; a city made up of beautiful homes, exclusive stores and fabulous people. It is difficult for my friends to believe that I am a native of Beverly Hills. The women who live in Beverly Hills are reputed to be thin (whether by good genes or surgery) and wear designer clothes. I am the antithesis of this. My plus-size body would look ridiculous in Prada, Chanel or Armani. I had friends, but felt huge next to them and could not stop thinking that my size was an unwanted addition to the group dynamic. I longed to be just like the other skinny Beverly Hills girls. I wanted what thin girls had and took for granted: I wanted to share clothes with kids at summer camp; I wanted to go into one of Gap's changing rooms and not cry in frustration of how badly the clothes fit; I wanted to play all four quarters of a soccer game; I wanted to eat the biggest slice of cake on my birthday instead of the smallest; I wanted to be able to easily maneuver between the rows of desks in my classroom; I wanted to participate in class and not worry about kids thinking I was stupid and fat; I wanted a boy to have a crush on me; I wanted to know that a boy chose to slow dance with me at my Bat Mitzvah because he wanted to not because he pitied me.

I was a fat person living in a thin world; sitting uncomfortably in chairs made to fit average sized people; hearing off-hand fat jokes that cut deeply and receiving fewer invitations to right-sized parties because I was wrong-sized. How many times did I reassure a friend when she thought she looked fat? I would cringe inside and wonder; "were they blind? How could they ask me, the fatty, that question?" It's unfortunate that I found that the best way to cope with weight stigmatization was to turn inward and internalize hurtful comments. Weight is an extremely sensitive subject for me; however, it was not until recently that I felt comfortable discussing weight openly.

In my sophomore year of college, I finally found a weight loss program that worked. Over the past year and the half, I have lost a considerable amount of weight. Unfortunately my decrease in clothes size did not accompany an increase in self-esteem and confidence. I have found it extremely difficult to shed the insecurities that have plagued me my entire life. Thus, I decided to use my senior thesis as a therapeutic tool to discuss the emotional consequences of being physically large.

The concept of body image has been explored both academically and artistically. However, I find that people shun away from discussing the emotional repercussions of being overweight in today's society. This was made evident when witnessing the reactions of my

fellow classmates after reading Nomy Lamm's "It's a Fat Revolution" for art theory. I found Lamm's article to be inspirational. I could relate to her struggles and her psychological wounds endured from being fat. I came to class excited and ready to discuss the article, only to find that my classmates were not as taken by the article as me. Instead, Lamm was dismissed as being nonsensical who had an inappropriate writing style. Scanning the room and noticing that I was the only overweight girl present, I chose not to defend Lamm. I realized it would have been a losing battle because my classmates had no knowledge of what it is like to be overweight; they had never sat in my chair. They had no connection with being large and were unsympathetic to the pain and suffering attached to carrying excess weight. This attitude is common, as research shows that "normative women minimized the situation of large women or were oblivious to societal and cultural prejudices."⁹ Through the artwork, "Being There," the stigmatization that women of size face and the resulting emotional consequences endured, such as feelings of restriction and invisibility despite their physicality, are showcased and taken under consideration by the viewer.

STIGMAS' CONSEQUENCES AS CAPTURED THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

Society's prejudices against overweight women can be exquisitely captured in photographs. A face fraught with emotional pain is difficult to hide. Although many artists prefer to use photography as the medium in the study of body image, I have chosen to avoid two-dimensional images in my discussion of weight stigmatization. However, to get a broader understanding of how overweight people are depicted in society, I believe it is important to examine several of these photos. Artist Lauren Greenfield's *Girl Culture* and my own photo project completed in the spring of 2007, reveal emotional scars caused by severe social disapproval. When viewing these images, it is difficult not to feel sympathy for the subjects' plight.

LAUREN GREENFIELD

Before she became an artist, Lauren Greenfield had a career as a photojournalist. Her journalistic background is apparent in the models and backgrounds she chooses to photograph; Lauren captures real people everyday situations. Having suffered from her own bouts of yo-yo

⁹ Sissem, 157.

dieting and having grown up in an image conscious Los Angeles, Greenberg has become fascinated by female body image as seen in *Girl Culture*. *Girl Culture* is a compilation of photos and personal testimonies of girls, young adults, and women who have body image issues. I was most drawn to the photographs of chubby, young girls. These pictures produce a feeling of discomfort because these girls pose as a direct assault on the “ideal body.”¹⁰

The subject of “Lisa from Edina, Minnesota”, one of the photos in *Girl Culture* (Image 01), is a 13 year year-old girl whose facial expression and body language reveal her concern with her body’s weight. She sits hunched on her bed, in a bedroom wallpapered with pictures of her favorite band, Hanson. Her eyes drift to the side in order to make eye contact with Greenfield’s camera and in the process of doing so her vulnerability is highlighted. She seems to be confined to her room, either against her will or by choice. With her baggy clothes and bad posture, Lisa is able to hide her flaws. Her eyes convey a longing to be somewhere else; perhaps hanging out with the popular girls or on a date with one of the Hanson brothers. Because this young woman is aware of society’s general repugnance of the overweight bodyweight, she could be afraid to interact with her peers since she is at risk of not being liked or accepted. To avoid being hurt, she resigns herself to a life of invisibility, “People make fun of me all the time because I am overweight. It’s just something you try to hide from; I guess you don’t want other people to see.”¹¹

Another effective image in Greenberg’s collection is “Weight Loss Camp,” a photograph depicting several girls in their swimsuit at a weight-loss camp (Image 02).¹² In the photo, only one girl, wearing a hot pink bathing suit, recognizes the presence of Greenfield’s camera. She feels conspicuous; her body language is different from the other girls in the frame. Her discomfort in the presence of the camera is apparent in both her face and her body position. The awkward positioning of her legs reflects her attempt to find a protective pose since she does not have clothes to hide her fat. In this circumstance, it seems that the camera represents the judgmental gaze of society. Consequently, she quickly goes from feeling happy and normal (everyone is overweight at fat camp) to feeling shamed and restricted, as the camera is symbolic of a world in which she doesn’t fit in.

¹⁰ Greenfield, Lauren. *Girl Culture*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

The other girls in “Weight Loss Camp”, unaware of the intruding camera, sit uninhibited, with their fat rolls visible, feeling accepted; even loved in this safe haven. The caption beneath the photo best explains this: “Many kids love to swim at camp but will not swim or wear a bathing suit at home.”¹³ It is doubtful that these overweight girls could endure the criticism and name calling they would most likely receive if they went out in public wearing their swimsuits. Yet even with the absence of teasing, their self-consciousness and low self-esteem could ruin their day in the sun. The overall message highlights the importance of having a normative body, “fat is a special liability in adolescence, an emotional reality...Greenfield’s portraits provides an unerring sense of social and emotional costs of being the fat girl in a culture that worships display of the [ideal] female body.”¹⁴

THE PERCEPTIONS OF OTHERS

The emotions displayed in Greenberg’s work reveal how debilitating weight stigmatization can be on one’s psyche. In the spring of 2007, I did a photo project presenting how societal beliefs can cause women to obsess about their physical appearance and how that can define one’s identity. I attempted to demonstrate how the perceptions of others affected one’s self-esteem and self-worth. I took black and white images of friends of various shapes and sizes. (Images 03-06) Each subject was photographed in two contrasting environments. First, the women were asked to pose as if they were getting headshots for a movie audition. While the second photo captures the subject gazing upon herself in a private setting, being very critical of what she sees.

The first of the images, replicates how one tries to appear to others around them. The image is slightly distorted. With the help of a plastic bag placed over the lens, the image’s distortion represents society’s ideal of the perfect beauty/body, which is unattainable and can never be a reality. Women are obstructed from attaining a normative body size. When one tries to move beyond this barrier and achieve the ideal, they run the risk of sacrificing their own identity in the process; not everyone is meant to look the same. The more women gaze at their image, the less satisfied they are and the more critical they become about their physical appearance. In the second set of images, (Image 05 & 06), the viewer sees Ellie’s reflection in a

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

mirror. Ellie stands to the side, examining her profile. Her facial expression reveals that she is unsatisfied with what appears before her. She tries to hide her excessive weight, the source of her unhappiness, by sucking in her stomach and using her hand to compress and flatten her fat body. The constant worry of being a body has invaded every aspect of life, even infiltrating the privacy of viewing one's self in the mirror. The pressure to be thin has permeated many aspects of women's lives. It is difficult to accept our body types and not become self-critical and suffer from body image distress.

Lauren Greenfield and I have attempted to capture the emotional pain endured from weight stigmatization. Our images reveal young women who do not fit the stereotypical mold for beauty. These women carry excess weight and emotional baggage. They feel shame, embarrassment, inadequate, unfulfilled, restricted, isolated and invisible. The images attempt to record some of the hardships girls of all sizes face growing up in an image conscious world.

THIS IS BEAUTIFUL

Can society ever truly accept and appreciate all body shapes even those that are not normative? Photographer Amanda Koster attempts to answer this question by breaking down existing stereotypes and stigmatizations that contributes to society's narrow definition of beauty through her photo series "This is Beautiful." "This is Beautiful" is part of larger undertaking titled "bodyBODY: You Can't Tell By Looking" which utilizes various art media to show viewers that they "are not alone in their experiences navigating cultural, media and familial messages about their bodies."¹⁵ In a dance studio, Koster has gathered a group of women ranging in both age and body size (Image 07 & 08). The women interact through conversation or dance. All their interactions with one another are done while being naked. Koster painstakingly documents every part of what makes them who they are: their tattoos, their stretch marks, their fat, their skin color, their hair and their smiles; her objective is to show that "there is beauty in every body."¹⁶ The reaction that Koster tries to elicit from the viewer is one of appreciation, pride, and hope. The self-confidence portrayed by her subjects makes the viewer think that there is a possibility that society can begin to move away from the idealization of thin. Koster makes it possible for the observer to recognize and appreciate the bravery that it took from each of the

¹⁵ bodyBODY Project, 26 Sept 2008 < <http://www.bodybodyproject.com/index.html>.>

¹⁶ Ibid.

participants to expose their bodies to possible criticism. These women are proud of their appearance; they have nothing to be shameful of or embarrassed about.

The camera plays an important role in the works of Lauren Greenberg and Amanda Koster. In Greenberg's images, the presence of the camera was an intrusion. The camera present in Koster's images is welcomed and embraced. Thus, perhaps there is hope that in the future weight stigmatization may not have the psychological repercussions of the past and present. Being overweight will be not a source of fear and frustration; instead everyone will appreciate their bodies and no longer measure her self-worth to societal comparisons.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

It important to identify the source of the stigmatization associated with excess fat and identify the disdain and fear associated with obesity in society. Weight stigmatization produces many psychological consequences for overweight women. Most prominently, women of size feel that their weight reduces them to second-class citizenship. Heavy women are avoided, excluded, ignored or worried they embarrass the people around them. It is hard to avoid weight stigmatization because this "stigma of people of size is always evident in human interaction since the source of their stigmatization is highly visible."¹⁷ Since it is impossible to hide one's size, it is nearly impossible to avoid psychological distress due to society's increasing fear and hatred of being overweight.

The effects of weight stigmatization are pronounced due to the dependent natures of physical appearance and self-esteem. A women's self-esteem is often tied to the opinion and approval of others; therefore, receiving negative comments is traumatizing and emotionally debilitating. Author Hesse-Biber notes, "As members of society, young women have to learn how 'to be a body.' For the most part, what a woman observes in the mirror is what she uses to measure her self-worth as a human being."¹⁸ As a woman stares into a mirror, her appreciation of the image she sees is tainted by the judgments of others. Unfortunately, what they fail to realize is that "all human beings are flawed, nonperfect, capable of making mistakes, with strengths and weaknesses."¹⁹ Confronted by this obscured reality, author Sisseem recognizes four

¹⁷ Sisseem, 160.

¹⁸ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, The Cult of Thinness. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 108.

¹⁹ Brownell, 171.

primary consequences of weight stigmatization: shame, isolation, restriction and lack of fulfillment.

The most common psychological consequence from being overweight is the feeling of shame. “Shame pertains to a sense of being flawed or different because of a sole aspect of the respondents’ total humanity: their weight.”²⁰ Shame insinuates that overweight women should be embarrassed about something. Whether hurtful comments are said or awkward glances are made, a woman of size begins to believe that they are inadequate and are to blame for this treatment. In addition, shame can cause feelings of worthlessness, which often leads to self-contempt further contributing to one’s body image distortion.

Isolation is another consequence of weight stigmatization that women of size endure. The impact of isolation is that it limits human interaction, which in turn reduces the social interaction necessary in building self-esteem. Societal influences makes overweight women feel that their differences make them undeserving of close bonds. That said, sometimes isolation can act as a coping mechanism for overweight women as they deal with weight prejudices. By retreating, heavy women can avoid scrutiny and find a proactive way to combat weight bias.

The feeling of being restricted from everyday activities is the result of weight bias. “Restriction centers on the discriminatory actions, policies and practices of dominant culture, commonly left unchallenged.”²¹ The bigger the body, the poorer the quality of life one is allowed to enjoy. For example, overweight women have limited control of their external presentation.²² The fashion industry caters to small body sizes and limits the variety of style options for overweight women. Overweight women face physical restrictions as well. Seating accommodations on airplanes and in movie theaters are problematic for ample woman. However, the biggest consequence of restriction is its effect on one’s self-awareness and self-development. Due to the psychological effects of weight stigmatization, most overweight women are not able to feel comfortable in public and are unable to complete the necessary social and educational developmental tasks. Large women are less likely to participate in the classroom and interact in the work environment because they are afraid their ideas will be considered inferior.²³ Restriction prevents overweight women from trying new experiences or meeting new people.

²⁰ Sisseem, 164.

²¹ Ibid, 169.

²² Ibid, 171.

²³ Ibid, 174.

The last consequence that Sisseem discusses is lack of fulfillment as it pertains to a person's love life. Because it believed that physical beauty is necessary to attract the opposite sex, overweight women believe they are unlikely to find success in that endeavor. Thus, it is felt that having meaningful relationships or even casual relationships are highly unlikely. The inability to find a partner increases one's self doubt and enhances the overall feeling of inadequacy and lack of worth.

THESIS PROJECT: *BEING THERE*

My work is the direct result of the psychological effects of weight stigmatization. I understand that in society there are overweight women who do not feel invisible or shame or suffer from low self-esteem. "For individuals who were more accepting of obesity, weight based stigmatization did not significantly impact their feelings about their bodies."²⁴ Although I recognize that these women exist, my work is an offering to the majority of women who have been affected adversely by their weight, and an offering to people who do not realize how their lack of sensitivity affects large people. As an artist, I have realized that the environment that I was raised in has shaped my attitude towards my non-normative body; "the problem of body image disparagement occurs most commonly in young Caucasian women of upper-middle class socioeconomic status in whom the prevalence of obesity is very low and the sanctions against them very high."²⁵ Although it is difficult for me to imagine a woman of size feeling confident and accepting of her appearance, I know that they exist. It is important that I clarify that I am aware that these women exist, but I have chosen not to address them in my work. I understand that not everyone will agree with my work or have the reaction and dialogue that I am aiming for, but I cannot let this impede my artistic expression.

The strength of my senior project, "Being There," lies in its use of space and materials. Body image in art is often expressed through the mediums of photography and video. I think that photographs and videos aptly explore and reveal the real emotional side effects of body image on human beings. However, weight stigmatization and my own art aesthetic makes working three-dimensionally a suitable approach. My work confronts the viewer with what an overweight person faces in real life situations. As a result, my project utilizes my entire studio space. I have

²⁴ Friedman, 914.

²⁵ Milkewicz, 30.

created an installation piece that is comprised of the walls of my studio, clear plastic cutlery, and a chair (Image 09).

The installation component of my work is an important characteristic. Often when one is confronted with an installation artwork, “the viewer is asked to investigate the work of art much as he or she might explore some phenomenon in life, making one’s way through actual space and time in order to gain knowledge.”²⁶ Because the installation space can mimic an aspect of life, one’s reaction to the work is a good indicator of how one would approach this same situation under real life conditions. My installation is not a site-specific work, but rather is a “filled-space installation,”²⁷ which means that although the setting of my piece is important; my work does not gain its meaning because it is located in the senior art studio. As long as my piece is enclosed within three walls, it can move to similar spaces. Thus, my work is not dependent on any one particular space.

The decision to explore my topic through installation art is logical because it correlates with the use of space and the subject of my thesis being overweight and its stigmatization. Within the muted yellow walls of my studio hangs an organic cylindrical structure made up of clear plastic eating utensils. The structure is comprised of over three thousand forks, spoons and knives that together reach a height of five-feet-seven-inches and leaves very little room between the structure and the studio walls. The shape and the materials used in this structure invoke the overweight body. The decision to paint the walls a muted yellow color was to add contrast to the structure and to add a feeling of distress. This particular shade of yellow was chosen specifically because it is supposed to visually unappealing and is lacking in cheerfulness.²⁸ The muted yellow facilitates the journey of the viewer into the world of the overweight person, evoking familiar emotional responses.

Due to the restrictive size of the structure, it is difficult for the observer to move within the environment that I have created. The structure is meant to occupy a large space, replicating the physical space that overweight people occupy in real life. The structure’s confinement within the walls also mimics one aspect of weight stigmatization: restriction. The assemblage of eating utensils is symbolic of the excess body fat that accompanies overweight people. Although there

²⁶ Mark Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art: from Duchamp to Holzer*, (New York: Prestel, 2003), 27.

²⁷ Ibid, 28.

²⁸ “Color Meaning.” Color Wheel Pro - See Color Theory in Action. 18 Nov 2008 < <http://www.color-wheel-pro.com/index.html>.>

is some space between the structure and the studio, it is apparent that the studio was not intended to house such a large object comfortably. Behind the hanging structure, sits a reading chair. The chair underscores how overweight people are restricted in their everyday activities. Overweight people usually miss out on certain experiences because their size hampers their ability to participate in these activities. Many activities do not include accommodations for heavy people. If the viewer wished to sit in the chair within the wall of plastic cutlery, they would be unable to since the eating utensils act as a physical barrier. With the barrier in place, the viewer is prohibited from experiencing that chair in that particular moment. The inability to sit in the chair facilitates a dialogue about what it might feel like to be unable to complete simple tasks due to having to live with a barrier. The vacant chair invites the viewer to metaphorically place him or herself in the chair; as they imagine themselves sittings within a wall of excess fat. Sitting in a fat person's chair, they gain a better understanding of what it may be like to be an overweight person living in a thin-centric society and perhaps sympathize with their plight. It is my intention that my work engages the viewer and causes them to pause and ask questions about their own behavior and beliefs regarding people of size.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Erwin Wurm and John Isaacs are artists that have influenced my work. Their pieces are three-dimensional and comment on obesity and weight stigmatization. Erwin Wurm's examination of obesity in society takes a comical approach as he questions humans' conscious and unconscious motives.²⁹ Wurm relates society's obsession with consumption to excess weight. In *Fat Car* (Image 10), Wurm takes an expensive, high performance sports vehicle, the Ferrari, and transforms it into a low performance vehicle weighed down by fat. Wurm places the folds of fat found on an overweight person on to the car. His piece is memorable to the viewer because of its bright color, exaggerated form, and its uniqueness. Although it catches the viewers' attention rather quickly, the piece's overall intent is to stay with the observer long after the show. Generally, the viewer would never be tempted to purchase the *Fat Car* and Wurm wonders why. The piece does more than critique society's aversion to overweight people; it

²⁹ Edlebert Kob, "Erwin Wurm: The Artist who swallowed the world," Erwin Wurm: The Artist who swallowed the world (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2006), 10.

critiques the role of socioeconomic factors; the expensive (high-class) vehicle is pristine while the inexpensive (low class) vehicle lacks desire.³⁰

Unlike Wurm, John Isaacs' criticism of overweight bodies takes a more literal form. In *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* (Image 11), a man with layers upon layers of excess fat manages to stand upright before the viewers. Isaacs end result is the creation of an abject sculpture; the excess fat resembles flesh and is so uncomfortable to look at that the viewer turns away in disgust. Isaacs deals with uncomfortable truths. His works reflect society's anxiety and aversion to obesity. Isaacs directly confronts the viewer with their worst nightmare: corpulence. Isaacs' piece challenges traditional ideas of beauty and sculpture. He wants his piece to shock the viewer and to coerce him to delve into the sculpture's meaning and its relation to the viewer's own convictions. Isaacs overall goal is to look "at modern life in a similar way and explore similar prejudices and conventions in our contemporary thinking through the use of often bizarre and surprising juxtapositions."³¹

Although Wurm and Isaacs both examine obesity in today's culture, they mainly use humor to elicit responses from observers. They take plumpness to the literal extreme by molding what looks like rolls of fat and flesh. Their lumpy figures have a funny edge, softening the dialogue that they, as artists, are trying to establish with the viewer. However, using humor is tricky since the artist risks not giving the subject enough credence. I, on other hand, have chosen abstraction and metaphor to discuss obesity. The materials used in my piece suggest excessive consumption, but there is no presence of the actual body. My installation focuses on the overweight body and the psychological effects produced from the prejudices formed against being large. Where I delve into the psychological and societal impact of weight stigmatization on the individual, Wurm and Isaacs simplify matters by presenting the problem, but fail in calling upon the viewer to question how they would interact with the large body or how they would feel if they had weight issues.

BEING THERE REVISTED

³⁰ Joanna Pitman, "The Diet of Wurm" *Times Online*, 2 July 2006, 12 Nov. 2008, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article682385.ece>

³¹ Robert Brown, "Chant Down Babylon." *Kinz, Tillou and Feigen: John Isaacs*. 12 Nov 2008. <www.ktfgallery.com/artists/john_isaacs>

The materials used in my installation are very significant to my overall piece and adds an additional layer of meaning. The use of common objects like eating utensils is used to grab the attention of the audience and to elicit certain connotations. Because eating utensils are not malleable, my exploitation of the material depends on its significance as an eating tool. I use eating utensils because a presumed characteristic common to overweight people is that they consume large quantities of food; certainly a greater quantity than those who have a normative body size. The abundance of forks, spoons, and knives present in my work reinforces the idea of overeating; to the point where one can become overweight.

The transparent nature of the eating utensils in my structure should be examined. Fat people often feel invisible as a result of weight stigmatization and being treated like second-class citizens. The irony is that this should not be the case as their size and their density makes them highly visible. The eating utensils function as the corporeal body, the source of stigmatization. However, as in my project and as in real life, for the overweight person the eating utensils/fat layer can act as a shield. For the normative viewer, the eating utensils act as a barrier and does not allow them reach and interact with the chair. The inability to approach the chair begins to demonstrate some of the restrictions and psychological effects endured by overweight people. However, for the overweight person, they might interpret the eating utensils as a shield rather than an obstruction. Learning to cope with the stigma of being fat, the overweight person has grown accustomed to life in a non-normative body. As result, their physical appearance can be a source of deflection and a way to protect their vulnerability. There are many reasons why people begin to eat and gain weight. One possible reason is that they purposefully find weight stigmatization appealing, as they might be looking for a way to escape, to hide, and to ultimately protect their vulnerability. My work is homage to the overweight person as it acknowledges their stigmatization and commiserates with them. It also aims to make people aware of how debilitating their weight prejudices can be to another person's psyche. The piece; however, is not limited to these reactions. As the complete installation can illicit several interpretations.

PAST ENDEAVORS IN MIXED MEDIA

I relish creating artwork out of everyday objects. Much of my previous work has utilized mixed media. In my piece, *Untitled* (Image 12), I use various household items and clay sludge to create a life-size robotic woman. The household items used in the construction are mops for legs,

two colanders for a head, back scrubbers for arms, the tops of plungers for breasts, car fresheners for earrings and paper plates for clothes. In addition, a pearl-type necklace made out of clay adorns the neck region. The element of clay sludge in this piece brings a feeling of movement to the piece. The sludge adorns the piece in several places: it covers the lady's feet, the mops and has been splattered across the body, the result of a hard days work of cleaning. My household robot was a commentary on the conditions women faced in the era of June Cleaver. The robotic cleaning lady could only be suited for the home environment; further emphasizing home and family as women's only region of expertise. The robotic nature critiques the monotonous nature of such an activity and the absence of creativity. By utilizing household items, I want the viewer to question women's place in society in an intriguing and humorous manner.

Art with comical overtones is something I have enjoyed producing. In a mixed media project focusing on age, I used white toothpaste (Image 14) for the hair on a Styrofoam head, used to hold wigs. In this project, the toothpaste did not have a direct relation to the topic, but I enjoyed the fact that toothpaste and toupee had similar sounds. In a project examining zoophobia, I found an interesting use for cotton balls (Image 13). I used ceramics to create a poodle, and then attached cotton balls to mimic fur. The cotton balls altered the piece tremendously by making it more friendly, adorable, and realistic. When presenting the gentle poodle adorned with red bows, I added sounds of scary dogs barking and a woman screaming hysterically, exaggerating the silliness the irrational fears of unthreatening objects. My previous works showed how everyday objects could be employed to make art. For my thesis installation, the use of eating utensils is the main component. My installation takes on the same characteristics as my robotic cleaning lady and is also influenced by the works of artists such as Tara Donovan and Tony Feher.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES: EVERYDAY MATERIALS AND STRUCTURAL ART

MacArthur recipient Tara Donovan is an artist who built her reputation in the art world with her innovative use of everyday items. Donovan used thousands of Styrofoam cup, for example, to create organic designs that ingeniously fill art spaces as seen in *Untitled* (Image 16). Covering the ceiling of a gallery, Donovan uses Styrofoam's ability to absorb light to create an interesting landscape/chandelier. In her work, Donovan analyzes the everyday material especially "regarding its physical properties in order to tease out structural possibilities that

flaunt phenomenal visual behavior that is amplified through the intense labor demanded by her ambitious strategies of accumulation.”³² Although her choice of object varies with each work (she also uses plastic straws, toothpicks, paper plates, steel pins, and more), her purpose is always the same: disguise the object’s original domestic use to create a new form that asks the viewer to question and examine what material is being used in the structure and makes them create a new relationship with the banal object and see its possible artistic transformation.

Tony Feher is another artist who incorporates the everyday object in his work. Unlike Donovan, Feher chooses to showcase the beauty of the original object; not camouflaging it. Feher’s arrangement of various collected objects depends on his exhibition space. Feher’s aesthetic style favors minimalism, but still manages to be provocative as it causes the viewer to question what makes his creation an art form and not simply an everyday object. Feher claims that he is able to transform the object into art because he “looks for the ‘trick’ in materials, that indescribable something that allows me to exploit the object for my own purposes: a reflection of light, a color, a play of density versus transparency, a little something that sets it off.”³³ In *A Little Bird Told Me* (Image 17), several small plastic bottles are filled with red water and are hung in a tree about 15 feet off the ground. In the picture of the installation, the bottles look like apples yet that could easily change depending on the viewing angle and the lighting.

Tara Donovan and Tony Feher are two artists that use the everyday object to create fascinating art, but in different aesthetic styles. My decision to employ clear plastic cutlery in my creative endeavor was influenced by both artists’ contrasting aesthetic and theoretical approach to their choice of materials. Donovan is inclined to obfuscate the object she uses to challenge and increase the curiosity of the viewer. However, in my work, I do not wish to obscure the object entirely, especially since I had chose to use eating utensils for a reason. Masking the cutlery would have made them irrelevant to my piece. Still, my goal was to make the organic nature of my work enticing to the observer and make them want to interact and move about the space. Ultimately, my hope is that by using an unexpected material, the viewer’s curiosity is piqued into

³² Paul Brewer, “About the Exhibition.” Hammer Museum. 12 Nov 2008.
<<http://www.hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/46/>. >

³³ “About Tony Feher.” Pace Wildenstein. 12 Nov 2008.
<<http://www.pacewildenstein.com/Artists/ViewArtist.aspx?artist=TonyFeher&type=Artist&guid=95ee5b4a-844b-4449-9fbe-fc802c6a2749.>>

staying awhile. The eating utensils in my piece represent more than eating utensils. They are part of the structure yet are intended to reference an overweight person.

CONCLUSION

The inspiration for my thesis project arose from deeply personal experiences. As the work progressed, it became a therapeutic outlet as well. *Being There* provided the necessary outlet to discuss the emotional toll of being overweight in a thin-centric society. Yet, the project's progression and the resulting creation, *Being There*, has become more than a personal antidote. Most overweight people can relate to the psychological consequences of weight stigmatization addressed in my piece. Yet, *Being There* is not just for the overweight person to appreciate. In fact, there are many different reactions to my piece, but in particular, the viewer is asked to imagine what life might be like being a fat person and at the same time critically examining their behavior towards fat people.

As obesity becomes epidemic, the exploration of body image both academically and artistically becomes more meaningful. In art, visual documentation has become the preferred medium to engage in the discussion of body image. For example, photography allows artist Lauren Greenfield to document how the quest to become thin is affecting women in her collection of photographs, *Girl Culture*. The use of photographic art can also allow artists to chronicle their predictions for society's future, as artist Amanda Koster did in her series of optimistic photos titled *This is Beautiful*. Through still images of naked women, Koster reveals her hope that one day society will accept all body types as beautiful. Unfortunately, it may take a while for Koster's prediction to come to fruition. In the mean time, weight stigmatization creates significant problems for overweight individuals. Weight prejudices not only cause individuals to suffer from low self-esteem, it also produces feelings of shame, isolation, restriction, and lack of fulfillment.

Unfortunately, the three-dimensional portrayal of the overweight body has not been sensitive to the overweight person. Artists like Erwin Wurm and John Isaacs employ humor or abjection to discuss the overweight body. However in *Being There*, my approach to discussing the body of size is through abstraction. By utilizing common, everyday objects like clear plastic eating utensils, the resulting structure within its confined space (the studio walls) refer to the overweight body and provides insight to how debilitating weight stigmatization can be on one's

psyche. Examining how other artists incorporate the everyday object in their work has lead me to reevaluate the aesthetic and theoretical approach to art. Artists Tara Donovan and Tony Feher, have opened my mind to the creative uses of everyday items. The clear plastic eating utensils are key in steering the viewer to the work's intended meaning. By utilizing the properties of installation art as well as exploiting the everyday object, I was able to create awareness to what it is like to be a person of size and its accompanying stigmatization through *Being There*.

HONORS IN STUDIO ART THESIS EXTENSION:

With the addition of several months, components of my senior thesis project have gained clarity and cohesion. The most noticeable shift is the aesthetics of the main, cylindrical structure. Also, certain elements of my first semester piece that were made in haste, like the chair and the choice of wall color, have been reevaluated and altered. Clarified cohesion

B(eats) Being There (formerly known as *Being There*) addresses the psychological consequences and the stigmatization that results from being overweight in today's world. Fat people, paradoxically, often feel invisible, where the opposite should be true (Figures 18-21). A large body takes up quite a bit of space, making it highly visible and difficult to discount. It's as if being around overweight people can result in catching a "fat virus", society discriminates against outsized people causing them to feel like second-class citizens lost in the background. To address this issue head on, I decided that my principal material would be clear, plastic cutlery. Using large quantities of forks, spoons and knives, I created a hollow cylindrical form that alludes to the overweight body. The current aesthetics of the cylindrical form looks different from the original version. I wanted my structure to appear more bulbous. I was unsatisfied with how flat my original configuration appeared. First, I began experimenting with using the cutlery to create the bulbous mounds on the outside surface, but I was unhappy with the results. I then decided that atop the cutlery, I would add plates to create a more organic form. However, I, along with my colleagues, liked the organic nature the plates created on their own. Thus, I decided to abandon the cutlery panels in favor of plate panels, that while it still incorporated the cutlery, it was able achieve the bulbous form I had intended.

The material I chose was my deliberate attempt to express the inferior treatment of overweight people. The material also allowed me to address the psychological effects produced by the stigma of being overweight. Within the structure, I chose to exchange the armchair with a chair I created. The chair, in fact, is impossible to sit in comfortably. I placed the chair in the center of the structure to create a feeling of restriction, isolation and neglect in the viewer. The viewer is unable to get to the chair because the cutlery serves as an obstruction. I want the

spectator to wonder what it would be like to sit in *that* chair and to understand how unattainable it is to sit *there*.

With the creation of the “impossible” chair, I have reproduced, to a small degree, some of the psychological reactions overweight people endure. It is unlikely that the viewer has ever had the sensation of having to sit in a chair that was so painful. I began with an Ikea chair, removed five inches from the middle, to create a very skinny chair that was unlikely to fit anyone’s buttocks.

The inclusion of the “impossible” chair is a poke at the societal standards of beauty and attractiveness. One morning while watching *Good Morning America*, the news anchors were in Los Angeles covering the Oscars. In one of the segments, the anchor was interviewing one of the interior designers responsible for decorating the Governor’s Ball (the party directly after the Oscars, attended by all the winners and the nominees). As the anchor pulled out a chair to give a better view to the camera, she commented on the fact that the chair was so tiny and that she, and possibly no one, could sit on it comfortably. But in fact, the very people the media inundates society with and our barometer of what is beautiful and an acceptable body weight, actresses and models, can sit on that chair. This segment resonated greatly with me and influenced my decision to create a very skinny “impossible” chair.

The last element of my first semester work that I addressed was the color of the walls. The original mustard yellow did not create the mood I was striving for. The dingy yellow was supposed express a feeling of sickness. Instead, the original color, along with the original armchair, simulated a residential living room. After doing further research into color theory, I choose to paint the few walls I have in my installation black. Black is seen as a heavy, even weighty shade. People think a black box will weigh more than a white one although they weigh the same. Black represents a void of color, a sense of emptiness or depression, which I felt, was more compatible with the psychological traumas overweight people endure from their stigmatization. In addition, wearing black makes one feel inconspicuous which matches an overweight person’s feelings of invisibility. Paradoxically, people often wear black to appear thinner.³⁴ My structure, “B(eats) Being There, placed against a black wall, anthropomorphically, looks as if it is trying its best to fit in and look thinner to a society which fears weight. However,

³⁴ <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/messages-meanings/color-meaning-symbolism-and-psychology/a-glimpse-into-the-meaning-symbolism-psychology-of-color.html>

during the installation process, the shadows that my piece were creating, needed to be highlighted. If I choose to the paint the walls black, the color would detract from the shadows. I am unsure if I will paint the walls black, yet, at this moment, I most likely will not.



Image 01 Lauren Greenfield "Lisa from Edina, Minnesota" (*Girl Culture*)



Image 02 Lauren Greenfield "Weight Loss Camp" (*Girl Culture*)



Image 07 Amanda Koster "This is Beautiful"



Image 08 Amanda Koster "This is Beautiful"



Image 03, Neena Laufer, "*Shelby*"



Image 04, Neena Laufer, "*Shelby*"



Image 05, Neena Laufer, "*Ellie*"



Image 06, Neena Laufer, "*Ellie*"



Image 09 Neena Laufer
"Being There"



Close-up Image 09, Neena Laufer
"Being There"



Image 10,
Erwin Wurm
"Fat Car"

Image 11, John Isaacs
"Can't Help the Way I Feel"

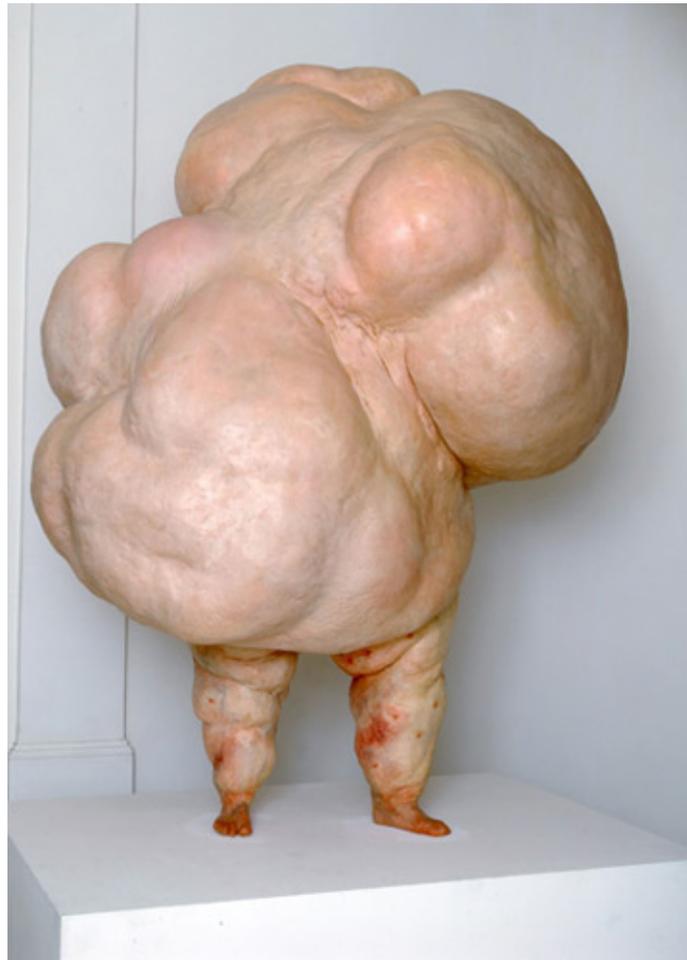




Image 12 Neena Laufer (Frontal and Rear View)
"Untitled (Cleaning Robot)"



Image 13, Neena Laufer
"Remedy"

Image 14, Neena Laufer
"Toothpaste Toupy"





Image 16,
Tara Donovan
"Untitled 2003"



Image 17,
Tony Feher
"A Little Birdie Told Me"



Image 18,
Neena Laufer
"B(eats) Being There



Image 19,
Neena Laufer
"B(eats) Being There"



Image 20,
Neena Laufer
"B(eats) Being There"



Image 21,
Neena Laufer
"B(eats) Being There"

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