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Skinny Girls Bleed Flowers, and Other Sick Lies

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Skinny Girls Bleed Flowers, and Other Sick Lies

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Senior Thesis Film in Media Studies

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Skinny Girls Bleed Flowers, and Other Sick Lies: An Artist's Statement

I am quite literally incapable of recalling a point in my life at which I felt comfortable in my own skin. What I do remember is giving my lunches to my boyfriend every day in high school. I remember being called fat for the first time in sixth grade, and, after that, never looking the same way at the other girls around me, always analyzing how the same shirts each of our mothers had bought us from Kohl's hung on their hips as opposed to mine, and eating my breakfast outside on the porch in the mornings so I could toss half-eaten potato patties and slices of toast into the bushes when my mom wasn't looking. I remember being in third grade and staring in the mirror for hours on end, wondering if I was *really* human, how that could be possible when I looked this strange and ugly, or if I was actually a part of some sort of alien race, which would finally explain how messed up and hideous I had always known I was. In some way of thinking or feeling or socializing or moving or, yes, eating, my eating disorder has always been with me. Even before I stopped daring to touch bread and started purging anything I consumed that exceeded 300 calories, it's been with me. And so has my love for creating.

I made my first film when I was ten years old; it was a re-enactment of a scene from one of the *Warriors* books by Erin Hunter, which were a middle-grade fiction series about clans of anthropomorphic wild cats, and the cast of the film consisted of a host of 20 small plush cat toys, my best friend at the time, and myself, she and I sitting just out of frame, reading lines off a script and wiggling whatever stuffed animal was supposed to be "talking" with our hands. As my abilities and interest in filmmaking developed, I started tackling a wider variety of subjects. By the time I finished high school, I had

made pieces about all forms of nostalgia (the main theme with which my work is usually concerned), travel, my traumatic junior year break-up, depression, and anxiety; in college I expanded my repertoire to include projects about sexuality, insomnia, family, loneliness, and, again, nostalgia. However, with the exception of one short Media Sketchbook exercise in which I touched on body image, this film has been the first attempt at tackling the subject of disordered eating that has ever seen the light of day.

For years, I had *tried* to make art about the experience of having an eating disorder; all I did was make art and starve myself, so making art about starving myself would only have made sense. But every attempt I made came up short in some way or another. It was too abstract and nobody would understand it, or it was too disturbing, or I was too self-conscious to film myself or look at the footage afterwards, let alone show it to anyone else, or it was problematic in some aspect or another, or it just wasn't *good* (or at least *good enough* - much like my body, as I saw it). Maybe my standards were too high because the subject was one too close to me, but I'm more inclined to believe that the difficulty lies with the subject itself. I've always been highly critical of existing media portrayals of eating disorders, because, well, they're horrible, at least the mainstream ones; how many times can you show people the exact same movie about an emaciated white girl who has enough privilege to scream and cry in a fancy treatment center and expect them to gain some sort of understanding about the experience of having an eating disorder from it?

But the more I tried to make media of my own about eating disorders, the closer I came to understanding why these portrayals continued to fall back on simplistic conventions and stereotypical imagery: eating disorders are virtually impossible to

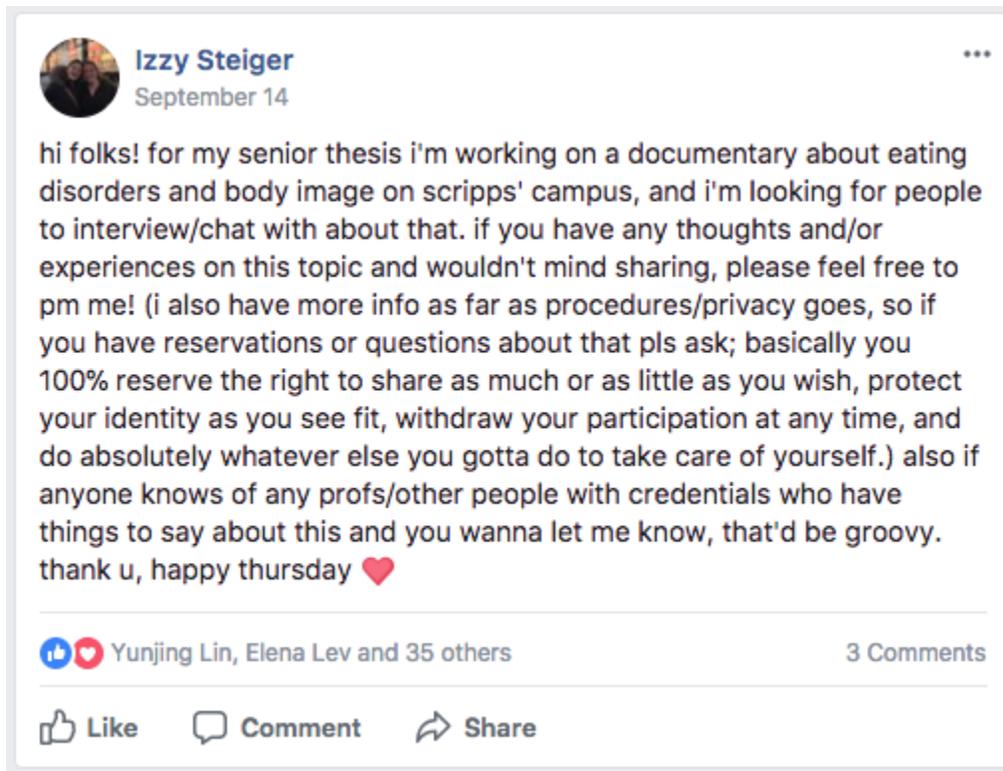
explain to people who have never had them, because even people who have had them can't understand them. They don't know why they're doing this to themselves any more than the people around them do. It's impossible to understand why this is happening to you, why there are so many important things you could be doing with your life and adventures you could be going on and late night talks you could be having with your friends and delicious foods you could be eating, but all you can think about is the size of your thighs. It does not make sense to hurt your body in this way, and if you can't explain it to yourself, how are you going to explain it to somebody who has never felt this way before?

In order to explain to people that this happens, it is packaged in the easiest pill to swallow, and that pill looks like Ellen in *To the Bone*, or Emma in *Red Band Society*, or Olivia in *Feed*: that pill is a tiny, long-haired, quirky, intelligent, cisgendered, class-privileged, able-bodied, white teenage girl. She's not fat, because a fat person who starves themselves is too hard to explain, and if they don't appear to be on the edge of death, audiences aren't as interested, either (mental health struggles, modern media tells us, exist, but they only matter if they're life-threatening). She's not a non-female identifying person, because men or non-binary people with eating disorders can't be as easily explained by the fashion industry, by advertising, by Hollywood, by glitzy pictures of size 2 women with flowing hair and perfect white teeth laughing on every billboard and television spot. She's not economically disadvantaged, because then you have to show what an eating disorder looks like *without* the experience of hospitalization or inpatient treatment or any other form of care that's accessible to our ideal heroine - the film needs to show them getting better so the issue doesn't weigh too heavily on

audiences after the credits roll. These tiny white girls are easy tiny white pills to swallow. If you're going to attempt to explain something as confusing and painful as an eating disorder, they are the ideal vessel. But I wanted to do better, I wanted to do more, and I wanted to do it differently.

After my many defeated attempts at creating films visualizing my own experience of having an eating disorder, I decided to try to tackle it from another angle. If I couldn't describe the emotional experience without packaging it in this cookie-cutter, problematic way, I would take another stance on it; I would make a documentary about eating disorders on Scripps College's campus. It would take a more analytical stance, and I would ask my peers questions about how they felt being at a women's college impacted their body image, and whether dining halls, gym culture, party culture, and Southern California's influence came together to create what seems to be a higher concentration of eating disorders than exists on most other college campuses. This is an issue my friends and I have discussed at length, especially since my eating disorder noticeably worsened in my second semester at Scripps, and I wanted to see if other people had also observed what we had (a tendency for Scripps students to comment on and therefore inadvertently police other students' food choices, a homogeneity of skinny body types on campus, a campus culture which worships the gym, and a tendency of constant comparison to one another). This concept was also another thinly veiled attempt to make a film that would help me explain to myself what had happened to me, although I was phrasing my leading question more as "Why does this keep happening here?" at the time.

So I looked for Scripps students to interview. I sent out an open call via our Facebook group of current students:



As is immediately visible, my post received a lot of likes; I had initially been looking for 3-4 people to interview, and had expected to need to put up flyers in addition to my post in order to achieve that goal. In reality, however, that post alone led 13 people to privately message me offering themselves up as interview subjects, and even more saying they would prefer not to be on camera but wanted to offer their services in any other capacity that I might need. I was instantly overwhelmed, but as a documentarian turning my camera not on myself but on others for one of the first times, I felt a responsibility to my fellow eating disorder survivors to hear every story that they were brave enough to be willing to share. I felt that this surge of interest was also deeply indicative of how rooted the body image epidemic is on our campus - if so many

people volunteered to be on camera, the number of people with similar traumatic experiences who weren't able to come forward about them must be huge.

The interviews themselves, which I began conducting in late September, were nerve-wracking, but each one was easier than the last, and they were all rich learning experiences. I asked a few of the same questions to each participant, most of which were campus-specific: "Do you feel like the dining hall has impacted your relationship with food?" "Do you feel as though you feel more pressure to look a certain way at Scripps than you do in other environments?" "How do you find the environment of the Field House?". I also allowed the interviews to flow more like conversations, bouncing off the answers that people gave me and asking follow-up questions, leaning in to the things that each person seemed interested in or comfortable talking about, and asked a question at the beginning of each interview that ended up being far more crucial to the end product of the film than I ever would have guessed: simply, "Can you tell me whatever you're comfortable with sharing about your history and current relationship with food and body image?"

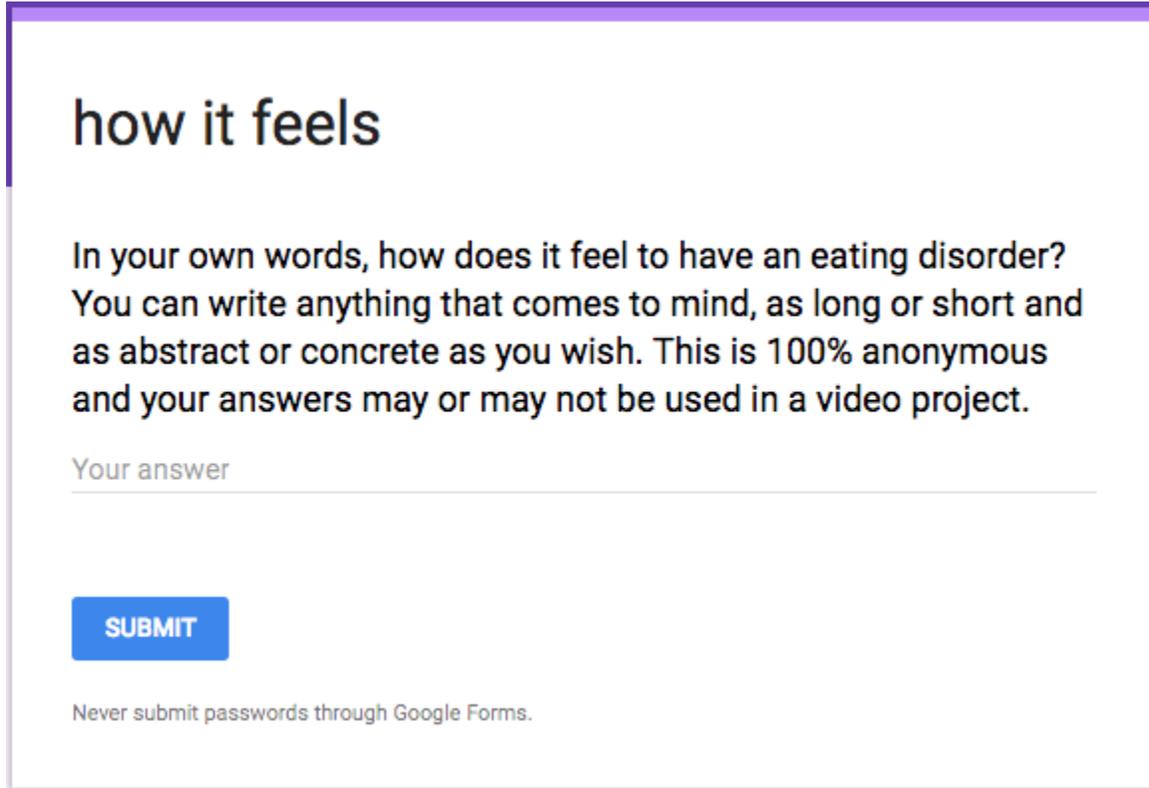
These interviews, of which I conducted eight over the course of about two months, ranged in length from 18 minutes to an hour and a half. I spoke with friends, acquaintances, and complete strangers. Some interactions were stiff, running along a mental wall through which we never managed to pass; others ended up being some of the most personal and revolutionary conversations I've ever had in my life.

As I was filming these interviews, I worked through each one in the editing room, creating timelines for each person in which I picked out the most significant or powerful things they had said, and slowly began to compile them together to create a narrative

about Scripps' body culture. I eventually ended up with a five-minute rough cut which touched on the dining hall, Southern Californian culture, gym culture, and every other thing I had asked about, but it still felt as though something deep and integral was missing from it. It didn't quite flow, and people weren't as dynamically in conversation with one another as I would have liked. I had also found myself unable to completely let go of the goal of creating a representation of the emotional experience of having an eating disorder, and had filmed various other clips, some with the assistance of a friend who is an artist and a gifted photographer, which were more artistic and dramatic in nature. Some of these clips included me re-enacting breakdowns I had previously had, in which I hit myself, repeatedly and violently body-checked, and cut my own hair. No matter how I tried, though, I couldn't find a way to pair these clips and that raw aspect of the eating disorder experience with the more detached, didactic clips I had selected from my interviews. Again, the tension between logic and experience was just too great.

In an attempt to generate some sort of middle ground between these two things, I reached out to Facebook once more, asking for responses to an anonymous Google

Form:

A screenshot of a Google Form titled "how it feels". The form has a purple header bar. Below the title, the text reads: "In your own words, how does it feel to have an eating disorder? You can write anything that comes to mind, as long or short and as abstract or concrete as you wish. This is 100% anonymous and your answers may or may not be used in a video project." Below this text is a text input field with the placeholder "Your answer". At the bottom left of the form is a blue "SUBMIT" button. At the bottom center, there is a small text note: "Never submit passwords through Google Forms."

I received 24 responses to the form. Choice phrases included, “no matter what you do, you will never be good enough”, “you are your own worst enemy”, “isolating”, “I am so focused on food on my body that I don’t get to live and experience joy”, and, the one which hit me the hardest, “you push your fingers down and push the weakness up... how strange to be made stronger by becoming smaller”. I read these responses out loud into an external audio recorder, and made a soundtrack for my emotional shots by layering my voice over itself seven times and fading the volume in and out on each track periodically, creating an overwhelming voice soundscape in which key phrases jumped out from time to time.

As a result, I had these two separate videos: my interview component, and my artistic component. I had them in the same timeline, but they absolutely did not work

together. 40 seconds of black space stood between them, and I had no idea how to bridge it. I was exhausted, physically and emotionally, from hours spent alone in an editing room with the voices of these people who were suffering repeating their stories over and over in my ears. Desperate and confused, I asked Professor Kaneko, whose Advanced Editing class I was in this semester and whose opinion I greatly respect, to sit down with me and look through what I had. What she told me was something that I didn't necessarily want to hear at the time, but certainly needed to. "What is most engaging to me about your interviews is the parts where people are talking about their own individual experiences," she said. "I know you set out to make this about Scripps, but having it revolve around the institution takes the emotion and individuality out of it. I think if you go back through and select pieces from your interviews that are more personal, you will have more success pairing them with your visuals, and it will be more complete."

So I completely re-cut everything, and picked out the clips toward which I gravitated because of their emotional impact. Eventually, I found other themes emerging: the relentlessness of eating disorders, the confusion and silence surrounding them, and, much to my surprise, something that came full-circle back to my initial struggles of representing eating disorders in film: the lack of complexity and variety in media about eating disorders, the false narratives it creates, and how these erroneous representations directly wrong and harm people who suffer from eating disorders who aren't encompassed by the easy-to-swallow white waif image. Before I knew it, I had taken audio from my interviews, added music to it, and put my visuals on top, mixed in with clips lifted from mainstream eating disorder media (from the three films/shows I

derided as generic on page three: *To the Bone*, *Red Band Society*, and *Feed*) and footage I had shot for one of my previous “failed” attempts at creating an eating disorder film a few summers ago, in which I cut, cook, plate, and eat flowers as though they are food.

The emotional impact, I was surprised to find, was strong and comprehensible. Through the combination of these interview describing other people’s experiences and my own visuals, I had created something close to what I had always wanted to create. But something was still missing, so I asked everyone if I could film them again - all but two of them said yes, one of whom was too busy, and one of whom is no longer on campus because she has entered inpatient treatment (I removed the first participant from the film entirely and represented the second abstractly). I rented a projector from the Pitzer equipment center, I exported my draft film, I went back to each of my participants, and I explained to them that I wanted them to sit silently in their bedrooms as I projected images onto them and filmed them under these images (and that they could watch/listen to the video I was projecting if they wished, with my warning that I, at least, found it triggering - about half of them did, while others elected to have me turn the laptop screen away so that they could not see, and listen to music or have me chat with them while the projection ran instead). I was expecting at least one or two of them to be uncomfortable with this suddenly artistic component, which I had not previously explained would be a part of the project, but everyone was very gracious and willing to help.

After completing this final segment of the shooting process, I took the footage of the participants in their room underneath the light of the projections and put it on top of

the audio clips of each person talking, accounting as best I could for relevance to what was being said paired with the clip playing in the projection, as well as how the projection appeared differently based on the shapes and decorations of people's rooms. The result was a soundtrack describing these people's experiences, with visuals of their faces and living spaces on top; however, these visuals and their stories were purposefully smothered by these other images conveying stereotypical representations of eating disorders. I aimed to simultaneously paint a picture of the experience while contrasting it with the narratives that I had always taken issue with in other media representations; emotional, yet still a charged commentary.

After creating this commentary, representing each individual visually with their voice behind them yet also blending their experiences into a semi-universal narrative under the same projected images, I bring it back to each person at the end by fading from a clip of the people under their projection to their interview footage. For the first time, the viewer sees these people actually speaking, and understands them as individuals. After seeing what it's not, and feeling what it's like, the viewer sees these real people with eating disorders and is finally enlightened as to who it *is*.

My hope is that this film creates an understanding of eating disorders in those who see it. Even if eating disorders are impossible to understand logically or intellectually, there is a powerful form of interpersonal understanding which results when people share their experiences with one another and find a way to relate. Comparing oneself to typical representations of eating disorders only leads to the feeling that one isn't sick enough, that one's experience is somehow invalid because it doesn't completely match a certain simplified narrative. By illustrating diverse experiences and

contrasting them to this normative image, I aim to facilitate the understanding that everyone's experience is different and valid, and that we can share our pain and our compassion with one another through it all.