

Throughout my time at university, the only life models I have had access to have thin, athletic body-types. Additionally, almost all the artworks seen around the university are of thinner bodies. Only one of all the artworks discussed during our *Demystifying The Image* module was depicting a larger body-type. This confuses me, especially when the purpose of life drawing is to understand the body; how it looks, how to draw it, different angles, and perspective. Towards the end of my first year, I wanted to explore rolls of flesh on the body. I found this idea particularly difficult to carry out given the models available. This led to an almost frustrating drawing session with the life model, as neither of us could think of a way to contort her body to a shape that portrayed rolls or folds in her skin, and if we did find just the right angle the depictions were unnatural... forced. The average body for a woman is 5'5" in height and a size 16 (Hosie, 2017), 41" bust, 33" waist and 43" hips (ASOS, n.d.). So why are we being taught how to represent the body using models that do not represent the body? Is modern art perpetuating the idea that to be thin is to be beautiful? To be thin is to be a work of art, literally? I find it so strange how in a time when we are questioning the idea of the model physique, we are still teaching that the human body is a surreal, statuesque build.

Venus By Fernando Botero is a fine example of breaking the 'small equals beautiful' theme that most art portrays. The statue weighs 5 tons and depicts Venus, "the goddess of love, sex, beauty and fertility" (Garcia, 2013). The most striking thing about this sculpture is that Venus is represented as a visibly overweight, curvy woman. Upon first seeing this image, I was shocked. This piece was the first time that I had seen a larger person portrayed as a public representation of the body. It is also the first time I had seen a bigger body have such strong connections to love and beauty.



Figure 1

Comparing this image to all the Venus' in the Victoria and Albert Museum's Explore Pages (Collection, n.d.), this is the largest figure by far. The second largest Venus' are those drawn by Jan De Bisschop. However, these depictions still have an unrealistic hourglass shape (V&A Explore The Collections, 2009).

For years society has been confusing hourglass and plus sized. Using Marylin Monroe as the example, she is constantly referred to as a larger icon within the media. However, a quick look at her measurements would inform you that she had a 28.5" waist (MARILYN MONROE'S TRUE SIZE, n.d.), which would only make her a UK size 10, in modern-day going by ASOS' chart (n/d). From an Independent article made in 2017, it is clear that even in the 1950s- when Monroe was at the hight of her celebrity- she would have been the size of the average woman, having a 28" waist (Hosie, 2017). Therefore, why is it that she is classed as plus sized? The horrible truth is the most cited picture of Monroe, used when discussing her being larger (see fig.2), she was pregnant (Rumor Revealed: Marilyn Monroe Plus Sized?, 2017) (Marilyn Monroe, 2014).



Figure 2

Additionally, Marilyn had endometriosis which is commonly associated with heavy bloating (Rumor Revealed: Marilyn Monroe Plus Sized?, 2017). Once again this as an example of the media we consume having an impact on the way we see the world. In modern day, you would not dare to comment on pregnancy weight gain...or would you? (see fig.3)



Figure 3

From figure 3, it is not hard to see that during all different life stages women are shamed and scrutinised by the way they look. Growing up in this toxic environment, consuming art and media all about weight, is bound to give young women complexes about their bodies. Recently Billie Eilish spoke about why she always wears baggy clothes.

*The singer explained “the only reason I did it was 'cos I hated my body.” She later went on to say, “There was a point last year where I was naked, and I didn't recognize my body 'cos I hadn't seen it in a while...Whose body is that?” (Willen, 2020)*

Being just 18 at the time of the interview, Eilish has a clear view on how she felt about her body. It would not be ridiculous to say that millions of other women have weight and body insecurities, especially given the way 2000's media portrays body image. The issue is, we can only identify the problematic behaviours within media by talking to people that it has affected when they are older and have the skills to associate their feelings with the environment they grew up in.

Unfortunately, this idea of overanalysing your body or focusing on your weight is not a new concept. Dieting has been around for years and the media having a hold on how we view our bodies is not modern. Nor is it an idea that is dying off. On the 29th of November 2008 episode three of season two of BBC's *Outnumbered* aired (List of Outnumbered episodes - Wikipedia, n.d.). Within this episode, we see a young girl -age 12- refuse a plate of biscuits with the excuse of “not for me, I'm watching my weight” (Outnumbered, 2008). There are no visible signs of obesity in this character, there are no unhealthy traits, and we only see this character partake in a healthy lifestyle. However, the fact that when offered a snack, her first response is about her figure, should have been more discussed within the episode. It is clips similar to this that will be internalised by young viewers and manifest into eating disorders in later life.

Studies have shown a correlation between when a child plays with a doll that has an ultra-thin body type and eating disorders. "...girls who played with Barbies were more likely to restrict their eating afterwards than girls who played with the fuller-figured (now discontinued) Emme dolls." (Hains, 2014) Why are there not greater movements to change this? Clearly media is not focusing on how this perpetuation of thin being beautiful is a negative concept. If Child A hears Child B refuse food, stating if they deny food, they will get thinner and therefore they will be pretty. Child A may learn this behaviour and start refusing food. Especially if they are constantly seeing their idols, who are already thin, promoting diet culture online. Media personality, Sierra Schultzzie talks about how 'detox' tea companies ask her to promote their products as a way of selling confidence, "with me I think they were going for, drink this so you can feel like me drink this so you can finally feel good about yourself" (Schultzzie, 2019). This furthers the idea that by consuming low calorie foods or liquid diets, in the eyes of the media you will be the best version of yourself.

In 1963 Mattel released a Barbie *Babysits* doll. Her subjects were; how to lose weight, how to get a raise and how to travel (Vintage Barbie Baby-Sits, n.d.). One of the books she carries *How to Lose Weight* states 'don't eat' on the back cover. "She came with a set of scales that read 110 lbs which would be around 35 lbs underweight for a woman of Barbies height" (MESSYNESSY, 2014). From this it is clear to see that for over 50 years, the content that young children have access to still somewhat relates to health, weight and size. Even if a young child does not realise that given the weight on the scales *Barbie* is severely underweight, they will notice small hips, small waist, large bust, skinny legs and her thighs do not touch. Other studies have shown that when presented with a doll that is more in proportion with the human figure than *Barbie*, the children found *Barbie* to be the more attractive of the two figures. When asked what job *Barbie* would have some replied model (Ramsey, 2014). Further studies have seen children respond to *Curvy Barbie* compared to regular *Barbie*. The results of this study found only 6% of girls chose *Curvy Barbie* to play with.

*"...when asked why they would not want to play with her, at least 25 percent of the girls said it was because curvy Barbie was fat, chubby, or "big." (Engeln Ph.D., 2019)*

This clearly shows that from a young age we idealise an unnatural and unobtainable figure. The children in the studies judged the larger dolls as not pretty because they were bigger, even though they were more accurate than original *Barbie*.

There is a constant mislabelling of what plus size and mid-size means. Continuing using *Barbie* as the example in 2016 *Curvy Barbie* was released. However *Curvy Barbie* was still only a "US size 4" or a UK size 8 (Engeln Ph.D., 2019). As established above, this is not even an average size; this wasn't even average size for 50 years ago (Hosie, 2017). This mislabelling continues, with the 2019 addition of a "plus sized" Victoria's Secret model. "... [Victoria's Secret] sought to repair it's image with the hire of size 14 [US] plus sized model... "size 14 is actually the average size"" (Moor, 2021). Once again this is exaggerating what plus sized means as we are labelling average or medium size as 'plus'. This suggests that the average woman is more or bigger than expected. In fact it is rather passive aggressive for society to see that is acceptable. By allowing this to continue we are implying that the average woman needs to loose weight or should be smaller as she is currently 'plus'.

Ideally, we shouldn't be over analysing ourselves however, it is very hard to do that even almost everything relates to our bodies. Surely looking at yourself and over evaluating whether you are neutral or positive or negative about your body is still a bad thing. Any kind of overanalysing will have negative impacts. We are aware as a society that too much of anything is bad for you; too much exercise, too much sugar, too much screen-time etc. Excessively looking at your body and commenting on it can and has led varying degrees of body dysmorphia -which the NHS considers a disorder in severe cases (Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), n.d.).

In the 1960s the fat-acceptance movement coined the phrase *body positivity*, the concept of loving your body no matter what it looks like (Naftulin, 2020). The root of the cause was to emphasise that not just euro-centric bodies were beautiful and valid. 2015 saw a *sister* concept arise, *body neutrality*

(Naftulin, 2020). As neutrality suggests, this movement is more about not having any thoughts about your body. Others have described *body neutrality* as what your body does for you over how it looks (Naftulin, 2020). Given how bombarded we are with pictures of people, be it on store fronts, *Instagram*, magazines or even getting dressed, it is hard to imagine not thinking about our bodies. Especially when part of your degree is about analysing human structure. However, that does not mean that just by living people are opening themselves out to be publicly scrutinised.

While I understand that part of my art degree focuses on drawing the human figure, it seems out of touch that this issue has not been addressed in terms of what artists are being taught. We are being instructed to use this life model as the baseline for our understanding of how to draw and look at people. The model being used does not represent people. Yet from the examples above it is clear to see why someone of a larger body type would not necessarily feel comfortable putting themselves forward as a life model. The media shows us that if you are larger, it is because you are unhealthy or if you are larger, it is because you are pregnant or if you are larger than what Society deems attractive you do not have a place in magazines or runway shows. I know that there are plus size models that exist but it feels like these companies are using larger women as a marketing ploy. Victoria's Secret needed to rebrand itself after the company had lost value and it was trendy at the time to get into the market of bigger women. We saw Savage X Fenty (van Elven, 2019) launch a range of lingerie for bigger women. Its shows were being watched repeatedly, it made headlines and the brand was being praised. So naturally other companies joined in, they expanded their plus size range. While it is great to see this inclusiveness, it is sad that it comes from a place of money making. Kim Kardashian's "mum weight" is put on front covers to sell magazines. It would just be nice to see larger representation from a genuine source. From a source of bigger women who love and accept their bodies coming into a place of education to teach younger people how to draw and experience the larger body. From an artistic perspective and not from a capitalist perspective.

## Further research

- Male experience- how I cannot really speak about it but I know that men must have a similar thing.
- Non-binary people- not mentioned at all, same with trans people, these bodies will look and respond differently.
- Larger women in historical paintings- are there any? Why are they not more known?
- Lizzo- body positivity, working out for a body that is no one's business.
- Male gaze- patriarchy, sex sells. Billy Vogue, abuse, sexual assault, baggie clothes. Misogyny.
- Other cultures- some cultures do not have an 'hourglass' as the desired figure.
- Waist-training- the return and/or reclamation of the corset
- Tessa Holiday- large woman on front cover, outrage? 2017/18 Now recovering from anorexia.
- Diet culture- becoming an industry, pills, lollies, powders. Gym subscriptions
- Overall, I want to talk about how art is supposed to be about freedom and expression, but it does not express the views or larger bodies- therefore, it cannot truly brand itself as inclusive. While art is about expression it follows the same tropes we see in all media of larger people not being seen or addressed at all.

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Figure 1

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Figure 2

Marylin Monroe, 2017. Available at: <https://marilynismsblog.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/cuws2gzwgaa6kqw.jpg?w=840> [Accessed 17 April 2021]

Figure 3

Daily Beast, Kim Kardashian, 2017. Available at: [https://img.thedailybeast.com/image/upload/c\\_crop,d\\_placeholder\\_euli9k,h\\_1439,w\\_2560,x\\_0,y\\_0/dpr\\_1.5/c\\_limit,w\\_908/fl\\_lossy,q\\_auto/v1492787173/articles/2013/03/27/pregnant-kim-kardashian-is-being-fat-shamed-and-it-needs-to-stop/130326-KIM-KARDASHIAN-FAT-tease\\_mbnei4](https://img.thedailybeast.com/image/upload/c_crop,d_placeholder_euli9k,h_1439,w_2560,x_0,y_0/dpr_1.5/c_limit,w_908/fl_lossy,q_auto/v1492787173/articles/2013/03/27/pregnant-kim-kardashian-is-being-fat-shamed-and-it-needs-to-stop/130326-KIM-KARDASHIAN-FAT-tease_mbnei4) [Accessed 17 April 2021]