

Cover Sheet

Student Number: 2104305

Course Title: Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Word Count: 1501

Tutor's Name: Ryan Moule

The Standard of Beauty

An exhibition exploring the unreasonable standard of female beauty.

The 21st century is undoubtedly the time of aesthetics and 'perfecting' our appearance, all steaming from the heavily influential space of social media. Beauty, of course, being a focal point to this, makes a lot of women struggle with feeling comfortable in their natural bodies or simply with being accepted by society. The standards are becoming harder and harder to achieve, but "the qualities of a person or thing that give pleasure to the senses or to the mind"(Merriam-Webster dictionary) is the simplified definition of beauty. Does this not mean that beauty is subjective in the eyes of the beholder? Yet so many are making a specific mould for all shapes to fit. This topic is much more prevalent in our everyday lives than a lot would assume, making it a hard-hitting, important exhibition to curate.

The curation will include 14 pieces of work in collaboration with 5 artists, located in the Mission Gallery, Swansea. The pieces carry themes of harsh beauty standards, female oppression and empowerment and the "male gaze" (Laura Mulvey, 1975). The importance of all 5 artists being women was imperative to the theme; having the woman's voice talking about women's struggles rather than being powered over by males. Female representation in art is a strong theme throughout this exhibition, even though it is not the concept behind the curation and exhibition, knowing that "the works of female artists comprise only a small share of major permanent collections in the western world" (Pallant Gallery, 2021) means more action needs to take place to improve this.

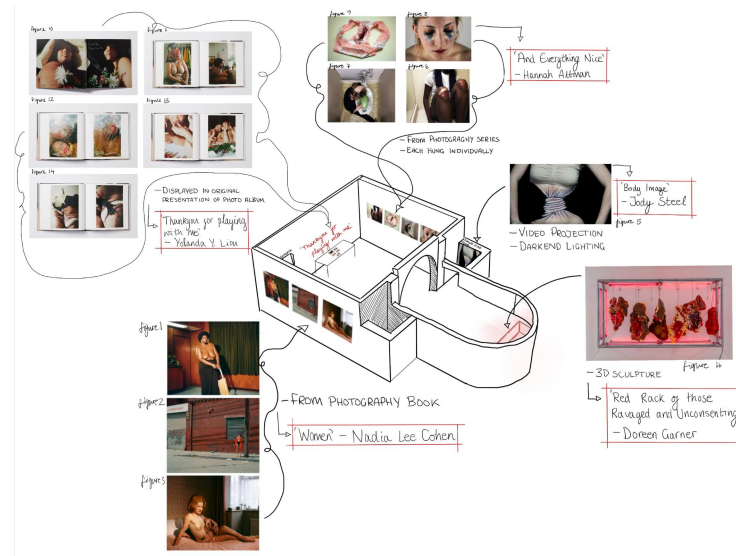


Figure 15

The Mission Gallery's layout lends perfectly to highlighting each piece individually, whilst also bringing everything together with the curved architecture towards the back of the gallery. The curation for the exhibition 'The Standard of Beauty' is layed out to follow a flow around the gallery, while also having a central piece, figure 4, in the back section of the gallery to pull the viewers around.

The location of the gallery is also a draw to hold the exhibition there; being near the sea will create a great juxtaposition between people relaxing and being hit with shocking art they would never have expected to see there. This notion of not being in-control of what they thought they were going to be viewing that day carries the theme of the exhibition right through to the audience member, in a way, putting them in the place of how women are viewed: "Woman is the object of the look. Ever on display, she receives the look and holds it, but lacks authority to give or direct it" (Mulvey, 1975). Parts of this exhibition, if not all, should make the audience feel uncomfortable, in order to fully sense the art work you have to understand the people behind it.



Figure 1, 2, 3

The exhibition will begin with Nadia Lee Cohen's *Women* (2018-2021) - Figures 1, 2 and 3 displayed on the immediate right wall when you walk in. This is a strong beginning to the exhibition as the selection of three photographs from the series, represents how women are viewed by society, while also celebrating the body and rebelling against censorship.

For much of western art history, male artists have used women as their subjects, very often characterising them as virgin, mother, whore. Women are idealised to fit particular ideas of beauty, femininity and sexual desire. (Pallant House Gallery, *unauthorised*, 2018).

All three figures show women photographed with their breasts uncovered. The shock people feel when viewing this series for the first time demonstrates the taboo of such a sight: a woman's bare breasts being shown non-sexually, while conforming to stereotypical roles of a woman, like cleaning, conveying the act of cooking and prostitution (which depicts that women are for men's satisfaction rather than their own beings).

In figure 1, the fact it is a Black woman being photographed, along with the previous point, is shamingly, a rare subject for art and photography. Similarly, figure 3 shows a burn victim as the subject, displaying another audacious act of artistry by displaying an under-represented section of humanity.

Cohen's inclusivity will not go unnoticed by women, especially women of racial and physical minorities as "it is important for us to be exposed to varying forms of the body in order to feel connected to our own" (Cohen, 2021). This is essentially what the topic of this exhibition is surrounding, making a world accepting of all women to feel comfortable in their own skin.

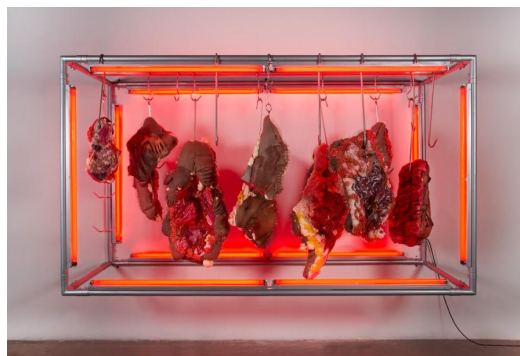


Figure 4

Figure 4, Red Rack of those Ravaged and Unconsenting (2017) by Doreen Garner, is the statement piece of this exhibition. This is not to say it is the most important piece, but arguably the most shocking in the exhibition, which is why it is placed alone in the centre back of the gallery. This will also enable a potential glow through the rest of the gallery from the fluorescent lighting it includes.

Similarly to figures 1, 2 and 3, this piece carries themes of disability, racism and capitalism, depicting "violent exploitation of Black bodies by the medical industry" (Thackara, 2018). This type of exploitation of Black women was not only dangerous, but added to the horrifying idea that Black women were not worth as much as white women. This is still seen today in society, as well as in the beauty world. It affects all areas of Black women's lives, which is why pieces like this are so important to include in exhibitions, so that hopefully it "helps people to understand how deep the wounds go, and the necessity of acknowledgement in order to begin healing" (Garner, 2018).



Figure 5

Displayed in the small side room of the gallery is figure 5, *Body Image* (2016) by Jody Steel. The reasoning behind this curation is because this space can have darker lighting than the rest of the gallery, better emphasising Steel's illusion of painting her torso to show the battle people face with body image. This powerful video had an impact on thousands, going viral the year it was released. This shows how relevant this subject is in today's society, being an urgent matter to address in some people's lives. The contortion Steel created through her painting is not "directed at one particular body image issue, but all of them" (Steel, 2016). This is a vital point to make, as there is not one issue that outweighs the others, but all of them that need to be tackled in order to make a change to The Standard of Beauty.

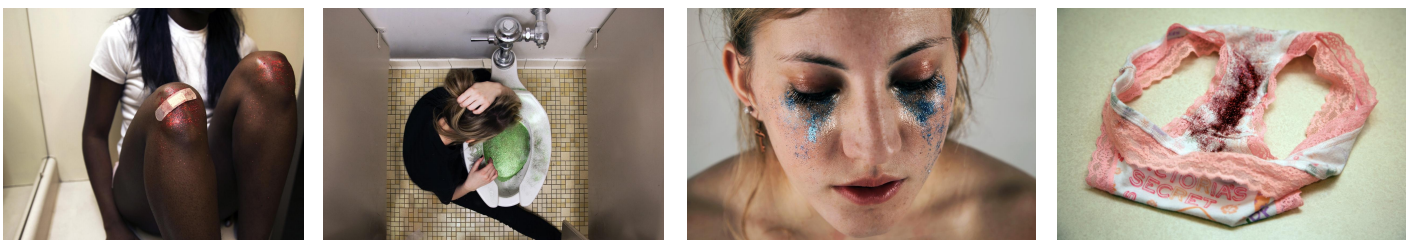


Figure 6,7,8,and 9

Considering the exhibition's curation, 4 photography pieces, figures 6,7,8 and 9 from Hannah Altman's *And Everything Nice* (2015) series will be hung on the wall opposing figures 1, 2 and 3. This series was created "to draw attention to the deeply rooted instinct she sees in society to sanitise and ornament women's bodies" (Newell-Hansen, 2015). This is such a

common, perhaps subconscious, thought from many that women are to be cleaner, more attractive and more pleasant to be around than men. This exact thought can be so pressuring to women, especially when facing everyday struggles of life; for instance, monthly periods, getting unwell or injured or simply crying. The narrative that women are to always be attractive like we are objects to view needs to end, and with series' like Altman's, this is slowly being realised more.



Figures 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Figures 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, *Thankyou for Playing with Me* (2019) by Yolanda Liou will be the final piece to the exhibition. The curation of this was decided by seeing this series presented as a book previously, this way it really comes across as a story to the audience. This series is specifically created with the beauty expectations from Asia in mind. Liou photographing plus sized women in beautiful ways brings the perfect representation she needed when she was younger, recalling how “almost like a mantra, we kept repeating: I want to be thin, I want to be tall” (Liou 2019). The simplistic elegance of this book is the perfect way to end an exhibition on *The Standard of Beauty* as it will leave the audience with a warming message that beauty is everywhere, however it will not take away from the importance of the rest of the exhibition they have walked through.

The intention of this exhibition is to shock and provoke the audience, causing them to look in at their own behaviours. How do they view beauty? Should they change their behaviour towards others' appearances? Is there a way to release the pressure of beauty standards, or is it too late? An exhibition displaying strong female artists is inspiring in itself, but along with the powerful messages from these women, makes this exhibition a real statement in moving towards equality and a more reasonable standard of beauty for everyone. The pressure of a seemingly simple or non-important subject is one which can change the way so many live their lives.

Figures

Figure 1: Cohen, N.L. (2018-2021) *Women* [photograph] published by IDEA.

Available at:

<https://www.numero.com/en/photography/interview-nadia-lee-cohen-women-idea#slide1376>

[18](#) (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 2: Cohen, N.L. (2018-2021) *Women* [photograph] published by IDEA.

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Figure 3: Cohen, N.L. (2018-2021) *Women* [photograph] published by IDEA. Available at:

<https://www.numero.com/en/photography/interview-nadia-lee-cohen-women-idea#slide1376>

[18](#) (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 4: Garner, D (2017) *Red Rack of those Ravaged and Unconsenting* [stainless steel bars, fluorescent lights, wiring, silicone, insulation foam, glass beads, fibreglass insulation, steel hooks, steel pins, pearls] Halle für Kunst Steiermark, Austria. Available at:

<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/doreen-garner-halle-fur-kunst-steiermark-1234612195/> (Accessed: 5th March 2022)

Figure 5: Steel, J (2016) *Body Image* [video] posted to Facebook and YouTube. Photograph available at: <https://www.self.com/story/jody-steel-body-image-viral-video> (Accessed 3rd March 2022) Video available at:

https://www.facebook.com/artistjodysteel/videos/?ref=page_internal (Accessed 3rd March 2022)

Figure 6: Altman, H (2015) *And Everything Nice ~ Knees* [photograph] Available at: <https://www.hannahaltmanphoto.com/andeverythingnice#9> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 7: Altman, H (2015) *And Everything Nice ~ Bathroom* [photograph] Available at: <https://www.hannahaltmanphoto.com/andeverythingnice#9> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 8: Altman, H (2015) *And Everything Nice ~ Crying* [photograph] Available at: <https://www.hannahaltmanphoto.com/andeverythingnice#9> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 9: Altman, H (2015) *And Everything Nice ~ Period Blood* [photograph] Available at: <https://www.hannahaltmanphoto.com/andeverythingnice#9> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 10: Lion, Y (2019) *Thankyou for Playing with Me* [photograph] Neo Hua Ren, The Crypt Gallery. Available at: <https://yolandaliou.com/Thank-You-For-Playing-With-Me> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 11: Lion, Y (2019) *Thankyou for Playing with Me* [photograph] Neo Hua Ren, The Crypt Gallery. Available at: <https://yolandaliou.com/Thank-You-For-Playing-With-Me> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 12: Lion, Y (2019) *Thankyou for Playing with Me* [photograph] Neo Hua Ren, The Crypt Gallery. Available at: <https://yolandaliou.com/Thank-You-For-Playing-With-Me> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 13: Lion, Y (2019) *Thankyou for Playing with Me* [photograph] Neo Hua Ren, The Crypt Gallery. Available at: <https://yolandaliou.com/Thank-You-For-Playing-With-Me> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

Figure 14: Lion, Y (2019) *Thankyou for Playing with Me* [photograph] Neo Hua Ren, The Crypt Gallery. Available at: <https://yolandaliou.com/Thank-You-For-Playing-With-Me> (Accessed: 3rd March 2022)

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