

Dissertation Proposal:

Beauty, Body and Social Standards

Student name:

Saffron Carthew

Student Number:

1907206

Course:

BA Fine art: studio, site and context

Module:

Practise in context (ADAD5001)

Word Count: 2370

Lecturer: Paul Duerinck

Beauty, Body And Social Standards

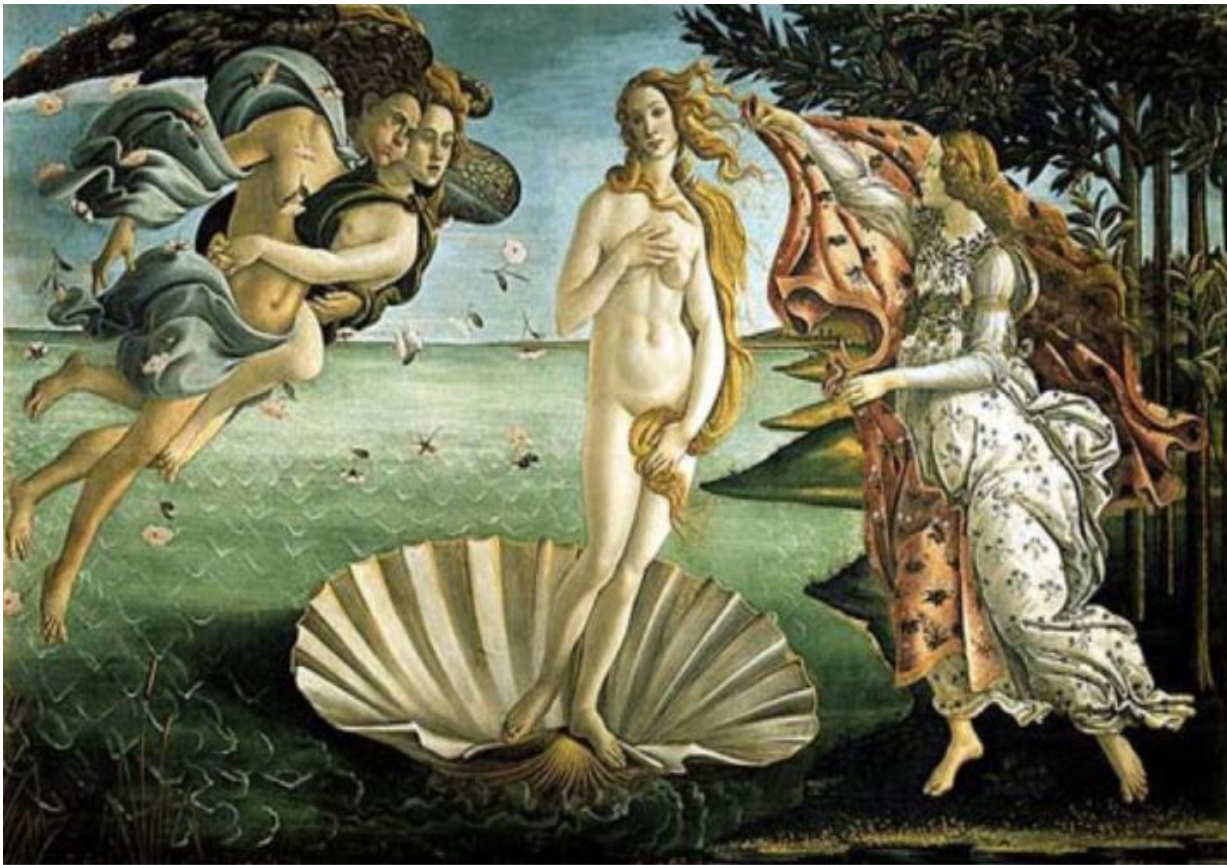
Dissertation Proposal

Within my proposal for my dissertation I will be focusing on 3 key words that reflect my interests and passions within my work. I will be researching Beauty, Body and Social Standards and will link them together to form a question for my independent document. I will look at ideas of beauty from the past and throughout society; also, how beauty has change throughout the centuries. My research will also delve into the body and modifications, to link with the feeling of 'beautiful'. I will then discuss Social Standards and the effects of today's pressure to look a certain way. These will all relate to a mix of visual artists, philosophers and contemporary and historical contexts. This theme is something I have very raw emotion about and understand on a personal level, this is shown in my own practice.

"Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty..."(Hume 1757, 136)

The definition of "beauty" and what may be seen as "beautiful" has been one of the most debated and controversial themes in philosophy. Throughout time it has showed many different theories and individual perspectives. Plato, a Greek philosopher believed that there was " a universal truth." He stated that there was a perfect form of beauty that was "imperfectly manifested in what we call beautiful" (Plato 427BC) Some people believe that outer beauty is dominant and beauty is defined by someone's outer appearance and other believe it is something that comes from within; this creates a controversial issue. Over the years beauty has changed and differed from culture to culture. The main questions that arise so far is what is the true meaning of beauty? How has have different opinions of beauty changed throughout the years?

Going back to Greek times, some of the ideas of beauty are still here today, on the contrast other ideas of beauty have completely gone. For example, long hair was essential for the women of beauty for a long time. However now in the twentieth and twenty first century this notion has been changed not just by women but also men for the gender equality notion. Beauty in the ancient times was associated with health and the ability of women to continue the healthy gene pool to their offspring. Women whom has big hips and larger breasts were considered beautiful as they was illustrated as the most fertile. This alteration of beauty ideals leaves me questioning what inspired to change the perception of it from plump and curvaceous to skinny and unnatural.



(Birth of Venus, Sandro Botticelli, 1486. Accessed 10th April 2021)

In Renaissance, the Ancient Greek culture and the ideas of beauty became embedded into everyday life. The antique style of women were portrayed symmetrical and proportions of women's bodies were voluptuous with graceful arms and legs. Their skin a soft porcelain complexion emphasised with makeup. The goddess in the birth of Venus is weightless, graceful and delicate. Over time it is easy to understand these ideals change and evolve, just as we do as a human race. In the Middle Ages nudity among women was praised and the display of a women's breast/cleavage became ethical. Women's necklines were decorated with frills and pearls. Although this time was hugely popular for women and began to spread it did not come without consequence. In 1713 The Guardian wrote a article complaint of women allowing their necks and top of their breast to remain uncovered. A English poet also wrote "the neck of a fine woman at present take in almost half the body" (Joseph Addison 1672). These opinions were not only stemmed from men but also women in later publications, Susan J. Vincent writes "otherwise polite, genteel women looked like common prostitutes." (The anatomy of fashion 2009)

During the Tudor period, Elizabeth 1st brought back the ideal of white cheeks, however during this time women's perceptions on body shape and sizes began to change in England. The view of women soon changed from fertility and health to fame and sexuality. In the twentieth century the appreciation of natural folds in the body was no longer, and the smaller size became the new standard. The pressure to fit into the smallest dress and have the tiniest waist was growing and the idea behind true beauty has been forgotten about. The Kardashians began to take over as well as plastic surgery and the once delicate female form now becomes a botched Barbie doll, with drastic bodily changes. "To live in a culture in which women are routinely naked,

where men aren't, is to learn inequality in little ways all day long" (Naomi Wolf *The Beauty Myth* 2002).

The questions that arise here are; How controlled and manipulated are women today? Will beauty become more about an individual's personal traits or will it forever be what we see on the outside?

This has led me onto my second keyword, Body. Throughout the times the ideals of bodies have changed drastically and are forever changing, will we ever appreciate again the true form of natural beauty?

The human body has been used in the art world for centuries and has been an enduring fascination. Many of the earliest surviving artefacts now classified as 'art' depict the human form, or testify to its presence, and artists have continued to grapple with the subject through postmodernism and beyond. Today in the 21st century, the body is all we as a society seem to be fixated on. Throughout the years not only the definition of beauty has changed but also the idea of the "ideal body". To be "natural" no longer seems to be the "trend" nor celebrated. Something in which we are simply born in and cannot help the way we look shows to be one of our biggest flaws. Curvaceousness is seen as "disgusting" and natural folds, scars or marks are not appreciated.



Saville 1994, *Strategy* (oil on canvas). (Accessed 11th April 2021)

The British Artist, Jenny Saville is a key practitioner who fights against the social ideal of the perfect body and majorly celebrates natural figures. Saville's paintings render female flesh on a monumental scale that magnify the raw details of embodied experience; large drooping breasts, layers of fat that create delicate rolls, flab. All things that conventionally today are covered or hidden.

The paintings shown above, display a larger female figure in powerful angles. Exposing all parts of her body while looking the viewer dead in the eye, a presence that demands your undivided attention. Saville shows the worthiness of this form and her right to occupy this vast space. In 1994 Saville said of her work

“It’s flesh and the paint itself is the body... the theory behind each one is as important as the painting. I’m trying to make people discuss, look at how women have been made by man. What is beauty? Beauty is usually the male image of the female body. My women are beautiful in their individuality.” (Saville 1994 independent interview)



Saville J (1992) Propped painting 84 X 72 (Accessed 11th April 2021)

As the artist has pointed out, she “grew up as a teenager in the 80s, when body regulation became huge... we had a cultural obsession with the body”. Propped by Saville displays a female figure whom is clawing at her flesh, struggling to exist within the narrow confines of the role prescribed to her by a patriarchal society. Studying Savilles work you cannot help but agree and understand how her work makes viewers discuss and become aware of their own body’s due to the large scale and the powerful emotion they portray. Propped includes writing by french feminist

writer Lucy Irigaray, that is inscribed backwards. In her gallery display, Saville has a mirror opposite the painting, as we turn to look in the mirror the writing is read around us but also we're confronted with our own body image. This forces the viewer to assess your own body and subconsciously compare with Saville's mutilated and grotesque form.

The exaggerated features of propped leads to the thought of mental health and the dangers of self judgment and restrictive social standards. What we sometimes see in the mirror isn't always what others may see.

This work questions all conventional and historical notions of the female standard of beauty. Naomi Wolf wrote in her book *The Beauty Myth*, 'A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about the female beauty but an obsession about female obedience' (Wolf 1991).

The standards of exterior beauty for women have quite clearly become absolutely unrealistic and the questions that arises is, does this result in females having a more negative perception of their body due to the extreme social pressure to look a certain way? "The Ideal Beauty is the source of untold human misery." (Polhemus, T., 1988).

This leads me onto my final keyword: Social Standards, as it links to beauty and body. A social standard is a unwritten expectancy or regulation that dominates peoples morals, beliefs, actions, attitudes and behaviours that are considered acceptable in a particular group or culture. Today modern beauty standards have a powerful, detrimental effect on young girls and women that causes the alteration of their body to achieve the desired "perfect look." Marianne Williamson writes in her book "A women's worth"

"Society programs us, through the subliminal messages of popular culture, to believe that we're not truly desirable as women unless we adhere to the current standards of physical beauty." (Marianne Williamson 1993)

Everyday young girls and women are bombarded and suffocated with distorted images of today's idea of beauty and social acceptance to beauty. During the prime time of young adolescent girls growth, they are constantly flooded with this beauty standard, in films, Ads and billboards and magazines. The real image of what their body should look like becomes heavily distorted and hidden, this can significantly effect their self esteem and value as-well as induce serious mental health issues as it creates a image in their mind of what is beautiful and what is not. This leads me onto the question of what lengths will people go to feel "beautiful" and content in themselves?



(A Protein World advert displayed in an underground station in London makes New York splash in Times Square. Photograph: Catherine Wylie/PA. Accessed 20th April 2021)

This type of media manipulation can have life long effects not just mentally but also physically. Plastic surgery is on the rise and these days people are getting Botox and surgery for a quick fix result to their insecurities. People will do anything to feel good about themselves and as a consequence plastic surgery has become the support system in doing that. All around the world people are paying thousands to modify and change their natural form. Cosmetic surgeons are making a lot of money with women doing cosmetic surgeries for every imperfection that we can imagine (Wolf, 1990).

Women learn to reconstruct themselves.... Over the past 30 years they have gone further than ever before in this process. They can re-arrange some of the organic material that is their body-sometimes without any harm, sometimes with devastating consequences.”(Wykes and Gunter, 2005)

A particular individual who focuses on the effects of plastic surgery and the mutilation of their body is Orlan a french contemporary artist. Orlan uses her face and body as tools for shifting identities and challenges the conventions women are forced to conform to. “I have been the first artist to use aesthetic surgery in another context—not to appear younger or better according to the designated pattern. I wanted to disrupt the standards of beauty,” (Orlan 1970)



(Photograph of Orlan performing in “The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan” 1990 – 1993. Accessed April 20th 2021)



(Photograph of Orlan on her 7th Operation Surgery Performance. 1993. Accessed April 20th 2021)

Orlan underwent facials surgery during this performance and was fixated on the world of art history and wanted to make characteristic features appear more alive. The questions that arises here is how will people mutilate their natural body to feel better within themselves? And how damaging can plastic surgery be to a growing youths mental health? What will the social standards be like in 10 years time?

When it comes to body shape however Women's bodies is not what changed, it is the ideals" (Kilbourne, 1995).

Throughout this examination of socials standards it has led to some sub genre words such as mutilation, mental health, social norms all of which can be taken under further investigation to reach a conclusive question generated upon this proposal.

In conclusion, upon exploring and studying these three keywords it has led me to numerous questions and sub-genre words that relate to the proposed question. Throughout this investigation I have demonstrated and explained that there is a strong relationship between the words Beauty, Body and Social Standards. The question in which I propose to research is “How does the media affect our perception of beauty and women self esteem and are beauty standards harmful?”

From the explanation of beauty throughout the years and the changes/influences. Followed by the body and the appreciation of the natural form, to social Standards and the length individuals will go to feel comfortable in their own skin due to these standards. Sub genre words throughout this proposal can be explored further such as, Mutilation. How will we continue to mutilate our bodies to feel like we fit in? How far will mutilation go in the future?

Also social norms, how will social norms change over the years? Will we always be governed by social standards? The concepts of self judgment, social pressures, masculinity, dominance, feminism and plastic surgery have also been considered for further investigation into my final question for the year.

References

Images

Botticelli (1485) Birth of Venus (Painting)

Available at : <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/birth-of-venus> Accessed (April 10th 2021)

Saville 1994, Strategy (oil on canvas).

Available at: <https://www.sartle.com/artwork/strategy-jenny-saville> (Accessed 11th April 2021)

Saville J (1992) Propped painting 84 X 72

Available at: <https://www.art-critique.com/en/2018/10/jenny-savilles-propped-female-worth-in-the-art-market> (Accessed 11th April 2021)

A Protein World advert displayed in an underground station in London makes New York splash in Times Square. Photograph: Catherine Wylie/PA.

Available at ; <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/apr/27/mass-demonstration-planned-over-beach-body-ready-tube-advert> (Accessed 20th April 2021)

Orlan performing in “The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan” 1990 – 1993.

Available at; <http://www.creative-mapping.com/controversial-french-artist-orlan-is-perhaps-most-infamous-for-using-her-own-body-as-a-tool-for-a-series-of-performance-surgeries-known-as-the-reincarnation-of-saint-orlan/> (Accessed April 20th 2021)

Orlan on her 7th Operation Surgery Performance. 1993.
Available at: <http://www.creative-mapping.com/controversial-french-artist-orlan-is-perhaps-most-infamous-for-using-her-own-body-as-a-tool-for-a-series-of-performance-surgeries-known-as-the-reincarnation-of-saint-orlan/>
(Accessed April 20th 2021)

Websites

Grube, G. (1927). PLATO'S THEORY OF BEAUTY. The Monist, 37(2), 269-288.
Retrieved
Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27901113>
Accessed 10th April 2021

Artnet.com. 2021. ORLAN | Artnet. [online] Available at:
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/orlan>
[Accessed 20 May 2021].

BOOM! by Cindy Joseph. 2021. How Our Idea of Beauty Has Changed Throughout History. [online] Available at:
<https://www.boombycindyjoseph.com/blogs/boom/how-our-idea-of-beauty-has-changed-throughout-history>
[Accessed 11 April 2021].

ELEPHANT. 2021. Fillers, Filters, and Facials: Can Art Hold up a Mirror to Cosmetic Surgery Culture? - ELEPHANT. [online] Available at: <https://elephant.art/fillers-filters-and-facials-can-art-hold-up-a-mirror-to-cosmetic-surgery-culture>
[Accessed 21 April 2021].

Oakes, K., 2021. The complicated truth about social media and body image. [online] Bbc.com. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190311-how-social-media-affects-body-image>
[Accessed 21 April 2021].

Racked. 2021. Classical Paintings Are Lying to You About Cleavage. [online] Available at: <https://www.racked.com/2017/12/21/16738658/cleavage-history>
[Accessed 11 April 2021].

Visage MedArt. 2021. The History of Feminine Beauty. [online] Available at: <https://www.visagemedart.com/brief-history-of-feminine-beauty>
[Accessed 11 April 2021].

Wall, R. and Wall, R., 2021. The human body in art | ArtWeb. [online] ArtWeb Blog. Available at: <https://blog.artweb.com/art-and-culture/human-body-in-art>
(Accessed 22 April 2021).

Books

Wolf, N., 2002. The Beauty Myth. Book Pp 19-32
Accessed (10th April 2021)

Susan J Vincent. The Anatomy of Fashion Paperback – 1 Nov. 2009.
Accessed (10th April 2021)

Polhemus, T., (ed) (1988) Body Styles. Luton, Lennard Publishing.
Accessed (20th April 2021)

A Woman's Worth Paperback – 1 Jan. 2003.
Accessed April 20th 2021.

The Media and Body Image-If Looks Could Kill
FIRST EDITION
Maggie Wykes - University of Sheffield, UK
Barrie Gunter - University of Leicester, UK
Accessed (April 23rd 2021)