

Perfect: Artist Statement

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The original concept for the project *Perfect* came from an online community at Livejournal.com. It is an all-female community where women post anonymous pictures of parts of their body that they think are flawed. The images are collected into files, and members can view the files whenever they want. The online project on Livejournal was created to show women that the things they think are flaws are actually completely normal, and that they're not alone. Since seeing this community a few years ago, I've wanted to start a large-scale photography project based on a similar idea- a collection of beautiful flaws. I wanted women like myself to look through the images and think, "This person has scars like mine, and she's beautiful." The difference between the Livejournal community and the idea in my head was that I imagined artistic, dramatic, thoughtful portraits instead of quick snapshots with a point-and-shoot camera.

Judith Butler suggests that the idea of gender comes from repetitive, ritualized acts through time, and that gender is not a seamless identity. Women are repeatedly viewing the bodies of actresses and models on TV who are supposed to represent real life, and as a result are comparing themselves to these women. The repetition of these images in the media does exactly what Butler claims- defining femininity through repetition of the ideal female body, which leads to the legitimization of this ideal. Because of this, women are scrutinized for their appearance.

“The body is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history. And history is the creation of values and meanings by a signifying practice that requires the subjection of the body”¹

The most important aspect of this, however, is that a huge portion of that scrutiny comes from within. My project seeks to redefine feminine beauty through altering a set of gender meanings that are already socially established. I want my subjects and viewers to love themselves the way they are instead of comparing themselves to or mimicking other women. I want to point out and eliminate the scrutiny and self-hatred. Images that define feminine beauty are thrown at us through the media, and because femininity is not a fact, these acts *create* what is feminine. In the microcosm of my photography project, I’m trying to start a new kind of repetition. Within this project, there is a new and more honest kind of feminine beauty. In a perfect world, I could mass-produce these images in the same way that Victoria’s Secret produces theirs. I want to shatter the idea that those models define what is ‘normal’ for women.

“The loss of the sense of ‘the normal’ can be an occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal,’ ‘the original,’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an idea that no one can embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived.”²

Eleven women volunteered to pose for me; all of them college-aged. For each model, there was a kind of metamorphosis between the first and last frame. Everyone started off very shy, awkward, and uncomfortable. Most of them audibly criticized themselves until I told them to stop, and even then it seemed to take effort. I wondered, as I still do, why it is so easy for women to beat themselves down. I was surprised that these models, who were ready and willing to pose nude for my project, could be so self-conscious and so self-loathing. By the last shot, the

¹ Judith Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

² Judith Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

nerves had subsided and the images were of strong, confident women. As I thanked most of them for working with me, quite a few of them replied, “No, thank *you*.” It was incredibly moving. I found that my initial intent, which was to empower the female viewers of the final product, suddenly didn’t matter to me as much anymore. The project turned into a method of empowerment for its subjects- for us, the models. There was a feeling that the photographs we were making weren’t meant for some unknown viewer, but for ourselves.

It was very important to me that I participate in *Perfect* not only as its photographer and coordinator, but as a model as well. I couldn’t expect my peers to pose nude for me enthusiastically and confidently without knowing exactly how it felt to do so. My own experience was difficult, because I found myself making the same criticisms I’d been warning against. Even after the session, it took me a while to appreciate the images. When I finally reached that catharsis, it made me a better photographer and improved the way I viewed my subjects and the project as a whole.

The biggest obstacle in creating these images was taking pictures of women’s bodies and maintaining beauty and art over sexuality. This was especially true when it came to body parts that are normally very sexualized. I’ve always been impressed and inspired by the artwork of Kevin Rolly, a photographer and painter who created the image *For Anna III*³, which was probably my biggest inspiration for *Perfect*. The photograph is of a nude woman, standing straight with her head held high. The first time I saw it, I was overwhelmed with how strong and confident it made me feel. That feeling is what I want for the people who see *Perfect*. As an artist, I think that it is incredible that Rolly can create an image like *Anna*, where the first thing that the viewer thinks is strength and not sex.

³ See image 1

As the project evolved from a class final to a Scholar's Day presentation, I maintained the format of a slideshow to display the work. I wanted a way to keep everyone's interest and I wanted something that unified all of the images. I found that unifying factor in P!nk's song *Fucking Perfect*. In the song, she says, "Change the voices in your head. Make them like you instead." I think that this particular lyric is amazingly honest and appropriate for my presentation, because that is what I continuously must tell myself and the models who pose for me. I'm concerned that without this song, the project won't be as powerful, but the song is only three and a half minutes long, and I am having difficulty narrowing down the images I want to include. In addition to this, the language in the song was another concern for me before presenting, especially in front of faculty and community members. I ultimately decided that it would be hypocritical of me to present uncensored images to the backdrop of a censored song, and that the language in the song gave it power. This also brought up another aspect of realistic femininity in that P!nk often swears in her music despite the fact that it is less socially acceptable for female artists to do so.

In continuing the exploration of this theme, I intend to add more variety to the images. I would like to include different ethnicities and age groups. I am most curious to see how women at different ages view themselves. At what age do girls start criticizing their bodies? At what age are they ever confident with what they've got? It is a special privilege and a unique opportunity to get to know someone through photographing them. It has always been an underlying theme of my photographic work to get my subjects to let their guard down and open up. I want viewers of these images to see who these women really are and to cast aside judgments and first impressions, because that's what this project has done for me.

Image 1:

