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On being formed: a self-reflexive view of the subjective body.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
at the College of Creative Arts, Massey University
Wellington, New Zealand.

Robyn George
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Abstract

In *on being formed: a self-reflexive view of the subjective body* I investigate and contest appearance politics as they relate to the overweight, aging, female body. Referencing contemporary artists who confront Western society's construct of the body, I show that art can play a crucial part in challenging cultural systems that create boundaries between differing bodies. These social systems denote bodies that meet their construct of an ideal body as preferred, and others (such as the overweight) as non-preferred. I argue that society exerts power over the overweight person through panoptic surveillance, and that female attractiveness norms serve as a form of social control through which those whose bodies fall outside of socially constructed ideals are marginalised and stigmatised. I consider how overweight people absorb the affect of social judgement, often resulting in debilitating shame and social isolation.

Through the genres of performance, sculpture and installation, I use a body of visual art to draw metaphors with female aging and appearance, a crucial issue that is often overlooked in contemporary art. I seek to confuse the signification of beauty and disgust through my aesthetically alluring sculptures made from a repugnant material, suggesting that there is a space between beauty and disgust which can be occupied by those with non-preferred bodies. Drawing on intimate autobiographical source material, I perform a limited-duration installation from my embodied experience as an overweight aging woman. This personal engagement, which provides authenticity and emphasises subjectivity, has resulted in meaningful personal transformation, and has affirmed the powerful role art plays in investigating and recasting corporeality.

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