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## **Fatness and Visual Culture: A Brief Look at Some Contemporary Projects**

STEFANIE SNIDER

*The production of visual representations of fatness and fat people is an important concrete and symbolic step toward fat liberation. There is currently a relative lack of critical and historical writings on fat art, or art with a fat-positive viewpoint. This article hopes to begin to rectify this situation by examining recent artwork created by five artists that challenge the idea of fatness as problematic and fat bodies as unsightly and unworthy of being seen in contemporary western culture. The artworks examined within reconfigure the visual culture of fat female bodies in humorous, cynical, joyful, and, above all, innovative ways that push viewers from multiple vantage points to think critically about social constructions of the fat body.*

**KEYWORDS** *fat, art, art history, visual culture, women, bodies*

Critical and historical writings on fat art or art with a fat-positive viewpoint are currently few and far between. Although there are several scholars who have written about contemporary manifestations of fat issues via visual representation over the last few years, fine art and visual culture remain often unexplored areas in fat studies compared with research conducted in such fields as media/communication studies, cultural studies, and sociology (for examples of scholarship that addresses a range of topics via fat studies viewpoints, see Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; LeBesco, 2004; Rothblum and Solovay, 2009; Farrell, 2011). The fat body can tell us much about how it is constructed, visually and socially, in comparison with the ideal thin body featured in various guises in art for centuries. This is just one reason why it is important to engage with fat art. Another is the need to combat the basic prejudices that continue to taint the ways in which the public and scholars

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alike see fat people. The fat art discussed in this article has been conceived of not simply as a way to trace how fatness is visualized or understood by contemporary scientific or public culture, but often in opposition to it.

In the face of a media industry that exaggerates the alleged “obesity epidemic” (for research that contests the presence of an “obesity epidemic” in the United States, see Campos, 2005; Campos et al., 2006; Saguey and Almeling, 2008) a scientific field that objectifies and pathologizes fat subjects (for research that looks at the ways in which the medical industry treats fat subjects, see Kolata, 2007; Rothblum and Solovay, 2009), and a government that demonizes fat people, fat parents, and fat children (for a brief introduction to the ways in which the current U.S. administration perceives fat children and “obesity,” see Stolberg, 2010; Obama, 2011), the artists responsible for the current wave of fat-positive artwork laugh at, remake, and defy fatness as problematic and fat bodies as ugly and wretched cultural artifacts. Although in no way comprehensive, this article consists of a brief tour of some of the kinds of artwork being produced in the last several years that are concerned with the construction of the fat body, in particular the fat female body, as a constantly performing “artifact” of our<sup>1</sup> white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and thin dominant culture.

#### CINDY BAKER

Canadian artist Cindy Baker has been involved in the world of performance art for several years. Baker’s artworks of the past few years have revolved around issues of beauty, desire, sexuality, and gender. Baker’s *Fashion Plate* (2007) consisted of a month-long call for members of the public of Toronto to take it on themselves to design and create clothing for Baker to wear in a fashion show. Based out of a hotel coffee shop known for its circle of “beautiful” customers (Mitchell, 2011), the amateur “designers” had to customize their fashions for Baker’s fat body only through their own visual and physical consumption of her body—no measurements were provided. Designers were allowed to compare their own bodies’ shapes and sizes with Baker’s, touch her body and drape her in fabric, and sketch from her as a model. At the end of the month, a fashion show was arranged in which Baker wore each of the 34 designs created for her, no matter how ill-fitting or poorly constructed the garment might have been. As Baker wrote, “This project challenged people to look at a fat (taboo) body, to think about that body in relation to their own and in relation to fashion, which is, after all, a visual translation of society’s rules and standards about bodies” (Mitchell, 6). One of the concerns of Baker’s art is that of the physical and conceptual public engagement with the artist as subject or self. In *Fashion Plate*, Baker played with and challenged the expected roles of the viewer as observer, consumer of information, and judge of bodies.

We might see this *Fashion Plate* as some kind of reconceptualized “Project Runway” in which there was one model and more than 30 designers. The model here, however, had become an inversion of the normative conventional runway models that are thin and forced to become a human hanger with no agency of their own. Baker was the fat “client” who demanded only that the designers, a self-selected set, be forced to visually or physically engage with her fat body to complete a component of the artwork that was included in the final fashion show. Baker was quoted on the interactive nature of the performance, even for those audience members not actually participating as clothing designers:

For those who didn't actually *make* [emphasis in original] something, they were still confronted with watching others do this awkward dance with me, got to see the process of the garment's creation, got to hear the conversations. I estimate that for every person that made an article of clothing there were 10 others that I had individual conversations with that covered a range of topics from body politics to women's rights to performance art to fashion design, and way beyond. I really feel like just because someone didn't make something, it doesn't mean they didn't actively participate in the project. (Mitchell, 2011)

Baker set the parameters of the project and at the same time submitted to any and all of the garments designed for her. Baker played with issues surrounding the female/feminine voice and agency in determining how clothing is made for the body and, more broadly, how women are seen in society. This is highlighted by the reception of the final product fashion show at the end of the *Fashion Plate* project. According to Mitchell (2011), the audience present on the day of the fashion show

either ogle[d] or consciously ignore[d] Cindy as she paraded through the hotel in her new tight and often skimpy outfits. The unveiling of Cindy's outfits in the pretense that it was a fashion show (and it was) was actually quite a solemn affair. The smallish crowd that had gathered to witness Cindy's performance tried to overcompensate with clapping and cheering but there was little interaction between the audience there to observe Cindy – “the converted” as she refers to them – and the groups of people who just happened to be in the space. But, according to Baker, this is truly what she wanted from her performance – some real reactions to her body. For many people the realest reaction was ignorance in all its forms.<sup>2</sup>

In *Fashion Plate*, Baker challenged the notion that there is a single, monolithic “object” known as “the fat woman” who can fit into a “one-size-fits-all” garment no matter what her actual size. By choosing to wear

each design no matter how it fit her, Baker became a living example that one size does not indeed fit all, and by extension, that not all fat women (or any women) should be seen as or treated in the same way. Through Baker's manipulation of the rules of her own fashion "game," the model had some say in how the fashion was designed, if not in what the actual garments looked like. Baker manipulated the project, and product, of a fashion industry built on designs that usually ignore fat women to challenge gender politics, notions of beauty, and limited body conventions.

Following a similar line of thought about analyzing the nexus at which the artist and audience meet, Baker's most recent ongoing project is entitled *Personal Appearance*. In this work, Baker wears a soft-cloth and foam mascot costume—of herself (Figure 1). *Personal Appearance* comments on the ways in which we corporeally and psychologically construct the self in everyday life by performing specific personas depending on any given situation or audience. Baker takes on an explicit form of the caricature of oneself that we all enact on some level or another; she is simultaneously her "true" or "inner" self, as well as her "exterior" or "hyper-self." Baker (2011) writes,



**FIGURE 1** Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance*, 2009. Photo by Clark Ferguson. (Reprinted with permission by the artist) (color figure available online).

In *Personal Appearance*, my persona's similarity to other cuddly and approachable characters functions to erase social barriers and encourage physical contact and play, as well as the building of emotional bonds; it therefore allows me further and more complex access to my project of studying people through allowing them to study me. While the audience's guard is down, *Personal Appearance* engages the notion of fatness, addressing the lived reality of taboo bodies in spaces made for the socio-normative body, and encouraging discussions on the nature of size, beauty, acceptance, accommodation and accessibility. (7)

In her Cindy Baker mascot costume, Baker appears quite literally larger-than-life, thus adding a second layer to her already fat body. At the same time, however, this added layer seems not to be repulsive to the viewer, but instead is quite compelling and elicits bemused and amused stares, hugs, and groping from a wide range of viewers (Figure 2). Perhaps in part because Baker's body has been covered over in – and effectively replaced with – a soft cloth and foam layer, audience members seem much more apt and willing to touch and engage with her fat body than they might with a flesh-and-blood fat body in everyday life. In wearing this “fat suit,” Baker contends, “I am more approachable; people are almost universally friendly and happy to see me” (Baker, 2011, 10). As the photograph in Figure 2 attests, Baker is often the recipient of rather copious amounts of physical touch from the viewers she encounters. In this photograph, we can see Baker in the midst of a street festival with a middle-aged man quite joyously attempting to grab her by the breast. Perhaps Baker's enlarged body and its parts are simply too much for the man to take in only with his eyes; the layer of protection that the mascot costume seems to provide Baker appears also to divorce much of the general public from the social norms about personal space they might otherwise exercise more stringently with a “live” person. While the man obviously knows that he is grabbing the breast of a plush mascot rather than a “real” woman, that he is happily taking part in a public display of affection before a camera<sup>3</sup> demonstrates the willingness by the public to interact with Baker's fat mascot-self more readily than with her fleshly self.

Regardless of the precise reason that this man—and many others—desire to touch Baker's costumed body, *Personal Appearance* points to the ways in which gender is performed by subject and viewer alike and the ways the fat body might exacerbate or challenge such a performance. The end results of *Personal Appearance* overlaps strongly with *Fashion Plate*, though perhaps in a more elaborate form, due to the open-ended and repetitive nature of the former performance in comparison with the latter. Indeed, *Personal Appearance* seems an extension of *Fashion Plate* that further complicates the relationship between the artist and her audience as well as the role of fat women in western culture. The differences exhibited between



**FIGURE 2** Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance*, Open Space Gallery, Victoria, BC, 2009. (Reprinted with permission by the artist) (color figure available online).

*Fashion Plate* and *Personal Appearance* show a growth on Baker's part to extend her reach past a select venue, city, and time period, as well as far beyond those individuals she had earlier designated as "the converted" (Baker, 2011, 10). When Baker performs as her mascot-self she does so in much larger and more diverse locations, all across the globe. She does not give the audience direction in the same way she did in *Fashion Plate*; rather, she "shows up"<sup>4</sup> in public and private spaces and engages with the people around her who happen to engage with her. This lack of direction from the artist does not limit the creativity of the performance; instead it seems to

amplify it by providing a wider and more varied range of potential interactions between her and the audience. There is no specific goal in *Personal Appearance* that Baker set for the project; the performance is open-ended and changes constantly. In *Personal Appearance*, Baker explores reactions to a monumentalized, and also playful, fatness that in ways that move beyond the conventional assumption that fat is always bad.

### KRISTIN KURZAWA

In mid-2009, then University of Michigan Master of Fine Arts (MFA) student and photographer Kristin Kurzawa was preparing to open a gallery exhibition of her newest series of work, *Femmes: Front and Center*, at the Ferndale, Michigan, Affirmations Pittmann-Puckett Art Gallery. The art gallery was an established space within the local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community center, in which LGBT and queer-identified artists had shown their visual artwork since its opening in 1992 (Affirmations: People Building Community, 2010). Slated to open in May 2009, the exhibit would feature Kurzawa's MFA project, a photographic series depicting femme-identified lesbians who had performed at a Drag King Conference (Carreras, 2009). While in the process of hanging the show six days before it was due to open, Kurzawa received an email from a gallery official, stating that Kurzawa's exhibition and opening party would be canceled because, "While we fully appreciate the beauty of queer femme performance portrayed in the collection, the images do not meet the agreed upon PG-13 or family friendly nature of our community gallery."<sup>5</sup> According to the gallery's director of communications, the photographs were too sexual, and "the exhibit was a bit more focused on sexuality than what was desired."<sup>6</sup> Kurzawa was shocked at the cancellation; she had a written contract with Affirmations and an ongoing discussion with curators about what images would be included in the show for months prior to the hanging and planned opening. At no point had she been told her show might be in danger of cancellation.

Kurzawa's series, *Femmes: Front and Center*, was composed of several photographs of femme-identified queer women who performed at the 2008 International Drag King Extravaganza in Ohio (see Figure 3; Kurzawa, 2009). Almost all of the images show women performing on a stage wearing costumes composed of corsets, skirts, t-shirts, underwear, and bras. None of the performers is entirely nude, and only one is wearing pasties over her nipples, rather than a full bikini or bra. No one is wearing less clothing than one might expect to find at a beach on a warm day. The performers are shown actively parading around the stage, interacting with the audience, singing, talking, and dancing. They embody a range of sizes and shapes, and there are several photographs that feature fat performers, unashamedly



**FIGURE 3** Kristin Kurzawa, Pidgeon Von Tramp, from *Femmes: Front and Center*, Photograph, 2009. (Reprinted with permission by the artist) (color figure available online).

moving around, displaying their bulges and cellulite, shaking their bodies, and posing glamorously before Kurzawa's camera.

In addition to the accusations of overt sexuality in Kurzawa's photographs, the issue of the performers' body sizes quickly became a focus of the show's contestation. In an article written about the exhibition's cancellation, Kurzawa stated, "These women have nothing to do with sex . . . they were having fun dancing. [. . .] There was nothing sexual or sexy about it. It was sensual, but there was no sex. The problem is that they have flesh."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in the written portion of Kurzawa's MFA, the artist argued that for her project to be a success—to be true to the community she was photographing—she had to include fat women in the photographs: "Body size was critical, as queer fat femmes are reviving the neo-burlesque movement" (Kurzawa, 2009, 14). The women in Kurzawa's *Femmes* series embodied a wide range of body sizes and not one of them tried to hide her body in the photographs. Indeed, they flaunted their bodies as they took up space on stage.

Letters to the editor of *Between the Lines*, a weekly Ann Arbor, Michigan, newspaper, poured into the newspaper to challenge the gallery's decision. A letter written by a local reader was published one week after the story first broke. It read,

There was nothing ‘sexual’ about the pictures displayed on the artist’s Web site. I think there are two points that Jessica’s [Carreras] article failed to consider (or perhaps she chose not to). Both are based upon the physical appearance of the subjects—not their clothing or the poses.

Unfortunately, in the LGBT community, way too many people place far too much emphasis on physical ‘perfection.’ Most of the subjects were very rubenesque. I wonder—had the subjects been svelte beauty queens, wearing the same outfits in the same poses—would the exhibit have been cancelled? Somehow, I don’t think so. The so-called ‘leaders’ of the LGBT Community tend to use pretty boys and beauty queens in any images promoting our community and our causes. News flash for them: there are a LOT of us that are plump, plain, or both. And we are a part of the community too. In fact, we make up a large portion of it. Maybe it’s time they started recognizing our existence. (Ault, 2009)

In bringing up the issue of fat, or “rubenesque,” bodies, this letter points to the issue of “having flesh” that Kurzawa cited previously. For body size and shape to affect an art exhibit’s chances of being shown smacks of censorship due to culturally ingrained thin body ideals. Whether this was the actual (or subconscious) reason behind the Affirmations gallery’s initial cancellation of Kurzawa’s exhibition matters less than the fact that multiple people cited this as a possibility. There was at least some level of sensitivity to the body sizes of the photographs’ subjects by its viewers. Although Kurzawa’s exhibit was eventually staged by the gallery at the end of May 2009, largely due to the community support Kurzawa and the show received as a result of the *Between the Lines* articles and letters, the notion of body size as a reason for the cancellation still remained attached to the exhibition, in addition to the issue of sexualized gender expressions of the lesbian femmes pictured in the images.

Kurzawa has more recently moved to working on photography that more explicitly deals with the construction of the fat body via gendered and sexual identities. Typified by the photo series of Cristy Cardinal and Melanie Hagan with their children in their Christmas holiday garb, an example photograph shows the intimacy, ease, and joy of the two fat butch women with their family (Figure 4). As we can see in this image, the subjects were casual and loving with one another; except perhaps for their matching holiday attire, they were rather unremarkable and ordinary. The artist seemed to celebrate the mundaneness, the sheer ordinariness, of fat bodies and families. There was no hiding of the subjects’ fat bodies in these photographs, nor were they shown as objects to be ogled over. The focus in such images was less on the subjects as representations of individual bodies as it is on the atmosphere created by the group and the relationships depicted within the image. This photograph in particular emphasizes the circuit of gazes between



**FIGURE 4** Kristin Kurzawa, Cardinal Hagen Family, Photograph, 2010. (Reprinted with permission by the artist) (color figure available online).

the family members in the photographs that were directed inward, toward each other, rather than toward the outside world. This kind of composition, as well as the casualness of the family members' poses, created the strong sense of intimacy and relaxation evident here.

Although the very creation of artistic representations of fat and lesbian subjects can be extraordinary in terms of self-representational techniques that value such subjects on their own terms and in unconventional ways, much of what we have seen and continue to see in terms of visual representations of these subjects features ordinary moments and depictions of "regular" people. During the last two decades, images that demonize fatness and fat individuals have increased exponentially; such hypervisibility tends to turn on the rhetorics of medicalization, disability, and inhumanity, ideas that, not coincidentally, have been widely applied to LGBT individuals and groups as well over the past several decades. Unlike the images of fat people that are most often circulated in the media, those of the "headless fatty,"<sup>8</sup> which focus on the subjects' body sizes and shapes while cutting their heads out of the picture, Kurzawa's photographs rework the notion of visibility to the fat subjects' own ends. Cardinal and Hagen were collaborators on the photographic series from which these images come. They chose Kurzawa as a photographer because she was a fellow fat and queer community member as well as a stellar photographer; this way they knew they could work together to create photographs they would be proud to circulate and display

for their holiday celebrations. The subjects of Kurzawa's photographs tell their own stories and fight for their own interests in the face of increasingly oppressive techniques of visualization and surveillance formulated by a U.S. culture obsessed with bodily normativity in so many forms.

### BERTHA PEARL AND MICHELE HUNT

May 2010 saw the first exhibit of fashion designer Bertha Pearl's garments with the show "BIGGER: Fat Fashion, Fat Politics, Fat Beauty, Fat Art," displayed at the Portland, Oregon, Q Center. The exhibition featured Pearl's most recent and fantastical designs, as well as photographs by Michele Hunt and Kina Williams of local fat models wearing Pearl's clothing around Portland. I conceived of and curated this exhibition of Pearl's work and the photographs of women wearing the fashions as a way to bring together my personal, scholarly, and activist areas of interest in terms of fat, art, and the body. Bertha Pearl's fashions are fat-positive activist projects in their own right, in their brightly colored and whimsical nature. One can't help but smile at the choices of fabrics and colors that Pearl uses to showcase fat bodies of multiple genders and sexualities; this is part of their inherent charm and their power to challenge and disarm people seemingly afraid of fat bodies as well as fat-phobic<sup>9</sup> discourse that tells fat people to dress in dark, muted colors and boxy garments to hide their bodies. In contrast, Pearl's fashions celebrate bodies of all sizes by making a joyful visual noise that catches the attention of spectators near and far.

Although currently residing in Portland, Oregon, Pearl spent much of her earlier life in New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area, both hotbeds of fat activism for several decades. Pearl designs her clothing under the name of Size Queen Fashions. The garments—vividly colored, adorned with tulle, ruffles, lace, glitter, and plastic toys—seemed the ideal subject for a fat-positive visual art exhibition (Figure 5). After their successful exhibition at the Q Center, the garments and photographs traveled to Oakland, California, in June 2010 for an exhibition at NOLOSE<sup>10</sup> and later returned to Portland for an encore exhibit in December 2010 at another local venue.

Michele Hunt's photographs of women and genderqueers wearing Pearl's fashions brought the designs hanging in the show to life. Friends of the designer, photographer, and curator were asked to participate in the photo shoots around the Portland area to add another visual dimension to the exhibition. In these images, the viewer can better understand how the garments fit and complimented a variety of fat bodies, as well as see them on the move around town. By bringing together the fashion garments with their photographs, the designs became multisensorial and appealing to viewers through visual and textural forms. As can be seen in Figure 5, Hunt's photographs complemented the playful nature of the fashion designs that were



**FIGURE 5** Bertha Pearl, *Hidden Treasures*, 2010. Model: Alisa Williams. Photographer: Michele Hunt. (Reprinted with permission by the designer and photographer).

hung on walls, spun from motors mounted on the ceiling, and rested on large-size mannequins in the gallery space.

Similar to Cindy Baker's performative works that look critically at how fatness and fashion have traditionally been constructed to be mutually exclusive, Pearl and Hunt's contributions to *BIGGER* brought an audience into close proximity with the process of making and wearing clothing for fat people. Indeed, many of the amateur models for Pearl's clothing in Hunt's

photographs were customers of Pearl's business as well as partners in community and activism. In exchange for their work, the models featured in the photographs were given a print of the image of their choice, as well as an option to buy their garment or another Size Queen creation at a discount. When viewers saw the photographs in the original and subsequent exhibitions, many of them could directly relate to the scenes and models photographed because they were friends or had been to the areas of Portland in which the photographs were taken. In this way, BIGGER became more than a typical art exhibit; it functioned as a site of community reinvigoration and interaction between the objects, images, and many of the viewers.

### RACHEL HERRICK

North Carolina-based artist Rachel Herrick recently completed her MFA degree with an incredibly comprehensive exhibition entitled *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* (MOCS; 2011). Herrick's "obeast" is a bipedal creature that was once numerous across North America, but has more recently only barely come back from near-extinction (Figure 6). Actually performed by and modeled on her own body, Herrick's obeast is part cultural satire and part conceptual artwork; its attendant MOCS is a museological parody that pokes fun of the many ways in which fat people have been ridiculed in contemporary social and scientific arenas.

The MOCS consists of a physical and virtual museum exhibition made to replicate the dioramas we expect to see at natural history and science museums.<sup>11</sup> At the museum site in which the exhibit is held, which most recently has been the Portland, Maine, Institute for Contemporary Art, a large scale faux-environment of grasses and trees are displayed with sculptural representations of the "North American Obeast" (Figure 7). On the walls of the space is painted a visual timeline of the evolution of the obeast, which originates from a manatee-like sea animal. A printed brochure and computerized kiosk provides information for the museum visitor on the history of the obeast and its sitings over the past few centuries, its physical structure, habitats, eating habits, and keys to its visual recognition out in the wild. The literature produced for the MOCS notes that the organization "was founded in 2010 with the mission to open dialogs about the endangered obeast and educate the public about its past, present, and future."<sup>12</sup>

Herrick's website is constructed as a virtual museum such that even if viewers are unable to attend the exhibition at any physical location in which it is shown, they are able to have a full MOCS experience at home. It appears that Herrick has conceived of every possible component of the museum experience on the MOCS website, where she includes images of the obeasts found in the wild, a video of "researchers" tagging an obeast, concise physiological and geographical descriptions of the obeasts and their



**FIGURE 6** Rachel Herrick, Female Northern Obeast: Androscoggin County, Maine, Photograph, 2010. (Reprinted with permission of the artist).

natural environment, charts of the three species of obeasts' pelts and the two sexes' facial appearance, and even a form to fill out to become a member of MOCS.<sup>13</sup> The ultra-scientific and allegedly objective language that Herrick uses to describe the obeasts comes directly from the world of scientific classification and categorization central to the construction of an "objective truth" for the natural history museum and the science that underlies "obesity" research. In so doing, Herrick critiques the notion of the veracity of culturally-mandated fatphobia from the inside out. She writes,



**FIGURE 7** Installation view of Rachel Herrick's *The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* at the ICA Portland, Maine, May 2011. Photo by Molly McIntyre. (Reprinted with permission of the artist).

I am interested in the way information and ideas get legitimized by frameworks like these, and how these legitimized ideas become incorporated into the ideology of culturally dominant (centralized) groups. My intention through the obeast work is to adopt the perspective and voice of the dominant group and satirize its systems by participating in them, straight-faced, within the parameters of a preposterous pretense. If in this way I can weave a narrative that wavers between almost plausible and completely absurd, what might that indicate about the conventions of information authority that we hold so dear and believe so reflexively? (Herrick, 2011, 10)

Herrick's attention to intricate detail juxtaposed with the obviously performative nature of being the obeast in multiple visual aspects of this artwork is what creates the sense of "a preposterous pretense" in MOCS. And it is this point, where science and absurdity meet, that is particularly important to Herrick in the creation of this work: "Frankly, the obeast is a badly created animal. It wears glasses, and shoes, etc. I'm not really making any attempt to hide my appearance so that hopefully right off the bat the humor comes through" (Rachel Herrick, personal communication, June 21, 2011).

Herrick's body is at the center of the concept of the obeast and MOCS. Herrick appeared in each of the photographs taken of the various obeasts in the wild featured in the virtual museum and the paper literature on MOCS, as well as in "vintage" images of obeasts that Herrick manipulated to look as if nineteenth and early twentieth century hunters found and killed obeasts in the past. In the diorama that is the center of the in situ museum exhibit, Herrick created a life-size sculptural replica of herself in silicone rubber as an obeast, clad in the ubiquitous muumuu "pelt" that each obeast wears. There are also paper dolls of male and female obeasts, as well as visual guides to the specific pelt patterns and coloration for each of three species of obeast available for download through the MOCS website. Herrick's repetitive use of her own fat body to construct the form of the obeast as well as the visual information about the creature available to the viewers of the MOCS project produces an abundance of fatness and fat fanciful creatures, which despite their purported state of endangerment, seem to overload the visual field with obeasts. In so doing, the fat body becomes excessive and overdetermined; it can no longer mean only one thing (i.e., it is bad) or be seen as an individual phenomenon. Instead, the multiplicity of the obeast, as it emerges from "extinction," puts pressure on the viewers to recognize their own prejudices about fatness while making fun of their willingness to believe anything – even the existence of an impossible creature such as the obeast. As Herrick demonstrates here, "things don't get interesting until you get into analyzing the dynamics around fat and stigma" (Rachel Herrick, personal communication, June 21, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

As will have quickly become obvious while reading this article, all of the artists I have examined here are women; the large majority of the artworks described here are also of or focus on female bodies. Although not consciously planned as such, this tendency for female artists to be fat-positive and interested in examining the ways in which fat female bodies are portrayed in visual culture is by far the predominant one in the world of contemporary fat art. Indeed, a rather simple Internet search for "fat art men artists" initially yields the question, "Do you mean: fat art *women* artists. Thus, questions are raised as to whether there are artists (male or female) currently out in the world making artwork about fat men and if there are male artists making artwork about fat women. The former question is the more open-ended one here, and will require more research. For the latter question however, artists as diverse as Leonard Nimoy (2007) and Les Toil (2011) come to mind.

Why then, do I concentrate solely on female artists in this article? In large part because the work that these women are doing in a wide variety of

media is either explicitly based on or somehow intersects with feminist interventions in the visual arts that question conventional subject/object power dynamics that have become replicated in the fat-phobic culture that surrounds us. As an academically trained art historian, feminist, and audience member for visual artwork, I find such works most compelling. At the same time, more questions need to be asked and further research needs to be conducted in the fields of art history, visual culture, and fat studies that examine issues such as how gender and power dynamics are played out through fat art; how previous generations of artists have visualized fat bodies of women, men, and children; and how artists have reinforced conventions or challenged the status quo of various cultures and time periods across the history of making art. In the meantime, it is my fervent wish that more contemporary artists make more fat-positive art to be examined and admired in the present. This can only add to a richness of dialogue and diversity in which Cindy Baker, Kristin Kurzawa, Bertha Pearl, Michele Hunt, and Rachel Herrick are already participating.

## NOTES

1. In using the pronoun “our” here, I consciously place myself within this dominant culture, even if I do not fit into each of the outlined categories described here. I, as are each of the artists examined here, am a product of this culture that values certain individuals over others, and we are thus deeply influenced by the attitudes and behaviors the dominant culture represents.

2. In Baker’s reference to “the converted,” I believe she means those individuals familiar with critiques that expose the ways in which fat people, in particular fat women, are made invisible in contemporary western culture.

3. From the man’s pose, facial expression, and body position, as well as Baker’s waving hand, it seems obvious that both individuals knew the camera was before them and specifically posed to have their picture taken here. This is no candid act, but rather a performative one by both Baker and her admirer.

4. In most cases, Baker is invited to participate in arts and culture events around the world as her mascot-self, rather than actually just “showing up” to an event unannounced, but to most viewers her appearance will not have been anticipated.

5. Maureen Jones quoted in Carreras (2009).

6. Michael Coleman quoted in Carreras (2009).

7. Kurzawa quoted in Carreras (2009).

8. This term has been coined and popularized by Charlotte Cooper (2007). In such images (whether static or filmed), the heads, and thus brains and mouths, of the individuals who become “headless fatties” in the media are nowhere to be found. Headless fatties’ anonymous figures stand in for fat bodies everywhere, with no accounting for personal agency or social power.

9. The term “fatphobic” is used widely by researchers in the field of fat studies to describe narratives that focus primarily on the fear of fat—the fear of getting fat, the fear of staying fat, the fear of not striving to be thin—that seem to be harbored by individuals and public and private institutions in a western culture that reinforces thinness as the ideal bodily state.

10. NOLOSE is a fat- and queer-positive organization that works to create national and international community for fat lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people and their allies. The acronym NOLOSE originated as an acronym for “National Organization of Lesbians of Size Everywhere,” but the full name has since changed in favor of a more inclusive community function. For more information, please see [www.nolose.org](http://www.nolose.org).

11. See the virtual component of Herrick's Museum of Obeast Conservation Studies work at [www.obeast.org](http://www.obeast.org).

12. Rachel Herrick, *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* Information Card, available to "members" of the museum upon registering at the MOCS website.

13. If you choose to become a MOCS member, you will receive a letter, ID card, and glossy photograph/information card describing MOCS, the obeasts, and your membership benefits.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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