



# This Is My Body

Photographs by Steve Stober

## About This Book

Steve Stober is a master at drawing into the inner emotions of his subjects and all these photographs in this series demonstrate that. Raw and honest in its approach to women's body issues, this book contains difficult subject matter that is not only timely but highly relevant in today's culture of body makeovers.

"This Is My Body" ran as a solo exhibition at G+ Galleries in Toronto in September, 2008.

"What strikes me the most about these photographs besides the superior quality of the portraits themselves and the delicate aspect of the subject matter is the 'burden of representation', showing legitimization of this difficult subject matter through photography."

*Nelson Ramirez de Arellano Condé  
Chief Curator, Fototeca de Cuba  
Havana, Cuba  
September, 2008*

# This Is My Body

*"My body is a cage that keeps me from dancing with the one I love but my mind holds the key"*      *Arcade Fire*

This project was born in stillness. Behind the curtain, in front of the camera lens, were women who for the most part were not happy with how their bodies looked. Whether they were lean or fat, voluptuous or flat-chested, pear-shaped or curvy, young or old, a common theme resonated in their confessions. Some were at peace with how they looked and had chosen to follow a path of self-love. Others have had to endure entire lifetimes of inner or outward turmoil and emotional suffering as a result of their self-image. Some stories were incredibly sad, often shocking, at times dealing with issues of abuse as young women. (statistics show that over 25% of women in Western societies have experienced some form of sexual or physical abuse in their lifetime.)

I listened to their stories. And I offered to photograph them as they are, in the hope that the experience of appearing in front of my camera and allowing themselves to confront their emotions would provide some sort of relief and acceptance of themselves. The theory proved successful. I was told the experience was cathartic in many instances, that the process of being photographed brought forth powerful feelings of renewal and empowerment. Many had never seen themselves this way before. For this, I am humbled and honoured to have somehow touched their lives.

For nearly all these subjects, it was an incredible challenge to even bring themselves into the studio, but they knew that they must do it for themselves and for others to see. I dedicate this book to all these women who agreed to work with me. Thank-you for your leap of faith and for trusting both me and the process you embarked on.

*Steve Stober*

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"I guess I've had body issues for a very long time. My mom is a beautiful woman with a perfect bird-like Asian body type. I've always been big, and my mom took issue with it. I am quite busty for an Asian woman and I am always teased by my mom's side of the family because of it. I believe I got my body structure from my father's side where all the women have a stockier build and are considered ugly. They called me "dai fan" meaning "a big chunk"- I never realized how much it hurt until I vocalized it out loud."





"One summer I starved myself to enter into a bikini contest but no matter how little I weighed, my body never looked the right way and my breasts never went away. I gained the weight back immediately afterwards plus more. I don't know why I even entered that contest. I guess I figured that if I am in it, the whole affair would give me some confidence. I'm hoping to find some closure to the way I see myself."

*Rebecca, Age 23*



"Like most teenaged girls, I struggled with my body image for years. I felt I was too short, too chubby, not busty enough, and not curvy enough. It wasn't until I decided to hire a personal trainer that I understood the mechanics of my body as well as its nutritional needs. It transformed me in so many ways, but most importantly, it made me feel at peace with myself. "



" Doing a photo shoot like this one was completely out of the question for so long in my life. The experience was liberating and therapeutic. No room for inhibitions, just acceptance." *Fabienne, Age 29*



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"I was raped by a stranger when I was 21. I began to seriously gain weight. As years went on, I had moments when I was afraid and thought I was safe because I was fat. But as I grew, my breasts grew also and I soon fit into a size 42H bra. When I decided to have breast reduction surgery, it changed my life."



"I am now physically stronger than I have been in years and my body pleases me in a way it never did before because I don't care what I look like. I care about what I am able to do, being flexible and strong." *Janet, Age 50*





"I am a passionate artist, in drug recovery after nearly 15 years of drug abuse as well a string of mentally and physically abusive relationships. I've struggled with body and sexuality issues as long as I can remember, only furthered by my negative self concept. I've often been mistaken for a man and have used mens' washrooms because no one would stop me as they did when I entered the women's room. I have had relationships with women but don't identify myself as gay."



"Men tend to perceive me as a tomboy or lesbian and talk to me as though I am a friend and not a potential mate. Every man I have dated has offered to pay to have breast implants done on me."

*Heather, Age 29*





"I am finally moving towards forgiving my breasts. First of all, they never looked the way I thought breasts were supposed to; they always faced downwards. But worse, they let me down when it came to breastfeeding...they didn't perform the way breasts are expected to. For my four kids, I consulted lactation experts and each time watched my newborns wail desperately of hunger. It's now time to forgive my breasts for not appearing or acting the way I expected them to. I am grateful just to have them still."



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"Oh my God! This is me! The most politically correct, well-brought- up prude you ever met exposing her body in a sensual way! I see myself stripping nudity of its shame and exposing the strength inherent in our very own vulnerabilities. Accepting to show this image is my act of war on the exploitation of the female body in the spirit of learning to accept , honor and celebrate women's delicate sensuality as a symbol of our extraordinary power." *Colette, Age 41*



"I have an estranged feeling with my body. Almost no one considered me a young, feminine woman in my twenties- except some perverts.  
A few years ago a male friend told me, 'Oh, you don't have curves.' I laughed. "



"After some relationships, I start wondering what people think when they look at my body. It's perplexed- yes, it's my body; and no, it looks so unfamiliar to me. Maybe I'm more familiar with my soul than my body.

*-Ailie, Age 33*



"At the time of this shoot, I was doing lots of yoga, dancing and playing tennis. I was fortunate in that the 'tall, slim, not-so-curvaceous woman' was the media's ideal at the time, which probably helped my body image. I have always liked my long legs and my height. I also do a lot of sports, so I was happy to have breasts that didn't get in the way. "





"The only thing I would have changed at the time is that I would have added an extra 20 pounds or so to make myself look a little healthier. I think it's best to be happy with whatever body we have because we come in all shapes and sizes and 'ideals' go in and out of style."

*Danielle, Age 25*

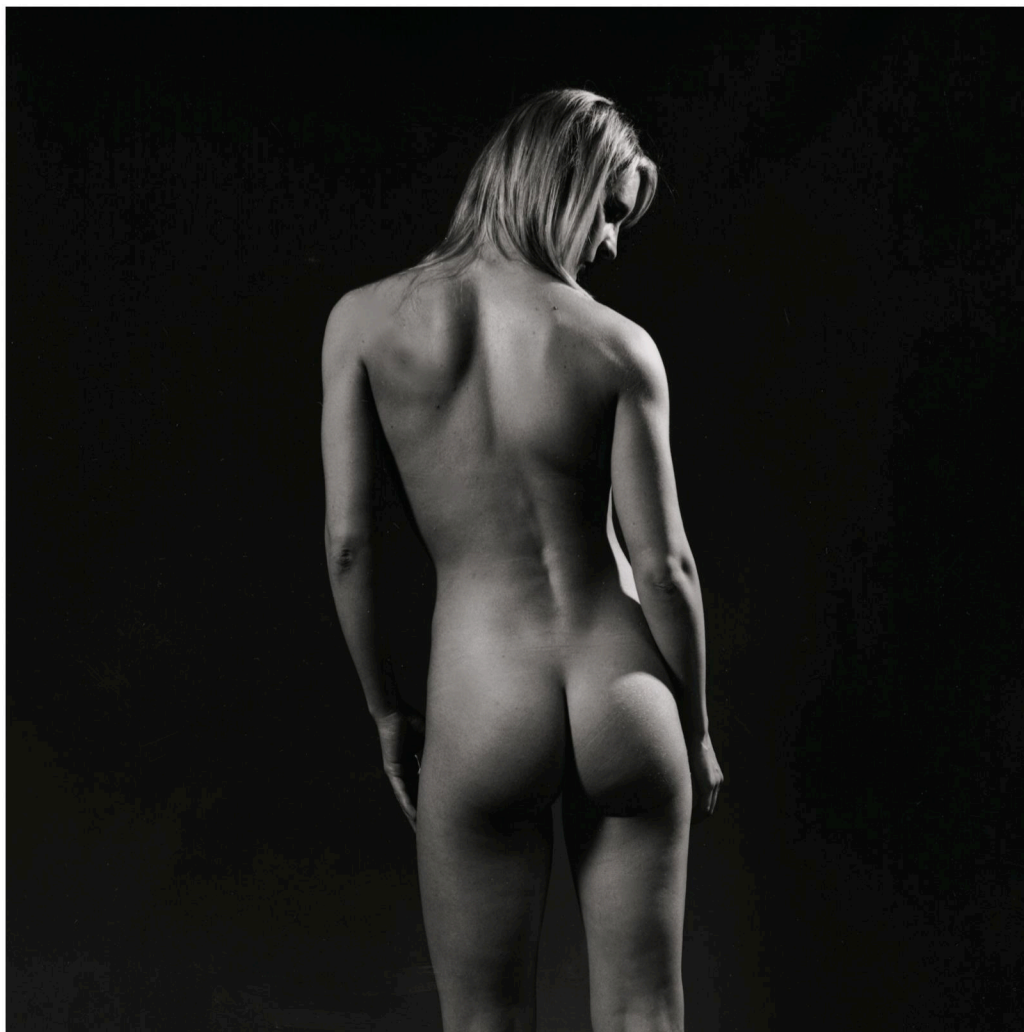


Woman with surgical scars (1)





Woman with surgical scars (2)



"I compete in fitness model talent shows and am constantly striving for the best physique that I am able to achieve. There is an 'off season' where I try to put on more muscle. At that time, I eat more food and hold more body fat. The 'on season' is where I diet harder and try to get as defined as I can."



"It is very hard mentally to go from a fit, cut body back to the off season physique with more body fat. My head sees me as one way even though I look completely different another time. I guess that it comes with the sport?"

*Vanessa, age 28*



"Because of long-standing self- image and health issues, I had a breast reduction at the age of sixteen. At twenty-nine, it was time to make peace with who I was and what my body meant to me. I didn't really know how I looked until I saw the images of myself on the contact sheets from the photo sitting. Looking at them now, they are beautiful ."



"It wasn't easy taking my clothes off in front of the camera but in the end, it helped me to look at the beauty I had but did not realize was there. " *Marie, Age 29*





"Growing up I learned to be what others expected me to be as being true to myself, which resulted in rejection. I developed a chameleon art of recreating myself to suit my environment and tragically lost myself along the way. Reclaiming the abandoned me has been a long process that began with loss. Heroically, I championed causes as a social worker and exhausted myself trying to be a mother figure at the same time."



"I was at a crossroads when these pictures were taken, having left my career and close to losing the home where I raised my three children. I felt I had no anchor to support me though this crisis and I was raw with sadness and grief. I felt vulnerable in front of the camera yet I also felt safe which resulted in the sadness percolating to the surface. There was a tremendous freedom in posing raw, without makeup or costumes or masks or smiles. I was not expected to be glamorous or happy or sexy or strong. I was free to be me." *Jacqueline, Age 45*





This is a personal fitness trainer who came to me to be photographed. She spent an inordinate amount of time conditioning other people's bodies and had placed high expectations on her own appearance as well.



Personal trainer with breast implants.



"My particular body issues are especially difficult to get rid of . I approach my body as a piece of design and do not find it to be as I would like it to be. Not enough curves, too boyish by the current standard of beauty. When I was growing up, I was often asked what gender I was. I wish that I was thinner, that my breasts/backside were larger. My legs are too skinny. My arms are too skinny for a midsection that is too wide thanks to my ribcage. It makes me look strange. I would like surgery to correct these defects."



"It's strange, thinking about what I want to change and what I don't. It's such a subjective thing that seems to be objective in the eyes of a lot of people, including myself- despite how irrational that may be. There is, at least, an awareness of the irrationality within my mind. It's a bit of a battle, two parts that should be functioning as a whole, the mind and body thing, but do not. Conditioning myself to be as I once was, to be accepting, is difficult. *Sabrina, Age 18*



"You have carried me on my life's journey through all of its sorrows, joys, pains and loves. I thank you for this amazing gift but I did not always feel this way. I mistreated you. I neglected you. For that I am truly sorry. "



"I see you now as my constant companion- to love and care for with compassion and dignity. You carry all the wisdom I will ever need."

- Clare, Age 65



"Recently, my feelings about my body image have become more healthy and accepting, and this has happened through the eyes of someone who loves me. I grew up thinking thin, minimally curvy women were the most attractive things around - and compared myself to them constantly. I've gained and lost weight in the past, never being satisfied and being terrified of gaining even one pound. I've slowly become more attracted to my own kind of body type, but I'm still terribly critical."





"I have cellulite. My breasts are not as perky as they should be. My arms are flabby and I will never go without sleeves or wear shorts. I have lots of stretch marks from losing and gaining weight, but I don't mind them at all. They are a reminder of what it's like to be blinded. I have a rubenesque figure that I think is actually quite attractive - for the most part." *Christina, Age 24*



"I am of Chinese/Columbian heritage. I had gone through emotional, physical and sexual abuse until the age of 16 at which time I began to mutilate myself through cutting over 2000 times. At the age of 20, I started working as a prostitute. I have worked as an escort, dominatrix and on the streets. Shortly after, I became a well-known advocate for sex trade workers and children in the sex trade."



" Four years ago, I began taking belly-dancing lessons. Recently, I had my first body modification done to commemorate how I feel about myself. I took no pain killers for the process because I felt it was important to feel the pain of all the years of self-mutilation. This modification has really helped me feel comfortable in my own skin and helped me cope with how others stare at me and my scars on a day-to-day basis. I am also on my way to becoming an orange belt in tae kwon do."

*Jaene, Age 32*



"After viewing these two photos I cannot help myself but think of my body as awful, old, terrible, despicable."



"At this point, I am quite ashamed of my body. This does not have anything to do with your art. Your pictures are perfect. Only your subject is ugly." *Name withheld, Age 50*





"It still overcomes me sometimes, that incredible urge to purge or starve that evil demon called an eating disorder. Some days I can be quite happy in my own skin, aware that my body has held up quite well despite my years and the bearing of four exquisite children. I remind myself that stretch marks are the proverbial 'badges of honour' and that the ugly scar above my groin enabled my beloved twins to be born. However, some days that evil looms in looking over my shoulder. whispering laughingly in my ear..."

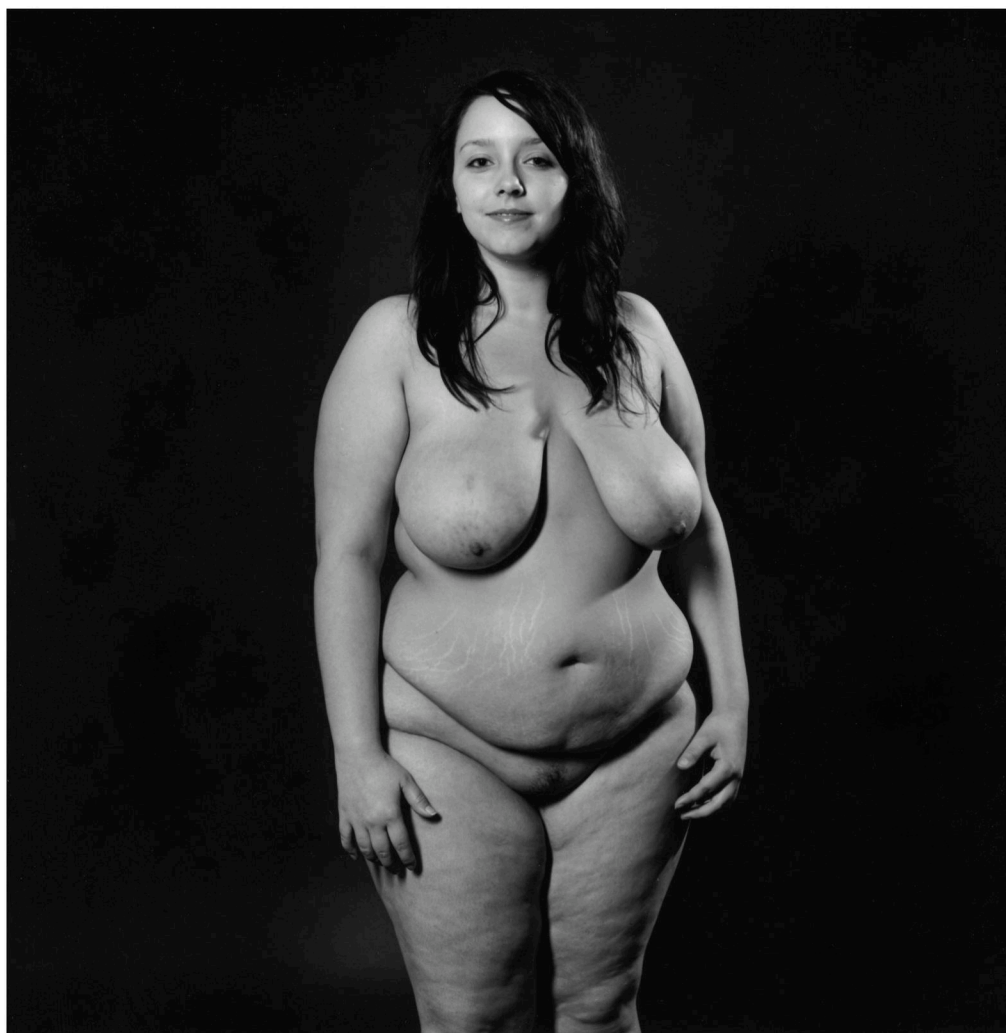


"...reminders that my thighs jiggle and my belly is a bit saggy causing me to fixate on photos of celebrities and reed-thin models who realistically, I know, are airbrushed caricatures of themselves- but who I envy regardless. It has been a long battle with the dark, being able to finally reconcile in my head (most of the time) that I am beautiful. I still struggle from day to day but I refuse to give in to the purgatory again. *Jacqueline, Age 37*



"Rather than feeling vulnerable, posing nude has made me feel stronger and made me understand much better how other people see me. Despite the flacid onslaught of age after 40, I've never felt better about my body or the way I look."





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"I've always felt insecure about my body. I feel my closest friends don't understand me sometimes. They're all small and well-proportioned and I just don't feel like they can relate. For me, going out to a club, or a beach or even going to the gym is complicated. I get there and I see all the tall, tiny, beautiful people, all the girls who can wear strapless dresses, bikinis and tight tank tops, and I want to be them. Just for a moment. It's a barrier on my whole life."





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"I find it difficult to show my stomach or my trouble areas to anyone, especially those I'm intimate with. I'm not religious, but a night doesn't go by where I don't pray that when I wake up in the morning I'll feel like I'm beautiful. That my body is perfect the way it is. Like I'm worth something to myself. Or worthy of someone else's affections."

- Erika, Age 21



"I have difficulty allowing boyfriends to see me undressed in the light. This is because my upper legs, ankles, wrists and upper arms are covered in scars . Some of these scars are faded and thin. Others are wide and still dark with healing tissue. These scars are my fault. I had a habit of hurting myself for many, many years. It has been a long time since I have deliberately harmed myself in such a manner, and I am getting better at allowing my scars to be visible."



"Tattoos are chosen scars that tie in strongly with the neo-tribal culture of hard core music. They are marks of identification, declaration and education. This can be especially important for those of us in my 'tribe' who cannot always claim our scars as desired or even remembered. Tatooing is a part of reclamation. I reclaim a part of myself each time I get body work done." *Rain, Age 25*



Pregnant Sitter

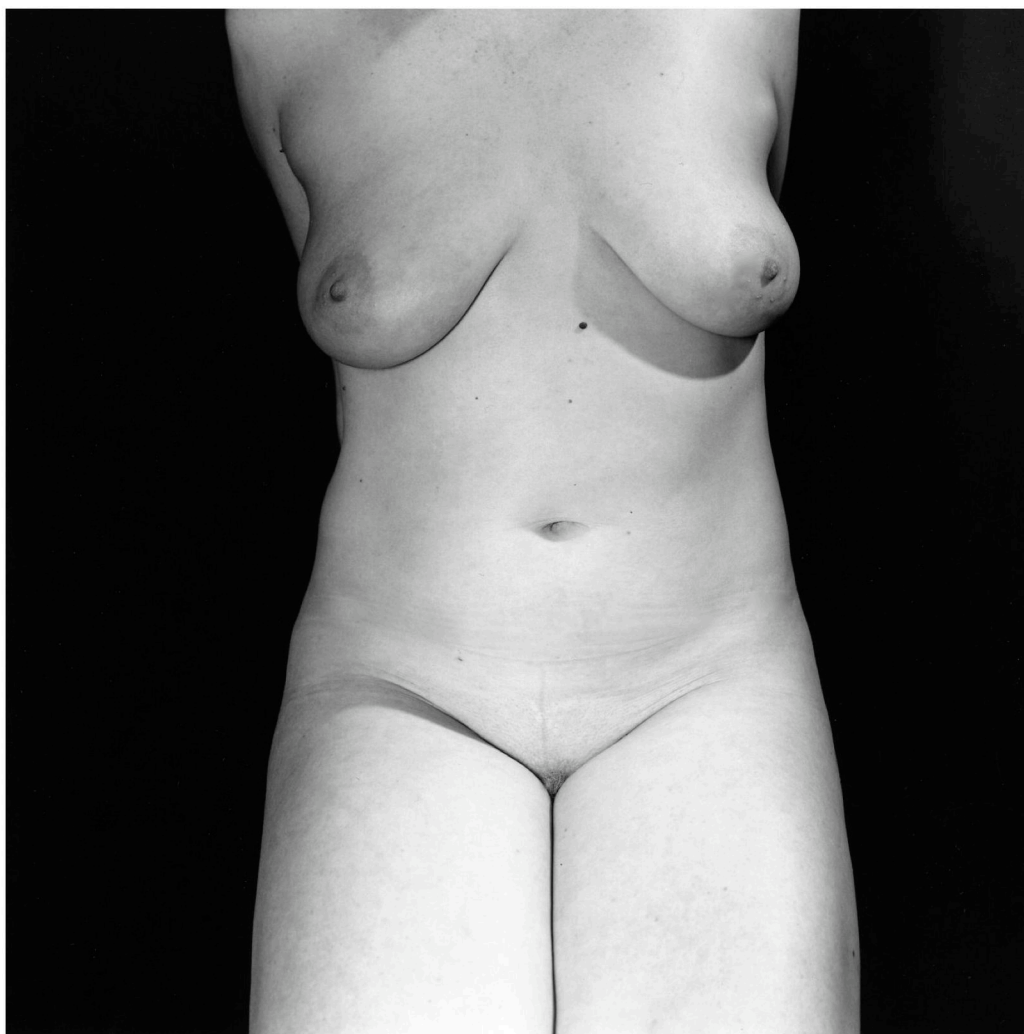


This pregnant sitter came into the studio to be photographed and almost immediately began crying. She was having her child out of wedlock, and that morning had an argument with her partner who she felt was going to abandon her and her baby.





" People would say I was a cute kid but I never saw that... I was a skinny kid with freckels, red hair, glasses. I was teased all through school. I always felt I never measured up or could compare with the pretty girls in school and that has carried through to adulthood..."

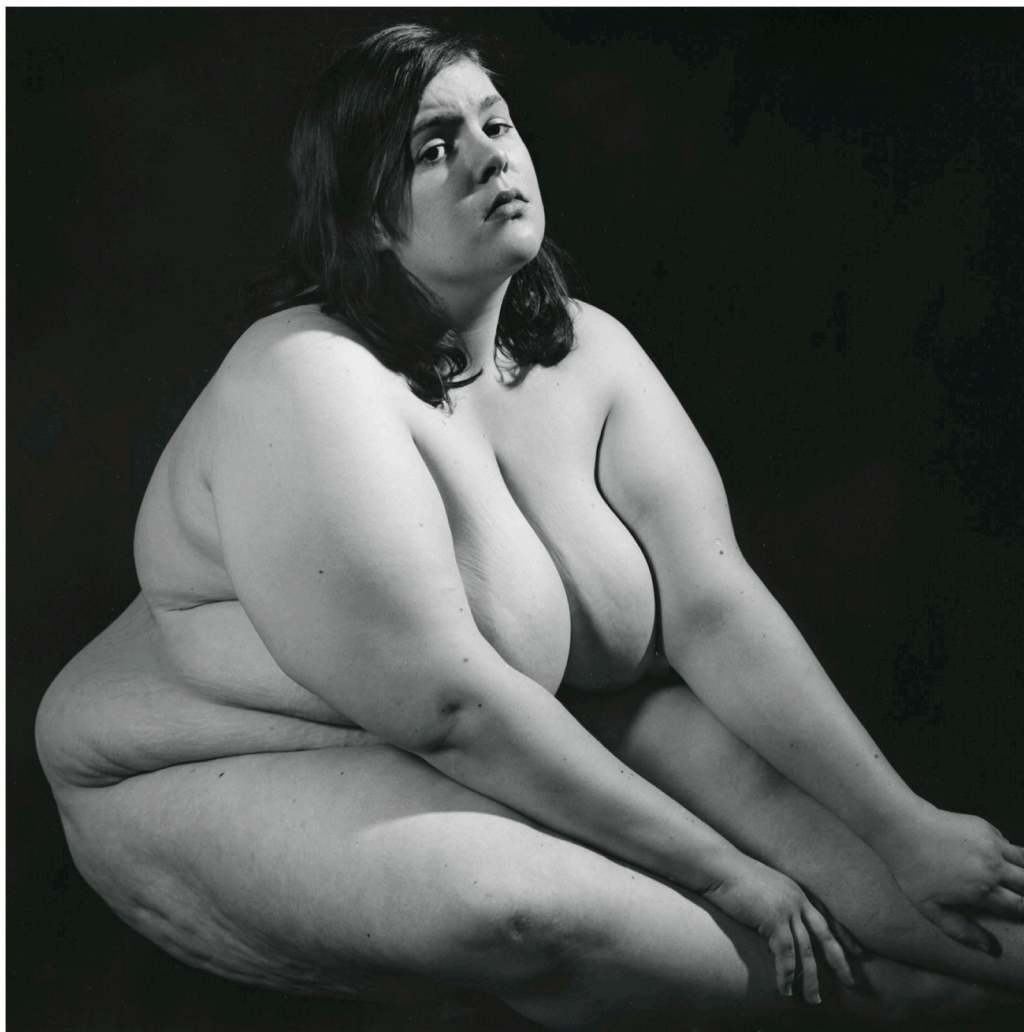


"I can't compare with the pretty blondes, exotic brunettes. I still see the frizzy, skinny redheaded girl. So while I force myself to smile on the outside, on the inside the voices keep saying "you're ugly, you're fat, there is always someone else better than you".

*-Kelly-Marie, Age 36*



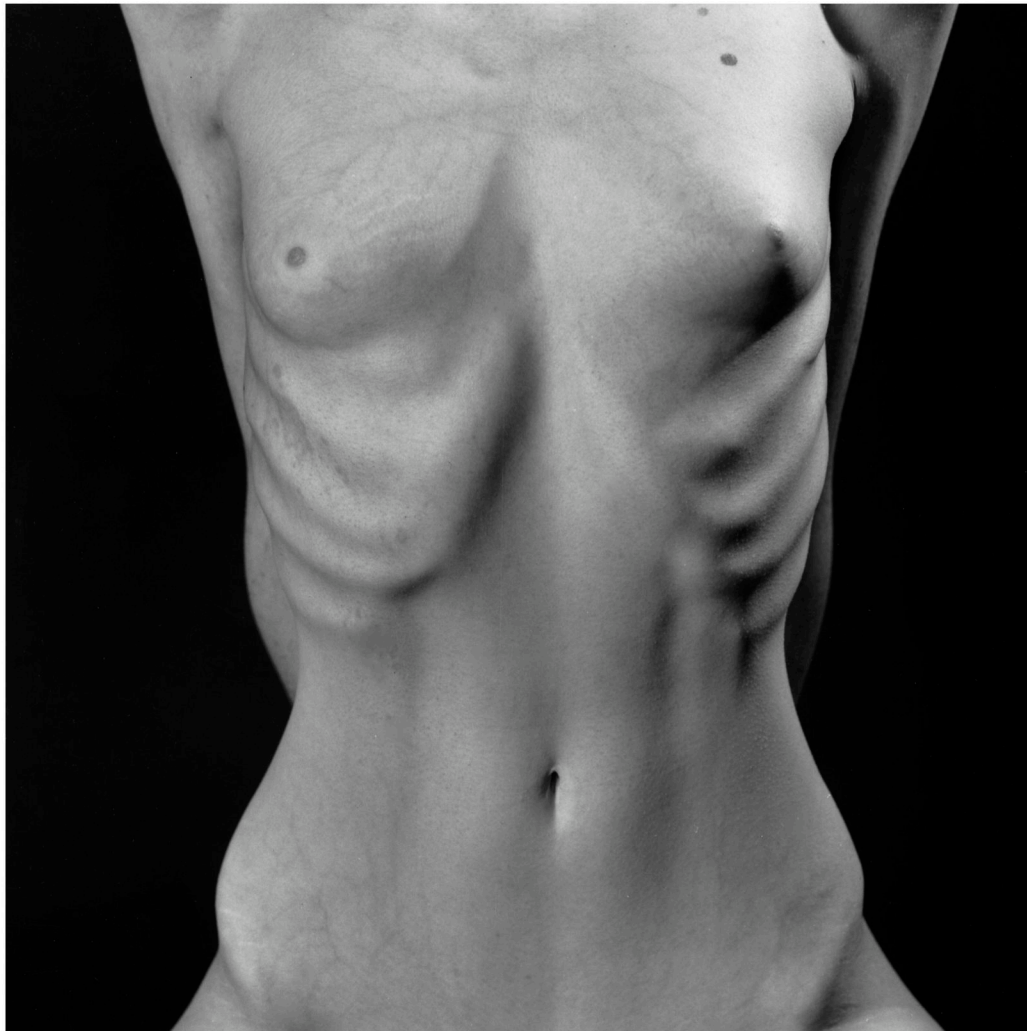
"I am a very big woman. I am a dress size 22-24 and weigh 275 pounds. As much as I feel I am a beautiful person, I often fear it does not show through all my layers of fat. Sometimes if I'm wearing the right outfit, I feel my weight doesn't matter, like I've got curves in all the right places but most of the time I wish I could do something about my big tummy, my double chin, my chubby thighs and especially my back fat- I don't think anything in the world could be less attractive."



"On the other hand, I feel blessed that I have a rather clear complexion and a lovely facial structure, and if you take away the fact that I am so heavy, I have nice proportions but that's what it always comes down to: 'I'm hot, as long as everyone ignores that I am fat.'"

*Tamara, Age 22*





"This pale, freckled body has been unloved as long as I can remember. It has been neglected, raped, bullied, bruised and broken. It has been starved and stuffed, parched, poisoned and pushed to exhaustion. It should be thanked and respected for its persistent strength and resilience to anger, sadness, shame and abuse taken out on it... but it's not."





"It can't be mine. It doesn't feel like it's mine. It is so disconnected from the playful , gentle spirit inside. That is really me!"  
*Susannah, age 35*



"Self-love is the source of all our other loves."  
*Pierre Corneille*



## About Steve Stober

Steve Stober is a Toronto-based portraitist widely recognized for his beautiful black and white portraiture. He has worked with celebrity chefs, musicians, actors, dancers and regularly photographs children and families from his Mount Pleasant Road studio in Toronto.

Steve Stober is firmly committed to the process of traditionally hand-printing his negatives in his studio darkroom and all portrait sessions are shot on film- a rarity these days in an era of digital technology.

Steve welcomes all inquiries about portrait sittings. Please email him directly at [steve@stevestober.com](mailto:steve@stevestober.com)

