

Body Conscious

Laia Abril, Beth B, Maureen Connor, Katya Grokhovsky,
Ariane Lopez-Huici, L.A. Raeven, Faith Ringgold,
Martha Rosler, Ivonne Thein

Curated by Emily L. Newman



(left to right) **Ariane Lopez-Huici**, *Dalila Khatir*, 2002. **Beth B**, *Trophies*, c.1995.

Amelie A. Wallace Gallery February 3 – April 10, 2014

Opening Reception: Monday, February 3, 2014, 4 – 8pm

Lecture by Emily L. Newman: Monday, February 3, 2014, 4:45 – 6pm

Performance by Katya Grokhovsky,
One Fine Day (2014): Monday, February 3 at 7pm

Artist's Talks:

February 5, 6:30 pm: **L.A. Raeven**

February 19, 5:00 pm: **Laia Abril**

March 5, 6:30 pm: **Ivonne Thein**

Film screenings: Schedules TBA – Lauren Greenfield's *Thin* (2006),
Ariane Lopez-Huici and Marilia Destot's *The Body Close Up* (2008),
L.A. Raeven's *Beyond the Image* (2010), and Beth B.'s *Exposed* (2013).

Body Conscious

The statistics are alarming. Seventy-five percent of women will suffer from some type of disordered eating, including anorexia, but more commonly skipping meals, avoiding food with carbohydrates, bingeing and purging, and even some ill-conceived types of dieting. Furthermore, it has been estimated that as many as twenty-five million men and women struggle with disordered eating in the United States alone. It is only appropriate then, that Body Conscious seeks to explore the way artists have addressed female body image in contemporary art. By tackling anorexia, dieting, obesity, etc., each of these artists attempts to articulate the Western obsession with the size of women's body.

SHAME: An important underlying issue that accompanies women's perception of their bodies is a feeling of shame and dissatisfaction with the size and shape of their figure. Both **Katya Grokhovsky** and **Laia Abril** address these problematic feelings of inadequacy in their artwork.

On one hand, **Katya Grokhovsky** (b. 1977) uses collages to depict the physicality of the body, showing the swelling of the physique or even figures vomiting. The combination of drawing and mixed media further alerts the viewer to the disjuncture and dissatisfaction with the body. Similarly, but perhaps more directly, her performance, *One Fine Day* (2014) uses t-shirts with text printed on them that have been used to refer to or describe her body. The words might seem encouraging at first, but as the performance builds and **Katya Grokhovsky** removes the shirts, it becomes clear that the language is often insulting and even degrading.

Women with eating disorders themselves often use similar vocabulary on Pro-Anorexia websites to berate themselves. **Laia Abril** (b. 1986) addressed this dialogue with her series *Thinspiration* (2012), which re-photographs pictures that appear on these types of websites. These photographs show women who are incredibly thin, and yet are still dissatisfied with their bodies. In an earlier piece, **Laia Abril** focused on the more personal side of anorexia, by following one young woman's attempt to recover from bulimia in *A Bad Day* (2011). Both artists certainly make the point that shame, often coupled with continued attempts to become thinner and better looking, are not just for anorexics or bulimics, but can affect anyone who does not feel that they measure up.

ALTERATION: Many women attempt to alter or reshape their bodies as one way to fit to appear thinner through physical means like corsets, girdles or Spanx but also through manipulating photographic depictions of themselves. Through extreme examples of body modification, **Ivonne Thein** and **Beth B** encourage the viewer to reconsider what women are willing to do to their bodies.



(left to right)

Faith Ringgold, *Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story*, Quilt (detail), 1988. **Ivonne Thein**, *Thirty-Two Kilos*, 2008. **Katya Grokhovsky**, *Untitled*, 2013.

L.A.Raevan, *Ideal Individual*, 1999-2001. **Laia Abril**, *Thinspiration*, 2012. **Martha Rosler**, *Losing: A Conversation with the Parents*, 1977. **Maureen Connor**, *Thinner Than You*, 1990.

In her 1995 *Trophies* series, **Beth B** (b. 1955) critiqued the way that society has perpetuated an ideal form by illustrating the mutations and mutilations of the female physique. In one work, she showed a very thin woman, surrounded by a mirror on all sides. The lifeless form hangs surrounded by repeated images of its body, much as the anorexic constantly attempts to find and correct the errors of their body. In another piece, she shows two different ribcages, one that is “normal” and one that shows the aftermath and damage of wearing a restrictive corset. These facsimile bodies are all reminders of the extreme lengths people are willing to go to alter their bodies.

In Thirty-Two Kilos (2008), **Ivonne Thein** (b. 1979) uses computer manipulation instead of the sculptural manipulation of **Beth B**. Taking photographs of her friends, **Ivonne Thein** makes their bodies impossibly thin. While their body positions evoke fashion magazines and advertisements, their tiny frames look as if they could easily break. Furthermore, the unhealthiness of their figure is echoed by the medical bandages and wrapping that serve as their clothing. Thein questions the medicalization and dialogue concerning women’s bodies and weight. Both artists’ work has the potential to encourage the viewer to reflect on the way that they present their body to society.

REJECTION: In trying to fit in and become smaller, it is inevitable that many women will face some kind of rejection, such as not fitting into a desired pair of jeans to not seeing that magic number appear on the scale. Loss and rejection play an important role in the video work of **LA Raeven** and an early piece by **Martha Rosler**.

In Ideal Individual (1999-2001), **LA Raeven** (twins Angelique and Liesbeth Raeven, b. 1971) placed an ad in papers across Europe looking for women who were extraordinarily thin, practically pre-pubescent. Once the women came for a casting call, they were videotaped changing into the same, simple t-shirt. The women, appearing before the artists, were all told individually told that they were not chosen to be an “ideal individual.” The pressure to be thin and fit in, is only reinforced here by the sheer impossibility of meeting **LA Raeven’s** intense demands.

Martha Rosler’s (b. 1943) video, *Losing: A Conversation with the Parents* (1977), shows how eating disorders affect people beyond those that suffer from the disease itself. In this case, **Martha Rosler** looks at the tragedy of anorexia from the perspective of the parents who have just lost their disorder to the eating disorder. Just over eighteen minutes, the film recalls the confessional nature of talk shows that were becoming increasingly prevalent throughout the 1970s. In the film, the prevalent themes of loss and grief make clear the far-reaching impact of eating disorders. Through the exploration of a variety of types of grief and dismissal, these artists recognize the broader feelings and pain that emerge from situations involving eating disorders.

IDEALIZATION: Accompanying the preoccupation with the female body image, is the focus that many women have placed on the ideal form. In various ways and mediums, **Faith Ringgold**, **Maureen Connor**, and **Ariane Lopez-Huici** show different approaches to the ways that women approach the ideal body.

In Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt 1988 (1988), **Faith Ringgold** (b. 1930) describes her recent dramatic weight loss with both pictures and text. And yet, **Faith Ringgold** also makes clear that one hundred pounds is not enough, as she describes wanting to lose thirty more pounds. At the center of the quilt, **Faith Ringgold** paints her ideal thinner self looking svelte in a swimsuit. But behind that form, lurks the larger shadow that is more consistent with the reality of her body.

Maureen Connor's (b. 1947) lingerie sculptures use the sexy material of underwear placed on metal forms standing in for the female form. *Thinner Than You* (1990) includes a thin metal rod as a mannequin, with a slinky black dress gathered around it. The waist of the "figure" is only a few inches wide. The smallness of *Thinner Than You* contrasts with the horizontality and width of *No Way Out* (1990). Here, a stretch body suit is pulled taught over a metal armature that seems to crawl over the floor. The two pieces work to confuse the viewer's perceptions of the body, while raising questions regarding the reality of the body.

Through her photographs of the 1990s and 2000s, **Ariane Lopez-Huici** (b. 1945) shows bodies that do not often appear in museums. In her photographs of Aviva and Dalila, **Ariane Lopez-Huici** shows women who are comfortable with their body, despite the fact that their bodies are larger than the "average" female body. Dalila is shown dancing and moving, simultaneously celebrating and showcasing her body. Aviva, as well as group photographs of similarly sized women by **Ariane Lopez-Huici**, emphasize power and strength, as the women appear confident and supportive. In these works, these women do not need to conform to an ideal, as they seem secure with their shape as it is.

In conclusion, this focus on the female body needs to shift. The ten artists in this exhibition attempt to complicate the idea of "normal," demonstrating the idea of beautiful in the various sizes of body types. However, they also show the intense side effects and the destructive capabilities that eating disorders and body manipulation can have on the female body. Hopefully, by showing these artworks together, the conversation concerning female body size can shift its focus from judging women based on the size of their body to judging the way that media and society often criticizes the female form.

Emily L. Newman, PhD