

An Interview with Holly Fischer:

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What made you want to explore this content?

My struggle to accept my own body led to my exploring beauty as a concept. Particularly as a teenager, I was very influenced by cultural standards for idealized female beauty. Like many young women, I desperately wanted to achieve the “perfection” advertised by the beauty and fashion industries. I developed an eating disorder. It felt impossible to ever measure up, be good enough, be pretty enough or thin enough. Art became an outlet: a way for me to channel my frustration and try to unravel what drives the impulse to conform.

Who or what sparked your feministic interest?

I think my feminist instincts were emerging when I began to question why I felt the need to match a prescribed standard of beauty. I wanted answers as to why our society places so much more value on the way a woman looks than on her other attributes. I became very interested in concepts of gender. I felt that understanding how and why gender stereotypes develop was key in understanding standardized images of female beauty. I took several courses in Women and Gender Studies as a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. I studied Freud’s theories on gender, and was influenced by Laura Mulvey’s foundational texts on psychoanalytic feminist theory.

The women that you display don’t necessarily comply with the contemporary “female ideal” which we see so often in the media. Is there a reason for portraying the female form in this way?

I’m my own model for my work. I struggle with body dysmorphia, and have a very difficult time seeing myself as others might see me. My sculptural forms are exaggerated versions of my flesh and figure – intentionally more voluptuous and curvy than the contemporary female ideal. Personally, I have found this approach to be therapeutic. I think my sculptures are beautiful. Although there are times when I still struggle with my reflection in a mirror, I feel no judgment about my sculptures’ full hips and fleshy folds. I think it is healthy to depict alternative forms of beauty, especially since the media has severely narrowed the definition of acceptable female beauty.

How do you think the public interprets the bodies?

I don’t think there is a single way in which the public views my work. I think the individual response of viewers is very telling in how they perceive beauty and sexuality, what they think about women and how they view themselves. In some ways I think public reaction to my work is a bit like a Rorschach test... it can be very revealing.

One side of most of your sculptures has a nude, and the other a fluid, sensual, and inherently “female” shape. What made you choose to display the abstraction in this way?

The abstract sections of my forms are inherently feminine and sensual. The flowing lines and curves of the abstract folds are intentionally seductive and suggestive. I hope they draw viewers in for a closer look at my forms. I want these abstract elements to provoke questions in the minds of viewers. To achieve this, the abstraction remains somewhat ambiguous – never fully revealing its origin; in some moments the abstraction harmonizes with the curves of the nude forms, and in other instances the abstraction may seem to violate the figures. The dynamic of looking and being looked at is particularly interesting to me, and I hope the juxtaposition of familiar female forms with unexpected sensual abstraction will make my viewers more aware of the inherent intimacy and voyeurism of viewing a nude.

How do you think being a woman influences the way you make art and display the female form?

My work is about being a woman and my personal struggle to become comfortable in my own skin. I think my femaleness and my work are intrinsically tied and nearly impossible to separate. The paradoxes of femininity are my inspiration. As a woman, I perpetually walk a line between objectification and empowerment. Beauty and sexuality can be powerful attributes, but those same traits can also become limitations and hindrances. Femininity is such a complex concept – full of subtleties and discrepancies, and I believe as a woman I can more authentically address these issues. Conversely, male artists must inherently create from a perspective of “other” when working with the female form. I am often asked why I don’t sculpt male nudes, and the answer is the same: my concepts arise from internal, personal questions about my gender. My work is a quest for self-knowledge.

What artists influence you?

I have many artistic influences spanning centuries. I love the sculptures of Michelangelo and Bernini, Gaston Lachaise and Louise Bourgeois. I believe there is much to learn from these four very different sculptors about how to convey passion, sensuality, and strength through the nude form. For suggestive abstraction, I’m influenced by Judy Chicago, Georgia O’Keeffe, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward Weston. Women like Cindy Sherman and Jenny Saville are influential in their use of their own bodies to confront the ever-present, voyeuristic gaze.