



Claiming Space

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Abstract

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The self-portraits in *Claiming Space* are presented as large, glossy full-color posters, pinned directly to the gallery wall. The photographs are photographs of me, a plus-sized woman, as I want to be seen confronting and challenging the ideals of beauty, desire, and representation in contemporary culture and media. Using an active and direct gaze, I present a plus-sized woman with power and strength even in vulnerability. I am challenging the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women, especially fat women, and asserting the right to be seen.



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Claiming Space is a set of large, glossy, full-color poster prints pinned to the gallery wall. The images reference and confront ideas of beauty, desire, and representation. Through the poster prints, I am challenging the ways ideals of femininity and beauty are disseminated in visual culture. The title, *Claiming Space*, addresses the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women, especially plus-sized women in media, claiming the right to be represented and the visual space to be seen.

My works are self-portraits. By taking self-portraits, I seek to show myself as I want to be seen. Using a performative method of creating photographs, I reveal myself presenting confidence and power, even in vulnerability. I stand comfortable with who I am and how I look and confront the viewer. In the image “Shapewear”, I am standing in a bedroom surrounded by

personal items that hint at who the woman in the image is. I stare directly into the camera, with my hair fixed, make-up on, wearing only a nude bra and a nude shapewear slip that serves to highlight the bulges in my stomach in a way that even nudity would not. The camera angle, my gaze, and posture assert defiance and confidence, while the shapewear evidences the efforts of women to conform to beauty ideals. My artwork comes from a personal place, but it opens a broader dialogue about the politics of representation to address universal pressures placed on women, such as myself.

By setting up the camera to photograph myself, I remove the opportunity for candidness. The removal of the ability to be unaware that an image is being captured means that the scene is always acted out or performed by the sitter. Anne Noggle used self-portraiture as a documentary tool, making images of herself that look like documentary images or snapshots. Most are obviously self-portraits based on the angle of the camera in relation to Noggle herself. The apparent spontaneity of the images make them feel almost candid but the frank directness of her stare and marks of a self-portrait reveal the performative action of photographing oneself.

Jen Davis uses performance in self-portraiture to create scenes meant to reflect her own personal struggle with weight and self-confidence. Her images are carefully set up and performed for the camera, yet they are a documentation of her own journey. Genevieve Gagnard also works in the genre of self-portraits but is using the language of her body to create characters constructed through stereotypes, cultural iconography, and tropes. She uses her identity as the daughter of a black father and white mother to explore issues of race, femininity, class, and their intersections through her performance and costumes.¹

Noggle documented the joys, challenges, and accomplishments of her life in a straightforward way with only the process as an indication of performance. Davis seeks to create a believable image to convey feelings about her daily life by constructing scenes with herself in them. Gagnard creates fictional scenes of imagined characters connected to one another purely through racial and social identity, and her personal history. Finally, my images are fictional

1 Gagnard, "Genevieve Gagnard: About."

scenes set up for the camera. However, the woman in the image is not merely a character I have imagined; she draws her ability to challenge cultural ideals from my strength.

Historically the pin-up girl has been a way that the standards for fashion and ideals of the feminine figure have been spread and reinforced in American culture. However, one can trace the roots of the pin-up as far back as when art first reproduced the human figure. In her book *Pin-up Grrrls Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, Maria Elena Buszek identifies photography with its ability to mass reproduce and easily disseminate images as the origins of the modern pin-up. Tracing this history from the celebrity women represented on the carte-de-visite through the Gibson Girls, to the Varga girl and her counterparts, who were the first to be named pin-up girls, many were appreciated by both male and female audiences. These images created a new standard of behavior and ideal feminine representation. Pin-ups also drew women out of the domestic sphere to being more actively and solidly in the public sphere.² Many early pin-up models were intelligent, professional women, asserting an independence and control of their own lives, while possessing their own sexuality, flaunting conventions of domesticity and femininity of the time. The pin-up most notable in drawing women into roles outside the domestic sphere is Rosie the Riveter,³ who is recognized as a pin-up but was disseminated as propaganda for women to take jobs to support the troops on the Homefront.

By displaying my photographs as 24" by 36" posters, with creases and folds, pinned to the gallery wall, I reference the pin-up and use the power of the poster to assert a different standard. By controlling the image and presentation of my body, I am claiming my right to be seen as I want to be seen: desirable, powerful, confident, and sexual. The posters are created through a third-party, small run printer. The color is not refined like a fine art print, hinting to the mass production of posters. I use the poster to address the way images are often disseminated

2 Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls*.

3 Rosie the Riveter was the center of a campaign aimed at recruiting females to work in the defense industries during World War II. Though she became one of the most iconic images of a powerful working woman her time was expected to be for the duration of the war, but it proved more challenging to draw women into the workforce than to move them back into the home. While Norman Rockwell created the first illustration of Rosie based on a song, the best known image of Rosie is a based on a photograph by J. Howard Millar, most likely of Naomi Parker Fraley. Fraley passed away in January of 2018.



in culture to communicate what the ideal woman looks like. As such, despite having controlled everything from capture to presentation of the image, I am also acknowledging my inability to control how an image of me is viewed or consumed by an audience in a personal space. Though I cannot control the consumption of my images in a personal space, I have chosen to further distribute my photographs with 11" x 17" signed posters as a promotional item for guests to take away from the exhibition.

The photographs reference the traditional pin-up in varying degrees and ways. For example, a poster of me reclining on a bed with red sheets wearing lingerie, red lipstick, and gold nail polish is a direct challenge to the conventions of the pin-up, especially the more recent *Playboy* centerfolds. The directness of my gaze in this image serves to assert that I am aware of the camera, therefore, also aware of the viewer; this assertive awareness communicates my choice to be viewed this way. My gaze is active and direct, not the passive seduction typically

seen in a *Playboy* playmate. During the wartime trials surrounding the Varga Girls,⁴ in the testimonies of female witnesses, both in favor of and against the illustrations, “the Varga Girls were viewed as ‘active subjects luring men, not as victims of the male gaze.’”⁵ As Buszek argues, the reimagined Varga Girl and playmates that appeared in *Playboy* “sought to reclaim both the genre and women’s sexuality for a privileged male gaze.”⁶ Though the image of me on the bed has the strongest visual connection to the playmates of *Playboy*, it also defies them by using this pose and gaze to show my own desires.

4 The Varga Girls refer to the pin-up drawings created by Alberto Vargas. His illustrations were the inspiration for the nose art on many World War II aircraft. The Varga Girl illustrations of this era were drawn for *Esquire* Magazine. Between 1943 and 1946 *Esquire* magazine was engaged in a legal battle with the U. S. Post Office Department calling into question the morality of the magazine. The Varga Girl was central to the argument against *Esquire*. It was argued that the content of the magazine, especially the Varga Girl illustrations were obscene, disqualifying the magazine from its second-class mailing status. Vargas later worked for *Playboy* magazine in the 1960’s. The drawings for the two magazines differed greatly, often being separated into two separate bodies of work. *Esquire* Varga Girls were seen as more active and in control of their own sensuality, while *Playboy* Varga Girls were seen to be more passive and submissive to the sexual desires of a male audience.

5 Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls*, 218.

6 Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls*, 237.



Girls and women often take cues about their beauty and value from the images they see in contemporary culture. The impossible standards of beauty observed by woman serve to teach them that they must conform to these standards or they are fundamentally flawed, even at a young age.⁷ In her book, *Perfect Women*, Collette Dowling talks about the uninhibited ability of two-year-old Catherine to take joy in her reflection in the mirror and believe herself pretty.⁸ Later in the book, Dowling shows that as girls grow-up they lose this ability and become increasingly unsatisfied with their body until 91 percent of women are dissatisfied. More than half overestimate their own size. The most shocking statistic was that half wished to be underweight.⁹ Thirteen years later, Hartley's statistics are not much more encouraging. Hartley says women learn as early as five or six years old to be dissatisfied with their bodies. As they mature, this becomes more pronounced. Hartley cites statistics indicating that 53 percent of thirteen-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies. This number increases and at eighteen 78 percent are dissatisfied. In women over eighteen, 75 percent believe they are overweight. This number includes 45 percent who are technically underweight¹⁰

An August 2016, *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* article cites recent findings which suggest that "The average American woman's (AAW's) clothing size is larger than anticipated. The AAW wear(s) between a Misses size 16-18... It is suggested that updating Misses and Plus-size clothing standards should be a major priority."¹¹ Plus-size clothing typically begins at size 14 leaving the AAW unable to shop in the "normal" clothing section. In 2017, Refinery 29 started the 67% Project, a campaign to move plus-sized women's representation from being niche to normalized, based on the finding that 67% percent of American women are a size 14 or larger yet only 2% of the images in the fashion industry represent them.¹² In the 1990's, the average fashion model weighed 23 percent less than the

7 Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go," 60.

8 Dowling, *Perfect Women*, 13.

9 Dowling, *Perfect Women*, 53.

10 Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go," 60.

11 Christel and Dunn, "Average American Woman's Clothing Size," 129.

12 Refinery 29. "67 Percent Project."

average woman, while only a generation before that the gap was 8 percent.¹³ Being so grossly underrepresented makes women in this group feel invisible. *Claiming Space* challenges this underrepresentation of plus-sized women in media, asserting the right for such women to be represented and seen.

It is not only the underrepresentation of plus-size women that shapes an understanding of how a woman should look, but also the way women are imaged that encodes normative and expected behaviors. When a plus size women is represented in media, she is often represented as lazy, sedentary, clumsy, or overwhelmed with a difficult, compulsive or consuming relationship with food. Though most pin-ups are idealized to be the perfect woman, one notable exception was Hilda,¹⁴ a popular plus sized pin-up from the 1950's – 1980's. She is attractive but next to her more classically sensual “ideal” counterparts she is portrayed as clumsy, funny, and accident prone. These qualities, coupled with her curiosity and ingenuity, make her approachable, almost attainable, though she is rarely found in the sensual poses and costumes one expects of a pin-up.

It is my intention to present a woman who is not different because of her size but a woman who owns her size by showcasing power, strength, vulnerability, and sexuality. By referencing the popularity and commercial power of the pin-up girl to shape the understanding of America's sensibility and standards, through the glossy posters in *Claiming Space*, I am claiming the power to use that language to challenge ideas of femininity, beauty, desire, and representation – presenting a new standard.

13 Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 184.

14 Hilda is a plump, redheaded pin-up girl illustrated by artist Duane Bryers. While notably larger than the average pin-up girl she became a staple on pin-up calendars for more than 30 years. I have been unable to find scholarly research on Hilda and her placement and role within pin-up.



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