OUT OF TRUE: LINE AND BODY

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Introduction

We, particularly women, choose to allow ourselves to be judged by external standards of body and appearance. These standards are self-imposed in response to societal expectations and our own innate need to conform, but our conformity is also policed by other women: not just the "woman on the street," but our mothers, sisters, and friends. When we let these external pressures push us out of true we are shifted off our personal foundations. Our true form may or may not be consistent with the contemporary idealized image of a beautiful, successful, fertile woman. Clothing such as high heels and corsets reform the body into an unnatural shape, which may paradoxically be considered the ideal.

How do we learn to recognize our own personal truth? By using the idea of the plumb bob within this work, I create a metaphor for the true self. A plumb bob is simply a weight on the end of a line, which has been used for millennia to find a true vertical. I am using this device to represent the truth we as individuals look for. With multiple plumb bobs, the truth may seem askew. As every weight points to the center of the earth, every line is at a slightly different angle than the one beside it, although the difference is completely immeasurable. These “true” lines seem to trick the eye into believing what it wants to believe, which is that there is at least one unconditional truth.

The title of this thesis exhibition, Out of True: Line and Body, is a direct reference to the line of the plumb bob and the body of the viewer. This thesis suggests that the obstacles in life, which we have most likely created for ourselves, will continuously push us out of true. The viewer is responsible for finding and following that one unconditional truth that one sets forth for one’s self. A truth for one person can be completely different
for another person. That is where the idea for multiple unconditional truths stems from. All of the hanging plumb lines are true even if they do not agree with one another. If multiple plumb lines are next to each other, all pointing to the center of the earth, they create a pie shape rather than being parallel to one another. This simply proves there are always multiple ways of truing one’s self.
“Out of True: Line and Body”

This exhibition has been realized as a result of several years of trial and error through my past sculptural work. My prior research revolved around gender stresses and insecurities, juxtaposed with issues surrounding female politics. As a woman in today’s society I am confronted with stereotypes and judgments based on appearance. These standards are projected on everyone at all times. These looming standards entice me to create work that brings to light these judgmental standards. They lead the viewer to make the choice as to what they want to believe and what truth to follow. The works created prior to “Out of True: Line and Body” had characteristics in common with the sculptures seen in this exhibition, such as, women veiling their body in order to fit into society, and figures being pulled and stretched beyond what is humanly possible. These works led me into, “Out of True: Line and Body.” I see this exhibition as a beginning and will continue to work within these parameters, which I have only begun to explore.

When entering the exhibition “Out of True: Line and Body,” anticipation is the first thing a viewer felt as they were instantly confronted with a huge pair of Barbie legs half way through the gallery. These towering legs give the viewer something to look forward to as they proceed through the space. (see plate 1) Immediately to one’s left after entering the exhibition was the signage and statement on the wall in large vinyl letters. (see plate 2) It was important for the viewer to read the statement either upon entering the gallery or immediately after viewing the works on the way out. The sculptures displayed are informed by the artist’s statement and were meant to be viewed in tandem.
Turning to the right after viewing the title wall, one was met with a suspended bronze corset with glass plumb bobs hung beneath it entitled, *The Truing Corset.* (see plate 3) Corsets are used to reposition the figure into a “more desirable” look even if the look is unnatural to them. This particular corset was made of cast bronze and bound with steel cable, which implies a forceful fit. (see plate 4) We are pressed into a mold created by our own self-imposed stereotypes. The crush of the mold reconfigures the wearer towards a vision of youthful seduction. The cable ensures no chance of escape and reinforces the fact that powerful forces beyond the wearer’s strength find them, and reshape us as humans. The lines of the glass plumb bobs follow the boning of the corset and compel us to look for the real truth no matter how fragile we are. (see plate 5)

A corset has been viewed not only as an object of eroticism but also as an instrument of torture and subjugation. Corsets were first used in the sixteenth century and called "payre of bodies."¹ They compressed the upper body and the lower body into a cylinder. A dressmaker would create a dress in two pieces, upper and lower, the corset would combine the two parts of the body to make a pair of bodies. The "payre of bodies," later called “stays,” emphasized the flatness of the torso and draw attention to the breasts by pressing them upwards. Not until the eighteenth century did it come to be called a corset.

“Gone With the Wind,” a 1939 classic movie, highlighted women’s insistence to have the smallest waist of everyone in the room. In this movie, Scarlett O'Hara was laced into her corset by her maid. She is clutching the bedposts as her maid, Mammy, pulls at the corset strings to achieve the desirable and highly restrictive tiny waist. Scarlet tells

mammy that she cannot be seen out in public unless her waist is at most eighteen and a half inches. This degree of distortion takes years of training your body and repositioning your organs to achieve. It has been seen for hundreds of years as the object of desire in the Western World.\textsuperscript{2} Although men did play a role in adorning women in this garment, it was the women who chose to look at it as a competition. The damage done to a woman’s body was irreparable as atrophy and organ deformation were some of the common side effects. Respiratory and circulatory diseases, birth defects, and cancer were just some of the medical dangers which might have resulted from wearing a tight laced corset, in some cases leading even to death.\textsuperscript{3}

Our own innate needs to conform led us to this, so whom do we have to blame? To wear a corset requires a second party to lace the back. Why would our mothers, sisters, and friends be the ones to subject a woman to such pain? External pressures push us out of true. In my sculpture, “The Truing Corset,” the glass plumb bobs hung from beneath urge women to look at themselves and rethink what it means to conform to what society wants. Binding ones figure in order to avoid body criticism shows what frail egos we hold.

“Formed to Fit” mirrors the corset in its gallery placement and content. (see plate 6) This piece emphasizes how unnaturally the body is formed to fit into conceptions of what is considered beautiful. “The Truing Corset” is the garment clothing itself with the illusion of a distorted figure. “Formed to Fit” is the figure with the absence of clothing.


Together they spoke of how fashion dictates the form of our body rather than the other way around. While uncomfortably positioned on the ball of the foot, the sculpture stood on a stack of fashion magazines. With steel lashings as laces soon to be tightened and painful, this is indicative of societal structures hurting the wearer. The urge to wear high heels comes from fashion magazines and also, there is evidence that taller people tend to advance in many things more quickly than shorter people. High heels are a very common sight today, though if one takes an objective step back one might notice the odd shape in which your foot is being transformed. The shape of a high heel shoe provides no support; the flattering element lies in the wearer’s calf muscle. The shoes keep the wearer’s calves under constant tension.

Pushing the idea of these steel laces even farther is the Chinese tradition of footbinding. This tradition lasted roughly one thousand years beginning in the 10th century and ending in the early 20th century. Footbinding usually happened at a young age. Parents wrapped their daughters’ feet tightly so they could not grow properly and would never get larger. Binding one’s feet does not stop the growth, but merely stops the feet from growing out and instead deforms the bones and causes the toes to curl under. This practice on young girls is widely seen as being perverse. It has come to be viewed as male domination over women. Both men and women perpetuated this act. Footbinding could also be used to have a woman marry up a social class. It would show that this particular woman would never have to work for a living, as binding ones feet would make this impossible. She would become an object to be owned and viewed.

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“Formed to Fit” and “The Truing Corset” are about aestheticism as it applies to women’s bodies. I chose cast bronze for its association with the commodification of a woman’s beauty over the past hundreds of years. Bronze has been used for overtly sexual sculptures of female nudes by male sculptors. I used bronze for its historical background and in turn, link it to the commodification of women. Although I usually use cast iron in my sculpture, it is absent from this exhibition. Cast iron speaks of heavy industry and for these two sculptures I was looking for the classical beauty that bronze brings to a sculpture.

It has to be noted that the color seen in these sculptures was not bronze, but rather a residue of a chemical reaction on the surface known as a patina. Currently patinas come in a wide variety of colors but for these sculptures I used a traditional one to reinforce my choice of metals. There is often a human like warmth to bronze that iron lacks. This warmth gives the viewer a clearer understanding that these garments were once on a person’s body and perhaps still maintain residual body heat.

The final piece in the first room was the most overwhelming, standing fourteen feet high were a pair of Barbie doll legs. (See plate 8) Barbie is an icon/idol and for over fifty years she has been setting impossible standards for women’s figures. Barbie was created by Ruth Handler, who based her loosely on a sexy German doll named Lilli originally marketed to men. Her creation was not the beginning of this societal need of women to be flawless, but it was a significant turning point in the way this discourse was directed at young girls.

The legs I created are simply a three-dimensional silhouette, which implied the building or creation of a woman. The drawings behind the legs supported this idea by
serving as a preliminary drawing with scaled measurements of this “ideal woman.” The viewer made the choice, to either walk around or through them, to enter into the next space. Walking through the legs leads one on the path of fertility, whereas if one chooses to walk around the legs, it perhaps symbolizes a decision to not be fulfilling the roles set forth within one’s gender.

Who set these gender roles and why is it so important to follow them? Athletes are confronted with distinct gender problems. “The female athlete lives through a severe contradiction. To succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman, because she has, in certain profound symbolic ways, become a man.”5 This pressure to stay within gender roles pushes people out of true. One’s true self may not fit into certain characteristics of society. On the other hand some female athletes work so hard at achieving peak physical condition that their body falls below the minimum body fat content required to ovulate. It makes you step back and reevaluate what the key differences between a man and a woman really are. If a woman does not have the ability to bear children, does she become closer in similarities to a man?

From any vantage point within the gallery these legs extended above the walls. They towered over but are still anchored to the institution by guy wires at the top. The institution I am referring to is the university educational system. In general scale, these legs dwarfed the viewer and revealed how overpowering Barbie’s influence is on our society. Support from the institution comes via our needs for conformity. The urge to conform that we all have is this want to be perfect and to play with a perfect doll. Barbie

needs the institution as well. No matter how overpowering she might be, she maintains this anchor to the institution because she is or represents the “trophy bride” to be won by gaining the best career provided by the institution, in turn, no one will conform. This makes her figure seem accessible to society but yet unattainable.

Exiting the first room the viewer was left thinking about restriction, constriction and construction. As the viewer moved into the second room they were confronted with dark grey walls and three prominent sculptures. (See plate 9) The plumb bob form is repeated in the second room, this time focused on truing ideas of fertility and regeneration.

Women were once defined by their reproductive capacity. The expectation to reproduce still exists; women who are unable to do so often suffer from an overwhelming feeling of inadequacy.6 A woman who is able to reproduce and simply doesn't want to, on the other hand, is considered to be selfish. This is problematic as this logic negates infertile women and women hesitant about motherhood and parenting. This theory also completely ignores homosexual women, lesbians, who may not face the same social pressures to procreate but may still be held accountable to the same standard when they do not have children. There has been a recent strike against this pressure to have children. “Childfree,”7 is a term used for people who, by their own choice, do not have children.

Where did today’s pressure to have children come from? The social and economic trends of Western culture of the past thirty years answered this question. “It all started with the birth control pill, which transformed parenthood from an assumption to a choice.

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Add the women's rights movement, which sent women into the workplace in record numbers, forcing employers to find ways to accommodate families, particularly women who become mothers.7 Having children was always a role of the woman but now with so many other options in life if a woman decides that it is not for her should she be judged? She is being judged by the same forces that bound her feet and put her in a corset. The birth control pill is a perfect example, women used to get pregnant and that was it, you had the child. Now you can stop pregnancy before it happens. These choices make it easier for society to point the finger at women and tell them they are selfish, but that does not make it right.

The figure in my sculpture, “The Fecund Woman,” (see plate 10) is blessed and cursed with fecundity, she trails her embryonic sacs like the train of a wedding dress. (See plate 11) They adorn her as a bride, but drain her like tumors. These sharp sacks are eggs representing children. (See plate 12) They are sharp to protect themselves while making it harder for the woman to drag them behind. An egg is a simple yet often overlooked symbol of life. “A remarkable sequence of formal transitions occur in the egg: division of the basic form, its replication, the development of vein and nerve networks, cephalization, organ systems and skeletal structure. In fact, almost all of the forms that occur in nature outside of the egg can eventually be found in it, as the egg proceeds through the modeling process of its evolution. We humans are complex and

evolved egg structures.” 8 Everything begins with the egg and perhaps never transforms out of this initial shell.

“The Fecund Woman” is required to lead these children she is dragging behind her through life and teach them right from wrong. One feels the need to question, however, who really knows what is right or wrong for these children? Experience can suggest what may be right or wrong. There are many different theories on how to raise one’s child and what type of parent one should be. Since the mid-nineties there have been multiple controversial viewpoints on motherhood. In 1990 a Newsweek article brought to light a rising argument between mothers nationwide, called “Mommy Wars”. 9 “Mommy Wars” is simply a matter of stay-at-home moms against working moms. The argument is, as a mother, does one work and provide financial support, while not being home with one’s children as much, or, stay at home with one’s child and possibly lose the chance to ever have a career.

“The Fecund Woman” has been mummified in a translucent skin by societal expectations. Although bound by these expectations, her hands and feet remained free. (See plate 13) Her role is not solely to give birth, but also to work to support these impending children. Her hair is set in rollers in an attempt to conform to some standard of beauty. This common activity women share makes this sculpture the everyday woman. She is also a single mother, which is a common trait of mothers in our time. One can decipher that she is a single mother because she is dragging these sacks by herself.

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without a partner helping her and also because she lacks a wedding ring. This means she will be forced to work to support these children without the choice that is debated in the “Mommy Wars”. This piece is simply about the decision one makes in life regarding fertility. The uncomplicated answer is it is one’s own choice, and no one else’s. However, that does not mean our societal need to conform and these arguments will no longer exist. Many artists struggle with these same concepts, creating work about the confusion and pressure of a decision that will plague one’s entire life.

Kiki Smith is an artist associated with feminist art, whose work deals with societal issues, gender politics, women’s rights, race, birth, and regeneration. Both Smith and I work in a myriad of materials and use the body to talk about its strengths and frailties. Her work skims the line between beautiful and grotesque but is always mentally stimulating.

Feminist artist is a title that Smith has acquired through her use of the female body, and concepts relating to female issues. The sculpture entitled “Rapture” deals with issues of life and death, by representing a birth. This sculpture combines mythological tales with regeneration and birth by showing a woman effortlessly walking out of a wolf’s stomach. The cross-gender birth conveys the relationship between human and animal. Most often Smith chooses middle-aged women as her models, because she believes people usually only make young nudes, or old wise women and she wanted to show a different side to the figure. Smith has inspired my work since I began to explore the female figure and has been an essential part of the research for this exhibition.

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In the back left corner of the gallery a silver tree grew over the wall of the room, drooping down into the open space of the gallery. (See plate 14) As the tree’s branches grew out, they morphed into elongated cast aluminum hands. (See plate 15) These hands were being drawn downwards pulling all of nature with them, by the force of the porcelain figure suspended from the fingertips. We are morphed and stretched by the burdens given to us by society. In our search to find the truth we add more weight, counterintuitively pulling us further from our center, stretching the truth in order to find it. The tree is acting as a dendritic connection between all women. These linking branches all start from one base and venture off in different directions yet all still are confronted with the same burden tugging at their fingers. The elongated hands were cast aluminum a reference to the twentieth century and technology.

The figures suspended from the tree were a portrayal of the Woman of Willendorf as a contemporary woman (See Plate 16). This heavier, yet suggestive, female is stretching what society thinks about women, showing her body type as the ideal, the truth. The Paleolithic Woman of Willendorf dates the entire sculpture, implying that the very parts of our planet, even trees have been influenced by humanity. We are shaping nature and shaping ourselves through longevity and through our pervasive need to conform.

Xiang Jing is a contemporary Chinese sculptor who works with similar concepts regarding gender stresses and insecurities as juxtaposed with issues surrounding female politics. Her work deals with nude, but yet non-sexualized “real” and imperfect women created from cast resin. She embraces the flaws in women’s bodies. Although her use of materials and aesthetics are different from mine, they speak about the same overall
concept. She intrigued me because in this exhibition I specifically refer to the issues surrounding Western cultures, while she is commenting on very similar issues in China.

“Your Body,” a sculpture created by Xiang Jing in 2005 is a monumental work in her career and in scale. This female figure is double life size sitting in a chair with her legs spread, and no details are left out. She creates her work as she states “in the first person,” emphasizing her fully subjective standpoint for executing the work. This is a sculpture of a woman, created by a woman, focusing on expression of female power. All sexuality is taken away from the nude, this in turn is the opposite of the normal male aesthetic expectations of women. Based on the feminist analysis, the male gaze projects its fantasies onto the female body. This sculpture is shadowed from the gaze because of the ambiguity in the figure. These ambiguous sexual characteristics enact “dissolution of male subjectivity by the female.” This nude sculpture with genitalia in view shows its femininity while still confusing the viewer by maintaining an apparent male quality.

In the adjacent corner of the second room there hung a human size plumb bob. (See Plate 17) The plumb bob was constructed in a scale similar to the Barbie doll legs in the front of the gallery. Continuity within the space interlinks the front room and the back.

At one point the Bible refers to a plumb line finding the truth within people. This idea appears in a narrative about God and the prophet Amos. God decides to hold a plumb line among the people of Israel and those who stay true to the line are spared from death. The Bible uses the Hebrew word 'anak (אֲנָךְ) meaning plumb or to draw a vertical

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line. The thick ten foot long cable used as the plumb line in my work is not a direct reference to the Bible, but it is meant to make the viewer question if they are true to plumb just as the Bible story tells. This also refers to the idea of the created. In Hebrew there are three words for creation; bri'ah (בריאה) is a creator someone who creates from nothing, yetserah (Ｙאת società) means to take material and make something from it or sculpt something, and ma'aseh bereshit (מאשאוב הפרשיט) refers to act of creation in the Biblical sense, this is not meant to be a word used to describe an everyday task. Although, the body is the visible reference in this sculpture I am specifically referring to personal foundations as well, with the rest of the exhibition.

I selected two different styles of plumb bobs for the exhibition. The larger plumb bob was the prominent style throughout the show. Its shape formed the silhouette of a figure, a head and shoulders with the lower half of the body ending in a point. The other shape used was the Woman of Willendorf with her legs tapering off into the traditional point of a plumb bob. Both forms are figurative and represent a person at the end of the line, slightly skimming their feet on the ground, all the while, trying to find that true plumb line.

The development of the design for the exhibition was a crucial element. Every piece and wall was positioned to formulate a journey through the concept of the exhibition. This show was designed for The Commons Gallery at the University of Hawai‘i Mānoa. The gallery is a 50”x30” rhomboid shaped space with an 18’ ceiling and 14’ walls. I divided this space into two separate rooms. The front room introduced the show and led the viewer into a space dealing with restriction and construction. The implied path of the gallery then led the viewer through or around the large legs into the
second room, which focused on fertility. The first and second room together veiled or concealed a female form either physically or emotionally. The dark color of the second room was chosen for its ability to make the lighter colored pieces more prominent in the space.

Two out of the four walls remained open with expansive windows, making the entire gallery viewable from the outside, overlooking the division of the space inside. (See plate 18) Thus the gallery could be viewed as a whole instead of in sections, giving another perspective on the exhibition. The gallery windows are located in a high traffic area so keeping them open with the monumental sculptures towering over the walls was essential to getting onlookers to stop and look in the space and hopefully walk into the Commons Gallery. Two people wrote in the comment book that it was their first time in the space after walking past it for years on their way to another building. These windows form the eyes into the exhibition. Could the sculptures be fully understood from outside the gallery? I don’t think they could be, but opening the viewer up to the entire space gives them a choice to walk in or not. Without the windows they lose that choice and would only walk in if they have prior knowledge of what is inside.
Conclusion

Society pressures us to make difficult choices. Does one follow the most commonly traveled path even if the repercussions push you out of true? Our need to conform is shaping who we are as a society and what it left behind in nature. Societal battles, as seen in the exhibition, make one want to step back and reevaluate one’s choices in life. Staying true to one’s self does not necessarily mean immediately protesting everything, we do need to conform to maintain a true society. This does mean there are multiple truths, at the minimum one unconditional truth. The viewer gets to leave in search of their true center. My exhibition only highlighted the pressures faced in society and gave options on how to stay true.
Out of True: Line and Body
MFA THESIS EXHIBITION BY
Jennifer Rubin

We, particularly women, choose to allow ourselves to be judged by external standards of body and appearance. These standards are self-imposed in response to societal expectations and our own traits tend to conform. But our femininity is also conferred by other women: not just the "woman on the street," but our mothers, sisters, and friends. When we let these external pressures push us out of true we are stripped of our personal foundation. Our true form may or may not be consistent with the contemporary idealized image of a beautiful, successful, fertile woman. Clothing such as high heels and corsets deform the body into an unnatural shape, which may paradoxically be considered the ideal.

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Plate 15
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