Beauty and the Beast – Can Life Drawing Support Female Students in Challenging Gendered Media Imagery?

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Abstract

How does life drawing impact on a group of 14-16-year-old female art and design students and their perception of body image? In contemporary Western society, we are bombarded with advertising, social media and celebrity culture on a daily basis, often with a focus on body image. This article questions whether, due to this visual assault, young female students have a democratic choice in forming a relationship with the body. Alternatively, do they feel pressured into conforming to a media led image? This article analyses the reaction of a group of GCSE fine art students to life drawing and a naked female nude. It questions their perceptions of 'normal' and discusses if art-based research projects can challenge contemporary issues and young female students' perception of body image.

Keywords
gender, life drawing, media, body image, female

In contemporary Western society, we are bombarded with advertising, social media and celebrity culture on a daily basis, often with a focus on body image. As an artist teacher, working in an all girls' secondary school (ages 11–18) in south east London, I am aware of the pressures young girls face in regards to their appearance. When we consider theorists such as Butler (1990), whose research states female identities are performed, this research questions whether insecurities felt by young females during a life drawing session was linked to a gender-specific model endorsed by the media and, if so, can we challenge these notions in a classroom through art-based research?

Background

Problems being faced by young girls in inner city London, such as gang culture and teenage pregnancy, are all issues within the local vicinity of the school where I work. Writing in the *Observer* newspaper, Mark Townsend (2012) interviews a former member of a Peckham gang, which is a gang local to the school. She discusses 'the growing levels of sexual violence against young women who join them [the gangs], …[and] are willing to risk being raped in return for the status of membership'.

A survey by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) 'has suggested that a third of teenage girls have been forced into sexual activity against their will' (Townsend 2012). With issues such as these being so prevalent in the areas surrounding the school, and with the sexualisation of women by the media, my initial aim in introducing life drawing into the curriculum was to provide an educational experience where the female form was not viewed in a sexual context.

I felt it necessary to offer female students a view of the naked female form that was opposite to the usual image of women seen in everyday media campaigns and pop videos, an image that was not underpinned by sexual undertones, but an image that was real, natural and normal. I use the word 'normal' with care, as what is normal? But what I consider it

to be in the context of this research is a female body that is aging appropriately, that has not had surgery to maintain a certain sense of youth, that has all the markings that go with life, for example stretch marks, scars and wrinkles. However, what I did not anticipate was the difficulty for some of the female students in engaging in the act of looking at a naked female form.

Butler's interpretation of gender as a 'performative' role, suggests the influence of society on female actions:

That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts, which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse. (Butler 1990,185)

Having questioned my own 'fabricated reality' as a woman during an Artist Teacher MA course a few years ago, which began a dialogue about my life as a woman, a wife and a mother, I developed a keen interest in gender constructs, and societies' impact on the female relationship with the body. I began to realise the emotions I associated with being a mother and the opinions being developed by my daughter, were not autonomous. This interest fed into the classroom, and upon the witnessing of the extreme discomfort of female GCSE art and design students during a life drawing class, I wanted to investigate what was unfolding during the session, and how their perceptions and discomfort was a 'performed' (Butler 1990) outcome, possibly influenced by society, youth culture and, more specifically, the media. I began to research media theory to try and understand the possible links between student behaviours in the life drawing class and media imagery that they are witness to on a daily basis.

I will initially discuss my thoughts and observations during the life drawing session, the initial responses from students, and the discussion that took place a week after the

session. I will then progress to try and unpick what might have been happening during the session with the students' anxieties and expressions of discomfort.

This research focused on a group of twenty female art and design students living in south east London, aged between 15 and 16, of mixed abilities, varying SEN (special educational needs), and from various ethnic and social backgrounds. The article draws on feminist theory and media studies. I used qualitative research methods; the research was undertaken in the form of questionnaires, taped group interviews and written observations scribed during the life drawing class.

Analysis of the session

A questionnaire was given to the students after the session, with the following questions:

1. What was your initial response to taking part in a life drawing session and drawing from a naked form?
2. Would your answer above be any different if the model had been male?
3. Why do you think you were asked to draw from a nude figure?
4. Did your views change after you had completed the session?

Out of the twenty students most felt it would be a positive experience, but one which would be slightly uncomfortable. They expressed trepidation, words such as 'shocking', 'astonished', 'weird', 'odd', 'embarrassing' and 'freaked out' were scribed. Two students felt it was 'disgusting' but they had to do it for 'a better grade'. All students felt it would be inappropriate if the model had been male. Five of the students felt the reason for participating in life drawing was for 'experience', six students reasoned it was to make their drawing better, seven students suggested it was to make them 'more mature', and three students could not offer an opinion.

These comments are interesting, as on initial reading it appeared that the students wanted to experience new things, they accepted that they were nervous and found the idea of life drawing 'weird', but that they wanted to be more mature and overcome these feelings. However, it was also clear that there was an underlying worry about the sexual nature of the session as when asked about a male model they unanimously stated it would have been wrong. One student stated 'I just don't think it would be right having a nude male in the classroom with lots of girls.'

The actual session started with the usual excitement, mixed feeling of intrigue and anxiety. The model was a middle-aged, slim built female. As the model entered for the first time, absolute silence fell on the group, which was such a startling contrast to the nervous noise that had preceded it, I was very aware of the students' anxiety. This did ease during the first drawing, when a number of students became focused, but there were five students who could not move beyond seeing the naked skin of the model, and the discomfort from this resulted in stifled laughs and grunts. One student was asked to leave by the artist who was leading the session. The student later said 'I could not get away from the fact she did not have any clothes on.'

Although three-quarters of the students thought it a positive experience, and only five said they found it very difficult to move beyond the nakedness of the model, they all spoke of fears and anxieties they felt at some point either before or during the session. Two main areas of anxiety were expressed during the group discussion, which took place a week after the life drawing session. The first was in reference to body image and looking at a naked female body, and the second was the naked form and its association with sex.

The student discussion constantly refocused on female body image and what is deemed beautiful. They all unanimously agreed that the images of women in the media are unrealistic; one student said 'Women are portrayed as sex objects not normal humans.'

Another commented that 'Women are portrayed as "perfect". They are fake, they are twisted lies. Women are sexual objects.'
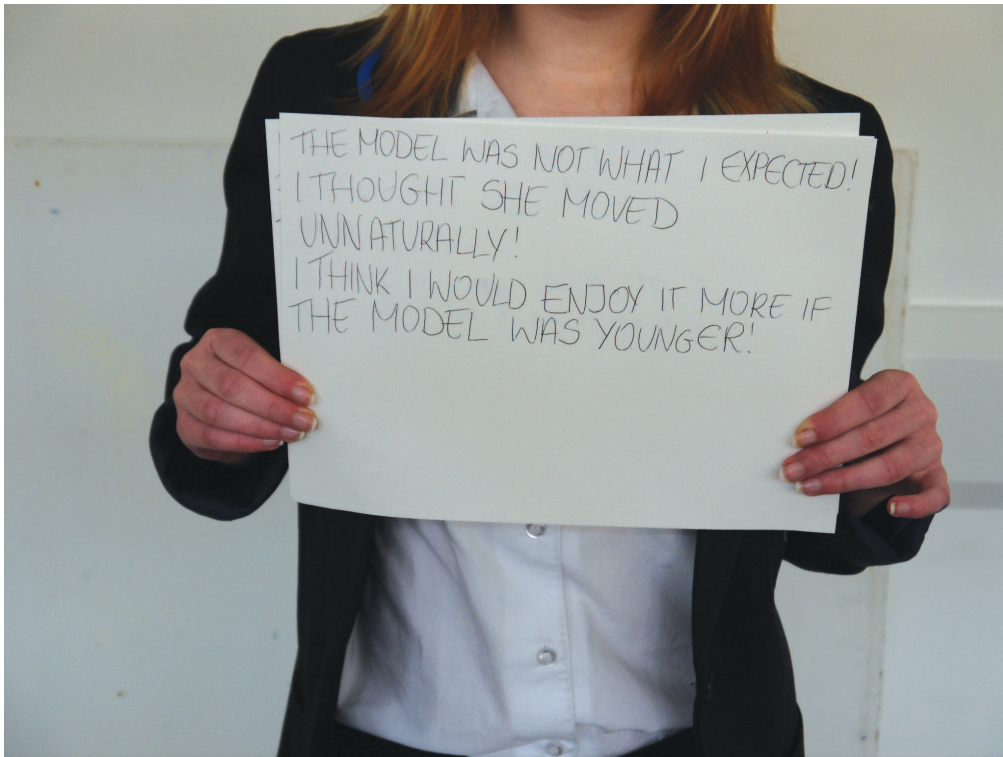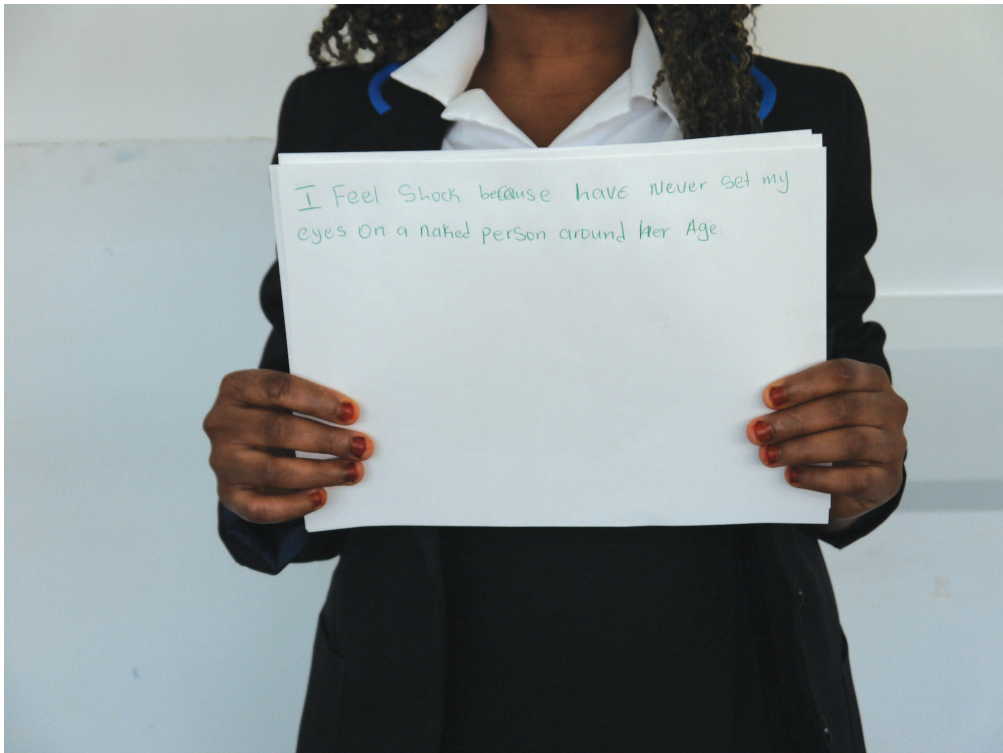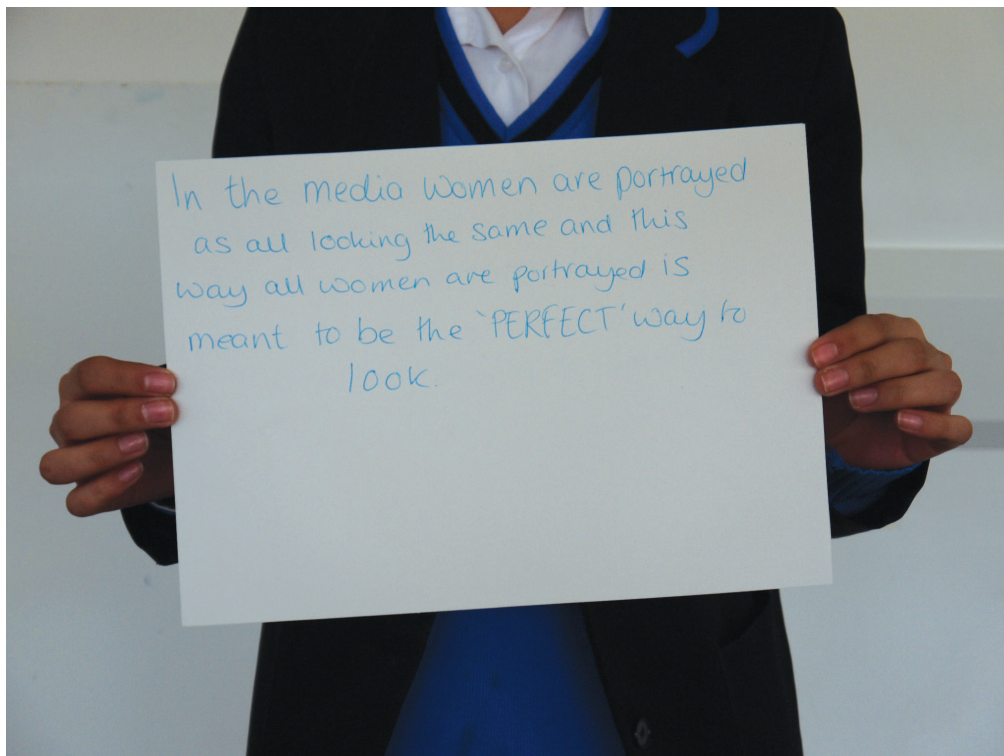
The students passionately spoke over each other during this debate, they all knew that images in the media were airbrushed, that the women in the images had been altered in some way and were not an accurate representation of reality; Bordo (2003, xviii) stated that 'Virtually every celebrity image you see – in the magazines, in the videos, and sometimes even in the movies – has been digitally modified.' That was ten years ago, and the students all seemed to have a visual knowledge of the manipulation that occurs now; they also spoke strongly that they felt this was wrong.

One student thought the life drawing model would look like someone of a billboard, and she later said 'I was glad she wasn't, I was glad she wasn't perfect.' Another observed, 'You would never see an image of a women that looks like her (the life-drawing model) [on an advert] they always have big tits and a flat waist.'

The students spoke forcefully about what they felt were the wrongdoings of the media, however, when they began to speak of how they want to look, they immediately reverted to media-embedded stereotypes and became very judgemental. One student remarked, 'Although I don't think its right to have perfect women on billboards, I don't want to see women that are not perfect.'

This paradoxical statement, I feel, summarises the students' thoughts and insecurities. They are trapped between fighting against gender stereotypes and wanting to look like the women in the adverts. They cannot separate the two identities. This incapability to separate the real from the unreal was something Baudrillard (1988) argued was prevalent in post-modernity, he suggests that 'images had become detached from any certain relation to a real world, that we now live in a scopic regime dominated by simulations, or simulacra' (cited in Rose 2001, 8, see also Baudrillard 1988, 1994). Baudrillard (1988) argues that society has replaced reality with signs and other meanings. An example of this could be

akin to a photocopy of a photocopy, the original photocopy is very similar to the initial image and therefore easily mistaken for the orginal, but as the photocopy becomes further distorted from the original, society fails to notice, still putting full faith in that image as the original. This is directly relevant to media images and the use of digital manipulation.

If these 'simulations' create constructs that become embedded in the subconscious, is this a possible reason as to why these young female students could not look at another woman, in the nude, without feeling uncomfortable? Was it because they are used to seeing female imagery that is manipulated, generally semi-naked female imagery of a false view of beauty?

Croll reports on research that calculates the effect of seeing particular body-centred imagery in youth magazines. She states that: 'Strong social and cultural forces influence body image in young people. From childhood to adulthood, television, billboards, movies, music videos, video games, computer games, toys, the Internet, and magazines convey images of ideal attractiveness, beauty, shape, strength and weight.' Her research goes further in analysing that: 'Young women surveyed before and after being shown fashion and beauty magazines have decreased self-image and increased desire to lose weight compared to young women shown news magazines' (Croll 2005, 157).

Croll's research confirms the impact of media imagery on the subconscious, if students are subconsciously enforcing media images as a truth, when they enter a life drawing session, they could be reflecting these embedded symbols onto the model. As the model is the embodiment of everything that opposes these social constructs, this disjointed image could therefore be mirrored back onto the student, highlighting their own insecurities. By being confronted with the realities of life, which is the antitheses of an airbrushed reality, or 'simulation' (Baudrillard 1988), is perhaps the reason the students find the session distressing and problematic.

What became apparent was that even students who were able to cope maturely with the session also began to notice the influence of society's constructs. During the student discussion, which took place one week after the life drawing session, one student re-analysed her drawings. She realised that although she enjoyed the session and did not experience any anxieties towards seeing a naked female, she had unconsciously made her drawings of the model curvier. She said, 'We were seeing a woman who hasn't got a perfect figure, and without even realising it, now I look at my pictures, I was trying to make her have more curves.' She became aware that she was influenced by something other, something deeper in her subconscious.

The impact of the media is prevalent in research (see Buckingham & Bragg 2004; Gill 2007; Messenger-Davies 2010; Van Zooner 1994) and it appears that it impacts on girls much younger than my students. In a recent article in the *Guardian* newspaper, which highlighted the concerns of a report drawn up by Members of Parliament and Central YMCA, which is the world's biggest young people's charity, states that 'girls as young as five now routinely worry about their weight and appearance'. It further suggests that:

The pressure to achieve an unrealistic 'body ideal' is now an underlying cause of serious health and relationship problems … [The report] *concludes that a toxic combination of the media, advertising and celebrity culture account for almost three-quarters of the influence on body image in society, yet the 'body ideal' typically presented was estimated to be not physically achievable by nearly 95% of the population.* (Smithers 2012)

If we as a society are infiltrating the minds of girls as young as five years of age, with gendered stereotypes such as Barbie (see Croll 2005), then by the time they reach adolescence these constructs are part of their makeup, and very hard to change.

Opposite page:

Figure 3

Adolescence is a particularly difficult time for young girls to come to terms with body image (see Croll 2005), as it is during this time that teenage focus is narcissistic, it is also during this time that teenagers are most prone to putting on weight, having spots and getting stretch marks.

Croll states:

Because adolescents experience significant physical changes in their bodies during puberty, they are likely to experience highly dynamic perceptions of body image. Body image is influenced strongly by self-esteem and self-evaluation, more so than by external evaluation by others. It can, however, be powerfully influenced and affected by cultural messages and social standards of appearance and attractiveness. (Croll 2005, 155)

This cocktail of self-doubt caused by adolescence and the bombardment of media image of 'perfect' women must aggravate teenage body issues. On reading further into influence of the media I began to see how powerful these images can be and the effect not just on how we look, but what we can achieve. Before I ventured on this research, I generally held the opinion that women were portrayed as objects by the media, either as housewife or lover, with the assumed subject being male. This is highlighted by Berger (1973) in his seminal work *Ways of Seeing*. He states that 'Men act women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between man and women but also the relation to women themselves' (1972, 47).

It was upon reading Carter's (2012) essay 'Sex, Gender and the Media', which discusses how the media has failed to represent the rapid change of women's lives during the twentieth century, that the potential of stereotyping and the impact of that on women's lives in the workplace and beyond became clear. Carter examines Tuchman's stance on the limitations the media inflicted on women during the twentieth century. She states: 'The media's symbolic representation of women was not in sync … with the lives they were living, and thus it may be assumed that the media were playing a part in limiting women's life chances' (cited in Carter 2012, 371).

Furthermore, Wolf (1991) discusses how this objectification of women is not only debilitating in terms of life careers, but can also lead in severe cases to eating disorders.

In Gill's (2007) research *'Gender and The Media',* which looks at the development of female media depiction, I was offered another opinion, and one which I could see reflected in the behaviours of the girls. Gill discusses how female media image has shifted over the past ten years. She analyses the shift from the objectification of women, to active sexual subjects. She discusses how we see celebrities with very little clothing on, in overtly sexual poses, which on initial viewing promotes a strong female stance of being in control. Gill discusses the Sophie Dahl advertisement; some feminist theorists interpret this image as an empowering and sexy image, as at the time Dahl was a UK size 16, and therefore bigger than most models. One such theorist, Attwood states: 'Sophie Dahl's body is … available for reading as an emblem of liberation, fun, self pleasure and pride' (Attwood, cited in Gill 2007, 38).

This ideal of a strong, sexually aware and in control female, is an image that I see 'performed' in my classroom daily. Not exclusively, but I am aware that young female students act overtly confident. I am fully aware this does not necessarily mean that is a statement of how they actually feel, but it appears to be an act of how they feel they *should* appear. Gill argues:

The traditional image of 'wife-mother-housewife' is now being replaced by images of sexually assertive, confident and ambitious women who express their 'freedom' through consumption … Increasingly all representations of women in adverts are being refracted through sexually objectifying imagery… the yesteryear in which women were divided into safe, reas-

suring motherly figures located in the home, and young free sexy symbols in the workplace has given way to a style of representation in which every woman must embody all those qualities … this is the new super woman. (Gill 2007, 81)

As an observer I can see considerable links between behaviours and the female media images that are becoming more prevalent. What is worrying is that the students are living out these images, not being empowered, but put into conflict. They are adolescents who are vulnerable and unaware of the power of media image.

Another important argument to discuss is that of McDonald, who notes that only some women are party to this media image, that is, the young, beautiful and slim. She states (McDonald 1995, 190): 'By attending to media representations, we might easily forget that fat, ugly, disabled, or wrinkled women have sexual desire, too, and that stretch marks are not incompatible with sexual pleasure.'

These comments suggest the foundations upon which the students gave judgement; all of their comments positioned themselves firmly on the side of perfection, which equates to slim, able bodied and young. The student's horror at seeing an older woman in the life drawing class was discussed; they stated that they felt it is not 'nice' to see older flesh. They discussed how they thought it was wrong that older women were not seen more in the media, and one student simply said 'You don't get older women in the media unless they have had a lot of plastic surgery', but then others quickly added they did not want to see 'some old woman wearing a swimsuit on a billboard'.

As the students very rarely see older women in advertising, or on television and films, it is not surprising that when confronted with 'older' skin, they are nervous. The model was approximately forty years old, so in terms of aging, not very old. The students were unable to articulate why looking at an older woman was not 'nice'. Wolf (1991, 83), on discussing airbrushing of older women in the

media, states ' to airbrush age of a woman's face is to erase women's identity, power, and history'. As young females do not consistently see older female role models in the media, and those that they do see are airbrushed or have had plastic surgery to look youthful, it is this erasing of female identity that Wolf writes about, that impacts on their concept of 'female'.

These impressions are also the guidelines which the students apply to themselves. It was the harshness of their criticisms upon themselves that were most shocking. It was the realisation that these young women will never be happy with who they are, because of these unachievable goals. I feel the answer to that lies in the implicit meanings behind advertising and the media.

In conclusion, I began this research to investigate whether insecurities felt by young females during a life drawing session were linked to a gender-specific model endorsed by the media, and if we can challenge these notions in a classroom through art-based research.

What I found interesting throughout this research, was that although the students were visually aware of the manipulation that occurs in the media, the semiotics of gender in the media are so deeply embedded that the students are struggling and failing to resist. Even though they can consciously distance themselves from the stereotypes, these images are, unfortunately, what informs their subconscious ideal of female 'beauty'.

What has emerged from this research is that it is even more important to offer ways of renegotiating identities (Adams *et al.* 2008), within the classroom context. Nead stresses that although:

The female body is dense with meaning in a patriarchal culture and these connotations cannot be shaken off entirely. There is no possibility of recovering the female body as a neutral sign for feminist meanings, but signs and values can be transformed and different identities can be set in place. (Nead 1992, 72)

Life drawing cannot redefine gender stereotypes, it can not instantly change how students view their bodies, but perhaps by offering art-based research sessions we can start to pick away and irritate the deep-rooted codes of gender, and start to challenge identities and offer alternatives (Nead 1992). As one student discovered on her re-analysis of one of her drawings, we do not always 'see' things instantly, but through the process of making we often are able to later reflect on underlying issues, which at the time were not apparent. Perhaps sessions such as this can give young females the opportunity to appreciate the marks on their skin as part of their existence, their journey, rather than viewing them like scars which need to be removed. Bourgeois states in an interview with Herkenhoff:

Our body is being influenced by our life. And yet our body is more than the sum of its parts. We are after all more than the sum of our experiences. We are as malleable as wax … We are sensitive to the souvenirs of what has happened before and apprehensive to what is going to happen after. (Bourgeois 2003, 20)

The implication of this quotation is that life's marks are a part of us. These marks are the everyday patterns that life leaves upon our skin, they should be part of us, not erased, and they should be celebrated or, at the very least, accepted. Through the life drawing session, the students drew from a natural female body. We need to offer ways of building confidence, and because of the bombardment of media image and pressures within teenage culture, such as gangs, if we do not offer young girls imagery and access to the normal female body, they will be persistently dis-empowered. Young girls need this dialogue; however uncomfortable it makes them feel, they need to be offered alternatives. By giving them imagery to grapple with that is real and normal, maybe they can start to understand the constructs that define them. If we can start to offer these open dialogues then maybe we can start to disturb these performed identities.

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