

Flesh after Fifty

Changing images of older women in Art

EDUCATION KIT

This resource is designed to be used or adapted for students in the creative arts, media, women's studies, English, health and all allied areas.

Pre-visit activities & discussion starters

1. Begin by using your imagination. You may wish to close your eyes. You are standing on a busy street. A stranger is approaching, an elderly man - describe him in detail, his appearance, his posture, his face, his attitude. Now do the same for an elderly woman. What were the differences between them, apart from gender?

2. Think about the power of words: what are five words commonly used to describe an old women/ now five words to describe an old man?

What factors might influence how you perceive older women?

3. A series of experiments by Princeton University psychologists revealed that it only takes a tenth of a second to form an impression of a stranger from their face. In turn, judgements based on facial appearance play a powerful role in how we treat others, and how we get treated. What pre-conceptions do you have about older women? For the next few days test yourself when you meet or see a new person - what assumptions do you make about them in those first seconds?
4. List the ways youth is privileged in our society. Why might this be so?
5. What was your family's attitude to nudity growing up? How has this influenced your view? Was your family's attitude related to religious or cultural views?
6. In the exhibition catalogue co-curator Kirsty Grant quotes photographer Eve Arnold's advice "never reveal your true age." What age do you assume some women wish to remain? Give reasons for your answer.
7. Have you used the app that can age you? If not, close your eyes and imagine what you will look like in 30 - 40 years.
8. What is your definition of art? Do you think it's possible that a work of art can change people's attitudes? How can art make a difference to changing people's perceptions.
9. Can you think of any artwork that may have changed people's views on war, the environment, politics or health? Can you think of an artwork on which you have based your understanding of a particular historical event or story.
10. What is your definition of **beauty**? Can the concept of beauty have multiple definitions? What is the difference between human beauty and beauty in art for example?

11. What would a soundtrack of old age sound like?
12. In his play *As you like it* Shakespeare listed the 'seven ages of man: the helpless infant, the whining schoolboy, the emotional lover, the devoted soldier, the wise-judge, the old man still in control of his faculties and the extremely aged man returned to a state of helplessness. What are the seven ages of women? List them and then add all the relationships and roles women you know have in their lives.

FURTHER STUDENT RESEARCH

Research the meaning of the 'male gaze.' Is there a female gaze?

Research and name some powerful mythical female characters and the powers they had. Before you visit the exhibition google these earlier representations of women on your phone and keep as a reference point when you visit the exhibition: Venus of Willendorf, Magna Mater/Cybele, mermaids, sheila-na-gig.

Google/find out the current amounts spent on:

- cosmetics, nationally and internationally
- cosmetic surgery, nationally and internationally

FIND OUT

What was the Abbotsford Convent before its current use?

Words to google and understand before you visit the exhibition; labiaplasty, matriarchy, patriarchy, conservator, hyper-realism.

RESOURCE FOR EXHIBITION VISIT

Ponch Hawkes

Over 400 women made appointments to be photographed by Hawkes in the months leading up to the exhibition. Many women said they felt empowered being photographed nude, and the portraits indicate that most women were having fun. What aspects of the project do you think they enjoyed? What are some of the advantages of being an older woman?

Why do you think some women decided to hide their faces?

Many women shot by Hawkes said they felt proud of their bodies. Look at individual portraits. What do you think they were proud of?

Why aren't these images pornographic?

The physical differences between the women in these photos reflect the greater diversity, particularly in regards to size, now appearing on fashion runways, and in commercial photo shoots and films. However, there are still some women not represented. Who are they?

Many of the women photographed are part of a generation that had far greater access to education and to financial independence than their mothers. Access to contraception also allowed heterosexual women to make far greater choices about their lives. Which of these do you value more in your own life?

How might viewing these images alter the way you see your naked body next time you're in front of a mirror?

Looking at these photos you may get the sense that many women were performing for the camera. As you walk through the exhibition consider which other portraits include this performative aspect.

Maree Clarke

This work reminds us of the prior ownership of the country where this exhibition is located, the women who came before and on whose shoulders we stand. Narweet is a respected community elder, the oldest elder of the BoonerWurrung mob, and the artist's relative. Who are the respected matriarchal elders in your community or family? Why are they respected?

What is Narweet communicating by wearing the possum cloak? List the links she is making with creativity, heritage, ritual, politics and tradition.

Why might Narweet be wearing the white ochre used in mourning?

Wearing the cloak connects Narweet with her ancestors as does the river reed necklace, also worn by her daughter Caroline. This was originally given to people passing through country as a sign of safe passage. However, the necklaces are oversized. Why do you think Clarke has increased the scale so dramatically?

Clarke made both the cloak and the jewellery with her nieces and nephews to pass on these cultural practices. What traditions have the elders in your family passed onto you?

ACTIVITY

Working with a partner see if you can find another work in the exhibition which involves a very different type of cloak. Discuss the differences.

Greg Taylor

These works express a central paradox in women's lives. So much is hidden both physically and psychologically. Shame and celebration are linked. Here is the core of many women's sexual enjoyment. It is also the place that links her to her birth mother and the site of delivery should she have her own children. Yet through the ages women have hidden their bodies and their body functions - hiding their bleeding, their menopause, their greying hair, their smell, altering their bodies by constraining fat, dyeing grey hair and shaving.

What do you think motivated the women who collaborated with Taylor for this work?

List the slang words used to describe female genitalia. Then the words used to describe male genitalia?

In much the same way that Hawkes' work celebrates the range and variety of body types these casts also highlight the endless variety of the female body. Can you estimate the age of the women who had these casts made?

The number of women undergoing non-medical Labiaplasty, that is cosmetic surgery to reduce or reshape the inner lips of the vagina for aesthetic reasons rather than medical need, has increased significantly in recent years. Why might this be so?

Catherine Staughton and Catherine Bell

The video and paintings created by "the two Cathies" set up a series of powerful contrasts and tensions. The works subvert the traditional role of male painters and their portrayal of the female nude. Here the painter is female and only she can fully see her subject's naked body. In the video the painter and mermaid inhabit a liminal space, a borderland linking sea and land, reality and imagination, rich with possibilities for intellectual and physical transformation. What qualities of the mermaid are expressed in the works? Why do you think the artists chose this mythical character? Consider dis/ability, multiculturalism, environment, hybridity, metamorphosis, and social issues in your answer.

Mermaids are laden with meaning and symbolism across many cultures. Many stories tell of mermaids leaving the ocean after falling in love with a mortal. In doing so they must renounce their essential self, their fins, and often their voice. In one tale every step is accompanied by searing pain in walking upon the earth. What are the ways women adapt and change themselves to reduce the stress of everyday living in a patriarchal society?

Staughton's portraits are immediate, energetic and highly coloured. How do you think the representation of the mermaid in the video is enhanced by the paintings?

How might a female nude painted by a female artist be different to that painted by a man?

The captions in the video remind us of the brief precious period of access Deaf people had to movies in the age of silent films. How do Deaf people access films these days?

The artists have worked together for 10 years. Each refers to the other as her 'muse'. What does this mean and what are the advantages of working collaboratively?

Hotham Street Ladies

Icing has traditionally been associated with the domestic sphere and 'women's work,' particularly relating to feeding and nurturing others. Cakes are also associated with celebration and anniversaries. Here the icing has been detached from its original function to create a most luscious and delicious installation expressing the fecundity and ripeness of the female form. Why do you think the artists built an immersive installation? How might experiencing the work in this way change its meaning or alter your perception of it?

Smell is a very important part of this work. What are the ways women disguise their own smell? Who or what pressures them to do this?

The humour in this work links abundance, appetite and enjoyment. Yet for some women eating is linked with guilt and self-hatred. In her podcast *Ladies we have to talk* on 4/6/19 Yumi Stynes reported that 900,000 Australians, the majority of them women, have some form of eating disorder. Binge eating was the most common. Further that in a longitudinal study of 57,000 Australian women 78% of those surveyed who had a 'healthy normal' weight were unhappy with their size. What do you think might be driving this dissatisfaction?

Traditionally women have been seen as feeders and carers. But in what way could society be seen to devour some women?

HSL are a group of 4 artists who have worked together for many years. What do you think some of the advantages and challenges would be working together in this way.

Patrick Pound

Pound spends countless hours searching the internet searching for old photos. In his collection of "orphaned found photographs", many bought on eBay, Pound is presenting images from past eras that were once personal and often intimate. What are the ethics of showing them in a public exhibition?

How were these photos made? What is the difference between these and the photos you take on your phone, or the other photographs exhibited in this show?

Women are often the family members responsible for remembering birthdays and anniversaries, they become the repositories for memories and marking time. Why might this be so? Did your mother or grandmother keep a box of photos? If so, how often did she or your family look at them? Think about the photos you take today - how do you keep them?

Pound has said how people "gather their thoughts through things, and things hold and express ideas". He thinks that "all collections solve puzzles and that his collections are puzzles already solved." What puzzle is he solving with these works?

Look at the photos carefully and note the settings - either in public places or more domestic scenes. How do the poses differ depending on the setting? Why might this be so?

When we take photos on our phones we can easily digitally alter them to distort or enhance the subject matter. Are they less authentic than the old photos that Pound has gathered? Give reasons for your answers.

Niki Koutouzis

Koutouzis uses the bodies of her family and friends to explore the ageing body. Look at the surface detail of each work carefully. How have her body casts enhanced our view of the nude body?

How has Koutouzis managed to suggest the inner life of each sitter? What does this interchange between inner and outer worlds suggest about older people and their relationship to the world?

How would you describe your inner world? How might it changed since you were a child? Has it become more important as you have grown up?

ACTIVITY

It is often suggested that our personal identity and roles in life are culturally determined, we are products of our society. These figures are adrift from any cultural references, we can only make assumptions about their socio-cultural and biological lives. Thoughts, feelings and desires seem to be more important. Working in pairs take an imaginative leap and create a short profile about two different women in 5-10 minutes, imagining their life-style and personality.

Penny Byrne

Byrne is a skilled porcelain conservator and remodels works she collects to address social and political issues.

What qualities of femininity does the figure on the first plinth suggest?

Who or what creates the cloak of invisibility Byrne suggests in this work and how is it used? Why might some women actively choose to wear this cloak? What are other ways women of any age make themselves 'invisible'?

What roles do women undertake in society which are largely invisible?

Peter Wegner

Female nudes painted by men pervade Western art history, and many share common characteristics: women are often portrayed in a seductive or inviting pose, depicted sleeping, bathing or dressing, or shown with their head turned away or eyes averted, all poses which are totally passive and loaded with erotic possibilities. Additionally, most are hairless, without visible genitalia. Describe some of the differences in Wegner's portrait of Fiona.

Traditionally nudes were also shown removed from reality, often depicted in an ancient, mythological, religious or exotic setting. Why might this be so?

What does Fiona feel about her body?

Wegner estimates that his painting of Fiona took up to 20 hours, they met every week to complete the work. He believes that portraits painted from photographs "remove the artist from any connection with the sitter." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

In this age of selfies and instant photography that can be digitally altered, distorted or enhanced discuss how Wegner's painting and drawings may be more authentic portraits than those created by a photographer?

In her catalogue essay for this exhibition Catherine Speck writes about Wegner's drawings of the

centurions which show “lined features and wrinkled hands and how she sees” each woman’s face and body as a record of time lived, an embodiment of its history, while each mark and fold is a register of experience. In what way might women erase their own history and experiences by using makeup, botox or cosmetic surgery?

ACTIVITY

Like faces hands also reflect ageing quite dramatically with their spots, lines and creases. Look at your own hands - what do they tell you about your life? When you can, look at the hands of someone close to your own age and then compare with someone much older. What do they reveal?

Sam Jinks

What role does scale play in the meaning of Jinks’ work?

Compare the technique that Jinks and Koutouzis have used to replicate these bodies. How does the difference in technique reflect both the intention of each artist and the meaning of each work?

Jinks’ style is sometime referred to as ‘hyper-realism’. Again comparing with Koutouzis which work is “more real?” Give reasons for your answer.

Megan Evans

Evans shows her friends animated by conversation, relaxed in a favourite environment. She took over 300 photos of each woman and then chose up to 20 to exhibit - how do you think she selected these, what was she looking for?

Do you think the multiple images reveal more about each woman than a formal portrait may have? Give reasons for your answer.

How does Evans subvert the idea of the ‘truth’ we think we see when looking in a mirror?

We encounter ageing faces everyday. How might these photos make you stop and look at people in a different or new way, or prompt you to stop and question the assumptions you hold about older people?

ACTIVITIES

“Mirror, mirror on the wall” Evans suggests that when passing a mirror most people seek for imperfections. Sit down opposite a partner with your knees touching. Look into each other’s faces for 3 – 5 minutes. Tell your partner all the positive qualities you noted about them.

Take a series of photos of your partner on your phone and then select only 2 or 3 that best captures their personality. Discuss with them. Do they see themselves as you do.

Deborah Kelly

Collage involves layering often disparate materials onto a single surface, which in turn creates a layering of ideas. Like Patrick Pound Kelly employs found images, using their former role to create a new work. She selects images from old art books and gives them a new aesthetic context and symbolic function.

Look at a single figure closely and identify any separate elements used in the collaged surface. What is being depicted by the use of these fragments or parts? What further meaning does it give to each woman in regards to her identity? Can you make any links to her cultural background, race, sexuality or class?

What tensions does Kelly set up in these works by using these re-imagined elements?

Some of the imagery refers to the ways women enhance their ageing bodies by using cosmetics and other methods. Do cosmetics disguise or highlight ageing?

The fabric banners create bold public statements akin to the billboards used extensively in advertising. Why has Kelly used this format and what might she be advertising?

Ruth Maddison

In this series of portraits Maddison uses text, giving each woman a voice to express her thoughts about her life and ageing. Some photos have been hand-coloured which adds a painting-like texture to the images, enriching the background, texture, skin tones and clothing. This gives both a lively and nostalgic quality to the surfaces linking each woman with her past and present.

"We are aged by culture rather than our bodies" Margaret Gullette wrote in her book "Aged by Culture", published 2004. Discuss what this means in relation to the women shown in these photographs.

These are very positive images of older women fully participating in life. As well as remaining physically active what other factors may have contributed to their longevity?

In the catalogue Grant refers to "New beginnings" after menopause in reference to these women. Germaine Greer also writes of a liberation after menopause. Why might this be the case for many women?

Like other photographs in this exhibition these very candid shots demonstrate a trust between artist and subject. How do you think Maddison achieved this with her sitters?

Maddison previously wrote "I see an individual's life as being immensely rich deep and complex, and everyone a mixture of ordinary and extraordinary". How has she achieved revealing this mixture in her works?

ACTIVITY

What are some of the challenges each woman may face at her age. In pairs choose 3 - 5 photographs and discuss how you imagine each would meet these challenges.