Desire Body: Fat Identity, Desirability, and Reclamation in Contemporary Visual Culture

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As the major professor for Gabrielle Barnett, and chair of her thesis committee, it is with great pride that her committee and I would like recommend that her degree be awarded with distinction. Her final work and paper is of the highest caliber and we would like her degree to reflect this.

Thank you,

Marni Shindelman
Associate Professor Photography

Gabrielle Barnett

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Introduction

Desirability is a construct shaped by societal expectations, cultural narratives, and personal experiences. Defined as wanting to be perceived as an attractive, useful, or necessary," desirability dictates who is valued and who is excluded. In *Desire Body* I investigate how desirability is assigned, negotiated, and denied to certain bodies, particularly fat bodies, through the intersections of fat studies, body image, and parenthood. These themes hold personal and societal significance as they shape self-perception, access to opportunities, and the broader cultural narratives surrounding worth and visibility.

Society treats marginalized bodies with systemic disadvantages, excluding them from full participation in social, economic, and political life through discrimination, unequal access to opportunities, and poorer treatment in areas such as education, healthcare, housing, and employment. Fat bodies in particular, are criticized, stigmatized, and positioned outside of societal norms. My work attempts to reclaim the fat body as an empowered site of desirability, playfulness, and strength, challenging dominant narratives that frame fatness as undesirable and unworthy.

As a lens-based artist, I begin my process within the frame using photography and moving images to establish composition and narrative. From there I transition to the medium that best suits the concept, whether it be printmaking, ceramics, or sculpture. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a multifaceted exploration of these themes. I create work that critiques and reclaims desirability, centering fat bodies within spaces of pleasure, visibility, and agency. By engaging in both personal and collective narratives, my work serves as both a critique and a celebration, disrupting dominant ideals while affirming the validity and vibrancy of marginalized identities.

The Concept of Desirability

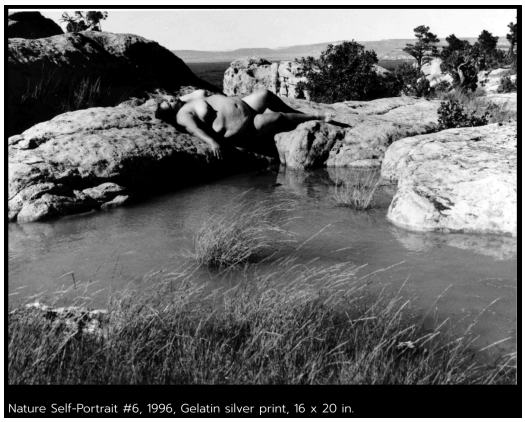
Desirability is a complex and fluid construct, shaped by cultural values, aesthetic norms, social conditioning and functional considerations. At its core, desirability is driven by pleasure, aesthetics, and mobility—three interconnected elements that define what is perceived as valuable, attractive, or necessary.

Pleasure is an intrinsic motivator, drawing individuals toward experiences, objects, and bodies that evoke enjoyment or satisfaction. Aesthetics, informed by historical and societal ideals, dictate visual and sensory appeal, reinforcing hierarchies of beauty and acceptability. Mobility is often overlooked in discussions of desirability but plays a key role in determining worth. Mobility, both literal and symbolic, often defines a body's value within societal structures—its ability to move, to function "efficiently," to labor, to fit, or to be contained within expected spatial and behavioral limits. In this context, mobility becomes a measuring stick for worth: a body that moves "freely" and "appropriately" is often seen as more desirable than one that challenges or exceeds normative expectations. By expanding desirability to include mobility, we can better understand how fat bodies are rendered undesirable not just through aesthetic judgment, but through perceived physical limitations—whether real or projected.

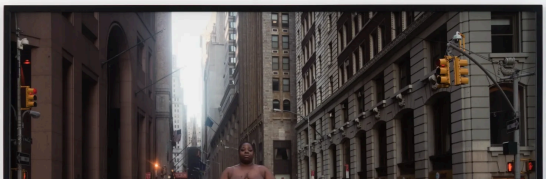
Seduction, richness, indulgence, and perfection further complicate the framework of desirability. Seduction implies an allure that transcends utility, appealing to emotion and longing. Richness suggests abundance and depth, characteristics often deemed excessive when applied to non-normative bodies. Indulgence carries connotations of excess and self-gratification, frequently weaponized against fat bodies in moralizing discourses. Perfection is an unattainable ideal, serving as an oppressive standard that marginalizes those who deviate from dominant norms.

Explorations: Navigating Lived Experiences Through Visual Culture

Bodies that exist outside societal norms are often excluded from these ideals, positioned as undesirable through cultural narratives that equate worth with conformity. Large bodies, in particular, are denied access to desirability, framed as excessive, dysfunctional, or lacking discipline. My work challenges these narratives by reclaiming desirability as a space of empowerment, questioning who is allowed to experience pleasure, to be seen as aesthetically valuable, and to exist without justification. In doing so, I align myself with a lineage of artists who have challenged dominant beauty standards by making marginalized bodies visible on their own terms.

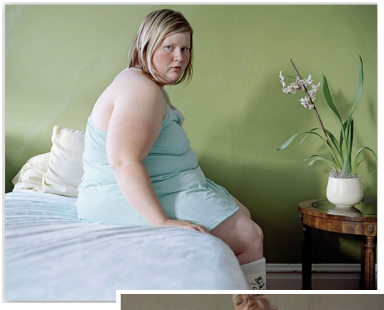

Nature Self-Portrait #6, 1996, Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in.

Laura Aguilar's self-portraits, particularly in her *Nature Self-Portrait* series, position her fat, queer, Latina body in natural landscapes, simultaneously grounded and expansive. Her work offers a radical reimagining of belonging, one that informs my own exploration of how bodies relate to environment and space.



Nona Faustine, in her *White Shoes* series, uses her nude Black body to confront historical sites of racial violence, wearing only white heels in a deliberate performance of visibility and vulnerability. Her work reminds me that the body is not just present—it is a witness, a vessel of memory, and a tool for rewriting inherited narratives.

Jen Davis captures the quiet, intimate realities of fatness through staged self-portraits that explore longing, vulnerability, and the complexity of desire. Her work challenges visual conventions by lingering in spaces where softness and self-awareness coexist—an approach that parallels my own use of constructed observation.



Jenny Saville paints the body as overwhelming, unapologetic flesh. Her large-scale canvases render volume and imperfection in strokes that resist containment. Though my mediums differ, I share her investment in making flesh visible and powerful—not as excess, but as essence.

"Propped" 1992

Iiu Susiraja takes this disruption even further through deadpan self-portraiture that confronts the viewer with absurdity, humor, and discomfort. Using mundane objects in unconventional ways, she destabilizes the expected narrative around femininity, decorum, and beauty. Her use of play resonates with my own desire to disarm and reframe the viewer's gaze, inviting new ways of seeing bodies that are typically dismissed.

YOU DID NOT CALL. 2018

These artists provide a constellation of practices that inform and challenge my own. Their works resist shame and reassert the right to be visible, strange, powerful, erotic, humorous, and whole.

Materiality plays a key role in how I navigate these questions. I use bright colors, tactile surfaces, and materials that evoke bodily sensations—bubble gum, slime, shiny plastic, cotton swabs, and even bodily remnants like saliva. These substances create visceral reactions, oscillating between attraction and discomfort, much like public responses to fatness. They create both attraction and discomfort, mirroring society's conflicted relationship with fatness.

I draw parallels between these materials and the fat body itself—fat rolls are jiggly, pliable, soft, sticky, textured with stretch marks and cellulite. It undulates and folds. Skin, fat, and muscle come in layers; it is sometimes gritty, sometimes smooth. Similarly, the materials I use are layered, built up, and textured in

ways that mimic the structure of the body. By aligning materials with the body, I challenge the gaze that deems fatness grotesque or undesirable and instead celebrate it as rich, layered, and sensually alive..

Throughout art history the body has been idealized, distorted, and politicized, from classical sculptures celebrating the muscular form, to photos or videos or what, contemporary critiques of beauty standards. My work enters this lineage with purpose: to intervene, disrupt, and offer new representations. I assert that all bodies—especially those long denied representation—deserve to be seen, celebrated, and valued.

Mediums and Processes in Practice

My artistic practice begins with the camera; framing, observing, composing—and expanding from the lens. My practice is deeply integrated into my daily life, inseparable from my routine and personal experiences. Art and life are inseparable for me. I observe, reflect, and respond through creation. Daily routines—mothering, navigating public space, facing discrimination—fuel my conceptual and material choices. This way of seeing informs every aspect of my practice, shaping how I conceptualize and create across mediums. While photography and moving images form the foundation, I shift into other media as needed, allowing the concept to dictate the material form.My practice becomes a way to process, reclaim, and rewrite those experiences.

Define *Constructed Observations:*

I define my photographic work as *constructed observations*, a term that describes the practice of recreating moments from life to curate specific narratives for the audience. I restage moments from my life to control how they are presented, manipulating composition to tell stories with specificity and intention. This method challenges the idea that photography simply captures reality. Instead it allows me to shape how fat bodies, motherhood, and identity are seen.

Many photographers work within c*onstructed observations* using staged yet deeply personal imagery to explore identity, memory, and cultural expectation. Like artists Genevieve Gaignard, Jen Davis Tommy Kha, Elinor Carucci, Pixy Liao, and LaToya Ruby Frazier, I blur the line between documentary and performance. My photos exist in the space between memory and imagination. They resist voyeurism by reclaiming authorship, reflecting how visual culture both constructs and distorts

marginalized bodies. Through constructed observations I claim space for my body and my voice.

Body and Design: Restriction and Exclusion in Public Space

Physical environments can become sites of exclusions and offer me a space for intervention in my work. My work identifies chairs as both literal and symbolic gatekeepers—objects that determine who belongs and who is excluded. I coined the term "Danger Chairs" to describe seating that inflicts pain, shame, or exclusion, particularly for fat individuals. These are the chairs that bruise thighs, snap under weight, squeeze with rigid armrests, or sit apart from others in social settings. They broadcast a clear message: this space was not made for my body.

Public spaces—restaurants, theaters, classrooms, waiting areas—embed these design choices into daily life. As a result, the simple act of sitting becomes a site of anxiety and exclusion. Each encounter with a danger chair reinforces the belief that fat bodies are unwelcome, too much, or out of place.

I photograph these chairs and create sculptural interventions that expose their hostility. I also position my body in relation to them—documenting how my body pushes against, spills over, and topples over these chairs, exposing their limitations. Through this process, I render visible the privilege that even design affords the smaller body. The built environment reflects and reinforces social hierarchies of size, worth, and belonging.

Kathleen LeBesco's *The Visual Politics of the Fat Body* provides a critical framework for understanding how these spaces enforce fat exclusion through design, showing how visual culture demonizes fatness and idealizes containment. Danger Chairs extend this visual narrative into physical space. They are not just poorly designed—they are ideological tools that enact violence through discomfort, fragility, and shame. By calling attention to these objects, I ask: *Who is allowed to rest? Who must shrink or adjust? And what does it mean to constantly navigate a world not built for your body?* My work aims to shift these questions from internal burden to collective responsibility. Danger Chairs are not personal failures—they are failures of design, imagination, and empathy. By centering these confrontations in my work, I call for new ways of building space—where all bodies; in their full dimensions, are invited to sit, belong, and be at ease.

Photography: Associations

Navigating public spaces in a fat body inflicts both emotional and physical burdens. The anxiety triggered by encountering a "danger chair" doesn't end at discomfort—it reinforces a broader cultural message: your body is not welcome here. These moments build a constant state of hyper-awareness. The fear of not fitting, of a chair breaking, of being the center of unwanted attention—these shape how fat people move through the world.

Physically, the harm is real. Tight armrests leave bruises. Perching on the edge of a too-small seat strains muscles. Contorting to fit into rigid spaces leaves the body exhausted. Emotionally, these daily negotiations drain the spirit. Each moment becomes a reminder of exclusion, feeding shame, invisibility, and the sense of always needing to adjust or apologize.

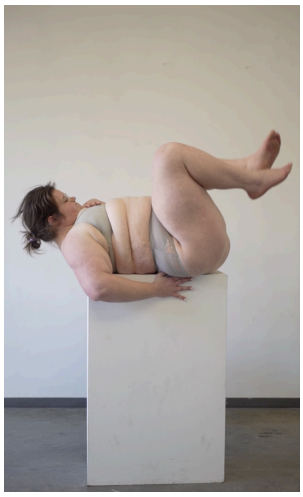
My images capture how my body interacts with chairs - how it holds, resists, collapses, and reshapes them. Rolls become mountainous terrains. Excess skin lifts like a flag in the air, squishy flesh becomes a firm, stationary form. Flesh is soft, pliable, dense; it sits in contrast to the harsh forms of furniture never intended for it. These photographs defy rigidity. They elevate the fat body as expressive, powerful, and unyielding in the face of erasure.

Photography allows me to document not just the body, but its resistance. These images are not passive portraits—they are performances of presence. They make visible the labor of living in a fat body. Each frame asserts that the body is here, whole, and worthy of being seen on its own terms.

The Pedestal as Chair: Art Historical Frameworks

Throughout art history, the pedestal has symbolized power, reverence, and idealization. It elevates the subject—literally and figuratively—setting it apart as something to be admired, studied, and preserved. Michelangelo's *David*, poised atop his pedestal, embodies the ideal male form, a standard against which other bodies are measured. The reclining Venus, found in the works of Titian and Giorgione, frames the female body as an object of passive beauty, sculpted for the viewer's gaze.

I intentionally subvert these ideals in this work. In *Slime, Body on View,* a video performance, I balance my nude body atop a pedestal—not as an object of reverence, but as a site of tension, instability, and confrontation. My presence on the pedestal unsettles its traditional function. Rather than reinforcing hierarchy, it becomes a tool of critique. I expose the expectations placed on bodies in art, especially fat bodies, and I push back against the assumption that only certain forms deserve elevation.



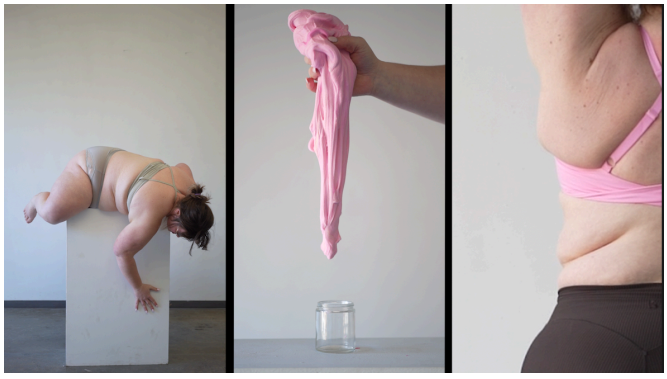
Linda Nochlin's *Women, Art, and Power* critiques the exclusion of women—and by extension, other marginalized bodies—from art history. She writes, "The white Western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as the viewpoint of the art historian, may—and does—prove to be inadequate in the case of women." Her feminist lens informs my approach: I insert myself, unapologetically, into a lineage that has long ignored bodies like mine. By asserting that fat bodies have been systematically erased from artistic representation, my reclamation and visibility is an act of defiance. My work not only challenges this exclusion but also reimagines the pedestal itself—not as a place of admiration, but as a stage for resistance, discomfort, and truth.

Kenneth Clark's *The Nude* draws a line between "naked" and "nude," arguing that "to be naked is to be deprived of clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The nude is not the naked body, but the body re-formed." Here he states that the nude is a stylized, perfected form, while the naked body is vulnerable, unfiltered. My work intentionally blurs this line. I refuse to aestheticize fatness into palatable perfection. Instead, I embrace the naked body as a site of agency. David Shirey's *The Naked and the Nude* expands on this idea, suggesting that bodies deemed excessive or uncontrolled have long been denied artistic dignity. He writes, "The nude has been drained of individuality; it becomes a formula. The naked, by contrast, retains humanity—even when the body is flawed, awkward, or resisting classification." By claiming the pedestal with my body—fleshly, imperfect, alive—I insert fatness into the aesthetic conversation and demand its right to visibility, representation, and reverence.

My body doesn't rest on the pedestal—it works against it. The weight of my form disrupts the smoothness of art history's narrative. In doing so, I ask: *What happens when the pedestal lifts a body not meant to be idealized? What truths emerge when we allow that body to take up space without apology?*

Video Installation: The Body in Motion and Materiality

My video *Slime, Body on View* features three monitors arranged in a U-shape, enclosing the viewer within a narrow corridor. This configuration creates a spatial tension that mirrors the discomfort fat individuals often feel navigating environments where their bodies have not been considered in the design.. Viewers are required to enter a confined space to witness the work—an intentional design choice that translates psychological and physical marginalization into embodied experience.



The central monitor, positioned at the back of the U, is split into three looping videos. One shows me balancing my nude body on a pedestal, testing the limits of stability and expectation. Another captures bright-colored slime stretching and resisting containment—its slippery, elastic qualities mirroring the ways fat

flesh is asked to shrink, fit, and behave. The third video documents my body in motion: working out, exerting effort, breathing,and sweating. These performances reclaim fatness from the stereotype of stagnation, asserting instead a vitality, resistance, and power through movement.

Facing one another on either side of the viewer are two additional screens. On one, I gaze into the camera before the image cuts to my daughter, her eyes meeting mine, her expression open and curious. These close-up portraits of our faces create an intimate dialogue—one rooted in inheritance, reflection, and the generational transmission of self-image. The opposing screen features a static shot of my nude body seated atop a pedestal. This quiet, confrontational image holds the viewer's gaze, asserting the right of the fat maternal body to take up space unapologetically.

Together, these five videos create a layered narrative of confrontation and care, exertion and stillness, repetition and resistance. The installation immerses the viewer in a multi-sensory world where fatness is not reduced to metaphor, but instead made material—stretching, breathing, breaking expectation.

The verticality of the daughter/mother portraits and the bodily stillness of the pedestal shot call attention to how bodies are read, remembered, and reproduced across time. The work centers not only on the labor of existing within a fat body, but also the legacy of how my body is perceived—by myself, by others, and by my daughter, who absorbs cues through my love and her observations.

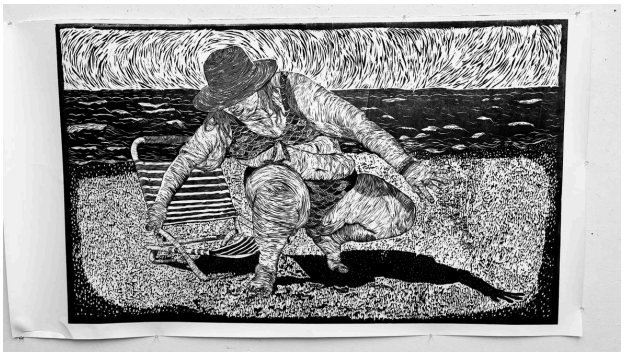
The narrow installation space enhances this narrative by making the viewer physically negotiate their own body in relation to the work. As they watch, they must consider how space includes or rejects them—how it feels to be confined, observed, or made aware of the body's presence. These sensations echo those that fat people experience daily.

Ultimately, this installation serves as an act of reclamation. Through motion, material, gaze, and space, I transform the fat body from a site of surveillance into one of authorship, intimacy, and endurance.

Printmaking: Material, Mark-Making, and Reproducibility

While my video work captures movement, sound, and bodily tension in real time, my printmaking practice focuses on the permanence of marks—the traves we leave, the stories etched into skin, and the tension between visibility and erasure. Relief carving and screenprinting are central to this process. Both allow me to translate the body's complexities into layered surfaces that speak to memory, repetition, and resistance.

Relief carving is an act of removal. I cut away material to reveal an image, much like life leaves its marks on the body. Each carved line echoes stretch marks, scars, and the subtle records of lived experience. The process foregrounds labor and presence—my hand in the surface mirrors the body's interaction with space and time. Through this tactile engagement, I reclaim the act of looking, insisting that fat bodies are not only worthy of depiction, but worthy of celebration.



My approach to carving resonates with the work of LaToya M. Hobbs, whose large-scale woodcut portraits of Black women emphasize beauty, labor, and individuality through intricate mark-making. Her prints center the body as both subject and surface, highlighting identity and presence with a precision and physicality that echo the emotional and material weight of her figures. Hobbs' work demonstrates how the body—especially a body that has been historically overlooked—can be honored through carving, and her influence affirms the capacity of relief printmaking to speak boldly and sensitively at once.

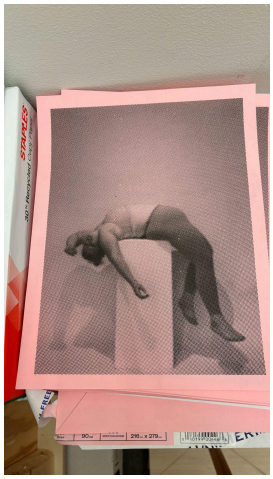
My carvings often depict myself or others in triumphant, joyful, and vulnerable moments—scenes not always granted to marginalized bodies in visual culture. These images serve as visual declarations: we are here, we have lived, and we deserve to be seen. Screenprinting, by contrast, draws from reproducibility. This method allows me to reflect on how beauty standards, body image, and desirability are mass-produced—circulated through media, advertising, and cultural norms. But where screenprinting once served commercial goals, I use it to subvert them. Each print carries small imperfections, reminders of the human hand, resisting the polished sameness demanded by dominant aesthetic systems.

A central component of this practice is my print stack installation. The stack features body-sized risograph prints—halftone images of my own body draped across a pedestal, printed on soft pink paper. As viewers remove prints from the top, the stack diminishes. Eventually, the pink paper disappears, revealing a base of blank white sheets. This erosion visualizes the slow disappearance of bodies that do not conform—each removed print a metaphor for the social processes that render fatness invisible, erased one interaction at a time.

This work finds conceptual kinship with Felix Gonzalez-Torres, particularly in his interactive stacks such as *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, where viewers are invited to take a piece of candy, gradually depleting the installation over

time. Gonzalez-Torres' work speaks to themes of love, loss, illness, and erasure—where absence becomes a marker of presence, and the viewer is complicit in both. Like his stacks, mine engages disappearance not as a passive phenomenon, but as a performance of systemic neglect—only here, the subject is the fat body, made increasingly invisible through cultural consumption and disregard.

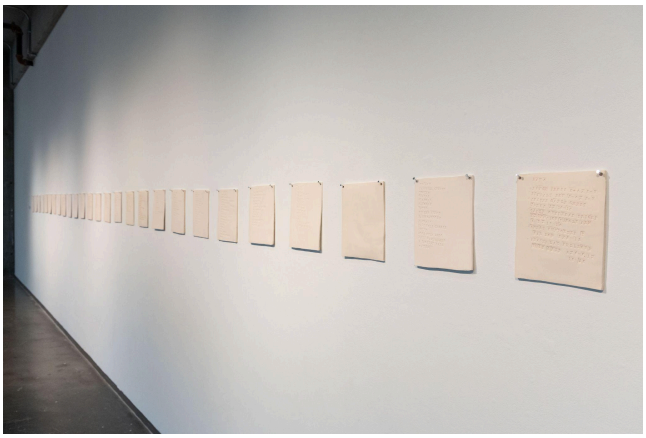
The interactivity of this piece implicates the viewer in that erasure. To take a print is to participate in the depletion, to physically witness the vanishing of form, presence, and identity. The work becomes a living document of disappearance, but also a call to recognition: the body was here, is here, and refuses to be fully erased.



Printmaking, in this context, becomes more than image production—it becomes a way to speak across time, space, and repetition. Each layer, each print, each carved surface holds the insistence that fat bodies carry memory, meaning, and the right to take up space.

Sculpture and Ceramics: Form, Function, and Physicality

When my practice moves off the wall, sculpture and ceramics become tools for embodying weight, pressure, and presence. These three-dimensional forms allow me to explore how the body interacts with the built world—not just visually, but physically. They make space for questions of functionality, vulnerability, and permanence. Clay responds to touch. It slumps, cracks, and records pressure. These qualities mirror the body's own responses—to space, to surveillance, to expectation. Sculpting becomes an act of translation: the material absorbs the tension I carry, the histories embedded in flesh. Each form is shaped not just by the hand but by the lived experience it channels.



In my piece *Diary*, I document a month of food consumption and physical activity by stamping each day's data into a series of 31 porcelain tiles. Nailed in rigid rows along the wall, the tiles evoke clinical detachment, mirroring the way society treats fat bodies—as data points, as problems to measure and correct. But porcelain—while often seen as pristine—is fragile. That fragility reveals the emotional weight behind constant monitoring. By exposing the labor of daily tracking, *Diary* reframes it not as discipline, but as a symptom of survival in a culture obsessed with control.

Other sculptural works incorporate bodily remnants: chewed gum, cotton swabs, discarded materials touched by intimacy and disgust. These elements carry trace evidence of the body—sticky, wet, abject. I transform them into objects of consideration, forcing the viewer into

confrontation with the things we're told to hide. Fatness, too, is often treated as an excess to be discarded. I refuse that logic. These materials reclaim space for the body in all its visceral, uncontained complexity.

Through sculpture, I engage discomfort intentionally. A mound of soft gum. A brittle frame made of wire. A porcelain form that looks too delicate to hold weight. These pieces challenge aesthetic norms by inserting bodily metaphors into familiar forms, using texture, imbalance, and instability as both concept and structure. They resist the notion that "good" design is invisible, sleek, or neutral. Instead, they embody the messiness of real life—where bodies leave marks, fall apart, rebuild.

Sculpture and ceramics offer a physical counterpoint to the conceptual erasure so often directed at marginalized bodies. While other mediums explore repetition and image, these works demand space. They take up room. They hold weight. They endure. In that endurance lies power.

Interrelations Between Mediums: The Fluidity of Desirability

My practice thrives on movement—between mediums, materials, and meanings. Photography, printmaking, sculpture, and video aren't separate pursuits; they're interwoven strategies for confronting how desirability is constructed, assigned, and withheld. Each form offers a distinct lens, but together, they create a more complete vocabulary—one that resists singular definitions and reflects the shifting nature of identity and embodiment.

Photography provides the foundation. Through the frame, I compose moments that anchor the work in observation and intention. These images often serve as starting points—reference material for relief carvings, prints, or sculptural works. What begins as a still image evolves, morphs, and re-emerges across formats.

Relief carving extends the photograph into something more tactile. Where photography captures presence in a fleeting moment, carving insists on permanence. The physical act of removing material mirrors the cultural pressures that wear down bodies—especially fat ones—but it also reveals strength, layering, and resilience. Each groove etched into the surface becomes a record of time, labor, and visibility.

Screen printing expands the conversation further. With every repeated print, I engage with how ideals of beauty, thinness, and worth circulate in our culture—copied, sold, and consumed. But within my prints, the handmade imperfections disrupt that smooth messaging. The result is a challenge to the notion that desirability can be mass-produced or universally defined.

Sculpture and ceramics bring these inquiries into space. They demand a physical response—movement, positioning, attention. These works confront the viewer with material weight, instability, and scale. They translate the abstract into the tangible, giving form to emotional labor, bodily tension, and the need for rest, support, and belonging.

Video binds it all together. It introduces motion, breath, repetition, and rhythm. In the moving image, the body no longer waits to be looked at—it performs, resists, and invites the viewer to feel alongside it. It bridges the still and the living, the personal and the public, placing the viewer inside the experience, not just in front of it.

These mediums speak to each other. A risograph print might echo a pedestal shot from a video. A relief carving might originate from a staged photograph. A sculptural form might embody the same discomfort performed on screen. This recursive dialogue mirrors the way bodies—especially marginalized ones—must constantly adapt, respond, and reinvent themselves to survive systems of surveillance, expectation, and control.

Desirability, like the mediums I use, is not fixed. It bends with context. It mutates with power. Through interdisciplinary practice, I resist singular narratives and instead propose fluidity—where bodies, like materials, remain in process. In flux. Alive.

Themes of Fat Studies and Marginalized Bodies

Contextualizing the Fat Body: Contemporary Theories

Life is shaped in small, defining moments—many of which are mediated through our bodies. For fat individuals, these moments often carry exclusion and hypervisibility. These micro-interactions shape how we navigate the world. Jeannine A. Gailey's *The Hyper(in)visible Fat Woman: Weight and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Society* introduces the concept of hyperinvisibility, highlighting the paradox of fat bodies being both hypervisible in cultural critique and simultaneously erased from positive representation. She writes, "Fat women are expected to be visible—on display for ridicule or as cautionary tales—but not to be heard or seen as individuals with autonomy or power." My work embraces this tension by reclaiming visibility without apology. It resists the narratives that either vilify or render fat bodies invisible in mainstream discourse.

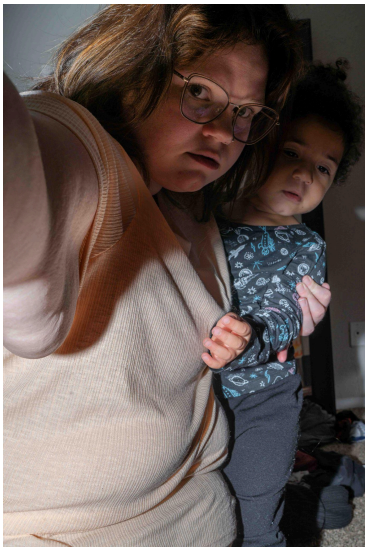
Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body Is Not an Apology* provides a framework for radical self-love as a tool of resistance against societal body shaming."Your body is not an apology. It is not something to be erased, fixed, or ashamed of," she declares. Taylor's philosophy echoes through my practice as I recast fatness as joyful, embodied, and whole. Amy Erdman Farrell's *Fat Shame* maps the stigmas surrounding fatness as having deep historical roots in systems of control, morality, and capitalism. She argues, "Fatness came to represent not just an undesirable physical state but a failure of moral character." My work challenges these biases, offering an alternative narrative asserting that fatness is not a problem to fix but a reality to honor. Kathleen LeBesco's *The Visual Politics of the Fat Body* examines how fat bodies are represented within visual culture, providing critical insights into the ways desirability is constructed and denied. I find resonance in the work of Iiu Susiraja, whose photographs wield humor, defiance, and honesty to confront societal discomfort with the body. Like her, I use play and the unexpected to unsettle assumptions and shift perception.

This conceptual framework grounds my artistic practice. The mediums I employ—photography, moving image, printmaking, ceramics, and sculpture—allow me to

navigate these concepts. Each medium whether still or moving, physical or virtual—offers a distinct yet interconnected avenue for examining the tensions between body, visibility, and desirability.

Personal Experience and the Internalization of Fatphobia

My work emerges from my lived experience of navigating the world in a fat body—an experience shaped by constant scrutiny, social exclusion, and internalized shame. These experiences are not isolated or anecdotal; they are symptoms of larger systems that devalue bodies that do not conform. Fat studies provide a crucial framework for understanding how cultural narratives construct fatness as deviant, while also offering tools for resistance, reclamation, and visibility. Fat bodies are not only stigmatized—they are policed. From medical offices to fitting rooms, classrooms to airplanes, fat individuals face judgment, restricted access, and a barrage of microaggressions that accumulate into something heavier than weight: a denial of full personhood.



These pressures manifest early and often. Everyday decisions—where to sit, how to dress, how to navigate a crowd—become acts of strategic negotiation. This daily labor shapes identity. It also fuels the work I make.

Shame is one of the most powerful mechanisms used to enforce fatphobia. From childhood, we are taught to see our bodies as problems to solve. This shame becomes embedded in our self-perception, passed down through families, media, and institutions. Amy Erdman Farrell's *Fat Shame* maps the historical and cultural roots of this stigma, showing how fatness is framed as a moral failure—a belief deeply entangled with race, class, and gender. She writes, "Fatness is constantly in need of justification, requiring the fat person to explain and defend their body in ways that thin people are not expected to." My work seeks to remove that burden of justification.

Fatphobia is not just external; it's internalized. I've felt it in the way I've monitored my movements, adjusted my posture, apologized with my body before I ever spoke. My practice aims to name and undo that internalization. Each artwork becomes a site of confrontation, but also of release. I offer images, objects, and experiences that reframe fatness not as a burden or pathology, but as something textured, powerful, and real. Roxane Gay's *Hunger* articulates the complexity of living in a fat body that is both hyper-visible and deeply misunderstood. She writes, "This is what most girls are taught—that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard." Her words resonate in my practice; particularly the tension between longing and refusal, between wanting to disappear and needing to be seen. My work translates that emotional landscape into visual form: the press of flesh, the awkwardness of space, the tension between containment and expansion. Judith Butler's theory of performativity also guides my thinking. Fat bodies are always performing—not by choice, but

by force. We are made to explain, to compensate, to shrink, to smile through discomfort. Butler argues, “There is no ‘being’ behind doing… the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed.” My work disrupts that cycle. By performing fatness on my own terms—whether through still image, movement, or material—I reclaim the narrative.

My art doesn’t ask for pity or tolerance, rather it demands recognition. It celebrates embodiment in all its contradictions. It insists that fatness is not just a body type, but a lived reality with political weight, historical context, and emotional depth.

Fat studies allows me to place my personal experiences within a broader discourse, and to connect with others navigating the same terrain. Through this framework, my work becomes both testimonial and intervention. It speaks back to a culture that renders us unworthy, and offers a vision where our bodies are no longer sites of shame—but of power, pleasure, and possibility.

The Universal Danger Chair: A Shared Experience of Fear and Shame

The Universal Danger Chair is one of my most direct attempts to translate the private discomfort fat people experience into a physical, public object. It’s a sculptural work, but more importantly, it’s a conceptual intervention—a confrontation with the material consequences of exclusion.

For many fat individuals, the simple act of sitting down carries risk: the fear of not fitting, the anxiety of being watched, the possibility of humiliation if a chair collapses. These are not abstract fears—they are learned through a constant confrontation with these objects. The Danger Chair is not just about poor design; it’s about what design communicates. It tells fat people they don’t belong here, that they are too much for this space, that their bodies must be negotiated, tolerated, or punished.

The Universal Danger Chair takes that message and makes it tangible—for all bodies. I constructed it from unsettling materials: chewed bubble gum, used cotton swabs, fragile wire. These are materials marked by the body—sticky, intimate, and abject. They provoke a visceral reaction, one that mirrors the discomfort fat people experience in spaces not made for them. Viewers don’t just see this chair—they feel its instability, its contamination, its refusal to offer comfort.

Everyone who encounters the Universal Danger Chair must reckon with its unease. In doing so, they experience—if only briefly—the psychological and physical toll of constantly assessing whether their body is welcome in a space. This shift, from distant empathy to embodied discomfort, becomes a form of critical witnessing. The chair implicates the viewer. It asks: What would it take for you to

feel unsafe simply by sitting? How often have you been offered comfort without question?

Another version of this work—the wire chair—is constructed from thin, fragile metal that bends and wobbles with the slightest pressure. Its delicacy contrasts sharply with the ideals of "good design," which prioritize stability, support, and utility. But here, fragility becomes the point. The chair fails, just as many public structures fail to hold fatness with care. Its thinness—so often idealized in bodies—becomes dangerous, unreliable, and exclusionary.

These works also engage with the abject aesthetic discomfort rooted in physicality. Chewed gum, saliva, cotton swabs: these are remnants of intimacy and bodily waste. They resist the sanitized environments most furniture aspires to inhabit. In this way, they mirror how fatness is often treated—as something messy, unwanted, and unsightly.Yetnstead of hiding these qualities, I forefront them. I turn discomfort into critique. I let the mess speak.

The Universal Danger Chair is not just a sculpture—it's a question posed in three dimensions: *What does design tell us about who matters? Who gets to feel supported? Who is left out of the frame, and what happens to their body in the absence of care?* By forcing that question into physical space, I am generating awareness, dialogue, and ultimately empathy. Because when a chair becomes dangerous, it reveals just how much harm is embedded in what we've come to accept as neutral.

The Reach of Fatphobia: Its Impact on Bodies

Fatphobia not only harms fat people—it shapes how every person relates to their body. From a young age, thin individuals are taught to fear fatness, to avoid it at all costs, to equate weight gain with failure. This fear becomes a driving force behind disordered eating, compulsive exercise, and relentless self-surveillance. Fatness is framed not as a neutral bodily state, but as a threat—something contagious, shameful, and morally wrong.

These internalized beliefs don't stop at the mirror. They seep into relationships, careers, healthcare, parenting. They feed a cultural obsession with control: the idea that a "disciplined" body reflects a disciplined life. Even those who benefit from thin privilege remain trapped in a cycle of anxiety, never permitted to fully rest in their bodies without fear of slipping into unacceptability. This system thrives on insecurity and shame. Convincing people that their worth is tied to size, ensures a market for endless products, diets, and fixes. And as long as fatness is positioned as the ultimate failure, society continues to uphold rigid binaries: healthy vs. unhealthy, good vs. bad, beautiful vs. grotesque.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps frame this phenomenon. Butler's theories on gender and identity suggest that the body is not simply something that "is," but something that "performs". Just as gender is performed through repetition, so is body compliance. People of all sizes are taught to perform respectability through physical appearance—to wear the right clothes, eat the right food, exercise with the right intensity. Fat bodies disrupt this performance

by refusing—or being unable—to conform. That disruption threatens the entire system. And so, fatness is punished.

In my work, I explore how these systems function—not just to exclude, but to control. The materials I use—flesh-like textures, unstable objects, repetitive forms—reflect the psychological weight of living in a culture obsessed with order and containment. My performances of excess, resistance, and refusal speak to this pressure. They show what it looks like when the body refuses to "behave." This section of my practice is not about blaming individuals for their internalized fatphobia. It's about exposing the systems that create it—and then asking what we're willing to do to break that cycle.

Fatphobia doesn't just isolate the fat person. It convinces everyone that their value is conditional. It makes rest feel like laziness. It turns eating into confession. It makes the body a site of constant judgment. We can imagine something else. Through my work, I offer that alternative: bodies that move without apology, rest without shame, and exist outside of binary classification. By confronting the systems that equate thinness with worth, I advocate for a broader liberation—one where bodies of all sizes are free to live fully, without fear.

Parenthood and Body Image

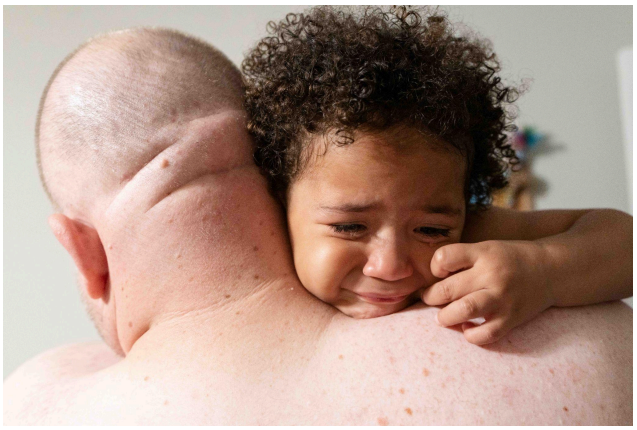
Personal Experience: Navigating Motherhood and Identity

Motherhood is a complex, multifaceted experience—one that is both deeply rewarding and intensely overwhelming. As a mother to a daughter, I navigate the delicate balance between shaping her understanding of self-worth while simultaneously reclaiming my own identity outside of the societal expectations placed upon maternal bodies. Motherhood often demands self-sacrifice, positioning the mother's needs and desires as secondary to those of her child. Motherhood magnifies the tension between selfhood and societal expectation. As a mother, I occupy a body that culture often deems unacceptable—and I do so while raising a daughter who watches me closely, learning not just how to be, but how to be *in a body*. Fat mothers experience a unique form of scrutiny. We are judged not only as women, but as caretakers whose bodies supposedly betray a lack of discipline, control, or concern. Our very presence disrupts cultural ideals of the "good mother"—thin, selfless, nurturing, contained. These expectations demand that we disappear, physically and emotionally, subsuming our needs, shrinking ourselves in both flesh and identity.

My work confronts this erasure. I reject the notion that to mother well, I must vanish. Instead, I assert the maternal body as expansive, present, and deserving of pleasure and power. My art insists on visibility—not as spectacle, but as truth. I offer images of fat maternal bodies that resist shame and speak to complexity: bodies that nurture, endure, express, and take up space—not

only for myself, but as an act of resistance and inheritance for my daughter, so she may grow up witnessing a body that refuses to disappear.

Nora Doyle's *Maternal Bodies* tracks the long history of these controlling narratives, revealing how motherhood has been weaponized as a site of discipline. Doyle writes, "The maternal body became a political site, disciplined to reflect ideals of purity, productivity, and self-sacrifice." These norms are slow to change, even under the influence of feminist progress. Fat mothers remain suspect—our bodies read as failures of care, our children framed as potential victims of our perceived inadequacy. This is not just false—it's violent.



In my own home, I challenge this narrative daily. I raise my daughter alongside a partner who also exists outside conventional body ideals. We model a version of family rooted not in bodily conformity, but in acceptance and inquiry. We talk openly about size, identity, shame, and love. In doing so, we teach our daughter that her worth is intrinsic—not something measured by weight, appearance, or how well she performs femininity. Our family resists dominant messages that reduce bodies to problems. We embody a different story—one where desire, messiness, vulnerability, and joy coexist. And still, the outside world presses in. My daughter will encounter the same toxic ideals that shaped my own relationship to my body. She will face pressures to shrink, perfect, and perform. I cannot shield her from those realities, but I can prepare her to question them. This is where my art informs my parenting. My work models resistance. It offers her a language for seeing herself as whole. It shows her that pleasure is not shameful, that softness is not weakness, and that bodies—especially ones like ours—carry stories worth honoring.

Motherhood doesn't exist in isolation. It's always tangled with history, power, and projection. But in reclaiming the maternal body as a space of defiance, I also reclaim my daughter's right to grow up in a world where she doesn't have to unlearn her own worth.

Intersection of Motherhood and Fatness

Fatness and motherhood collide in a cultural landscape that demands impossible contradictions. Mothers are expected to give everything—time, energy, body—yet remain invisible, contained, and effortlessly thin. Pregnancy briefly permits bodily expansion, but only within limits and only temporarily. Once the child is born, the pressure to "bounce back" arrives swiftly and mercilessly. Fat mothers, already outside the bounds of acceptability, are seen not as nurturing but negligent, their bodies read as failures of both femininity and parenthood.

This intersection—of fatness and motherhood—amplifies cultural shame and surveillance. The fat maternal body is coded as undisciplined, unhealthy, and irresponsible. It

becomes a site onto which fears of excess and moral panic as inherited traits are projected. These narratives strip away complexity and ignore the lived reality of mothering in a body that refuses to conform. Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* articulates this dynamic with clarity. She identifies the female body as a canvas of cultural anxiety—expected to reflect restraint, purity, and control. Fat mothers violate these ideals by simply existing. We're positioned as threats: to our children, to health systems, to aesthetic norms, to society. This is not only inaccurate—it's dehumanizing.

Through my work, I reject these narratives. I center the fat maternal body not as deviant, but as abundant, resilient, and fully human. I challenge the idea that love and care must be performed through self-denial. Instead, I depict a model of motherhood that includes pleasure, autonomy, and presence. A body that holds, feeds, rests, creates—and refuses to vanish in the process. My art asks: *why must motherhood erase the self? Why do we fear visible, unapologetic maternal bodies? What might change if we saw them as powerful rather than problematic?*

By challenging the structures that pathologize fatness and idealize maternal self-sacrifice, I offer space for alternate narratives—ones that hold space for desire, agency, and imperfection. Fat motherhood, when represented with care, becomes a radical act. It insists that nurturing and embodiment are not mutually exclusive, and that bodies of all sizes are capable of love, labor, and liberation.

Generational Transmission of Body Ideals

Through my art, I explore how generational attitudes toward body size shape identity and self-perception, urging viewers to consider how they perpetuate or challenge these ideals in their own lives. By confronting these inherited biases, we can collectively work toward a future where body acceptance is the norm rather than the exception, creating spaces in which all bodies—across generations—are treated with dignity and respect.

Body ideals don't form in a vacuum—they are passed down, absorbed through repetition, language, and silence. Children learn how to treat their bodies by watching how the people around them treat theirs. In many homes, especially those shaped by Western beauty standards, the fear of fatness becomes part of daily life: a comment about second helpings, a glance at the scale, praise for thinness disguised as concern for health.

These inherited messages take root early. They shape how we dress, eat, move, and value ourselves. I know this because I've lived it—and because I now parent with the awareness of the

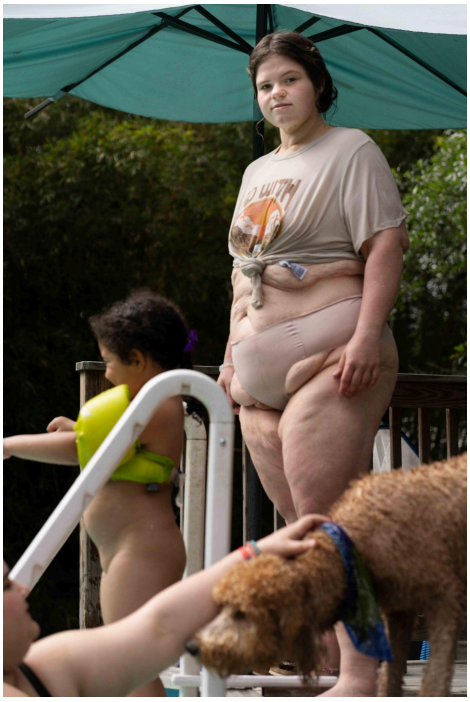
power of these transmissions. My daughter watches me. She sees how I move through the world in a fat body. She listens to the language I use, the way I talk about food, the way I look at myself in the mirror. She absorbs not just my words, but my silences. My task isn't just to protect her from external judgment—it's to break the lineage of internalized shame.

Body surveillance and aesthetic judgment are not neutral forces—they're cultural scripts passed from generation to generation. I inherited them too: quiet warnings about gaining weight, celebrations of thinness, the constant underlying belief that a smaller body meant a better one. These ideas weren't always spoken aloud, but they didn't have to be. They lived in the background of everyday life, shaping how I learned to see myself. Now, as a mother, I confront those scripts head-on. I refuse to pass them down. I model self-acceptance—not as a polished performance, but as a daily act of resistance. I tell my daughter that her body is not something to fix. I create space for her to love herself without conditions, to take up space without apology, to question the messages the world will eventually try to impose.

This intention extends into my work. Through my art, I build a visual language that resists inherited shame. My photographs, videos, and sculptural objects offer new scripts—ones that center fatness, softness, messiness, and care. These works speak not only to my own healing, but to hers. They are messages sent forward: *she does not have to shrink to be loved*. Teaching self-love and body acceptance to children is a radical act in a world that profits from insecurity. Fatphobia is a learned behavior, deeply embedded in media, healthcare, and social interactions, but it can also be unlearned. By fostering conversations around body diversity and challenging harmful beauty standards, I aim to equip my daughter with the tools to resist internalized fatphobia and embrace her body as it is. It means unlearning generations of fear. It means replacing praise for weight loss with praise for pleasure, creativity, and presence. It means affirming that the goal is not perfection or control—it's wholeness.

Art becomes part of what I pass down. Not just images of myself, but evidence of a mother who dared to be seen. A woman who refused to disappear. A body that stood tall, soft, present, and unashamed. These works form a living archive, a different kind of inheritance—one built not from fear, but from affirmation. I can't shield my daughter from the world entirely. But I can show her that bodies—her body—are not shameful. I can give her tools to navigate her future. And in doing so, I plant something new: a generational memory rooted not in erasure, but in love. My work reflects this commitment, offering representations of fat bodies that are celebratory rather than apologetic, ensuring that future generations see themselves reflected in ways that affirm their existence rather than diminish it.

Conclusion



This body of work exists at the intersection of desire, resistance, and lived experience. Through photography, printmaking, sculpture, and video, I confront the cultural narratives that shape how bodies—especially fat, maternal, and marginalized bodies—are seen, valued, and erased. My work challenges dominant aesthetics and systemic exclusions not from the outside, but from within—through the intimacy of daily life, the repetition of shame and survival, and the inherited scripts I am actively rewriting.

By centering fat bodies, I reclaim visibility on my own terms. I expose the physical and emotional labor of moving through spaces not designed for me. I document moments of tension and tenderness, exhaustion and defiance. I make visible the discomfort that is so often made invisible: the squeeze of a danger chair, the ache of hyperawareness, the grief of generational shame. But I also carve out space for joy—for play, sensuality, and care. These bodies are not merely surviving; they are deserving.

Art becomes the vehicle through which I ask larger questions: *Who gets to be seen? Who is allowed comfort, rest, reverence? Who is framed as desirable, and who is denied that gaze?* These are not abstract inquiries—they shape access to care, power, safety, and love. And they begin in the body. My practice operates as both a critique and an offering. I hold a mirror to the systems that harm us, simultaneously building new reflections. I present the fat body as capable of softness, of beauty, of deep meaning. I situate the maternal body not as selfless or disciplined, but as expansive, complex, and fully human. And I invite viewers to reconsider what they've inherited—to examine their own roles in upholding or dismantling these ideals.

This work is deeply personal, but its reach is communal. Every photograph, sculpture, and performance asks for empathy,reckoning and action. Each gesture pushes back against the notion that only some bodies are worthy of celebration. I want my work to shift what feels possible—not only in art, but in life.

I create art to imagine a world where all bodies can move without shame, sit without pain, and exist without justification. A world where desirability is not a weapon but a shared inheritance—where visibility becomes a form of care, not control. A world where no one has to shrink in order to belong.

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