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## Contextualising identity : The intersection of gay culture and consumer culture on the gay male body

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**CONTEXTUALISING IDENTITY – THE INTERSECTION OF GAY CULTURE  
AND CONSUMER CULTURE ON THE GAY MALE BODY**



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Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts)**

**This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of**

**BA (Visual Arts) Honours**

**School of Communications and Creative Industries  
Faculty of Education and Arts  
Edith Cowan University**

**November, 2006.**

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

Gay Culture is largely informed and influenced by the wider social values and systems that surround it. Commodity culture infiltrates every area of day-to-day living, and is no less influential within gay culture. Images presented by the media, particularly gay targeting media such as DNA magazine, show a male body as almost exclusively young, muscular, good-looking and of western appearance. The continuously repeated image of the male body as being of only one specific type can be problematic within a minority culture as it can lead to exclusion for those who do not measure up to the standards. While acceptance is a necessary means of reinforcing a positive identity within gay culture, challenging the set standards could lead to liberation from stereotypes. Social change is still necessary within gay culture, as equality and acceptance are still lacking in many areas.

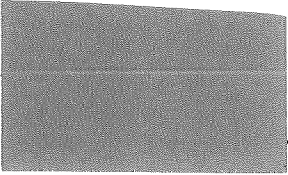
By examining gay history and politics, consumer culture, gay art and my own creative practice, I am attempting to greater understand the cultures which frame and contextualise not only my work but also my identity. This dissertation is an attempt to be self-reflexive, and to realise that it is possible to be part of yet critical of the culture that informs my identity. My practice has become a site of interrogation, challenging images of the male body as presented as commodity to the gay community.

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## INTRODUCTION

Gay male bodies, images of male bodies and identity are linked within both gay culture and commodity culture. As a cultural group, gay men have had to endure many varying levels of acceptance and nonacceptance throughout history, in both the world in general and Australia. From a contemporary viewpoint, it would appear that gay men are awarded many more freedoms than previously allowed. However, by examining the relationships between the gay male body, consumer culture and gay culture, it becomes evident that there are still many areas in which acceptance of a true gay identity are in need of challenging. My research topic identifies how the male body is portrayed and framed by gay culture. In particular, I am exploring how commodity culture influences gay culture and the impact that this has on the gay male body. The influence of marketing strategies and consumerism aimed at gay men infiltrates from everyday mainstream media right through to gay specific media publications. It is the implications of this on gay identity and the gay male body that I aim to explore and develop within both my research and my visual practice.

Commodification and gay culture have formed an image of what the ideal male body is in contemporary Australia. The images portrayed by the media demonstrate a male body that is muscular, youthful and western, and this image is repeated constantly in gay exclusive media. In this research I attempt to examine the complexities of this, specifically the influence of commodity culture on the construction of the gay male body and identity. By examining previous gay movements throughout history, as well as analysing commodity culture and gay consumerism, I aim to position my own artistic practice critically within a contemporary gay art mode. My research analyses consumer culture and the way it dictates cultural norms, in regard to body image, sexuality, physical appearance and identity. It is an attempt to discover how critical theory contextualises gay culture, as well as my own identity, and also the influence consumer culture has on gay culture. My research thus far has identified a large variety of texts covering topics from queer theory, masculinity, consumer society, as well as looking at gay magazines and gay artist's creative works. I am interested in the interrelationship

between social, historical, political and queer theories, with specific focus on the body and its commodified form. My research examines ideas stemming from queer theory, and particularly those relating to commodity culture, also looking at the way the male body is framed in terms of masculinity, sexuality and culture.

Personal identity has formed an integral part of both my research and art practice, with my own sexuality informing my identity. I aim to examine the complexities of this, through positioning my practice within gay culture and the influence of commodity culture. Also critically analysing my work alongside works of other gay artists, with specific reference to Pierre et Gilles and Mathew Stradling<sup>1</sup>. It has become extremely important to contextualise my work and also realise that I am critiquing and analysing a culture that I am both part of and critical of. As Adorno states: "Not only is the self entwined in society; it owes society its existence in the most literal sense" (1951, p. 154). This level of involvement becomes central to my art practice. Challenging the influence of commodity culture, where the body becomes a marketable commodity, is attempted in my practice, as well as recognising the level to which my own life, as well as gay culture, is infiltrated by media manipulation and imagery.

Chapter One explores gay history and gay politics in order to create a context for the current climate in gay culture as well as an historical background. I examine several movements and periods important to gay culture, from early gay liberationists to the crisis of AIDS, and further forward to examine queer theory. Queer theory forms an integral part of the research, and it is examined critically and in terms of how applicable it is in order for social change and understanding to be brought about in regard to gay culture and the gay male body. Masculinity is also discussed in terms of relevance to and influence on the gay male body.

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<sup>1</sup> I have recently come across the work of Lachlan Warner whom had similar concerns to me regarding gay culture, however his work was more diaristic in form and deeply personal. My work however is concerned with a broader identity involving social and political concerns within gay culture.

Commodity culture, the influence of consumerism in gay culture, and the relationships between consumerism and gay identity and the gay male body in Western Culture are examined in Chapter Two. Capitalism is examined as the driving force of commodity culture and for its influence on gay culture. Importantly, the gay male body is discussed in terms of becoming a marketable commodity manipulated to sell products and services. Examples of media (both television and magazine) are examined for their positioning of the male body within gay culture. Masculinity is further linked to the body, and cultural acceptance is questioned in terms of exclusion of those whose bodies do not conform to media images of what is deemed to be attractive and sexy.

Chapter Three examines gay art and the works of several other gay artists. In particular, the artists who are examined are those who have used the male body frequently within their practice, and the ways in which the body is dealt with in relation to both gay culture and consumer culture. Matthew Stradling's painting *The Mirror* (see Figure 2, page 14) is examined briefly, and the work of Pierre et Gilles is discussed specifically. Pierre et Gilles works are viewed as both a comment on commodity culture and gay culture, as well as being a part of this context. This takes a similar position to my own practice.

My own practice forms the basis for the discussion in Chapter Four. I examine the contexts within which my own practice can exist and the differing meanings these contexts can create. By analysing my own practice, I am becoming self-reflexive in critiquing a culture within which I am part of and critical of. My art works are discussed in detail, with importance placed on the use of cut outs in the shape of the male body and comment on the gay male body as a commodified form. The relationship of my own identity to my practice and research forms a central role in the discussion of both gay culture and the media and commodity cultures representations of the male body. The conclusion brings together the research and practice, to demonstrate their correlations, and the results of my research.

# CHAPTER 1

## Gay History and Politics

In order to gain an understanding of where gay culture has been developed, and to create a context for which to understand the positing of the male body in this society I find it relevant to examine the history of gay culture in Australia as well as gay politics. The history of gay culture in Australia is how I will use history to position my discussion in a contemporary framework of gay culture. Discussing only as far as the late 60s and early 70s is beneficial as a turning point in Australian consciousness when, gay issues were brought to light by incidents such as Stonewall and further forward towards events such as Mardi Gras, The AIDS crisis, and the development of Queer as a movement and identity. The reason why I am only going this far back is because my practice discusses what is a contemporary culture, I feel that going far back into history will be unnecessary. Stonewall was a critical site in the development and formation of contemporary gay culture and as such is a relevant context to commence this analysis.

Stonewall riots occurred in 1969, when New York police stormed a gay nightclub (which had been a frequent practice throughout the early 60s). It was this event that is generally viewed to be the beginning of the early periods of gay rights protest, and the event that lead to the forming of Gay Liberation groups in New York and America. This situation was reflected in Australia on a smaller level, resulting in Australian Gay and Lesbian Liberation. During this time, homosexuality had begun to be discussed publicly, traversing politics and every day life. This was a shift in attitudes in Australian culture and as Willett (2000, p. 71) argues:

The Key to understanding this shift lies in recognising that the new tolerance towards homosexuality was part (and, in fact, a rather small part) of a broader, and rather new, liberal current in Australian political culture and Australian political life – a current which looked to a wide ranging reform of society.

One of the first organisations in Australia that lobbied for gay rights was CAMP, which was superseded by the Gay Liberation group, due to being fractured and dysfunctional<sup>2</sup>. Gay Liberation lobbied for gay people to have the same rights as heterosexuals<sup>3</sup> and to be recognised for their sexuality and not discriminated against, and helped to bring gay people out into public view. Liberationists explicitly linked their revolution in individual consciousness with the radical restructuring of society” (Reynolds, 2002, p. 59). The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras can be seen as a product of gay liberation, as both a celebration and protest for gay rights. The Mardi Gras began on June 24, 1978 as a protest march and commemoration of the Stonewall riots<sup>4</sup>.

Following on from this openness led to a crisis in gay culture, the epidemic of HIV and AIDS, taking hold of - and devastating - the community in the 80s. The AIDS movement led to a crisis not only of health but also of the broader identity of gay people individually and as a whole within mainstream culture. AIDS was viewed as a disease only linked to homosexuals, and created a negative image of gay culture in society.

“Even though AIDS is in no intrinsic sense ‘a gay disease’, the fact that, at least in the Western world, it has primarily been experienced by male homosexuals has shaped the entire discourse surrounding the disease” (Altman cited by Edwards, 1994, p. 132). The Queer movement in the 90s was borne out of this, a renegotiation of gay identity as a fluid, less categorised identity constructed as both a way of protest and reclaiming of power.

Queer called for less labelling, more equality and acceptance, and social change. Queer was transgressive, and “was never a unified strand of beliefs or practices” (Reynolds, 2002, p. 160). What this movement aimed to achieve and develop was an understanding of an evolving identity. The emergence of Queer in the nineties as a movement also coincided with an abundance of lesbian and gay art being exhibited around Australia<sup>5</sup>. The Queer movement spawned a large amount of theoretical writings and discussions, relating to individuality, culture and social change. Queer theory plays an important role

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<sup>2</sup> In-fighting between members led to a division between age groups within the organisation.

<sup>3</sup> Gay Liberation sought justice against discrimination based on sexuality in the workplace, unequal recognition of relationships, and unequal employment opportunities.

<sup>4</sup> Homosexuals in Sydney were linked to those in New York, both cities having a relatively large gay population and similar social situation. The Sydney gay community was urged to protest by the New York community as a way of staging a mass protest. The Australian Mardi Gras was inspired by the events that occurred in Stonewall NY.

<sup>5</sup> As seen in the work by Artists such as David McDiarmid, William Yang, Rod McRae, and Lachlan Warner. This will be developed further in Chapter 4.

in the analysis of contemporary modes of gay culture and identity. Queer theory resulted in the development of the usage of terms including Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, as well as purely being known as Queer in regard to sexuality, due to a desire to remove or at least reduce categorisation of sexuality as rigid structures. There are many debates around Queer theory, contesting whether it can actually be applied and the impact it has on the development of a gay community. Possible examples of problems and criticism relating to Queer theory is in the fact that it can become based in theory rather than reality, and therefore cannot be applied to real communities or lifestyles. Also, that the celebration of diversity may lead to individualism and fragmentation, and celebrating difference can lead to marginalisation. However one very important aspect of the Queer movement, and the resulting queer theories, was the discussion of social change.

Social change was an important part of the establishment of the queer movement, it aimed to deconstruct the rigid boundaries of what sexuality was and meant, to reclaim this space in a new way, re-examining identity, individualism and culture. In terms of social change, a new level of acceptance and understanding was called for, as well as a radical reform and rejection of dominant hegemony such as patriarchal heterosexual structure and gender definitions. In order for social change to be possible, there is a need to work collectively to re-examine, as “we are not alone, and we cannot act alone if we are to work towards social change” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 10). Politics form an integral part of social change, and one example of contemporary politics in Australia as working against a positive mode of acceptance for gay culture is the absence of recognition of gay marriage as equal to that of heterosexual marriage in society<sup>6</sup>. The recognition of equality for gay people is an apparent arena for the need for social change which queer theory aimed to expose and reconstruct.

Important also in queer theory, and development of social change, is the understanding and acceptance of a queer or gay identity as Edwards (1994, p. 154) states:

Identity remains to the gay community what the state is to communism; a necessary means to an end and ultimately useless yet currently essential. It is, therefore, still vital to preserve a positive identity or at least identities and maintain and develop the strength of the gay and lesbian communities to resist these processes.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the current Howard government states marriage as a sanctity reserved for heterosexual couples exclusively.

Identity relates not only to an individual, but also to a collective identity, such as that of gay male culture, and queer theory often discusses identity “as a mode of affiliation rather than strictly as a category of personal definition” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 7).

Culture is referred to as a “complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by members of a society” (Tyler cited in Kirsch, 2000, p. 44). This definition of culture is what I will use in my discussion of gay culture as it is based in popular culture and media. This research however, relates to my own identity, and gay male culture is discussed almost exclusively to apply to my practice to create a critical context and informed position.

As this research deals with gay male culture and gay male sexuality, I feel a discussion of masculinity and its impact on gay culture is necessary<sup>7</sup>. Masculinity and homosexuality are closely linked in gay culture, resulting in images, labels and subcultures relating to body type<sup>8</sup> and body image. The image of the muscular gay male body can be viewed as a rejection of traditional notions of the gay male as effeminate, as “the straight world has told us for that if we are not masculine we are homosexual, that to be homosexual means not to be masculine... one of the things we must do is redefine ourselves as homosexuals” (Diaman cited in Cole, 2000, p. 93). Masculinity is linked to gay male sexuality and identity. In reclaiming masculine imagery, “gay men began to regard themselves as masculine” (Cole, 2000, p. 93). The masculine image can be viewed as both a result and a development of Queer culture, in the reclaiming of a space that was traditionally heterosexual, and crossing the boundary of how homosexuals were perceived. The gay male body has, however, become an object that can be manipulated to sell products through the media and consumer culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Masculinity and its impact on gay culture, and gay commodity culture, will also be discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> For example, large hairy gay men over the age of 30 are labelled as ‘Bears’ and the Bears group organise separate events for their subgroup.

## CHAPTER 2

### Consumer Culture and Gay Culture Converge

Commodification can be defined as a process that takes place when economic value is given to something that traditionally would not be considered of value in economic terms. For instance, sex, identity and gender have become marketable commodities, something to be bought and sold rather than freely exchanged. This can also easily be viewed in the representation of the body as a space to sell products or be consumed in commodity culture. This culture is the product of a marketed society dominated by media and advertising. Commodity culture and consumerism form a large part of the structure of contemporary Western culture, infiltrating every sphere of the life-world. The influence of these extends to no less a degree into the gay community, and particularly, the gay male community<sup>9</sup>. Commodity culture is driven by capitalism.

Western contemporary culture is a product of capitalism and capitalistic attitudes. Every day we are bombarded by advertising and media, selling, upsizing, marketing products for every possible occasion or situation. In order to sustain an existence in a capitalist commodity driven culture, it is necessary to spend money to survive. This culture implies created individuality through purchased products and the illusion of choice, employing clever marketing and manipulation of media in almost every sphere (television, billboards, radio, the Internet) to enhance the experience of living in contemporary western society. Implied individuality is a powerful mechanism of capitalism, and it is this that drives consumerism and has led to the development of a culture that is based in spending and material possession. Capitalism is a system that has been developed to benefit the individual rather than the community as a whole. Humans become commodities, which can be manipulated and marketed to increase profits and sell products.

This is apparent in the use of the body, both male and female, in advertising and media to sell a massive variety of products, from cars to perfumes to hair loss treatments. Such images function as an ideal representation, creating a desirable image that can be achieved if only the product advertised is purchased, “Media images of the body

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<sup>9</sup> Marketing campaigns target homosexual audiences through homoerotic imagery and manipulation of the male body to sell clothes and products.



function like the traditional icons of the church. In other words, people read themselves and their place in the world through the pictures. Modern media trades in the icons of modern, secular, culture” (Pronger, 2001, n.p.). Advertising exploits the body as a marketable commodity, and this form of advertising is used to appeal to both heterosexual and gay males and females in western contemporary culture. Sexuality and the body are strongly linked, put simply, sex sells. “Sexuality and desire has thus been massively consumerised... Who creates the images of the desirable and how are they played out? Who creates Consumption?” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 75). The image of a ‘sexy’ body sells more products to a consumer driven society. The male body, especially in more recent times, has become a steady icon for the selling of products, and is now used to appeal to both heterosexual males<sup>10</sup> as well as homosexual males. “Consumer Culture had discovered and begun to develop the untapped resources of the male body” (Bordo cited in Edwards, 2006, p. 157). Desire and sex help to drive consumers to indulge in commodity culture, alluding to the attainment of a perfect or sexy body with the purchase of a product.

Gay male culture is largely affected by consumerism, commodity culture, media and advertising as Berger states, “Many commercials overtly connect sex and consumption... In recent years, advertising has used homoerotic appeals for gay men and lesbians” (2004, p. 17). Companies and corporations targeted the gay community, as Klein points out - “The gay community got its very own cool hunters – market researchers who scoured gay bars with hidden cameras” (Klein, 2001, p. 113). This helped them to develop products to appeal to this niche market: “People who saw themselves as belonging to oppressed groups were ready made market niches: throw a few liberal platitudes their way and, presto, you’re not just a product but an ally in the struggle” (Klein, 2001, p. 113). Gay culture was manipulated and infiltrated by advertising media and corporations to create a new target audience and increase profitability. Over time, as gay culture has become more widely exposed, this infiltration has increased, examples being a larger variety of gay published media, through to entire channels on Satellite TV being devoted to a gay audience.

One prime example of gay culture being manipulated and exploited by consumer culture to become a marketable commodity is the television program *Queer Eye for the*

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<sup>10</sup> The term ‘metrosexual’ has been coined to describe heterosexual men who are also interested in spending money on looking after their faces, body and clothes.

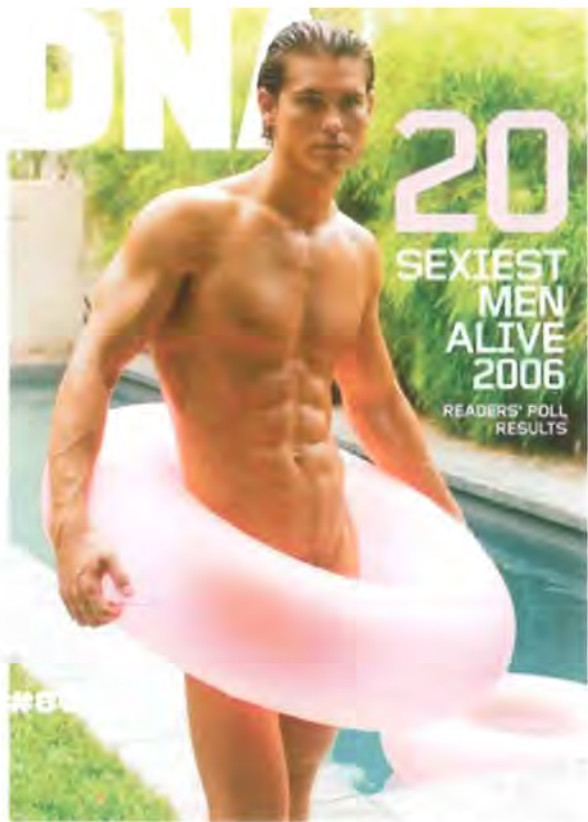
Straight Guy, which aired in the UK, the United States and Australia, each creating their own version of the same formula. Five gay men were employed to ‘make-over’ a heterosexual male and therefore better his quality of life. “The TV program *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* “squeals, often literally, at the appalling states of such men who do not ‘measure up’” (Edwards, 2006, p. 160). The gay men were each intended to represent a different aspect of life in contemporary society – fashion, food, culture, home decoration and self-beauty. The men became archetypes and stereotypes, from the relatively butch guy who teaches men beauty, through to the flamboyant and self-proclaimed fabulous effeminate fashion guru. These characters were used as a means to help better heterosexual society, to serve as entertainment, and there was little to no discussion of actual queer culture or the problems gay men were facing, there was a distinct lack of actual sexuality, rather more it was presented as something that was ‘other’ and something to be laughed about.

Gay culture also has its own forms of media, as previously expressed, from print such as magazines and newspapers, to television and the Internet. One such magazine is *DNA Magazine* (See Figure 1, page 11), an Australian magazine that is based in Sydney and dispersed Australia wide. *DNA* is slated as “Australia’s best selling gay magazine” (Creagh, 2006, n.p.), and therefore reaches the broadest audience for a gay magazine in this country. *DNA* serves as a product that informs and also influences gay culture. It addresses issues that are popular or viewed as important to gay culture (such as gay marriage, the discourse between homosexuality and religion among other things). It can be viewed as a lifestyle magazine, and provides interviews with celebrities, beauty and health information as well as reviews of fashion and the latest DVD’s, movies and music releases. However, amidst all this is the recurring theme of the semi naked male body, always primed, primed and pumped to perfection. The men in the photographs and adverts are beautiful in western society, slim and muscular, young and tanned, more often than not they are exclusively of western descent<sup>11</sup>. The male body is exploited in this magazine to sell products relating to anything from cars to sex implements through to fashion and holiday destinations. As Australia’s best selling gay magazine, there is very little ever discussed or demonstrated of bodies which may not be perfect and western or Caucasian in appearance. For example, in issue 81, out of 84 pages, 61 pages contained at least one image of a partially nude male with a muscular youthful body.

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<sup>11</sup> The term ‘Western’ implies Caucasian appearance.

This clearly shows how much commodity culture has infiltrated gay culture, using a specific type of male body as a sexy emblem to sell a product to a target audience.



**Figure 1** DNA Magazine Cover, issue #80.

Physical appearance is closely linked to identity in gay culture. This can be seen in subcultures such as Bears, Twinks (Young skinny youths) and Muscle Mary's (Muscular men who work hard on their bodies). These categories inform identity and inform how explicitly to body and body image relates to the creation of an identity in gay culture. Throughout history, the gay male body has been an important site to signal to other gay men of the owner's sexuality, through codes of fashion and certain colours being worn. An example of this is the Hanky code, in which handkerchief's were displayed in the back pockets of gay men pertaining to their choice of sexual activity and preference. Gay men have learnt to manipulate their bodies to create signals to others, and the body has been an important site for homosexual men in defining themselves, their lifestyles and their masculinity<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> This has become an important site within my practice.

Masculinity has had a powerful impact on gay male identity and culture. Throughout history homosexual men were viewed as effeminate or less masculine than heterosexual men, however “with the advent of gay liberation in the 1970’s, many gay men developed an interest in projecting a more masculine self-presentation, often based on traditionally ‘macho’ images” (Cole, 2000, p. 119). This attitude was the result of homosexual men wishing to redefine themselves and homosexuality as more masculine in a predominantly heterosexual world, using the body as a site for transformation, “Gay men began to regard themselves as masculine. They adopted manly attire and demeanour as a mean of expressing their new sense of self” (Cole, 2000, p. 93). This developed masculinity for gay men continues in contemporary culture, and has been redeveloped by commodity culture, as can be seen in DNA Magazine, which places such a focus on the “sexy” male body being masculine (muscular, strong, and handsome). A problem however of the male body being used as a site to demonstrate masculinity is that “gay male desire often remains chained to limited modes of masculinity” (Edwards, 2006, p. 98). Such limited modes of masculinity can be seen in gay media, which lack differing examples of male bodies, rather sticking to the usual western, muscular youthful form. If sexuality was reconstructed by the Queer movement to be more fluid and less structured, then there would be no need to conform to the rigid body images of what is deemed ‘sexy’ in contemporary culture. This can be problematic for gay men and gay culture, as these stereotypes essentially exclude those whose bodies cannot resemble the standardised image. By not conforming to this image, it could become liberating, as these depictions would be challenged.

The possibility of challenging commodity culture is a contentious issue in gay culture, because, as a minority group, cultural acceptance is a necessary means of reinforcing a positive identity. The body can be seen as both a site for protest and transformation, but also as a commodity. The idea of what is desirable or ‘sexy’ in contemporary culture is so ingrained into our everyday lives, through media, magazines and advertising that it is next to impossible to escape. By reclaiming their bodies as masculine, many gay men have found a certain level of acceptance. However, this also allows the male body to also be exploited as a commodity. By bombarding gay culture repeatedly, there is a lack of power and control over identity, and exclusion of other members of the community can occur<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> As a result, it has become important within my practice and research to position my work as being both a part of and yet critical of gay culture.

## CHAPTER 3

### Examining Gay Art

As an attempt to research how the gay male body is positioned in gay culture and commodity culture, it is necessary to examine how several gay artists have worked with the male body, and what the relative successes and failures of dealing with this subject matter had been. Examining gay art helps create a context for my own practice as well as informing my research. Art forms an important part of culture, and gay art is a specific genre, which explores, deconstructs and re-examines its own culture, as well as critiquing the world and contextualising it. Many gay artists examine their own identities and sexuality, and create work that reflects and attempts to understand, and comment on, their social situation. In discussing the abundant use of the body in gay art, Emmanuel Cooper states “the western humanist tradition that places the body at the centre of its concerns is also at the core of much of this art – for it is here that discoveries can be made, complexities of desire explored and truths revealed” (Cooper, 1986, p. 341). Sexuality and desire influence and inform many artists, however not all gay artists make work concerning simply sexuality or sex. Subject matter ranges from sex, pornography, the body, AIDS related works<sup>14</sup>, Mardi Gras posters to political issues and art as a form of protest. The idea of challenging the role of the male body could be possible in the form of gay art, where it can be manipulated and worked upon in any way desired.

Gay art has a popular following and has been developed as a contemporary commodity, and one example of a well known gay artist is Tom of Finland, known for his finely detailed drawings and images of muscular men with sculpted bodies in tight fitting clothing, which are highly eroticised and homoerotic, being made into calendars, books and postcards. The different movements in gay culture can be seen reflected in art. Examples of this can be seen in the rise of the Queer movement in Australia in the late 80s to early 90s, which coincided with an abundance of gay and queer art being exposed to public view “The acceptance of group shows clearly identified as involving gay and lesbian sensibilities in mainstream venues is, in part, due to the decriminalisation of

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<sup>14</sup> Such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, David McDiarmid, William Yang and Brad Levido.



homosexuality” (Ashburn, 1994, p.43). This demonstrates how closely gay culture and gay art are linked by the society they exist within.

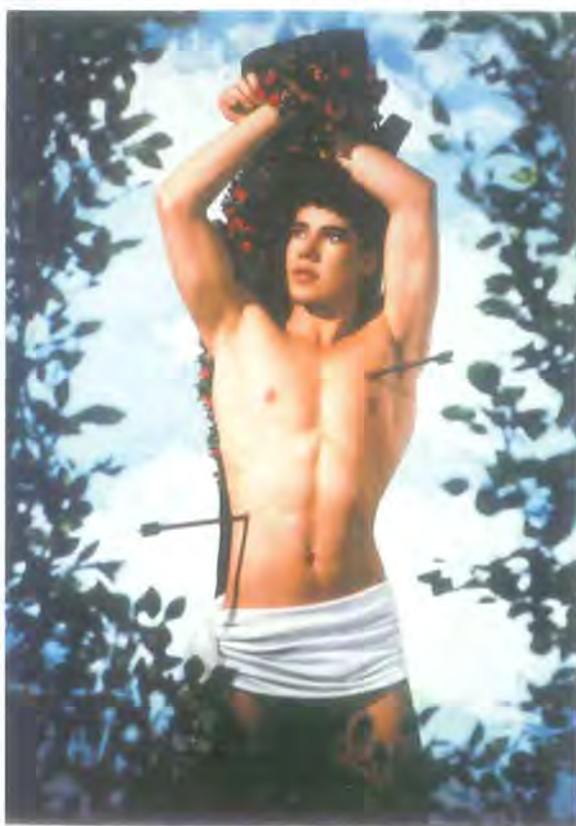


**Figure 2,** Matthew Stradling, *The Mirror*, (1993) Oil on Canvas

One artist whose work reflects this period (the early nineties) is Matthew Stradling, who identifies as gay however does not wish to be known as simply a gay artist as he feels this can lead to exclusion. Stradling created work that reflected the positioning of the male body in gay culture, and a perfect example of this is the painting *The Mirror* (see Figure 2, page 14). This artwork features the image of a large muscular gay man staring at his reflection in a mirror. The models features are smooth, muscular, youthful and perfect, yet his genitals are very small. The work serves as a comment on the narcissism in gay culture and the apparent lacking of true meaning in this lifestyle. Stradling states - “A lot of gay art depicts ideals, concentrating on looks, ignoring the person underneath, an attitude I was finding prevalent in the gay world in general” (Stradling cited in Horne, Lewis, 1996, p. 141).

Of particular relevance are Pierre et Gilles, gay artists who use the body, often the male body, as subject matter. Pierre et Gilles work crosses over many contexts. These artists

have worked in collaboration and as partners for over 25 years. Pierre et Gilles practice consists of photographs of celebrities, society people and friends of the artists taken by Pierre which are worked back into with paint by Gilles. The pair has created work not only as art pieces, but also for magazine covers, album covers, book covers and for music videos. By reworking the original photographs, added layers and details help to create the world that the artists are attempting to develop. The artists come from backgrounds in commercial art, and their practice crosses over the boundaries of art and photography and blends with media and advertising. Their work is highly glamorised, presenting perfect images of bodies, worked and retouched so they become bordering on kitsch. Pierre and Gilles images feature beautiful and perfected models idealised and placed in setting and scenarios that are constructed by the artists to reflect themes such as sex, Hollywood, love, religion, archetypes and death. The works contain strong elements of camp and kitsch, alluding to the influence of gay culture including its relation of the body as a perfected ideal. The artists attempt to create a world in which every body is perfect, skin is flawless, fantasy meets reality and the impossible occurs.



**Figure 3,** Pierre et Gilles (1990) *Saint Sebastian – Boubadallah Benkamla*,  
120 x 79 cm, painted photograph.

One example of Pierre et Gilles work is *Saint Sebastian – Boubadallah Benkamla* (see Figure 3, page 15) which features a muscular and youthful model posed as the religious

saint, pierced by arrows in his torso. The male body has been used by Pierre et Gilles in reference to Saint Sebastian being known as the Gay Saint, and the body reflects the ideal of a perfect sculpted form. Pierre et Gilles works feature the homoerotic as a recurring theme. The influence of gay culture and commodity culture is very clear in the work of Pierre et Gilles, as the work reflects traditional views of celebrity glamour and false beauty as an ideal form. Pierre et Gilles reference gay imagery frequently, with the use of glitter, sculpted male forms and sexual innuendo playing a large part in their images.

This in turn also comments on the over the top nature of consumption and commodity culture, in a gay context, serving as a “comment on aspects of the gay world, using obvious glamour and artifice to create images that both celebrate and examine convention with irony and humour” (Cooper, 1994, p. 341). Pierre et Gilles work reflects both gay culture and the culture industry – Hollywood hype, celebrity and unattainable glamour and perfection. While Pierre et Gilles works can be seen as kitsch and camp idealistic celebration of gay culture, they can also be viewed as critiquing this culture. They repeat what is traditionally viewed as beautiful, and take this over the top, perfecting every last detail until the result is somewhat plastic looking and flawless. This can be seen as a comment on the unrealistic expectations that are put on gay men and their bodies by their own culture. Their work can also be seen as a social statement relating to gay identity as Cameron (2000, p. 17) argues “Pierre et Gilles work offers a passionate argument that the projection of an unflinchingly idealized gay identity remains one of the few culturally subversive gestures possible in a society that ascribes second-class legal status to gays and lesbians”. This may be the case, however by continuously representing a similar male body form, Pierre et Gilles are also helping to construct an image of the gay male body as having to conform to rigid stereotypical ideals.





**Figure 4,** Pierre et Gilles, *Boys and Girls (Mardi Gras)* (Enzo, Laurent, Spohie, Pasquale), 1994, 120 x 79cm, painted photograph.

Gay art and culture reflect each other often, and one example where this can be seen is the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, as well as the Perth Pride Festival. Mardi Gras originated as a protest march and has turned into what is supposed to be a celebration of gay culture and gay liberation. It can also however be viewed as commodified, resulting in dance parties and souvenirs, as well as providing a spectacle of ‘other’ as entertainment for the larger community. Mardi Gras spawned many gay exhibitions in well-known gallery such as the *Queerography* exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 gallery in Sydney. An example of commodity culture influencing Mardi Gras can be seen through the posters, which advertise the event. Originally local Sydney artists and designers, reflecting the community aspect of Mardi Gras, designed the posters. However, at the height of queer culture being recognised and popularised in Australia, even broadcast on national television, the Mardi Gras Board decided upon commissioning Pierre et Gilles to create the Mardi Gras poster in 1995 (the image featured two perfected masculine looking men and two feminine looking women dressed in leather) (See Figure 4, page 17). “How appropriate though, at the moment when Mardi Gras had successfully commodified itself as a cultural event, that its key representation should be through

international glamour product photography” (Raymond, 1996, p. 55). Members of the gay art community regarding the representation of stereotypical gay identity criticised this, as well as the commodification of what was supposed to be a community celebration and protest.

Gay art can celebrate the gay culture and challenge ideals, and also can employ the use of the body as representation of sexuality and identity, yet it can also be informed and influenced by commodity culture and the culture industry. However, it can also be used as a site to challenge rigid ideals relating to both contemporary western cultural ideologies of sexuality identity, as well as the infiltration into gay culture by commodification.

## CHAPTER 4

### Self-Reflexive Practice



**Figure 5,** Dan Gladden, *Pin Up Boy*, installed at PICA (2006). Drawing Pins.

I have had the opportunity to exhibit my work in two such separate contexts, the first being Skandalous, a gay nightclub in Perth (see Figure 6, page 20), and the second being Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) (See Figure 5, page 19). Each venue has specific target audiences, with the club being almost exclusively gay, and PICA being open to all public, regardless of sexuality. While placing the cut outs in a gay nightclub visually worked well, I feel that by positioning the artwork outside of the gay context of the nightclub and into a gallery, the artwork can serve more effectively as a comment on the culture I am critiquing, rather than becoming another image reinforcing a stereotype in a predominantly gay space. By analysing previous works, it becomes critical to contextualise my current practice. Self-reflexivity is important in analysing my works, positioning my practice as being critical and an involved part of gay culture.





**Figure 6,** Dan Gladden, *Cut Outs*, Installed at Skandalous Nightclub (2006),  
Acrylic and Spray paint on Masonite

As a visual practitioner, my research has run parallel with my artistic practice. My own research and practice is about consumer culture dictating norms, such as sexual and physical appearance. I am attempting to look at how this impacts upon gay culture, and to position myself as being part of yet critical of gay culture. One theme that has emerged throughout the duration of my research development and practice has been the influence of my own identity. I believe my work is a response to my own sexuality, being a gay artist, as well as ideas of sexuality generated by the media. Establishing identity as a construction of the cultures and attitudes surrounding it has been important in examining the role of the body in gay culture. I have a strong interest in realist representation of aesthetic imagery in response to the male form, as well as the use of silhouettes (the blocking out of identity to become just a body form), and my own practice currently moves between an interest in painting and photography, relating strongly to my research. The main themes which inform my practice generate from sexuality, as well as ideas related to male body image specifically within media and advertising.

The male body, and particularly imagery of the male body in gay generated media, has been one of the largest influences on my creative practice. Media examples of the male body depict males as being muscular, toned, tanned and of western appearance<sup>15</sup>. This

<sup>15</sup> Such as can be seen in DNA Magazine, as discussed in Chapter 2.

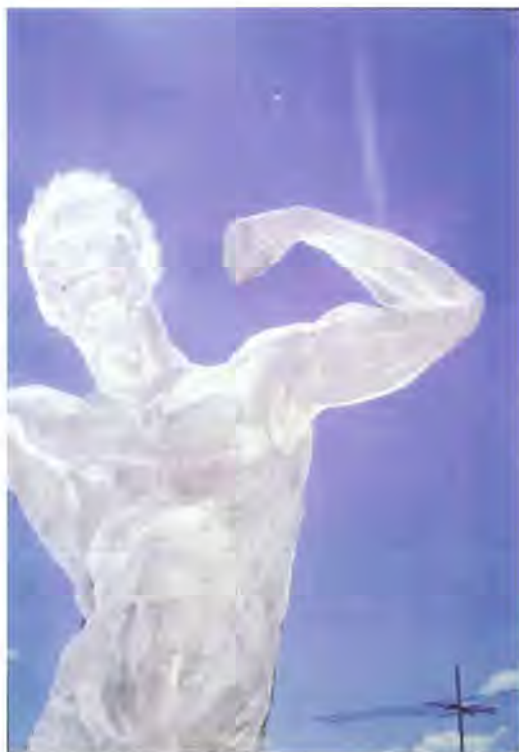
body form has become a marketable commodity and has helped to sell thousands of products to both gays and heterosexuals alike. In particular for my research, I have examined how the male body is exploited for a gay niche market by the media. It is the influence of this constantly repeated image of the idealistic gay male that I have attempted to critique within my practice, questioning how realistic this ideal is for an average gay man. If a gay man's body does not fit within these parameters set by the media where does that leave their identity? In commodity culture, identity has become mediated by advertising and consumerism, and this is no less apparent within gay culture. Media representations allow for the body to be used as a stereotype (muscular, youthful) and archetypal (e.g., - *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*). This demonstrates how acceptance and proper equality for gay rights have still not been attained; rather they have become manipulated by the media to become more easily digestible or to serve as entertainment.



**Figure 7**, Dan Gladden, *Take Away Bags* (2006), graphite on paper.

Critical to my research and development of my practice was a process of elimination and development of ideas over the course of the year. One idea that helped generate my resulting artwork was based on gaining an insight into gay men's ideas of what the ideal body would be and the relation of the gay male body to consumer culture. I was planning to interview a selection of gay men to garner their opinions and then display these thoughts anonymously on plain white take away food bags (see Figure 7, page 21). Due to ethical reasons, this project did not take off, however the take away bags did

continue to be of use to my practice, creating a space for me to play with ideas based on throwaway culture and gay body image. By using my own opinion, one bag had my view written on the outside in the shape of a male. This idea acted as a foundation to the development of my current practice (as can be seen in *Cut Out I*, Figure 9, page 24).



**Figure 8,** Dan Gladden, *White Boys* (Detail), (2006), acrylic on magazine paper

In developing the idea of the gay male body and its relation to consumer culture, I became interested in examining the imagery of bodies of gay men in gay related publications, especially DNA magazine, as previously discussed<sup>16</sup>. Noticing how the bodies seemed to be all the same type, repeated constantly in different poses with different faces in each issue of the magazine, I became interested in creating an art piece which explored the way the male body is of one specific type in this publication. As the bodies that were displayed were all of western appearance, I developed the idea of reinforcing this by making all the bodies white with paint. By painting directly on to the surface of the magazine images, I am attempting to expose the bland repetition of similar bodies that I have found prevalent in gay related media. *White Boys* (see Figure 8, page 22) is a series that is displayed as a way of exposing what is contained within the pages of a magazine. The images leave the models without faces, making them just a silhouette, lacking personality or substance. All the bodies have become the same,

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 2 discussion of DNA magazine and its relation to commodity culture.



repeated over and over, becoming emblematic of the repetition of sameness within popular media. Media representations of gay men work against what queer theory and gay rights have lobbied for, that is, social change and understanding, and the gay male body has now become a mediated commodity product. This is even evident in John Howard's current stance to acknowledge gay couples but not award equal marriage rights as heterosexuals. The gay body is not awarded equal status to a heterosexual.

As my practice has progressed, I have had one art form that has reoccurred several times in differing states, such as exhibited at PICA and Skandalous Nightclub (See Figures 5 & 6, pages 19 & 20), and has become extremely relevant to be revisited alongside the research of this project. The resulting artwork from my investigation has emerged as the male body as a cut out (see Figure 9, page 24). These cut outs have been developed in response to the idea I have been researching of the male body as a commodity product which is used to sell, and more importantly, as being used to represent masculinity and sexiness in gay culture. These cut outs are made of masonite board, which is painted with three layers of different coloured paint, the first white, then hot pink and then black. The cut outs are then scratched back using sandpaper to reveal musculature and details of the male body. Importantly however, the face and head is left dark or shadowed out, resulting in only the torso body being visible without any distinctive face or personality. The torso is only included to relate to the exploitation of the body without personality, and the absence of actual sexuality. These cut outs are then displayed on a wall, where the positioning of the work becomes critical. Placed higher than standard convention on the wall, they become taller than the average person, placing this body type into a position of power and dominance reminiscent of official monuments. This positioning also references classical sculpture and the use of the body in advertising. They are slightly larger than life size, to re-enforce this. As a group, they work to comment on the repetition of this particular body type, in both gay media, but also more frequently now in contemporary representations of male body in any media.



**Figure 9**, Dan Gladden, *Cut Outs 1, 2 & 3* (2006),  
Spray paint and acrylic on Masonite.

One of the cut outs have been further developed to include a reference to my own body within the larger form. By positioning myself in the actual work my aim was to explore and demonstrate how I am also a part of, yet critical of, the culture I am analysing, thus being self-reflexive. This image is taken from a photograph of myself emulating a pose similar to those found in gay magazines. The body however, is made unclear and undefined by the fact that it is a silhouette made up entirely of text. The text contains a description of what my ideal body would be, which was developed from my earlier project involving the take away bags (see Figure 7, page 21). The importance of this image is to demonstrate my own level of involvement with body image stereotypes as well as gay culture. My own body is small and insignificant juxtaposed over the cut-out contrasting with the large, bright powerful image of a traditional sexy male body, and therefore does not measure up.

I felt that this was an area which could be developed further, to make it become more apparent, as the image of my own body was lost and completely dwarfed by the cut out it was placed upon. In an attempt to further bring my own body into the work, I created a self-portrait, painted life size and in a quite raw style, with visible brush strokes and garish colours. In the image, my own body is displayed, however it is largely covered in shadows, and the face is downcast, intending to comment on a feeling of inadequacy



when compared and positioned next to the perfectly sculpted male forms of the cut outs. The colours of the work, being predominately green and yellow, also contrast strongly with the bright pinks of the cut-outs. In this piece I have attempted to use my own body as a site to create a discourse relating to an average body compared to a media doctored image of gay male sexiness. By creating these images, I am attempting to allow for a discourse regarding male body imagery and develop a space that may create an avenue for social change, or a greater understanding of the level to which this marketed image infiltrates gay culture. In a similar sense of how Pierre et Gilles work can be viewed, where the male body is so perfected and sculpted that it becomes an unattainable representation (see Figures 3 & 4, pages 15 & 17), my work makes the body seem larger than life and is extremely idealised.

It became very important throughout my research to critique consumerism and the relation of commodity culture to gay culture as well as the gay male body. In order to establish this involvement within my practice, I developed the idea of the 'pink dollar', a term which is used to describe the buying power of the gay community in relation to commodity culture. By making a stencil of a stylised dollar sign, and using pink spray paint, I marked each body (cut-outs and self-portrait) with a dollar sign 'tattoo'<sup>17</sup>. This tattoo is intended to represent the link between the body and commodity, the body becoming a product to be bought and sold and consumed. It was important that all three cut outs plus my own self-portrait were stencilled with this icon, to demonstrate the level to which consumerism infiltrates all levels of body image and culture.

The context of my practice is important, and I find that the works meaning differs when placed in different contexts. Skandalous Nightclub reflected that particular space and culture. When it was placed in PICA it could be read not just in terms of homosexuality, but also in terms of heterosexuality, from both male and female perspectives. The use of the body in advertising is equally as common in heterosexual magazines and consumer culture. Instead of attempting to comment on consumer culture as a whole, I approach it

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<sup>17</sup> Tattoos are used as a form of branding and can also contain to symbolism relating to belonging to a certain cultural group. They are also linked in a contemporary sense to fashion.

from a gay cultural perspective, as this is relevant to my own experience and values. My possible target audience is not exclusively gay<sup>18</sup> however, I understand that it would appeal largely to a gay audience.

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<sup>18</sup> Gay and feminist themes are often linked together, as became evident to me in the beginning of my research with the large amount of gay texts that were based in feminism. Understandably, my work could take on a feminist reading, however I do not feel this to be a critical factor in my practice, as I am talking explicitly about gay men, their bodies and gay culture.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

It can be seen that consumer culture infiltrates everyday life in a myriad of ways, practically touching every aspect of day-to-day existence. Western culture is informed by capitalist values, and spending money in order to survive has become a necessary part of life. Within this system, the human body itself has become a marketable and profitable commodity. Gay culture, as examined, is no less infiltrated, and has become manipulated and informed by media images of the gay male body as to what is supposedly sexy and desirable. The media plays a large part in informing gay culture, and by examining sources such as DNA Magazine and gay themed television shows such as *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*, the social position of gay men and their bodies becomes clear. The role of the gay male body has become a marketable stereotyped commodity, selling products and entertaining audiences. Images of the male body aimed at gay men can become problematic for gay men who do not fit within the parameters of the so-called 'ideal' body - muscular, attractive and western looking. Achieving acceptance within a community, such as the gay community, is important in terms of re-enforcing a positive identity, however by challenging set ideals, liberation or social change may occur regarding rigid boundaries of body image.

By examining the history of gay culture, as well as some of the politics surrounding homosexuality, an understanding of the development and evolution of a gay identity as being an essential part of being has become apparent. Movements throughout history have attempted to achieve equality and acceptance for gays and lesbians both around the world and within Australia specifically. The Queer movement was one such voice, which aimed to deconstruct rigid boundaries of what a gay identity was, and also bring about social change by re-examining categorised identity and sexuality. While some inroads have been made, it is apparent however, that equality has still not fully been achieved within Australian culture. Social change seems necessary in re-constructing equality and acceptance for gay men and women. Gay identity is linked with the body, and the influence of commodity culture and consumerism becomes clear with acceptable images of gay men's bodies being of a certain ideal. One space where it

became clear that challenging the role of the gay male body could be possible is within gay art, where it can be used as both a site of protest and transformation.

By examining gay artists such as Pierre et Gilles and Mathew Stradling, I have positioned my own practice in terms of relevance to gay culture and consumerism. The works of Pierre et Gilles can be seen as working both for and against set stereotypical ideals of a gay male body, with their imagery reinforcing set ideals. However, the use of extravagance within the work can serve as a comment on the unrealistic cultural ideals that have been formed regarding gay men and their bodies. My own practice is an attempt to further highlight the issue of consumer culture framing the gay male body. By creating art which questions the role of the gay male body, I am attempting to create an avenue for discourse regarding the positioning of the body within both consumer culture and gay culture. The form of the male body as a cut out, marked by a dollar sign is an attempt to critique the gay male body as a marketable commodity rather than as a site for transformation and social change.

My practice is strongly linked to my theory and research. I find it important to understand more fully the ideas relating to culture and Queer theory to help substantiate my work. In turn, through my research I aim to question and critique my own work and explore how my own identity is formed through both gay culture and popular imagery of male body. My own identity has become a large contributing factor in both research and practice, as it is informed by my own sexuality and cultural influences. By utilising this, and positioning myself within the artwork, I am attempting to acknowledge and critique my own level of involvement within both gay and commodity culture. By exposing the body as a commodity with a price value, I am attempting to link consumer culture and gay culture and how they frame identity. Questioning my own position leads to questioning the implications of these cultures on the gay male body. Due to consumer culture, particularly media and advertising, infiltrating every area of life, it would seem there is little space left for social change and protest to occur. However, by manipulating body representations, and by not conforming to rigid ideals disseminated and perpetuated by the media, a space may be made for social change.

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