

Contemporary media is blatantly sexist. This sculptural installation explores the negative portrayal of women in mainstream media.

This work seeks to understand the way media manipulates social constructs about gender. By being literally entangled in twisted elements of culture and media, the viewer realizes the dangers of portraying women as sexualized objects.

How did we get here? Are these *my* ideas about women or are they forced upon me?

Isabelle

## **The portrayal of women in the media**

Isabelle



Every woman was once a girl who had wide eyes to the world. Every woman has been young and impressionable and has carefully listened to everyone's dialogues and. Not all women have experienced what it means to be a girl in this present generation. This generation has been exposed to different portrayals of women in the media. When girls see images of supermodels on Instagram and in print ads, they see society's expectations of them -- women must be more beautiful, cool, sexy, strong, or weak than they already are. Girls can't ignore these images; they are bombarded daily.

Alice Walker, an American writer and activist, once said, "The most common way that people give up their power is by thinking they do not have any." In our current society, the media influences most aspects of life and strongly impacts the way that we see the world. Over 1 billion people use the internet every day and the average American teenager spends about a third of each day watching television, listening to music, and reading magazines. The media has created a platform for being able to send messages to our modern civilization, whether that message is in advertising, news, television, or movies. However, the darker side of the media is often overlooked. From early on in their childhood, the media teaches girls and women that their appearance is the most important thing about them and that, no matter their achievements or intelligence, a woman's value somehow still depends on how she looks. The media is also limiting and derogatory towards some of the country's most powerful women; this puts into question, "Does the media take any woman in America seriously?" The media's portrayal of women sends a negative message to them about who they are and what their place is in the world.

One of the most prominent issues with the media's representation of women is the unrealistic beauty standard that it promotes. One strategy in advertising is provoking and inducing anxiety and insecurity, in hopes that the viewer will doubt herself and purchase the product or service. Advertising induces anxiety surrounding status and power and tells women that they are not beautiful or smart enough; this leads to questions about self-worth. Magazines often heavily retouch the photographs of models, which is what feeds into the unachievable ideals that are set for women and makes them judge themselves more. It also causes others, particularly men and boys, to judge them more harshly too. This creates the idea of an unattainable "perfect woman" that makes women think poorly of their appearance, when in reality, they are comparing themselves to a fantastical creature created predominantly by computers. Women between the ages of eight and twenty are more vulnerable to influence because the brain does not fully develop until the mid-twenties. Therefore, young girls are the most affected by these unattainable standards.

Throughout history, the image of the "ideal body type" has evolved quite a lot, whether it is through a Peter Paul Rubens painting or the cover of a Vogue magazine. The media preaches that in order to be "beautiful," women must conform to current socially constructed standards. One example of this is from the 1890s to the 1910s; the body image archetype was called "the Gibson Girl," a term originating from the drawings by graphic artist Charles Dana Gibson. A "Gibson Girl" was a woman with a thin waist, large bosom, rounded shoulders, and smooth neck who was fragile as well as voluptuous. During this time period, women traditionally wore corsets in order to make their waists smaller. After this, the 1940s and 1950s ushered in the ideal of the "curvy pin-up girl." Popularized by Marilyn Monroe, pin-up girls were glamorous models or actresses whose photos were mass-produced and meant to be "pinned up" on a wall. Photographs of these women were turned into glorified illustrations, created mostly by male artists, that would accentuate the features of a "real woman" to the point that the figure was

unrealistic and unachievable, similar to photo retouching in modern society. Today, magazines have countless articles about weight loss, hair care, and makeup, but back in the 1950s articles had titles like “Men Wouldn’t Look at Me When I was Skinny” and “Skinny Girls are NOT Glamour Girls.” During the 1960s, the psychedelic rock star, scrawny, hypersexualized look for men was popularized and, along with that, came a new rail-thin and fashionable female form popularized by fashion icons like Twiggy and Audrey Hepburn. Following this era was the “Heroin-Chic Waif” of the 1990s when “the grunge style” became popular. A wispy, slender, drugged look was made popular by models like Kate Moss, who once said “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.” In every era we see a different ideal body type in every form of media, because beauty, or society’s perception of it, is what sells.

If women are solely focused on appearance and fitting into the societal mold, they begin to form the belief that a woman’s value lies in her looks over all else. This allows men to objectify women and women to objectify themselves. This damages female leadership because women who self objectify have lower political efficacy, which is the idea that your voice matters in politics and that you can bring about change in politics.

Women currently make up 51% of U.S. population but make up only 20% of Congress; to date, only 39 women have ever served as governors in the United States. Additionally, 67 other countries have had a female president or prime minister, while the U.S. has had none. Cuba, China, Iraq, and Afghanistan all have more women in government than the U.S. It is ironic how America likes to think of itself as one of the most revolutionary, progressive and modern countries, but it disempowers women to the point that many feel it is not her place to be in a political position. Male leadership cannot accurately represent the female community and fight for women’s rights without women because they have no personal experience fighting gender inequality. Marian Wright Edelman, an American children’s activist said that, “You can’t be what you can’t see.” Females working in formerly male-dominated careers and positions of power are extremely important. If women are not in positions of power, young girls do not see these positions or career paths as feasible for themselves. The media does not only choose how female politicians are portrayed, but they have the power to decide if they will be spoken about at all. In John Boehner’s first four weeks as Speaker of the House, he was on the cover of five national weekly magazines, but during Nancy Pelosi’s four years as Speaker of the House she had not been featured on a single one.

Judging women running for political offices on their appearances rather than their insight on current issues disempowers them. On KSFO’s “The Lee Rodgers Show,” Lee Rodgers said, “Look at these ugly skanks who make up the female leadership of the Democratic Party.” On KTLK’s “Chris Baker Show,” Chris Baker said, “Nancy Pelosi, that— Hey lady get another facelift, Lady. Another reason why it’s very rare to find a woman worthy of serving in political office.” Sarah Palin differs from other female politicians in that she isn’t a feminist and displays a much more classically feminine demeanor than people like Hillary Clinton or Elizabeth Warren. The media took advantage of this when she ran as McCain’s vice presidential candidate. On “Hardball” with Chris Matthews, Matthews said, “She’s irresistibly cute, let’s put it that way, in the way she presents herself, obviously, she’s attractive and all that.” On the other hand, female politicians like Hillary Clinton who are very strong-willed, powerful, and work-oriented are labeled by the media as “cold,” “hard,” and “emotionless.” On “the Glenn Beck Radio show,” Beck refers to Clinton as “a stereotypical bitch.” Powerful women of color in political positions often have racist and sexist remarks made towards them. On the “Rush Limbaugh Show,” Rush Limbaugh stated, “I think I’m going to send Sotomayor and her club a

bunch of vacuum cleaners to help them clean up after their meetings.” Fox News did a segment before the 2008 inauguration on what Michelle Obama can expect from the media and said, “Cynthia McKinney, the former congresswoman from Georgia, was another angry Black woman.”

Women are objectified, sexualized, and condescended on a regular basis in the news. Katie Couric made history in 2006 by becoming the first woman to anchor CBS Evening News alone. She received more questions and comments about her appearance than her achievements, her intelligence, or the fact that she was in an important position. Rachel Maddow, a female newscaster on MSNBC, is the first openly gay anchor to host a major prime-time news program in the United States. From when she started to present day, she receives extensive amounts of hate mail pertaining to her gender and sexuality, rather than the fact that she is an accomplished television host, political commentator, and author.

The more power that women gain, the stronger the backlash is against them. Media shows women trying to achieve power as a bad thing, as if it is not their place. Articles paint women as very emotional and irrational, and therefore, they cannot handle crisis and should not be in positions of leadership or power. Women are often shamed for not staying home with their kids and deciding to have professional careers instead. Women are scrutinized in tabloids and gossip columns. More often than not, news outlets seem to care about a female celebrity’s current weight, appearance, or relationship than who they are as a person and the importance of the work that they do. Gossip sells. The fact that we live in a society where we find whether a female celebrity is “pregnant or just eating too much” more intriguing than the charity work she is doing, is a huge issue.

The portrayal of women on television and in movies is extremely influential to our society and plays a huge part in how women are treated and appraised in real life. According to the documentary, *Miss Representation*, “The average American teenager spends about nine hours a day on television and movies,” making them susceptible to these influences. Female roles for movies and tv hold the same recurring stereotypes; there are few complex or powerful female characters. In the 20s, 30s, and 40s there were many more multidimensional female characters, but now they are “put in boxes” or confined to one stereotypical personality. Men are not willing to put themselves in a woman’s skin so they often write characters that only embody a restricting archetype. In fact, only 16% of protagonists in movies are female. Females are predominantly main characters exclusively in “chick flicks” where she has a “knight in shining armor” and her objective is to get a man, get love, get sex, get married, or to get pregnant. In most of the Disney Princess movies, the Princess has a problem and her Prince swoops in to save the day, showing little girls that they are not able to “save” themselves and need the help of a man. Female leaders in movies are often portrayed as the “bitchy bosses” who only care about work, not family or love, and the objective is to bring her down a notch and turn her from “hard” to “soft.” For example, the movie *10 Things I Hate About You* is a romantic comedy based off of the William Shakespeare play *The Taming of the Shrew*; and the objective is exactly that: to *tame* the “shrew.” The whole movie centers around “softening” the main character, Kat, through the love of a male character. This socializes boys to believe that “being a man” means being powerful and in control, or having dominance over women. A male dominant system values women as child bearers, thus limiting their value to sexual and reproductive activity. “Badass” female characters, commonly in actions films, are objectified and targeted towards the male viewer. The media’s sexualization of women sends the message to young girls that their sexuality is their biggest “power” and “weapon.”

Most female central characters are in their teens, 20s or 30s. Women of that age only make up 39% of the population, but depict 71% of female characters on television. Women who are above 40 make up 47% of the population, but only 26% on television. Women who are middle-aged are considered “old” and told to get modifications like botox to maintain roles. We live in a civilization that values beauty and youth to the point where it is preferable on television to paint the world as if most of the people living in it are youthful and traditionally beautiful, rather than portraying a realistic representation of our diverse society. Another huge issue is how women are portrayed on “reality” television. Women in reality television are depicted as decorative, stupid, gold-digging, bitchy, catty, manipulative, vindictive, and not trustworthy. They are pitted against each other and illustrated as natural enemies. For example, on *The Bachelor*, women are vying for the love of the same man. The show normalizes the concept and encourages women to treat each other poorly over a man in real life. Another example is the show *America’s Next Top Model*, a show where women compete to win a modeling contract, proving herself the “most beautiful”. This establishes a competitive nature between women in real life to be the “prettiest” girl in the room and to criticize themselves because they do not look like another woman who they perceive as more beautiful.

Media wants to tell us our worth. It wants to make us believe that no matter what we are or what we do, we must strive for something more or something different in order to be good enough. The media has created a worldwide base for anything and anyone to display their views, dialogues and communications, and an extremely large part of it is negative. We do not have to allow the media to determine our place in the world; and we sure as hell do not have to let it determine who we are.

## **The Perfect Girl In The Eyes of the Average Asshole**

She is an American textbook beauty  
She has long straight hair  
She looks like a younger version of the girls on barstool sports  
She wears an hermes bracelet  
She plays field hockey or lacrosse or soccer or squash  
Her family makes good money  
Her family belongs to your country club  
Her father says you remind him of himself when he was your age  
You go to the cape with her family  
She goes to nantucket with yours  
She doesn't care about politics  
She knows when to hold her tongue  
She knows when your opinions are more important than hers  
She knows to choose her battles wisely  
She knows her place  
She is always down to hook up  
She doesn't ramble about feminist nonsense  
She doesn't speak up about civil rights issues that much at all  
She knows that she can't go to parties because you're paranoid she'll cheat or god forbid have fun without you  
She's funny, but not too funny  
She's outgoing, but not too outgoing  
She's smart, but not too smart  
She's nice, but not too nice  
She is not particularly weak  
But you have to make sure she is not too strong either  
She's independent when you want her to be  
But she reverts to dependency when her individuality becomes inappropriate  
She does not fight back when you yell  
She accepts your condescending tone and belittling words  
She does not protest when you tear down her worth  
When you strip her of everything that she could be  
When you shape her and mold her to fit your fantasy of a flawless creature  
And finally  
There she stands  
The perfect girl.

## **Miss Magazine America**

She's beauty  
She's grace  
Especially with her retouched face.

Her dress is designer  
Made only from the finest threads of perfection  
Her jewels are the hearts of young girls  
Who question everything because of her presence.

Her elegant walk across the page  
Impresses the shelves at the mini mart  
But makes the audience quiver with fear as they step on the scale  
And she collects their tears to drink after the question round.

The banner across her chest reads "buy me.  
Buy me and cut me out.  
Paste me on your bulletin board and look at me everyday  
Strive to be me, until you are nothing at all."

She is smooth and shiny  
She has no quirks  
Or flaws  
But yet you tell yourself  
That she is real  
And that you will one day win this pageant like she did.

But this pageant, as are most,  
Is corrupt.

Everything about her was molded to please the eye  
But never the heart  
She sits upon a pedestal of unachievable heights  
Yet we still try to jump and climb and reach the top

Everything she is  
Is purely fairy dust  
Creating an illusion of an unattainable goddess  
With long legs  
And cascading hair  
That falls from her dainty collarbone to her round breasts

Try as you may

To rip up her page.  
She will just crawl like a poisonous spider to the next one.  
For she did not just win this pageant  
She wins all of them.  
She will find a new young girls stomach to parasitize  
As long as she exists on the shiny paper she calls home.

Long live Miss Magazine America.