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This book is dedicated to the memory of George Bryce Stretton

University of Cape Town

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THE ENCODED BODY

**Hearing the voice, reading the text, decoding the sign.
The body and meaning in the case of anorexia nervosa.**

Pamela Jayne Stretton

Documentation and commentary on the body of work presented for the degree of
Master of Fine Art at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town.

Faculty of Humanities

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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10 November 1994

"I have to go get weighed tomorrow. I don't even think I have lost any weight, so I don't know why everyone is making such a fuss. I'm still feeling down. I just wish I wouldn't think about my body so much... I can't wait to go to the sea. It's warmer there so I won't be so cold all the time... I'm scared to go home cos I've gotten used to eating hardly anything here, and now that's going to change."

Personal Diary Entry

PREFACE



Inspiration for the body of work produced for this degree stems from a personal battle with the condition anorexia nervosa. I was diagnosed with this condition at the age of fourteen after a case of 'burn out' saw my usually healthy social life, sporting ability and academic performance plummet. In what I believe was a compromising attempt to regain control of my life, I had already begun to focus all my energies into one area of concern: my body. This focus was to become an obsession occupying my thoughts, actions and appearance for the most part of three years.

It is always difficult to pinpoint a specific reason or cause for eating disorders, and my case was no different. No single catastrophic event stands out as being a possible starting point for what followed. At the time, I was fortunate enough to be at a co-ed private boarding school surrounded by high-achievers, ensuring a common presence of peer-pressure. Taking this competitive environment into every aspect of my life, I began setting extremely high standards for myself, and what started out as an ambitious attempt at achievement, developed into a dangerous obsession with my body, and ultimately my mental health.

To this day I struggle to make sense of why I began to question my body's weight, shape and size, but the sense of power and control gained from the careful monitoring of food and exercise seemed like a solution and a gave me a sense of being 'on top of things'.

This notion of strict discipline and control became a central part of my life to the extent that I was eventually described as being 'so in control that I was out of control'. I still apply discipline and control to my life, and have been coined a perfectionist. My MFA practical work is no exception. It focuses on my own body, and is to a large extent autobiographical. Although my body is well and doesn't appear emaciated in any way, the work is perhaps more of a 'retrospective look' at my experience and some of the issues with which I have been left. Control is a central element to the work (in relation to my body), and I have adopted rather tedious, time-consuming methods, which, aside from coming naturally to me and giving an immense sense of satisfaction, I feel also strongly portray the

notion of obsessive neatness so necessary to my discussion of anorexia. Aside from the strong element of control and order in my work, notions of flesh and references to food are also made continuously to highlight the obsessive relationship between the female body and eating disorders.

Until fairly recently, those years of my life have felt 'too close to the bone' to acknowledge, but presently (a couple of mentally and physically healthy years later), I find myself ready to reflect on an experience that has had a profound effect on my life and in shaping the person I am today. Working on this project has been at times challenging and disheartening, but for the most part, satisfying. Art, for me, is the easiest form of expression, and working with my body in this way has led me to discover parts of myself, both physically and emotionally, that I had not seen before. Having studied my body from every angle while gathering information for my artworks, has had me measuring myself, weighing myself, photographing myself, and worst of all, exposing myself. All of these are activities I initially approached with difficulty. I have learnt to feel more comfortable in my own body through this process, partly because I have been able to see my body as other people do, and partly because hours of research on the subject of anorexia has taught me to understand the complicated nature of the condition, and why I may have involved my body in such an ordeal.

INTRODUCTION



Locating an exploration of the female body in an art historical or theoretical context has not been a difficult task as this subject supports a variety of existing writings from various approaches. The project also has its origins firmly rooted in the realm of the 'visual' or visual culture, a phenomenon essential to the discourse of art today.

Helen McDonald, author of *Erotic Ambiguities*, poses the question: is there such a thing as the ideal female body? She believes that even the Old Masters would agree that an ideal is not a thing, but a concept. One could say that in art history, some of the nudes were said to be near-perfect representations of the ideal female form. These works of art, McDonald states, have for centuries, served as interpretations of the ideal. Subsequently, popular culture and the media have replaced these high-art traditions, seducing the masses with a closer link to real bodies (McDonald, 2001: 1).

In terms of nineteenth and twentieth century discourse and theory, the body has been a constant theme. In Rosemary Betterton's book entitled *Looking On*, she talks about the study and analysis of visual images, stressing the 'visual' as the point to note. In terms of defining femininity she suggests that the visual is important, not only because of its significance to images in modern culture, but because of the judgement of a woman's character and status with

regard to her appearance (Betterton, 1987: 2).

According to Marsha Meskimmon, it was science and the medical profession which became important tools in the definitions of womens' bodies during the so-called Enlightenment. This, she believes, brought the female body to the fore as the subject of increased scrutiny and depiction (Meskimmon, 1996: 166-167). Susan Bordo, however, believes that in the late 1960s the re-emergence of the women's movement began to have a continuous link with the politics of the visual image, resulting in the serious debate and analysis of the ways in which women have been (and are) represented across a range of cultural practices (Bordo, 1993: 30). Be it in paintings, pin-ups, news photographs, pornographic material, advertising or fashion images, Betterton notes that it is hardly surprising when taking into consideration the presence of the female image in our modern capitalist culture (Betterton, 1987: 8).

Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw's view is that the 1970s brought about discussion around the ways in which the female body began to conform not only to conventions of feminine behaviour and movement, but also to factors such as beauty, fashion, health and fitness, and the media (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999: 5). Today one sees the focus of debate around womens' bodies broadening all the more. Areas of particular concern have pointed to the power of ideals relating to body shape and size, beauty and youthfulness. Meskimmon, like Betterton, believes that the forces which have defined women in terms of these ideals have operated through the visual (Meskimmon, 1996: 167).

Where contemporary culture provides the environment in which norms and ideals are constructed, visual culture usually takes the form of the actual messages these ideals strive to project. Meskimmon characterises the extensive display of beautiful, thin bodies as if they were a norm, as the pressure of social regulation through visual representation (Meskimmon, 1996: 168). Bearing this in mind, the visual aspect of culture plays a crucial role in the formation of womens' perceptions of their bodies, and is therefore important to the focus of this work.

Since this project is ultimately rooted in the realm of fine art and the discourse thereof, much of this dissertation will explore visual representations of women and womens' bodies. Discussions on the changing shape of the female body and the ideals these images strive to portray are some of the areas that will be addressed.

This dissertation is divided into three main sections, all with one major point of focus: the female body. The first section deals with the female body in a theoretical context, as well as looking at notions of beauty. Visual representations of the female body such as paintings and fashion photographs, will be comparatively explored from the nineteenth century through to the present. Artists working with the subject of the female body in relation to feminine beauty ideals and eating disorders will be looked at. Artists working with their own bodies and experiences will rank amongst these. The second section discusses the female body in relation to eating disorders and anorexia, putting forward some of the complex narratives attached to this

condition and noting the role of culture and modern living therein. The third section focuses on an examination of the body in terms of practical artworks, discussing important aspects of the work from content to production.

The practical work explores a print-inspired medium that operates visually through a system of signs which encode the body. Since the psychological narratives around anorexia are complex, the body becomes a major area of concern, and it is this body that communicates and produces meanings, putting forward a powerful message. The practical work focuses on these elements of anorexia; on the body as a medium which, in a sense, 'speaks' for the person inhabiting that body.

THE FEMALE BODY: CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND



Beauty and the Ideal

What is the idea of beauty that has dominated the Twentieth Century? At bottom we have done nothing else in this cavalcade through the history of Beauty, but pose ourselves similar questions about ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the early or late Nineteenth Century... (Umberto Eco, 2004: 413)

'Beautiful', 'perfect', 'superb', are some of the many adjectives used to describe something that one likes or admires. In terms of everyday experience, what one likes is also often something one would like to have for oneself (Eco, 2004: 9). From a young age, girls are led to believe that to be beautiful is an important part of being a woman. And so begins an on-going variety of procedures and regimes involving the body, in search of such 'beauty' and perfection.

Elaine Scarry, in *On Beauty and Being Just*, believes that responses to beauty are important events, and are significant in society and for the individual. She argues that beauty has a direct appeal to the senses and so has the possibility to transfix one. The core of Scarry's discussion is that beauty causes the individual to turn away from self-preoccupation and focus attention onto others. This, she believes, points ultimately to fairness (Scarry, 1999: 1).

Umberto Eco, in his book *On Beauty*, focuses on the

history of art as well as that of aesthetics when defining ideas of beauty. Eco finds that when looking at the history of beauty, it is largely linked to works of art. He believes this is so because it was artists, novelists and poets who put down their ideas as examples of what was beautiful to them (Eco, 2004: 10). From an historical point of view then, artworks provide an appropriate visual source from which to begin a study of beauty. However, Eco points out that as one focuses on more modern times, imagery from popular culture, with no artistic purpose at all, is given equal value when considering beauty ideals of specific times. He believes that the ideal in feminine representation today has been diffused by the notion of mass-media, and therefore he sees this field as important when considering present notions of beauty and the ideal (Eco, 2004: 418).

Eco stresses in his argument that beauty has never stayed the same. For him, it has taken on different aspects according to different time periods and places. This difference is highlighted by Eco as a point of interest (Eco, 1994: 14), and one which has inspired much of the work discussed in this paper. Rita Freedman believes too, that beauty norms are in constant flux. She states that:

Beauty has an illusionary function that divides those who have it from those who don't. If the majority succeed in transforming themselves into the ideal, then the standard must change, for the value of beauty as an ideal depends on its remaining extraordinary. Thus the odds are fixed so that only a few can win. (Freedman, 1986: 6)

Freedman suggests that beauty is an interactive process, attaining as much from the perceiver as from the one being perceived (Freedman, 1986: 5). Scarry states that contemporary views on the notion of staring or gazing often draw attention to the implications suffered by the person being looked at. She sees this as odd, for like Freedman, she sees the perceiver as equally, if not more vulnerable than the person being perceived (Scarry, 1999: 73-75).

Since 'beauty' is an expression given to many things, one needs to be specific about the context of the term. The physical beauty of the female body is what will be explored in this dissertation, focussing on contemporary notions of beauty and its link with eating disorders. Drawing from historical and contemporary art, as well as popular culture in terms of visual imagery, the sociological and psychological aspects of beauty ideals and the female body today will be touched on. The different and ever-changing aspects of beauty put forward by Eco and Freedman, as well as the notion of self-perception, and the woman's constant strive for beauty are also central elements to the discussion.

Traditional Fine Art Historical Context

In terms of medium, when looking at representations of the female body in art history, the first images came in the form of sculptures, followed for much of the nineteenth century by paintings. The twentieth century brought to the fore the medium of photography, which became the dominant medium of representation in terms of the female ideal¹. Today, photography still claims that position and is aided further by digital

media. Aside from works of art, there is the motion picture industry, promoting beauty ideals through movie stars and supermodels on television, the big screen and in print media. Looking at some of the earlier representations of the female form through the history of art provides an interesting standpoint from which to begin a comparative study of the female body through time, noting not only mediums and forms of representation, but changes in anatomical proportions, dress and pose.



Figure 1. Artist Unknown. 2nd Century BC. *Venus de Milo* (Arscott & Scott, 2000: 2).

From the time the female body emerged as a central theme in academic art, Venus became the exemplary subject where the nude was the genre for the creation of the ideal.

¹ In the context of this paper the 'female ideal' refers to the visual representation of a woman bearing the ultimate characteristics considered ideal in terms of beauty with regard to specific cultures and time periods.

Venus was meant to be an idealised figure, thus becoming the ultimate challenge to artists searching to portray this ideal. Venus, associated with beauty, and with a presence in art, can only trigger a connection to the domain of the aesthetic. Venus invites us to see art itself as synonymous with the body of the goddess, seductive in colour, texture, contours and surface, evoking feelings of pleasure and excitement (Arscott & Scott, 2000: 5).

The Venus de Milo (2nd century B.C) (fig. 1), is described as symbolising all that is ideal and sublime in art, with the attributes necessary for the solemn beauty of a goddess: grand forms, noble bearing, and a calm and impassive expression (Arscott & Scott, 2000: 10).



Figure 2. Sandro Botticelli. Mid 1480s. *The Birth of Venus* (Legoux, 1977: 26).

Similarly, Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (mid-1480s) (fig. 2) was not intended as an erotic figure, but rather as a symbol or an image of beauty, evoking men's most noble thoughts. In this work, Botticelli's

evocations of feminine grace and beauty represent the classical ideal of the Italian Renaissance: soft, rounded figure, small breasts, slightly accentuated stomach, strong neck and small head (Legoux, 1977: 90). This classical ideal can be seen too in the paintings of Titian. His *Venus of Urbino* (1538) (fig. 3), voluptuous, aware and aloof, portrays all these qualities (Hamlyn, 1968: 58-60). Ruben's work *The Three Graces* (1638-40) (fig. 4), Rembrandt's *Danae* (1636) (fig. 5), and Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot* (1866) (fig. 6), are some of the many paintings exploring the notion of ideal feminine beauty in terms of the traditional classical nude. However, it is perhaps Manet's work *Olympia* (1862-3) (fig. 7) that first began to challenge this concept. This work received a reaction of unprecedented hostility, becoming a notorious symbol of modernity (Flemming & Honour, 1976: 49).

In terms of discourse on the female nude, Manet's *Olympia* is said to be a modern equivalent, or transposition of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. When comparing the two, it is the nude figure itself in *Olympia* which proves to be the modern counterpart to *Venus*, begging a different kind of homage in a society of different values. Where Titian's *Venus* shows a natural sensuality, Manet's *Olympia* lacks any warmth. Where *Venus* reclines, relaxed and at ease with her nudity, *Olympia* sits stiffly upright, tense and self-conscious. *Venus'* complete nudity is contrasted with that of *Olympia's*, where the richness of her accessories seems to enhance her nakedness all the more. Unlike *Venus'* softly rounded figure, *Olympia's* body is thin and bony. This fact perhaps also reflects the work's modern taste, and sheds light on the vogue for slenderness that



Figure 3. Vecellio Tiziano (Titian). 1538. *Venus of Urbino* (Guibert Ferrara, 2002: 13).



Figure 5. Rembrandt Harmensz Van Rijn. 1636. *Danae* (Guibert Ferrara, 2002: 20).



Figure 4. Peter Paul Rubens. 1638-40. *The Three Graces* (Baudouin, 1977: 361).



Figure 6. Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet, 1866. *Woman with a Parrot* (Guibert Ferrara, 2002: 33).

came about in the 1860s (Flemming & Honour, 1976: 50-57).



Figure 7. Edouard Manet. 1863. *Olympia* (Guibert Ferrara, 2002: 27).

According to Gill Saunders, the controversy around Manet's *Olympia* lies in her unashamed awareness of the spectator's desire. She suggests that it is *Olympia's* bold look and alert pose which distinguishes her from a thousand other nudes, and her gaze which has been characterized by critics of the time as immodest. Saunders compares the *Olympia* to the stereotype embodied in images of naked women in our culture today, where sexuality is passive and narcissistic, and nudity is linked with availability. Referring to advertising images, which often associate a product with a naked or provocative woman, Saunders implies that both are desirable and available (Saunders, 1989: 25).

Linda Nochlin agrees that Manet's *Olympia* jolted the notion of the nude as elevated and timeless, doing so by justifying its subject matter as the naked prostitute

(Nochlin, 1999: 220). John Berger believes that the *Olympia* replaces the traditional ideal with the realism of the prostitute, posing the prostitute as the quintessential woman of early twentieth century painting, which was later to be seen in the work of artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, Rouault and the German expressionists. Berger suggests that today, the attitudes and values which informed that tradition are represented through a wide range of media, such as advertising, journalism and film (Berger, 1972: 63).

Nochlin points out another painting which has shed light on the critical politics of the female body in the late nineteenth century. Seurat, in his work *Poseuses* (1886-88) (fig. 8), represents his women as off-duty models. These nudes are not represented as ideal and timeless nor are they linked to the classical notion of nature. Rather he intends for these women to be seen as contemporary working women, who are paid for their posing. They are professionals, their thin, plain bodies stripped for work.



Figure 8. Georges Seurat. 1886-88. *Poseuses* (Herbert, 1991: 191).

Nochlin notes too, the feminine artifices everywhere in the painting, placing the work in the contemporary world of fashion and commodities. For Nochlin, the influence of the modernity of photography can be seen in this work, although the medium was relatively new at the time. She suggests that although Seurat's *Poseuses* is not consciously feminist, it may question this notion by way of its unhistorical approach (Nochlin, 1999: 217-37).

Seurat's *Poseuses*, although not traditionally regarded as a work representing the 'ideal', is however rooted in this subject, and clearly puts forward questions in terms of the representation of the female body. An interesting point to note about the painting is that it suggests the changing role of women. It shows women as working professionals, independent and earning their own money, giving them choices and opportunities. This work sheds light not only on the fashion world of today (and its models), but on women in general, and their attitudes towards their bodies. It has become clear too, that Manet's *Olympia*, with her slim body, bold gaze and rich array of accessories, points to the goddesses appearing in the glossy magazines of today, which have come to represent contemporary notions of the ideal female body.

Where the *Venus de Milo* represented the ideal of the time; beauty, without a visible allusion to female sexuality or productivity, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* represented the classical ideal of the Renaissance; passive, rounded and sensual. Manet's *Olympia* became a symbol of modernity, her slim body questioning previous notions of feminine

beauty and sexuality. From the twentieth century onwards, fashion models and film stars have come to represent contemporary ideals; their adolescent bodies today, representing notions of success, power and sexual desirability. The changing role of women in society seems to run parallel with the changing shape of their bodies. And, as one can see clearly in the history of representations of women's bodies, the general trend is of an ever-shrinking female form. Sarah Duguid feels too that the notion of thinness, often associated with fashion and film star celebrities, has come to connote self-control and success, and believes that the reason many women feel the need to slim down is because of the message a sleek body sends out (Duguid, 2003: 69).

Women and Consumer Society

Women, today, are often associated with consumerism, not only with regard to the appearance of feminine ideals in the media, or to the use of women in selling products, but also to the notion of the woman herself as the consumer. Josephine King and Mary Stott believe that the many spheres of a woman's life, such as house-keeping, family structure, cooking skills, shopping patterns, eating habits and social attitudes, all contribute to her immense potential as a major buyer in society (King & Stott, 1977: 37).

Susie Orbach talks about capitalism as 'consumer society'. She believes that this phenomenon affects consciousness and shapes our sense of ourselves, our desires, our priorities and our aspirations and values. Inanimate things become signs for how to perceive

people. They become identity badges which convey information about gender, class and style (Orbach, 1993: 13). It is no wonder then, that advertising plays an important role in both shaping and reflecting culture. Commercials and advertisements usually show recognizable and socially acceptable situations, although they also try to sway public opinion towards new products and services. The role-appropriate behaviour learnt by men and women is reinforced by the media, especially in terms of femininity. Women are constantly reminded to remain attractive and young forever (Cross, 1996: 91). Helen McDonald believes that 'the ideal female body' these days has become a marketing strategy. Capitalism has contributed to the promotion of thinness, emphasising the fit, slim body as the key to cultural and social power (McDonald, 2001: 2).

It is factors such as these which place women at the top of the consumer market. For Mady Schutzman, the commercial brand-naming of the female body strips off layers of identity, consuming as it labels. She believes that the consumption of products may be a woman's way of putting back what has been stripped away. Ironically though, these layers wear out and become obsolete, relaying the very notion that will attract yet more consumptive gazes (Schutzman, 1999: 54-55). Capitalism makes sure that this 'ideal' women strive towards with all their purchasing power, is difficult, obscure and ever-changing, ensuring an ongoing cycle (McDonald, 2001: 2). Rebecca Schneider suggests that it is precisely this inaccessibility of commodities or ideals which sums up the desire for access, and that is what propels the purchase of the commodity in ques-

tion. In acquiring the object, one is convinced with the assurance that one can never fully possess that which one has acquired (Schneider, 1997: 93). Peggy Phelan believes that "impossibility maintains, rather than cancels the desire for it" (Phelan, 1993: 14) She elaborates that the desire for the real is always marked by loss, but it is this loss that fuels the desire. For Schutzman, woman represents both loss and acquisition. She represents something that is forever alterable, but still lives on. These images encode notions of exchange until the difference between commodities and women narrow and become undistinguishable. Images of women consume womens' reality (Schutzman, 1999: 58).

The inaccessibility and loss referred to by Schneider and Phelan are clearly born out in light of the above statement, in that the 'ideal' or 'real' (as Phelan puts it) that women strive for, is in fact not real.

Advertisements have successfully convinced women to aspire to a concept that very often doesn't exist, yet the subtlety with which this is done ensures their co-operation and worse still, has them coming back for more.

In the context of the prevalence of eating disorders today, Susan Bordo believes that the fluctuation of consumerism is reflected in the binge-purge motif. She believes that females binge on false promises, denying their bodies health, growing out of shape and out of order (Bordo, 1990: 49-50). Schutzman adds that on the other hand society binges on the female body. She believes that the bulimic response of women is perhaps a reflection of the ambivalent position of the female body (Schutzman, 1999: 151). Susan Sontag in

Women, states that any large-scale picturing of women is linked to an ongoing story of the way in which women are represented, and the way in which they are invited to perceive themselves (Sontag, 1999: 20). Similarly, John Berger believes that photographic images are linked to women's images of themselves. Women experience themselves as observers, as under scrutiny (Berger, 1972: 64). In terms of a feminist cultural point of view in relation to this, criticism has arisen that anorexia is a form of 'reading disorder' in terms of the way in which women have come to perceive media images. Abigail Bray, in *The Anorexic Body: Reading Disorders*, points out how metaphors of consumption have been attached to the anorexic body. She states that "An excessive consumption of media images...activates a pathological fear of...consumption...Over-reading produces under eating" (Bray, 1996: 415).

Naomi Wolf agrees with this notion stating that:

Men may be exposed to fashion models, which they see, but do not adopt as role models. Women on the other hand, react very strongly to images, scraps of paper. Women treat mannequins as if they are paradigms. (Wolf, 1990: 59-62)

Fashion Photography

While representations of the female body remain a common theme across a wide range of art forms, it is perhaps the development of fashion photography as a

genre in the 1920s that replaced the painted Venus with the supermodel. The fashion imagery of the twentieth century, with its position in the media and consumer society, and the ability to reach the masses, began to influence beauty and bodily ideals in feminine representation.

In terms of fashion, Elizabeth Wilson believes that in society, dress and the body together create a given desired effect. Referring to an exhibition of Pierre Cardin fashion, Wilson explains that without the body the clothes seemed abstract and uncanny. She suggests that this clearly demonstrates the importance of the body in fashion, supporting the notion that the realm of fashion plays an important role when considering the body in cultural studies (Wilson, 1992: 9-15).

According to Rosetta Brooks, photographers have traditionally been inclined to regard the 'captured' moment as a more powerful point in photography, where the 'real' world reproduces itself. This has been considered more creative than the mass-produced processes involved with associating an image with a commodity. Brooks believes that fashion and advertising photography should be seen in light of Walter Benjamin's theory of the 1940s; as the process of mechanical reproduction in terms of the 'contrived' image (Brooks, 1992: 17). According to Sontag, "fashion photography is based on the fact that something can be more beautiful in a photograph than in real life" (Sontag, 1977: 104). For Mady Schutzman, a photographic image claims to provide real information about something, but then it pushes that realness into a distortion that becomes surreal (Schutzman, 1999: 70).

In this regard, perhaps much of the success and power of today's representations should give credit to technology. Techniques such as airbrushing, photo re-touching and image manipulation have given women the sense that scrutiny has become super-human. The eye of the camera has developed a judgement that has overtaken and outdone the imperfect human eye. It has magnified the flaws people cannot detect. According to Naomi Wolf, "perfection now has to survive the microscope" (Wolf, 1990: 109). One of the concepts of what Schutzman calls a 'crisis of representation', is that technologies of the industry of reproduction are capable of so much more than mere light, exposure and framing manipulations, making transformations radical and rendering notions of the real (already challenged by the mass media) even more questionable. She states that:

Advertising images of women abound with twins...echoes and reflection that remind us we are never alone...forever sharing our consciousness with visions of our bodies transmuted into something both ideal and unrealisable... photographic representation particularly promotes the fraudulent fact.
(Schutzman, 1999: 173)

In mass-produced fashion photography the female body itself undergoes a technological transformation. In these images, the female body is codified by doubling, or multiplying. She becomes more than herself, not herself, reproducible, a copy, replaceable and excessive (Schutzman, 1999: 60). According to Roland Barthes, it is when photography uses the female body as its object, that reality becomes abstracted. The female body repre-

sents something other than herself (Barthes, 1987: 91). In terms of this 'other' Barthes refers to, an interesting notion to consider is the obscure message the reader receives, when the focus on the size and shape of a woman's body dominates the image and becomes more obvious than the original intent of promoting a product. Wendy Chapkis puts forward a valid point, suggesting the metaphor of fashion photographs to be apt in that they are totally static. She refers to these images as "still lives of unchanging perfection" where the female body is actually a "constantly changing landscape" (Chapkis, 1986: 16-17). Nicholas Mirzoeff in *Bodyscape*, believes that it is the tension between the imperfection of the body itself, and the idealized body in representation, and the uneasiness resulting from this awareness, that has motivated art practice and the criticism of representations of the body (Mirzoeff, 1995: 19). This notion bears truth to the fact that representations of women for the most part, have been just that; representations and not the real thing, and the ideals women strive towards are very often not real, or at least not physically normal and healthy.

This warped idea of the ideal has led to discussions of body shape in relation to fashion as being dominated by moralistic concerns in terms of health, especially with regard to the prevalence of eating disorders today. For it is precisely this body that one tries hardest to alter. Wilson questions the popular view that the use of young, pre-pubescent models has 'caused' anorexia nervosa (Wilson, 1992: 17). Instead she looks to Michel Foucault's notion of the 'disciplined body', which I will refer to in more detail in the context of obsession and control, which are common characteristics of anorexic behaviour.

For the most part, fashion photographs bombard the senses through many forms of print and visual media, but according to Dennis Freedman, curator of *Blink*, editorial fashion photography has changed radically in the last couple of years. He notes that many contemporary artists have appropriated fashion iconography in their work, while fashion photographers on the other hand have increasingly become part of the art world, proving just how much these two fields have influenced each other (Freedman in Phaidon, 2002: 412). With the female body proving an ever topical subject in the field of fine art, it is no wonder that fashion images have increasingly become noticed in this regard. The focus on eating disorders also points to these images, despite questions surrounding the causes of these conditions, and is therefore an important source of feminine imagery to pay some attention to.



Figure 9. Helmut Newton. 1974. *Portrait of Xavier Moreau and his Girlfriend* (Newton & Lagerveld, 1989: 42).



Figure 10. Guy Bourdin. 1981. *French VOGUE (September)* (Cotton & Verthime, 2003: 81).

Dealing with the manipulation of stereotypes, the work of fashion photographers Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin (figs. 9 and 10) emphasise the artificiality of the image and making explicit features that are usually covered up or edited out in other fashion photographs. They challenge readers to accept the falsity of their images as their defining characteristic (Brooks, 1992: 19-20).

Amongst many artists using elements of fashion, beauty and the body as part of their art making are Vanessa Beecroft and Cindy Sherman. Beecroft, in her performance work, is drawn to fashion for its ephemerality and photographic quality. In addition, the artist personally suffered from an eating disorder. She feels that the skinny girls displayed in much of her works, serve as visual references to an obsession with food (fig. 11). Beecroft's first work focuses on her personal experience. It was entitled *Despair* (1993), and was a so-called book of food, containing lists of the food she ate day by day (Beccaria, 2003: 16-20). Sherman, well-



Figure 11. Vanessa Beecroft. 2001. *VB35, 377*.
MS (Museo d' Arte Contemporanea, 2003: 220).



Figure 12. Cindy Sherman. 1990. *Untitled*
(Commissioned portrait of *Cosmopolitan* cover girl)
(Schutzman, 1999: 170).



Figure 13. Daniele Buetti. 1996-98.

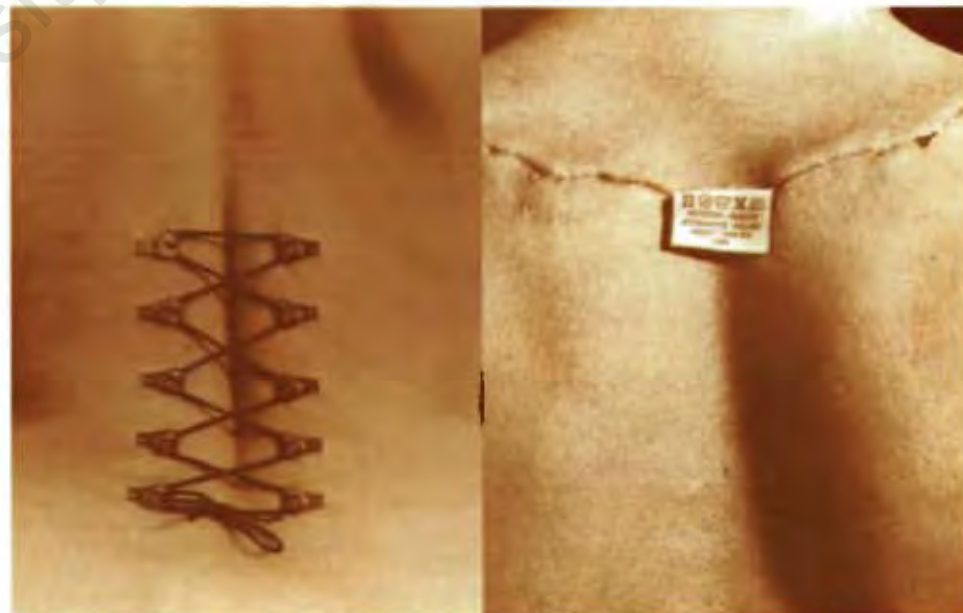


Figure 14. Fran Herbello. 2000. *In Our Own Likeness (detail)* (Phaidon, 2002: 122).

known for her work dealing with multiple permutations of the self, focuses on the ugly and obscene sides of wealth and beauty in her *Self-portrait Cover Girl* (1990) (fig. 12) commissioned by *Seven Days* magazine (Schutzman, 1999: 170). In a work entitled *Good Fellows* (1996-8) (fig. 13), Daniele Buetti uses photographic imagery taken from fashion magazines. Beautiful people are seen wearing brand names, seemingly etched into their skin. Buetti achieves this look by scratching the words onto the reverse side of the page. In a sense, he brands people like cattle, suggesting their similarity to commodities (Ewing, 2000: 216). Similarly, the photographer Fran Herbello's work *In Our Own Likeness* (2000) (fig. 14) hints at consumerism, advertising and fashion. The skin of a body is reduced to an item of clothing, with a zip or a label, enhancing the idea of the body as a commodity (Freedman in Phaidon, 2002: 120-123).

Eating Disorders and Contemporary Art

Both locally and internationally, eating disorders have been addressed and discussed by professionals in many fields. Medical and psychological accounts are probably the most common, and come in the form of literature. Contemporary art provides a diverse range of art forms, providing visual rather than written perspectives on this subject. Much of this art stems from personal experience, making for an interesting and more genuine understanding of an essentially complex situation. Since the practical work is inspired by such an experience, much inspiration has been drawn from looking at the work of artists dealing with this subject.



Figure 15. Janine Antoni. 1992. *Gnaw (detail)* (Cameron, 2000: 26).



Figure 16. Janine Antoni. 1992. *Gnaw (detail)* (Cameron, 2000: 27).

The eating disorder bulimia nervosa, characterised by binge-purge behaviour, is perhaps more common than anorexia, and is referenced in the work of many artists. The use of actual food as a medium or as materials combined with more conventional ones (along with references to food in other forms), are common to the practice of many of these artists. American artist Janine Antoni deals with the compulsive practices associated with femininity. She criticizes society, characterising it as bulimic as we are constantly consuming and discarding the products of our culture. Her exhibition entitled *Gnaw* (1992) (fig. 15) shows two six-hundred-pound blocks, one of dark brown chocolate, the other of soft white lard, each sculpted slightly by the artist's bite marks. Displayed along with these were heart-shaped boxes made of chocolate, containing red lipstick in black and gold cases (fig. 16) (Schor, 1997: 112-113). Video artist Maureen Connor also focuses on bulimia in a work entitled *Taste 2* (1992). Here, a bathroom scale sits on a platform. A monitor has replaced the numbers that usually reveal weight. It plays a tape of the artist stuffing herself with foods in random order. This bingeing ends as the monitor plays, in reverse, the images seen already. By the end of the tape, the food re-appears on the plates, intact and ready to be purged again. Connor also draws a link between anorexia and art, believing that they both represent a culturally imposed ideal of the body. She states then, that artists too, are at work to destroy cultural ideas and myths (Schor, 1997: 113).

Looking at the constructions of body politics and female identity, South African artist Leora Farber deals with the body in its beautiful states, as well as its



Figure 17. Leora Farber, 2003-4. *Nemesis (Part 2)* (Schmahman, 2004: 66).



Figure 18. Nicoletta Comand. 1994. *The Food I Ate Turned into Flesh* (Betterton, 1996: 147).

this project, and the decision to work autobiographically, was not an easy one to make, since, despite being healthy, the body is still a site of personal contestation. However, not only has it shed light on a real and existing phenomenon of contemporary culture and provided some interesting discourse, it has also made way for a therapeutic and ultimately liberating platform from which to express and lay to rest some of the issues involved in such an ordeal.

In a painful portrait of herself as an anorexic, entitled *Am I still a woman?* (1990) (fig. 19), Rachel Lewis shows herself set against a collage of pin-up girls and tabloid words such as 'gain', 'fail', and 'sexy' (Borzello, 1998: 173). Eleanor Antin's work *Carving: A traditional sculpture* (1973) (fig. 20) portrays Antin dieting over a period of weeks. She photographed herself from the front, back and sides each morning. The work sheds light on the contradictions between societal demands and self-definition (Broude & Garrard, 1994: 195).



Figure 20. Eleanor Antin. 1972. *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (detail) (Borzello, 1998: 162).

The impact of a painting by Jenny Saville entitled *Branded* (1992) (fig. 21) forces viewers to confront their response to 'imperfect' bodies. This work shows the artist as a monumental nude. The flesh is branded with contour lines and words, making reference to plastic surgery (Borzello, 1998: 178-179). Dealing quite literally with plastic surgery, the work of French artist Orlan, in the form of an ongoing performance piece (fig. 22), suggests that her body has become a site of public debate that poses crucial questions for our time (The Art and Culture Network, 2003: 1).

Cindy Sherman uses her own body to question feminine roles and ideals by posing as many different women in her untitled film stills. Addressing feminist theories of representation, she challenges the gender stereotypes of post-modern culture, making a comment about the many roles women feel they should assume (Dorfman, 1985: 1). Making reference to the discomfort of western women in search of beauty, Hannah Wilke, in her work *S.O.S- Scarification Object Series* (1974) (fig. 23), shaped chewing gum into labial folds and stuck them to herself (Borzello, 1998: 174). Similarly, the photographer Maedbina McCombe's work *Clitoris Allsorts* (1990) (fig. 24) from her *Appetites* series, shows the artist's nude torso photographed with pieces of candy. Here, she sheds light on the link between eating, dieting and body image. Fashion model and artist Mariko Mori, produces self-portraits, in the form of cast mannequins. Mori's work talks about consumer culture and the definitions of women as objects within it (fig. 25) (Meskimmon, 1996: 125).



Figure 21. Jenny Saville. 1992. *Branded* (Borzello, 1998: 178).



Figure 22. Orlan. 1990. *Le Visage du 21 Siecle* (Borzello, 1998: 190).



Figure 23. Hannah Wilke. 1974. *S.O.S Starification Object Series* (Borzello, 1998: 175).



Figure 24. Maedbhina McCombe. 1990. *Clitoris Allsorts (Appetites Series)* (Meskimmon, 1996: 174).



Figure 25. Mariko Mori. 1995. *Birth of a Star* (Bryson, 1999: 91).

South African artist Antoinette Murdoch, in her work *Eksie Perfeksie (Just Perfect) - Self-portrait* (2002) (fig. 26), represents herself as a paper doll with four different outfits. Her body shape here goes against the usual slimness of paper dolls, and at the base of the doll she states her name, height and weight, which she says is confessional. Measuring tapes feature a lot in Murdoch's work. In *Te Kort Skiet (To Fall Short)* (2001-2) (fig. 27), one sees a wedding dress made of tape measures and wire, also based on the artist's dimensions (Schmahmann, 2004: 31). The use of this measuring device links to the work in this project in that it makes reference to the notion of control exerted on the body through the act of measuring.



Figure 26. Antoinette Murdoch. 2002. *Eksie - Perfeksie (Just Perfect) - Self-Portrait* (Schmahman, 2004: 54).



Figure 27. Antoinette Murdoch. 2001-2. *Te Kort Skiet (To Fall Short)* (Schmahman, 2004: 66).

ANOREXIA NERVOSA: THE DISORDERED FEMALE BODY



Anorexia, the Body and the Mind

Since the significant rise of the disease anorexia nervosa in the past twenty years, and especially in the last two decades, the attempt to link the condition to some pathogenic situation has been as ardent as the attempt to link it to an established category of disorder. The diverse narratives given to the disease anorexia, result in a very complex, and often confusing and even contradictory understanding of the phenomenon.

Anorexia has been described as a side effect of neurotic perfectionism relating to body image, as well as the result of low self-esteem and psychological stress (Strober, 1996: 421-436). Some have said that it is a 'slimmer's epidemic' affecting intelligent middle-class women (Felska & Sofia, 1996: 423-429). Susie Orbach states that it is something that is instigated by patriarchy, causing conflict around women's natural body size. She also sees it as a way in which women express difficult feelings (Orbach, 1978: 12). Hilda Bruch believes the disease to be a disorder relating to the pursuit of slenderness, placing emphasis on virtues such as sacrifice and denial (Bruch, 1978: 224). Showalter (1997: 20) describes it as a modern epidemic of hysteria, and Morag MacSween suggests that bourgeois patriarchal culture contributes to this disorder (MacSween, 1996: 254).

Some readings of the disease pinpoint its transgressive nature or refer to it as a form of protest. Susie Orbach's book *Hunger Strike* discusses anorexia as the response of women to dealing with the contradictory requirements of their roles in today's society. She suggests that the anorexic's struggle symbolises a battle for autonomy. It is, for Orbach, a hunger strike, or cry of protest against the demands women in contemporary society are faced with (Orbach, 1993: 4-5). This point links to the re-reading of anorexia from a post-colonial and post-structural feminist viewpoint by S. Fuller and Derek Hook. They believe that rather than seeing the anorexic as a victim of consumer culture and patriarchal preferences, she is more of a resisting or transgressing subject, contesting and even mocking the so-called ideal (Fuller & Hook, 2002: 110).

According to Susan Bordo, it is in the cultural context that a common element seems to exist for this condition (Bordo, 1993: 49-50). Paul Garfinkel and David Garner define anorexia as a multi-dimensional disorder where perceptual, familial, cognitive and biological factors act in different combinations in varying individuals, to produce a common pathway (Garfinkel & Garner, 1981: 112-113). Likewise, Joan Brumberg in *Fasting Girls*, believes the disease to be multi-determined, suggesting that biological, psychological and environmental factors play as important a role as the powerful messages about body image (Brumberg, 1988: 164). The obvious understanding is that culture gives shape to and provokes an existing pathological condition. A common viewpoint in relation to the causes of anorexia, is to understand what it is to be living in modernity, and to what extent modern social formations affect the body, and

ultimately, why anorexia is often seen as symptomatic of our modern society (Folker, 1999: 1).

The Body: A Medium of Culture

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, speaks about the body as being constantly in the grip of cultural practices. He elaborates:

...The body is...directly involved in a political field, power relations have an immediate hold upon it, they invest in it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. (Foucault, 1979: 20)

The anthropologist Mary Douglas has put forward the notion of the body as a powerful symbolic form. She believes the body to be a surface on which the rules, hierarchies and metaphysical commitments of culture are inscribed, and are thus re-enforced through the language of the body (Douglas, 1996: 25). In terms of the body's materiality, Susan Bordo refers to the post-modern reading of the body as malleable plastic, shaped to the meanings we choose. She believes that the daily rituals through which we attend to the body, point to the body as a medium of culture (Bordo, 1993: 165). Similar to Bordo, Jean Grimshaw characterises the body as a kind of 'cultural plastic' which one can shape at will (Grimshaw, 1999: 93). According to Rosalind Coward the body is a site on which feminine culture can be literally manufactured (Coward, 1984: 80-81). Tamsin Wilton sees the body

as an event situated in time, rather than as an object located in space. She believes that:

Bodies are chronically changeable and subject to time and to processes that are frequently beyond our control. Gender is a process rather than a property of bodies, in which the 'conversation' between the body and the social is continually recreated. (Wilton, 1996: 7)

Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw state that the body should not be seen as given, as pure nature, or as an object on which cultural ideology is written, but rather as the subject of social inscription. They feel that it is constructed by many forms of social discipline (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999: 7). Similarly Cor Baerveldt and Paul Voestermans see the body as a thing that certain discursive meanings attach themselves to (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 1996: 1). Elizabeth Grosz emphasises that the body is not only the site of the inscription of power and knowledge, but also a site of resistance, for it has the possibility of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways (Grosz, 1995: 64). In Marianne Thesander's book *The Feminine Ideal*, she states that the formed and moulded body suggests our affiliation to culture and our position in society. She examines how the 'natural' body is reformed into prevailing cultural feminine ideals (Thesander, 1997: 9).

The body becomes a sort of mannequin which 'wears the signs of sex, power, status, and the like,' and as such serves as the battleground for body politics. (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 1996: 2)

What comes to the fore is that the (female) body and culture are undeniably and inextricably linked. The reference to bodies as plastic, malleable and moulded is particularly valid in today's society, in that many women use their bodies as a so-called voice in what Douglas refers to as a "language of the body" (Douglas, 1996: 25). For many women this involves the changing shape, size and appearance of their bodies, making a statement that is perhaps a form of resistance, but is nevertheless both a response to, and a result of cultural processes.

Helen Malson in *The Thin Woman*, defines the anorexic body as a place on which many discursive currents converge, resulting in it being a passive surface, reflecting the power relations of an era (Malson, 1997: 231). One could conclude then, that anorexia sufferers are not merely victims of a unique condition, but rather bear truth to some distressing facts about culture, offering their bodies as aggressively graphic texts that demand to be read as cultural statements.

The body, offered as a woman's ticket into society, becomes her mouthpiece. In her attempts to conform or reject contemporary ideals...she uses the weapon so often directed against her, she speaks with her body.

(Orbach, 1993: 28)

In light of the above, some interesting correlations can be seen in the work of artists such as Vanessa Beecroft, Cindy Sherman and Orlan. Beecroft's performance work involving naked models, displays these women in such a way (expressionless and mute) that their bodies

become the focal point, speaking for themselves. Orlan's work operates similarly in that the extreme way in which she manipulates her body certainly brings to mind the notion of an aggressive and graphic text, and begs one to consider the context which prompts her to produce such a radical artform.

THE PRACTICAL BODY OF WORK



Reading the Encoded Body

The most obvious element of anorexia is that it clearly demonstrates its effect on the physical body, but due to the psychological nature of many of the so-called causes of the disease, it is necessary to acknowledge that the mind plays an equally important role in the process. Cor Baerveldt and Paul Voestermans, discuss anorexia and its relationship with the body in terms of the discipline of psychology, proposing that the body is able to produce meaning in its own right in terms of bodily communication. Pointing to psychology's involvement with the body in this regard, they suggest that it is not merely the body as a biological apparatus that one should look at, but rather the body as a mode of self-representation, and as able to express emotions and feelings (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 1996: 1).

The problem with current research on anorexia is that the relevance of the physical body is undermined when regarding the psychological factors. When the body is considered, it is usually in relation to the cultural ideal of slenderness. This ideal though, when studied in detail, does not entirely explain the phenomenon of anorexia. For Baerveldt and Voestermans, the way in which anorexia is dealt with, is important to the role of the body in the production of meaning (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 1996: 2).

Taking a semiotic approach to this idea of the body producing meaning is central to this project in terms of the encoded aspect. For Harre, "the human body is such that its states, conditions, parts and postures serve as signs. It is both a semiotic system in itself, and made meaningful by a semiotic system" (Harre, 1991: 223). Baerveldt and Voestermans talk about modes of communication that use codes, or shared sign systems, referring to the body as what they call the flow of co-regulative skills. They believe that when a type of bodily conduct explains something about that person to an onlooker, it becomes a communicative act that involves the perception of that act; the perceiver has to decode a kind of message (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 1996: 7). Anorexia, then, in a sense, can be seen as a very ornate sign system.

Earlier on, there is a brief reference to the notion of anorexia as a form of voice for women; as a way in which they can speak with their bodies. Language is one of the most successful and developed modes of communication, which also falls under the greater heading of sign systems, and which clearly relates to the notion of codes. In this practical body of work, a system of signs is dealt with. In a similar way that a real live body omits signs in the form of communicative acts, which are then interpreted by perceivers, the body in the two-dimensional form of images, becomes encoded with information in the form of text, icons and numbers, which is intended to be perceived in the same way; as messages to be decoded in the ornate system of signs involved with the body and anorexia. The encoding is literally 'written on the body', and actually makes up the surface tonality of the body

image, likening the body to a text that should be read. Having focused on bodily acts as forms of communication, there is the notion of anorexia as a voice in terms of a spoken language, a reference to the system of encoding used in the work as a form of relaying a message, and to the text and written elements involving the reading thereof. All of which refer strongly to the realm of semiotics, or meaning production in relation to sign systems. It seems that the case of anorexia is ultimately about displaying a powerful message, which is relayed to the world in what is perhaps a more effective mode of communication than writing or speaking. The body silently 'shouts out' this message.

The artworks take the form of pixilated digital inkjet prints, which are adhered to a layer of flexible polyurethane foam, and then built up, pixel by pixel onto a firm surface. Each 20 x 20mm pixel contains a piece of information in the form of iconography drawn from the food, fashion, consumerism and health and fitness industries, encoding the entire image in a specific context. The finished works are squares, mirroring the shape of the pixel, 1 500 x 1 500mm in dimension, depicting a slightly reflective, rippled and soft surface. An intimate and close-up take of different parts of the body are seen from the author's perspective, rendering the camera an extension of the artist's own eye. As a result of this, the works often take on odd compositions and slightly distorted and abstract elements. The colour of the works has been reduced to subtle flesh tones rather than full colour, as a means to enhance the private and intimate nature of the works.

The pixel plays an important role in the work, pointing to a number of elements that should be noted. The first of which is the idea of scale. According to Ron Brinkmann, in *The Art and Science of Digital Compositing*, the most obvious form of measurement in a digital image is the number of pixels used to create the image. Basically, the pixel count for an image is the primary measurement of an image's resolution; the greater the spatial resolution, the finer the detail of the image (Brinkmann, 1999: 17). Since the images are large and pixilated, the viewer is forced to stand at a distance in order to make them resolve visually. While the image resolves at a distance, the information contained within each individual pixel cannot be seen, and requires the viewer to come forward to within a few centimetres of the work. Tension is created here through this constant pull between intimacy and distance. Enlarging a specific area for the purpose of immense scrutiny is crucial to the work as well. It relates to the notion of scale, and is prompted by the presence of the pixel. Repetition in the work also points to the use of the pixel. The colours of the pixels making up a digital image are often repeated, or vary slightly from one to the next, and in keeping with this notion, the information contained within the pixels in these works operates similarly. It becomes apparent that the contents of these pixels are variations of the same thing, if not repeated exactly. This repetition points to the notion of excess. Other relevant elements to note in terms of the pixel are fragmentation, control and conformity, which will be expanded on in the following sections.

Medium and Methods

It should already be clear that the artworks consist of two elements, a large image filling the entire surface, and a series of smaller images (usually in the form of text or numbers) making up the large image. Put simply, it is a large image made up of many smaller images.

The first phase of the work involves photographing the body (fig. 28) as well as the iconography to be used in each image (fig. 29). The camera (an extension of the artist's eye) enhances the notion of self-perception in this regard. Once the content of all the images has been decided, gathered and scanned, the first step is to create two layers in Adobe Photoshop. The first layer is the large flesh-coloured image of a part of the body, re-sized to 1 500 x 1 500mm at a resolution of 59 pixels per centimetre, and then pixelated in mosaic format. Each pixel is now 20 x 20mm in size. The larger-than-life size of the works and their fragmented and pixelated elements draw attention to scale and the idea of close-up scrutiny, as well as making reference to the digital media industry. For the second layer, a greyscale grid is created, 1 500 x 1 500mm in size with guidelines every two centimetres (and matching the first layer exactly). The smaller images (usually in the form of text or iconography) are re-sized and inserted into the grid randomly. The two layers are then merged using a method called colour burn, where the colour layer shows through the grayscale layer (fig. 30). After doing this and flattening the image, there is now one layer with all the information on it, the large pixelated colour image portraying a part of the body, with a

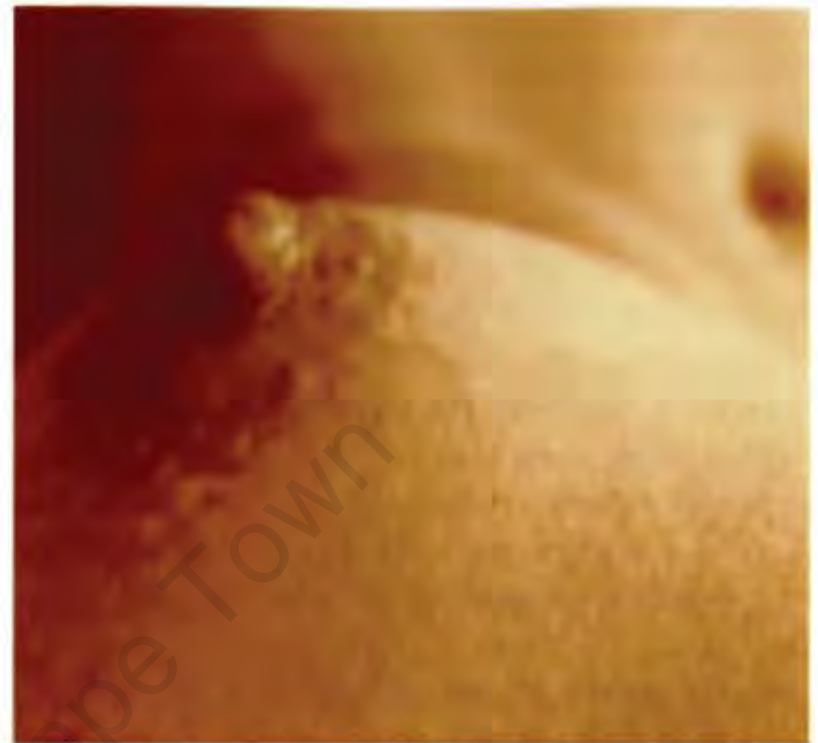


Figure 28. Pamela Stretton, 2004. *Photographed Body Part.*



Figure 29. Pamela Stretton, 2004.
Example of Iconography.



Figure 30. Pamela Stretton, 2004.
Iconography Merged with Pixelated Image.

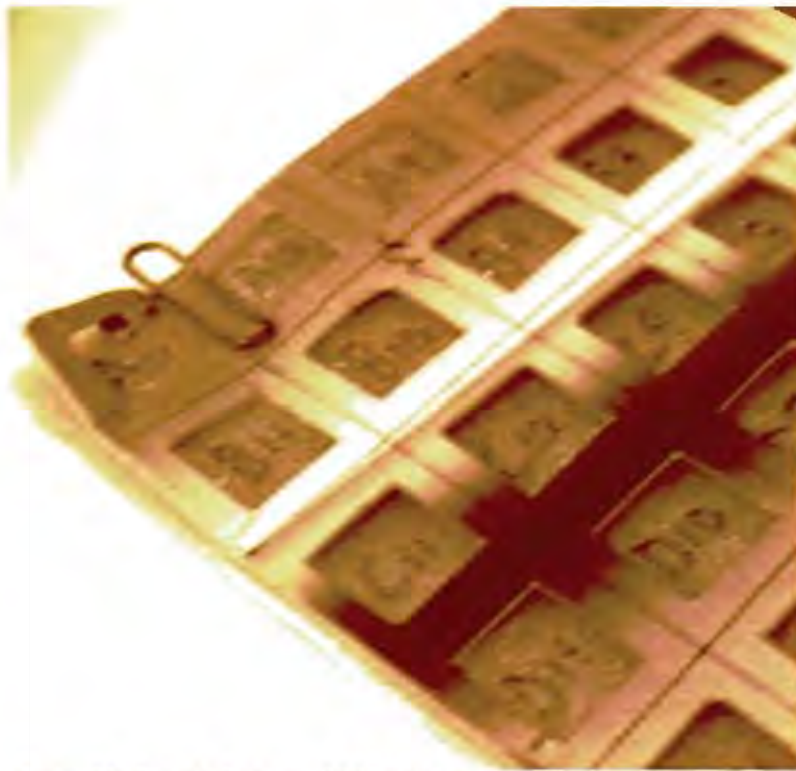


Figure 31. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Alphanumeric Sequence using a Grid.*

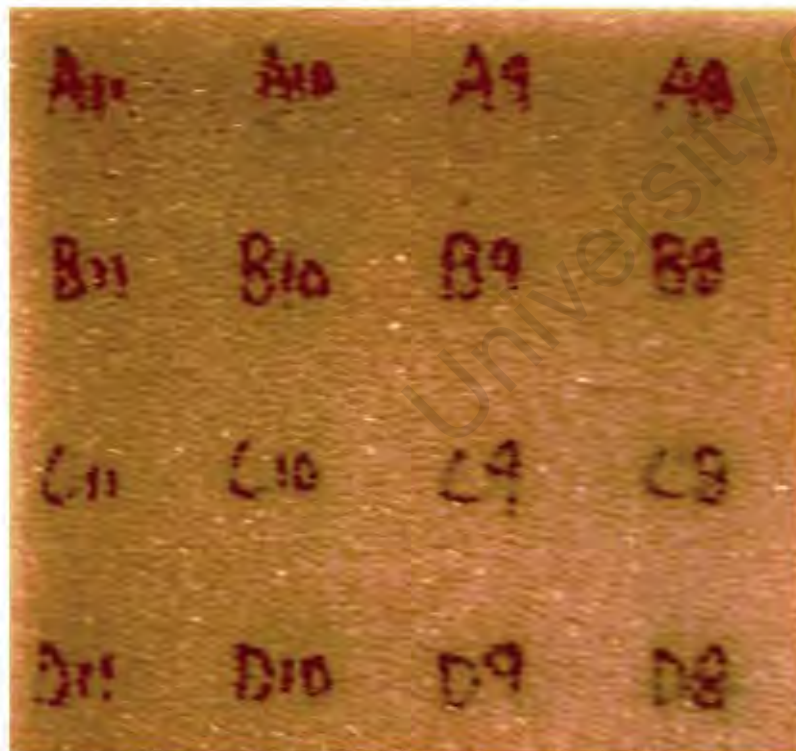


Figure 32. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Individual Pixels Marked from Underneath.*

smaller piece of iconography lying neatly inside each pixel. This image is then prepared for printing and finally digitally printed on Azon Semi-matt 180 g/sm paper using pigmented inks.

The second phase of the process involves a more practical hands-on application. To start with, the print is divided up into thirty six squares of manageable proportions. Each square gets numbered in an alphanumeric sequence using a grid (fig. 31) (so as not to be misplaced when rebuilding), and painted with a layer of shellac. The shellac adds a protective layer to the pigmented inks against any harmful UV light and gives the work a slightly reflective surface, making subtle reference to glossy media images. An 8mm thick piece of soft foam is then glued to each square. Taking one square at a time, a grid is placed on the underside and another alphanumeric system is drawn onto the foam, marking each pixel from underneath (fig. 32). The final step of the process involves cutting the square into its individual pixels, and gluing them down onto a firm, marked out surface of 6mm medium density fibreboard (figs. 33-36). This meticulous method of rebuilding the image is an essential element of the work, requiring patience, neatness and control, and is intended to resonate throughout the finished body of work.



Figure 33. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Random Cut Pixels.*

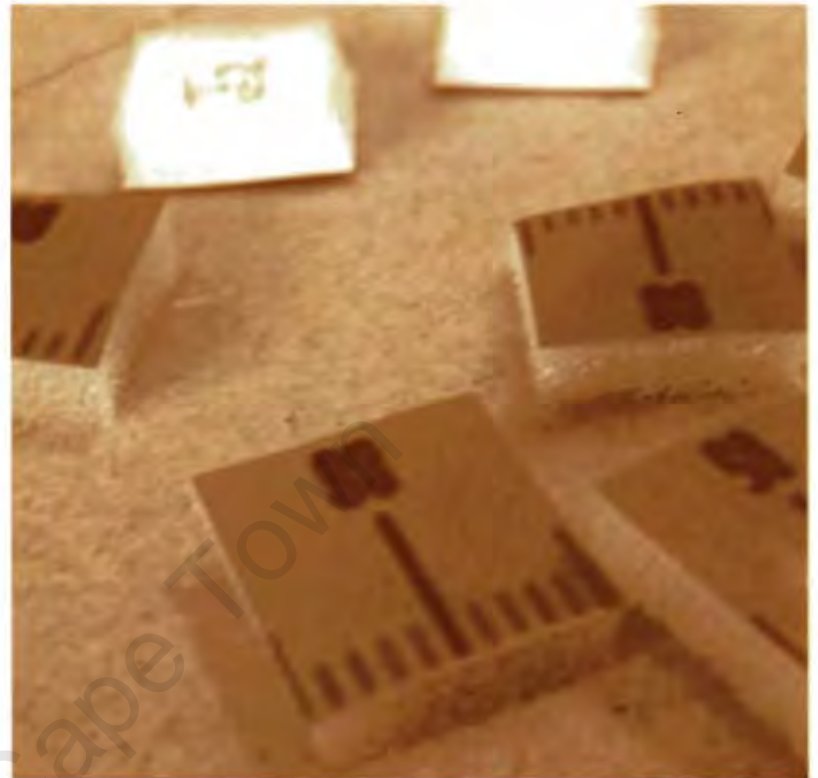


Figure 34. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Cut Pixels ready for Gluing.*

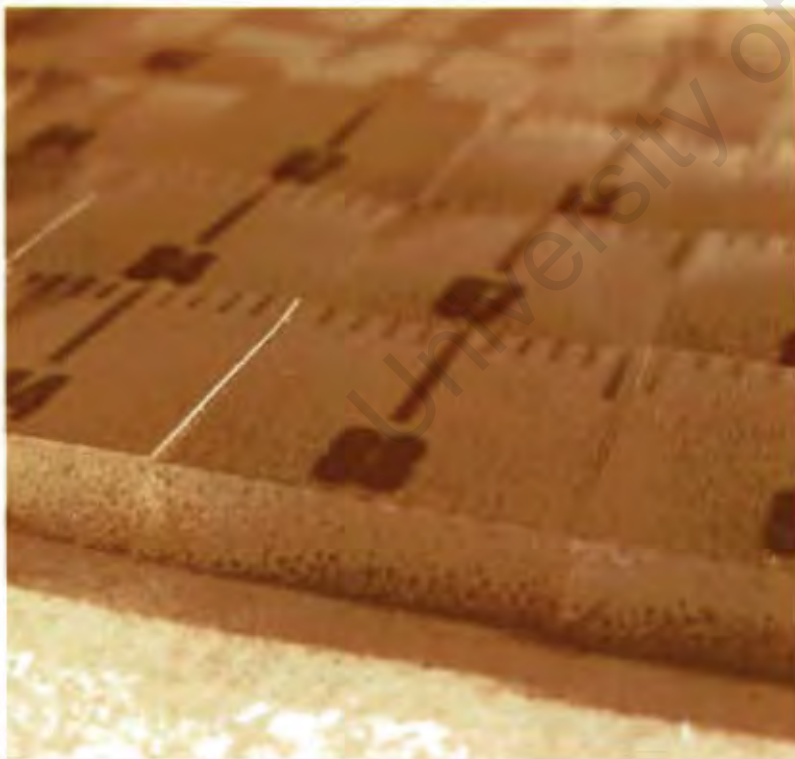


Figure 35. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Pixels Glued Down Onto Supawood Surface.*

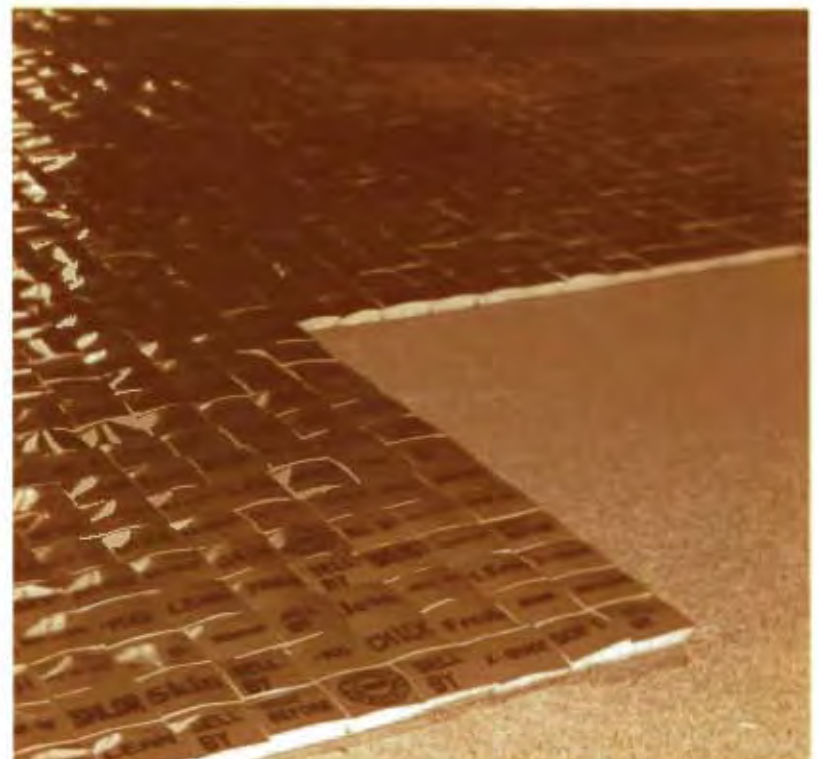


Figure 36. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Gluing in Progress.*

Food, Flesh and Fat

It is said that there is nothing on this earth which is not as much beloved by one nation as it is detested by another; our preferences about what we eat are determined by social and cultural conditions as much as by nutrition. (Stephen Bayley, 1991:177)

Since the project focuses on the female body in terms of eating disorders, notions of food and eating with regard to women are important areas to address. The fact that food seems to plague women is a discussed and acknowledged aspect of everyday life. Food is often the medium through which women are addressed, not only in terms of what and how much they themselves eat, but to the preparation and cooking of food for others. Food has become a language of women's response (Orbach, 1993: 3). Betterton puts forward the notion that food offers a way of exploring the pleasures and dangers of the limits of the body. These ways are particularly relevant to women, not only because food is gendered in culture as feminine, but because it makes way for the discussion of other elements of female identity (Betterton, 1996: 160).

Eating, for many women, is not merely an action played out as a necessary means to survive, or as one of enjoyment. It has rather, and specifically in the context of eating disorders, become an area of conflict and fear. Much of this fear is generated from the idea of food that is eaten turning into 'flesh' or worse 'fat'. According to William Ewing, whether figuratively or metaphorically speaking, the notion of flesh usually

refers to 'flesh and blood'; the whole physical substance of the body - organ, fluid, muscle and bone (Ewing, 1994: 142). However, it is anorexia sufferers that have developed the concept of 'flesh' into fears of 'fat', for in their eyes 'flesh' resembles pure fat, something disgusting and unsightly. Mary Douglas suggests that eating is a process whereby a formal organic matter (food) enters the body and then changes into another (flesh). The anorexic, by refusing this invasion of the body, tries to retain purity, essence, bare bones, feeling the need to totally eliminate flesh in order to become pure (Douglas, 1991: 20).

Rosemary Betterton believes that for women, fatness signifies a loss of control as well as a failure of feminine identity. She notes that this goes as far back as Freud's hysteric patients in the Victorian era (Betterton, 1996: 131). Joan Brumberg notes that food in the Victorian era was made to be feared, as it was linked to gluttony and physical ugliness, and the consumption of meat, or the flesh of animals, was considered to produce heat, which in turn stimulated blood production, fat and passion (Brumberg, 1988: 176-177). It seems, in a sense that not much has changed with regard to women's eating habits and the negative associations with flesh.

Fatness, according to Naomi Wolf (unless in the form of obesity as an illness), is seldom correlated with ill health, and thus female fat is in itself not unhealthy, yet it is the subject of intense public passion. Women feel guilty about this fat in that they recognise their bodies (in terms of the beauty myth) as society's and not their own. She believes that thinness then is not a

private aesthetic, but rather, hunger is a social concession enforced by the community (Wolf, 1990: 187). For Bordo, according to today's dominant ideology, fat is perceived as indicating laziness, unwillingness to conform, lack of discipline, and the absence of managerial abilities that lead to upward mobility (Bordo, 1993: 195). Moya Lloyd points out that most of the discourse on aerobics and exercise isn't really about health, but rather about an antipathy to fat and flesh. She states further that fat is always referred to negatively (Lloyd, 1996: 79-98).

Artists working around the subject of eating disorders have made reference to eating and food, as well as to the notion of flesh, as can be seen in the work of Janine Antoni and her use of chocolate and lard (figs. 15 and 16), Nicoletta Command's apple carvings (fig. 18) and Jenny Saville's portrayal and manipulation of flesh (fig. 21).

Some of the earlier work for this project focused on this notion of fat and flesh. Experimenting with the materiality of different foodstuffs, such as melted chocolate, lard, sugar and candy, one such work consisted of a series of packaged Barbie dolls which were cast in Holsum cooking fat (fig. 37). Due to the perishable nature of food, exploring substances that were visual equivalents, rather than the actual thing, seemed to make more sense. Wax, silicone and latex are some of the materials used in another earlier work, showing parts of the body cast, packaged and displayed like meat in a supermarket (fig. 38). Still on the subject of meat and its relation to flesh, a later work began to move away from these materials and three-dimensional objects, to

explore a digital medium, representing meat and the body in the form of a pixelated image (figs. 39 and 40).

The reference to fat products and meat links strongly to the personal aspect of the work in terms of the anorexic experience. Fat, and anything to do with fat, was detested for obvious reasons. Perhaps the biggest aversion of all foodstuffs, and for the longest period of time was meat, possibly for its relation to flesh. The final body of work makes reference to these substances by means of recognisable iconography found on their packaging (fig. 41). Packaging is focused on, not only for its relation to consumerism and its role in the sale of products, but for the information it displays. This information, for the anorexic, becomes an area of intense analysis and forms part of an obsession with food (fig. 42). The excessive use of such iconography in this project is inspired by this obsession. The foam adhered to each pixel is also a reference to the notion of flesh, and the softness of women's bodies.



Figure 41. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Iconography from Meat Packaging.*

NUTRITION INFORMATION	UNIT	PER 30g DAILY SERVING	PER 100g
ENERGY	kJ	531	1770
TOTAL FAT	g	15	50
TRANS FATY ACIDS (Max)	g	0	1
SODIUM (Max)	mg	194	645
VITAMIN A (21% RDA*)	µg RE	207	691
VITAMIN D (35% RDA*)	µg	2	6

*RDA is RECOMMENDED DIETARY ALLOWANCE

Figure 42. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Nutritional Information.*



Figure 37. Pamela Stretton. 2003. *Holsun Barbie Dolls*.



Figure 38. Pamela Stretton. 2003. *Packaged Body Parts*.

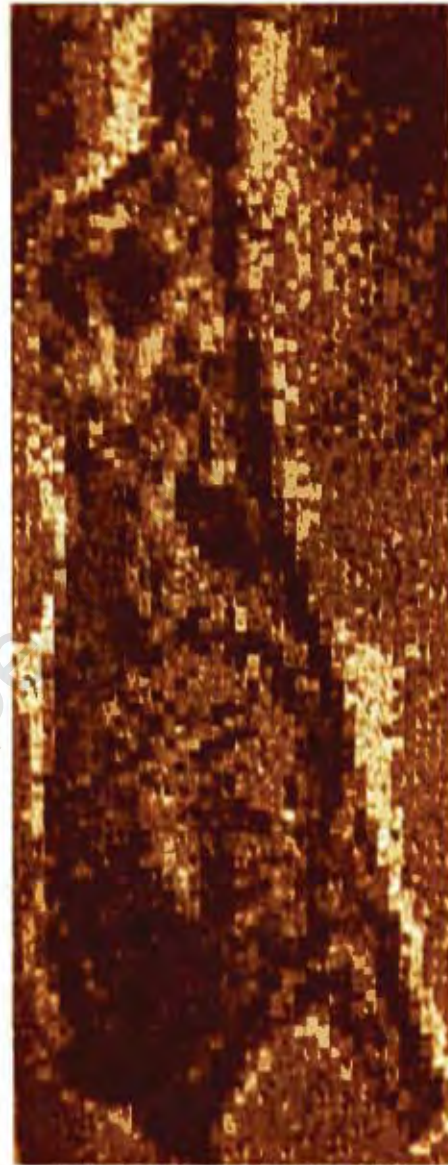


Figure 39. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Pixelated Carcass*.



Figure 40. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Pixelated Carcass (detail)*.

Fragmentation

In William Ewing's book *The Century of the Body*, he states that:

A fragment could have a striking visual and emotional impact, partly because it brought the viewer into an extremely intimate relationship with the subject, and partly because there was an intriguingly abstract- and therefore ambiguous- aspect to it: a fragment simultaneously reveals and conceals. It is in a sense, a piece of a puzzle. (Ewing, 2000: 20)

Nicholas Mirzoeff, in *Bodyscape*, suggests that the current sense of the fragmented body is a response to the collapse of the nineteenth century notion of the ideal body in representation (Mirzoeff, 1995: 28). The twentieth century saw fragmentation of the human body becoming an increasingly acceptable aesthetic practice, where these fragments began to stand as works of art in their own right, rather than as studies to be used by sculptors and painters. Aspects owing to the rise of fragmentation may have been influences such as instantaneous photography, the appropriation of body parts in constructivist and surrealist collage, dance, sports and medical photography, as well as cinematic close-ups (Ewing, 1994: 36).

The practical body of work focuses on what Ewing calls the realist fragment. This places a portion of the body under intense scrutiny. The body is seen up-close and in part (Ewing, 1994: 32). This scrutiny refers to the scrutiny of the body, especially in relation to specific

parts. Jean Grimshaw, referring to the fitness industry, claims that it is destroying the unity of the body, in that the body is broken up into parts which need to be worked on individually (Grimshaw, 1996: 96). In Linda Nochlin's *The Body in Pieces*, she discusses the fragment as a metaphor of modernity, referring to modernity as a concept that is constantly changing form (Nochlin, 1994: 56). Anthony Giddens too sees modernity as fragmentary and ever changing (more of which will be discussed later).

The fragment is made all the more prevalent in the work through the presence of the pixel. The works themselves depict fragments, making up a body of work, but the pixels too can be seen as fragments of a whole, since a pixel is the element of which a digital image is made up. An important concept to note here is that it is not only the relationship between one pixel and another that serves to resolve the image, but also the relationship between each work and the others, in reading the body of work as a whole.

Obsession, Order and Control

In Morag MacSween's work *Anorexic Bodies*, she approaches anorexia sufferers in an attempt to understand their behaviour. She discovers that for many of these women, it is a desire to exert control over their lives. By consciously controlling weight and food, the anorexic believes that a certain amount of success and power will be achieved, and that this will be evident to the world (MacSween, 1997: 201). A personal experience of anorexia bears truth to this notion and it is per-

haps the characteristic that stands out most clearly when looking back on the experience. In light of this, the idea of control is a major focus of the subject. One of the most obvious elements of the practical work is reflected in the method of construction. The decision to use the pixel as a form of building block in the literal sense was inspired by the challenge of making an image manually out of its smallest elements, focusing on the patience and obsessive control required to do this. Adding to this, the information contained in the pixels represent things which were part of an obsession manifesting themselves in control issues.

Anthony Giddens, in his work *Modernity and Self-Identity*, talks about modern society and its fragmentary nature. He believes that this phenomenon instills an increased uncertainty in the individual and disrupts the idea of a stable identity, leading many to feel uncertain about their actions (Giddens, 1997: 107). In light of this, Professor Christopher Szabo, principal psychologist at Tara hospital in Johannesburg, referring to empowerment and societal changes in South Africa, believes that women's self-perception has been challenged. He states:

For many young women, the words "You can be whatever you want to be", are read as "You have to be everything you can be and you must be the best at it". (Szabo in Duguid, 2003: 69)

Giddens suggests then that the behavior of an anorexic is symbolic of the strive for security in a world offering a vast amount of ambiguous choices. The anorexic, by

tightly controlling the body, provides a safe existence from the wide open social environment (Giddens, 1997: 107). Like Szabo and Giddens, authors such as Lawrence (1984) and Chernin (1986), have focused on anorexia in terms of the social position of women that are highly educated, and having to conform to the demands of a career, as well as to traditional feminine roles, such as housekeeping and motherhood (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 1996: 3). In a recent screening of the popular South African television show *Carte Blanche* (30 April 2005), an interview with a teenage girl recovering from anorexia revealed that she not only recalls controlling everything in her own life, but the routine of those around her too.

As has already been hinted at briefly in the section on fashion, the concept of control and discipline emerge as a central part of the anorexic condition. Looking at the work of Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, he explains how the development of industrial society began to focus on the discipline of the body. This body was studied, classified and controlled in this regard. He saw the body as a representation of order and efficiency, resulting in the creation of the 'docile body', in other words, a "body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1979: 136).

Foucault's work relates to that of Sandra Lee Bartky, who believes that individuals, through the development of body regimes (such as exercise programmes and diets), gain the values required by society in order to function successfully in that society. She suggests that these 'docile bodies' are produced because of the requirement of coercion placed on bodily activities, and

makes reference to fashion with regard to females, and ultimately anorexics (Bartky in Diamond & Quinby, 1988: 64). The idea of uniforms, as well as the use of fashion in bourgeois society as a form of regulation and control, illustrates this regime of discipline. The corset is another obvious example, which has perhaps been replaced with the regulation and control of diet and exercise from the twentieth century. Since one of the primary concerns for this project deals with the body and its size and shape, it is necessary to note the important connection of the body to the awareness and control brought on by the realms of fashion.

Relating back to the artwork, looking closely at a section of a pixilated image brings to mind the idea of a grid. Since the work involved a very neat, ordered and controlled method of arrangement, the use of grids was necessary throughout the process. The main purpose of these grids was to contain something or to keep something in place. These grids, in the context of the work and made evident through their pixilated nature, may be seen as a metaphor for control and conformity. Not only is the pixel a perfect square, an essentially geometric form, making up a curved, organic body, but also the format of the works themselves is a square inside which the body is contained. Almost all negative space is eliminated to highlight this notion of containment. This idea of the tightly controlled containment of the square via the grid is an important element of the work in terms of the behaviour of anorexics.

The Individual Works

The works will be explained in the order in which they were produced. One should note that although most of the works deal closely with their encoded aspect, some of them do so in a more obvious way than others. In a sense one should imagine that the encoded aspect of any one work could be applied to any of the other images and vice versa.

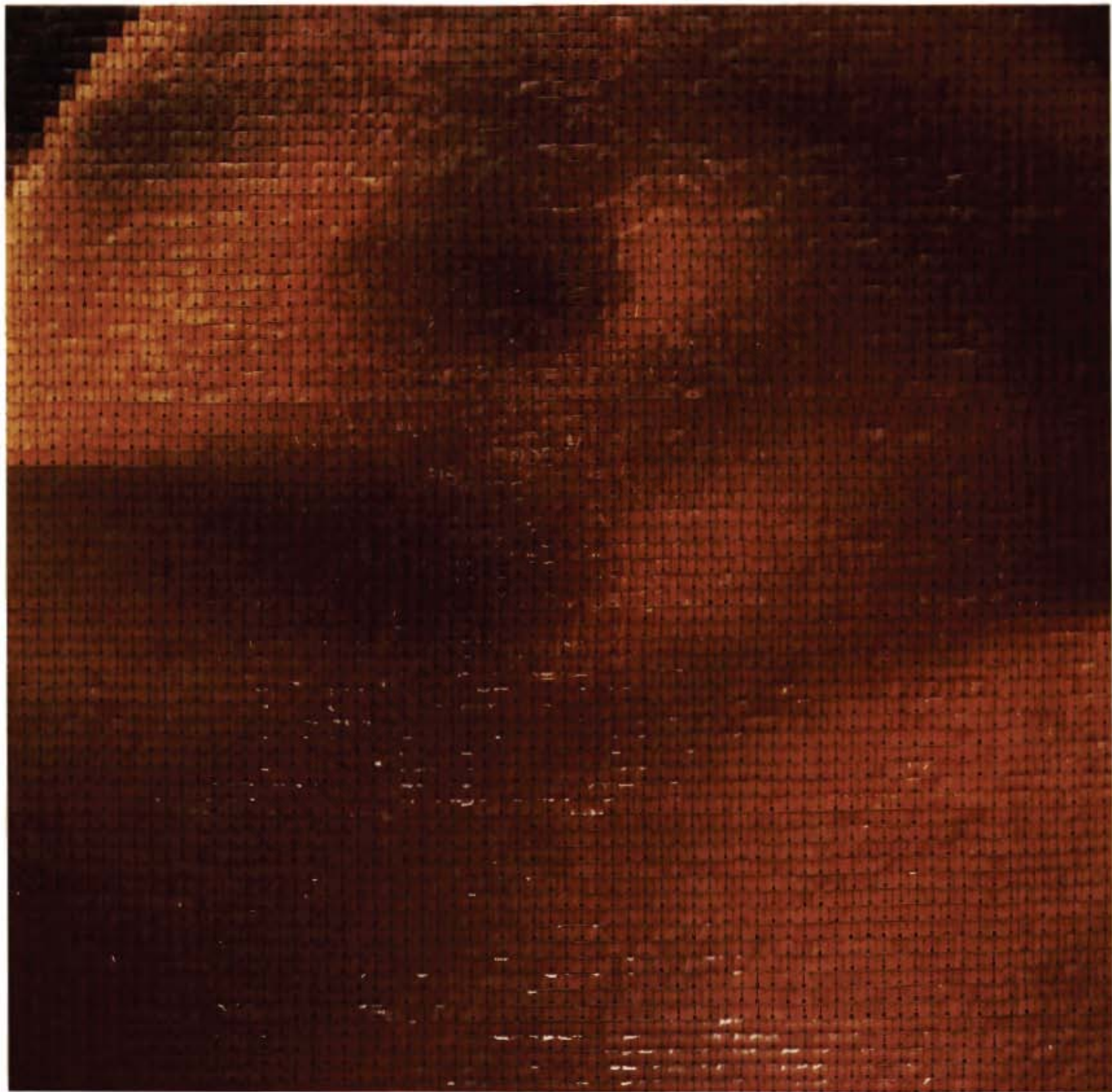


Figure 43. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Measuring Up*.

Measuring Up

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

This work portrays the stomach, seen through the eyes
of the author (hence the upside- down perspective for
the viewer). The stomach or waistline is often an area
of concern for women, and is focused on when one
wishes to slim down. The strive for a flat and toned

stomach is usually monitored by strict measuring. The
reference to the measuring tape in the encoded pixel,
or more specifically to centimetres, suggests this need
to measure and compare the size of parts of the body.
The centimetres are not merely randomly chosen, but
reflect actual measurements of different parts of the
body, and slight adjustments either way referring to
fluctuating changes in body size. The fact that each
pixel represents one centimetre, and is actually 2 x
2cm in size, could also be suggestive of a distorted
body image.



Figure 44. Pamela Stretton. 2004 *Measuring up* (detail).

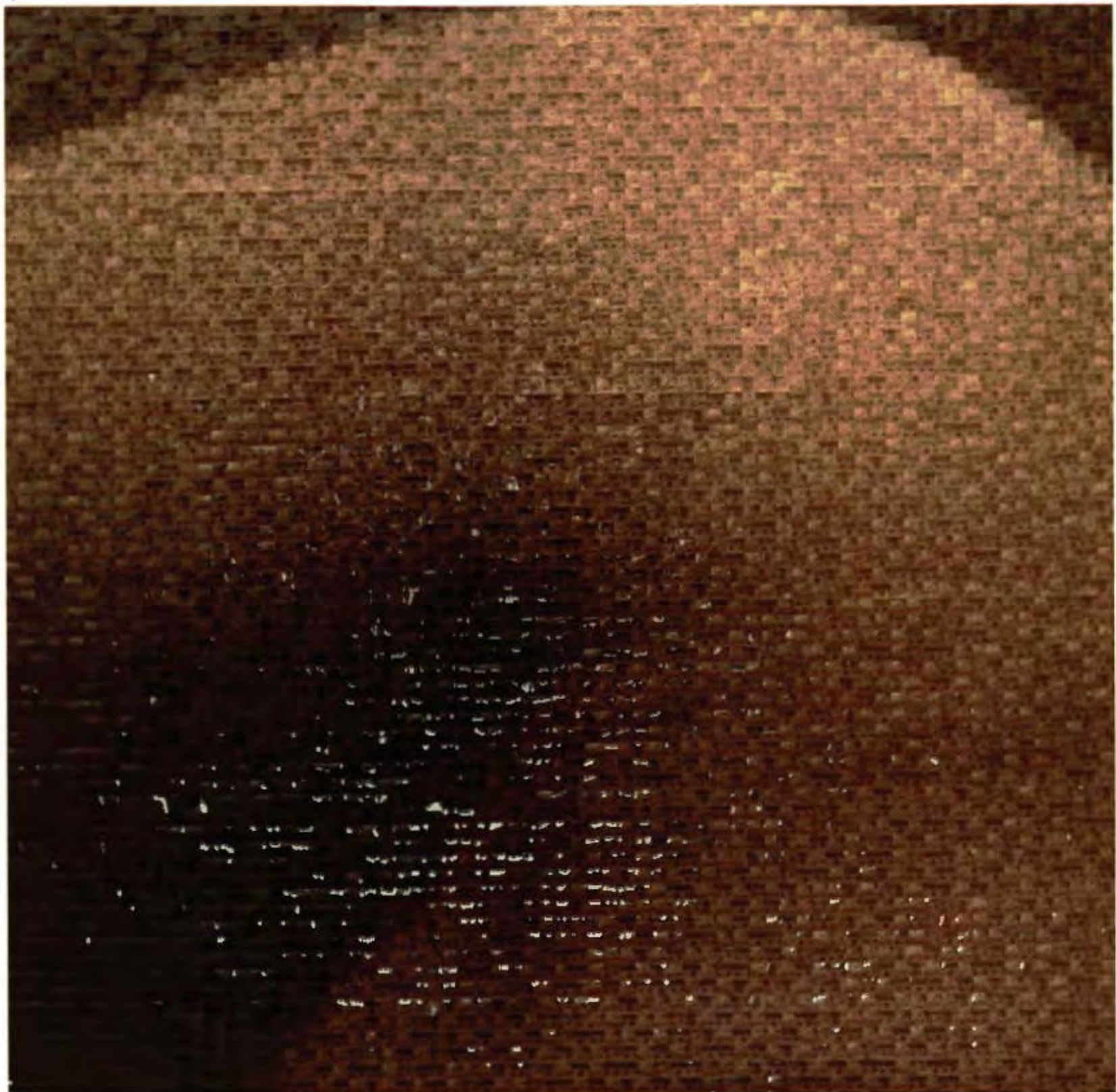


Figure 45. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *More or Less*.

More or Less

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

This work looks at the curve between the top of the thigh and the left buttock. When standing up straight this part of the anatomy would be the hip. Hips are another area of focus for women when criticizing the shape of their bodies. While it is

natural for women to have wider hips than men, it has become fashionable to support narrow, boyish hips. Rather than a measuring device, there is a reference to the dial of a scale that measures weight. Again, the weights portrayed here are not random, but rather reflect different personal weights, from the time of the eating disorder, through to the present. Gathering the information for this work was a challenge in that it required getting back onto the scale, something which has been avoided for a number of years.



Figure 46. Pamela Stretton, 2004. *More or Less* (detail).

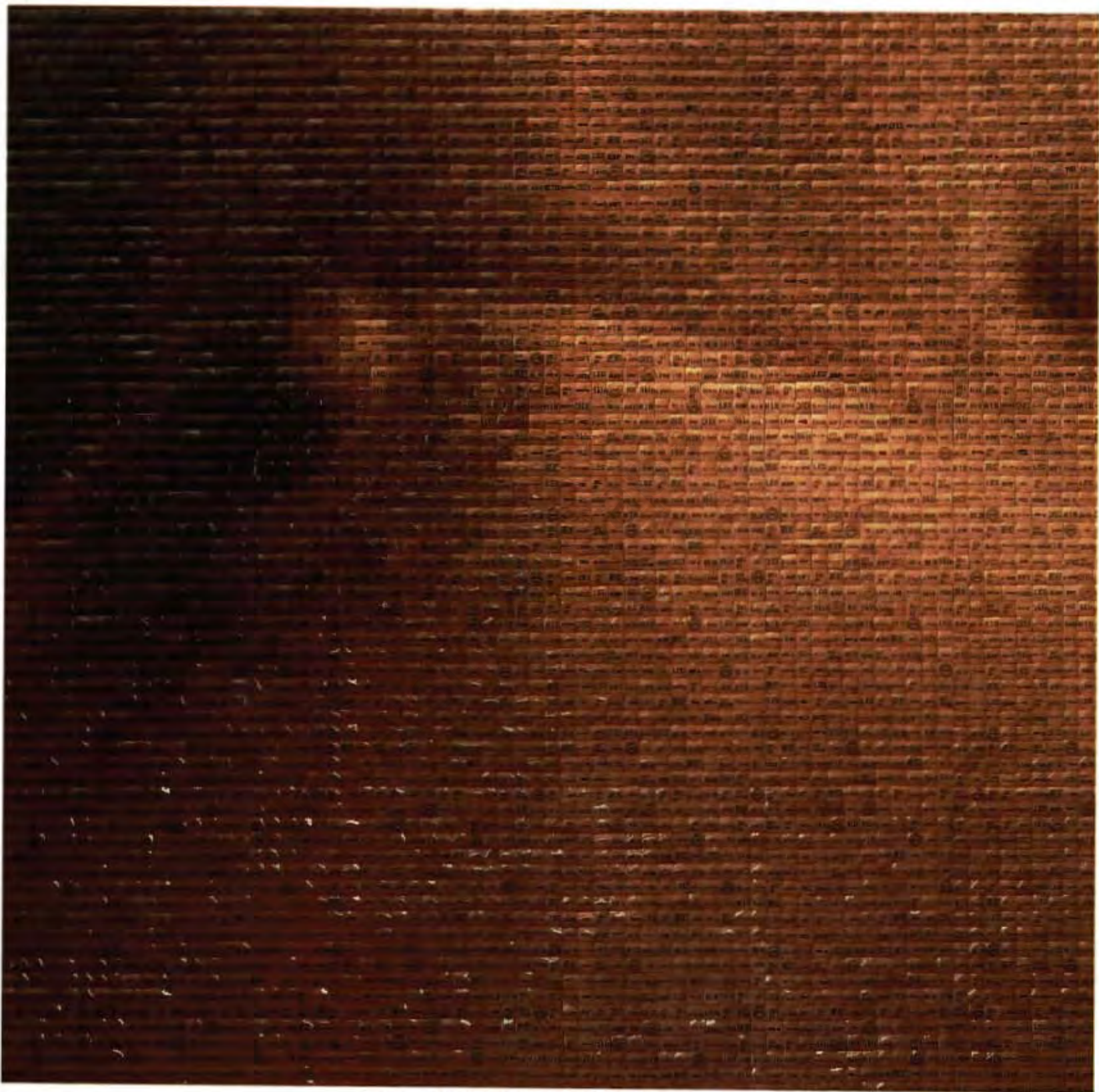


Figure 47. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Select Cut*.

Select Cut

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt 180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

This work shows a close-up view of the breast, again seen through the author's eyes. Breasts, which are often regarded as an asset to women, stand as exactly the opposite of that to an anorexia sufferer. They are seen as part of the fleshy curves of womanhood,

and are despised. It is often with great satisfaction, to the anorexic, to find that when large amounts of weight are lost, the breasts almost disappear completely. The iconography appearing in the pixels of this work is taken from meat packaging, drawing a connection to the notion of flesh and the aversion to it. Using words such as 'rump' and 'breast' draws one's attention to the classification of meat. These are also terms by which women are often referred to and categorized, similar to 'products' in a 'meat market'.



Figure 48. Pamela Stretton, 2004. *Select Cut* (detail).

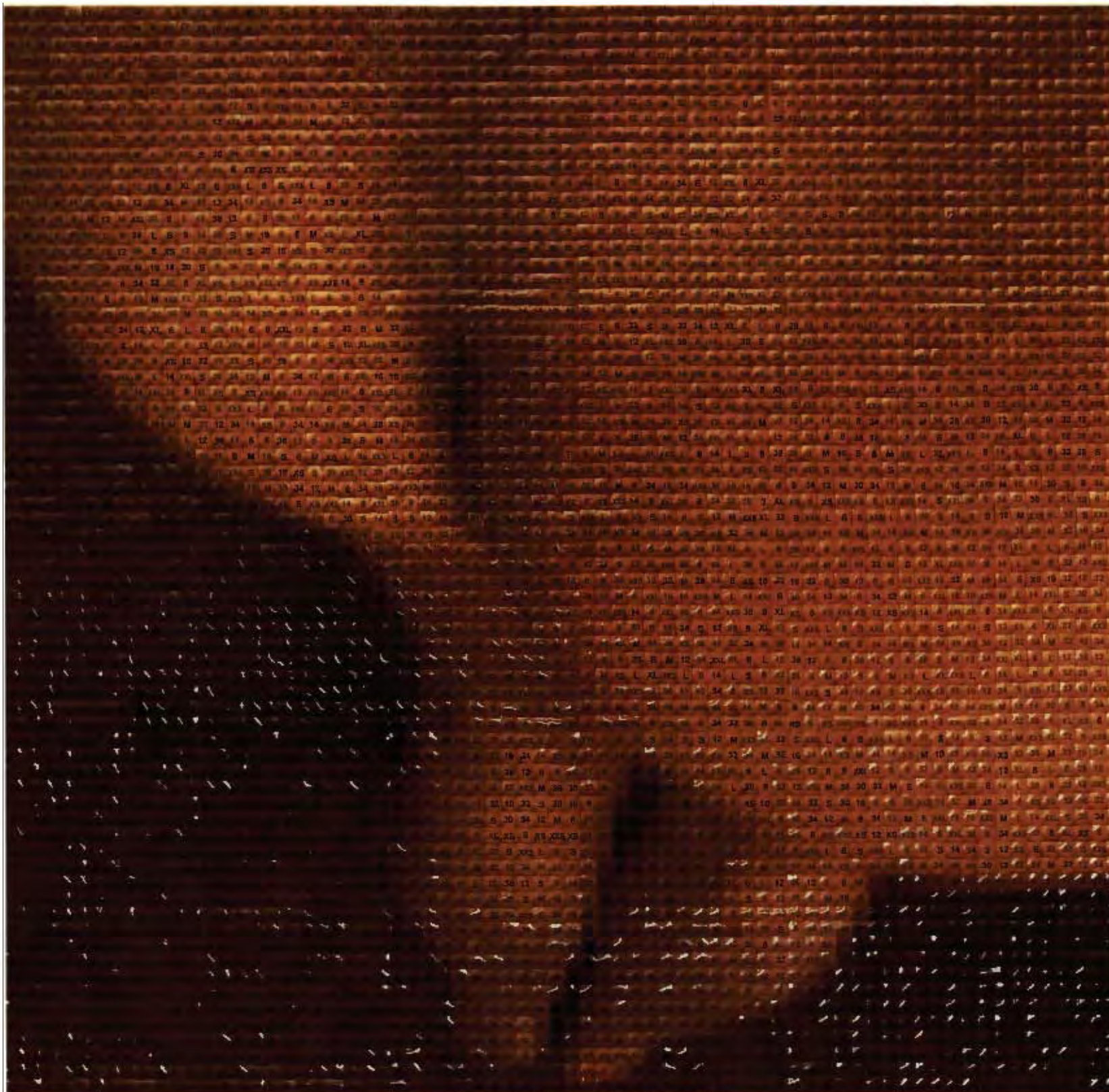


Figure 49. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Size Matters*.

Size Matters

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

This work is a view of the buttocks, seen from the awkward angle over the shoulder. Inspired by the commonly asked question "Does my bum look big?" this work deals with what is perhaps the most detested part of the female body in terms of staying in shape.

In this image, the buttocks fill more than half of the surface, in contrast to the tiny legs appearing at the bottom, again enhancing the notion of a distorted perception. The pixels show common and recognizable size labels, used in the clothing industry. Size, like weight and measurement, is a source of major concern for most women, let alone anorexics. The work also comments on the fashion and consumer industries, in which clothes play an integral part, and are often displayed in rather small sizes on fashion models.

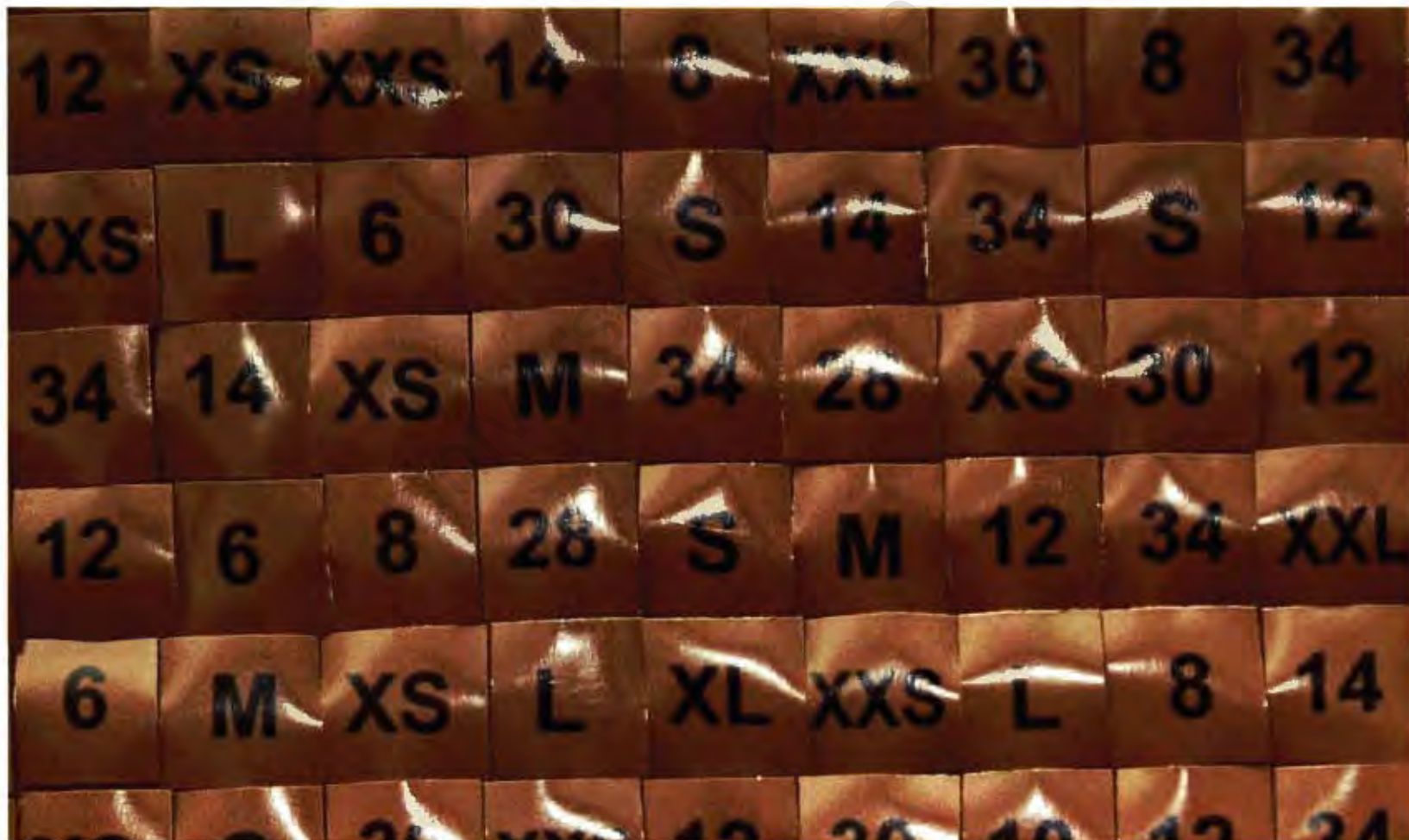


Figure 50. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Size Matters (detail)*.

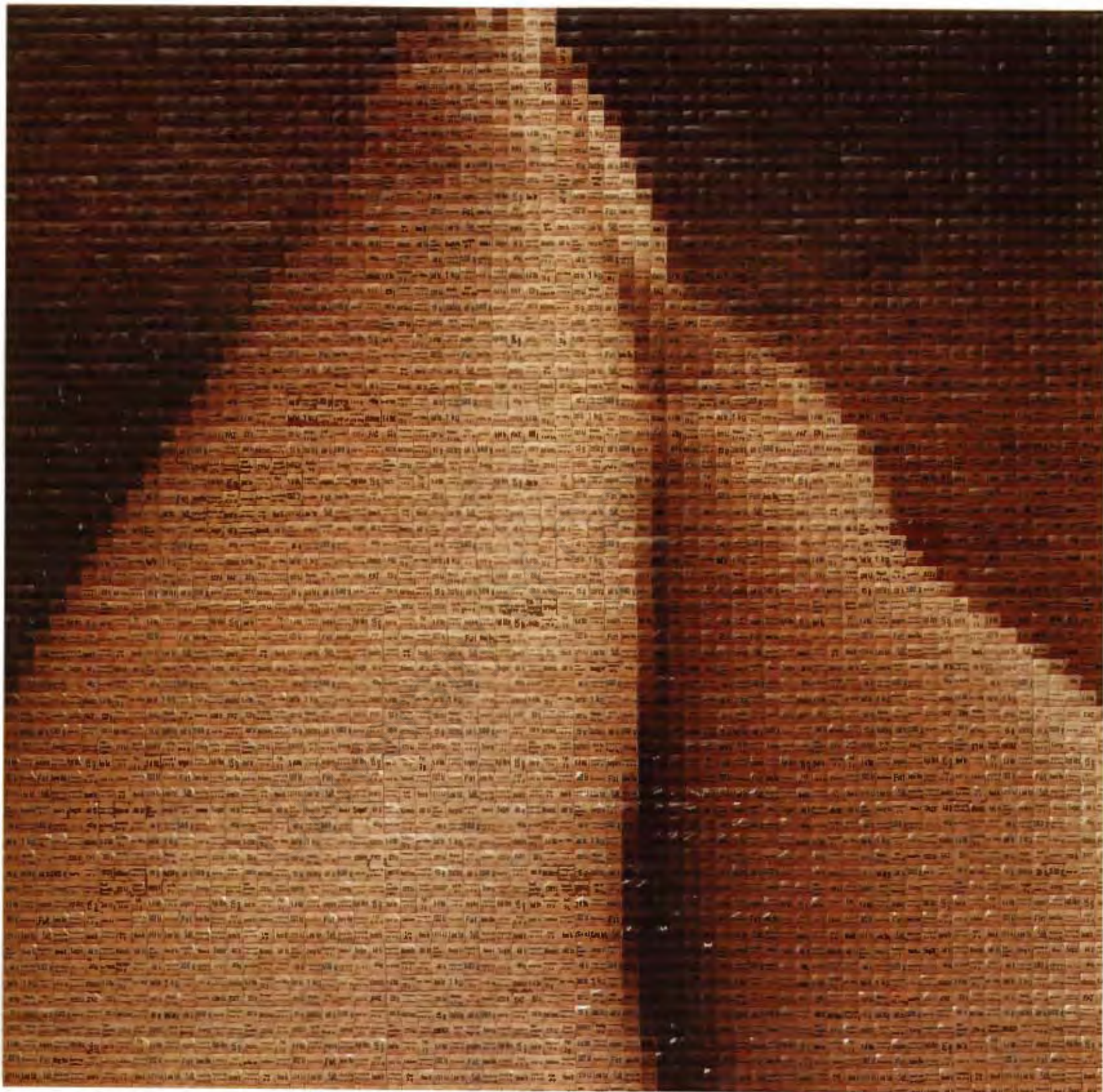


Figure 51. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Recommended Daily Allowance*.

Recommended Daily Allowance

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

The thighs are portrayed here, another part of the body regarded as problematic to women, often falling victim to strenuous workouts and diets in a bid to combat cellulite. The experience of anorexia prompted an obsessive drive to keep track of the thighs by measuring the gap between them while standing in front of a mirror. Text from nutritional information

labels found on food products makes up the encoded aspect of this work, since analyzing these is one of the obsessive activities many anorexia sufferers are involved with. From counting calories to comparing the sugar and fat contents, these items are judged accordingly. Taken straight from their sources, these words and numbers, usually small and barely legible, and relatively insignificant compared to the more appealing parts of food packaging, have been enlarged here to suggest that, to the anorexic, these elements are more important when making the choice of whether or not to buy a certain food.

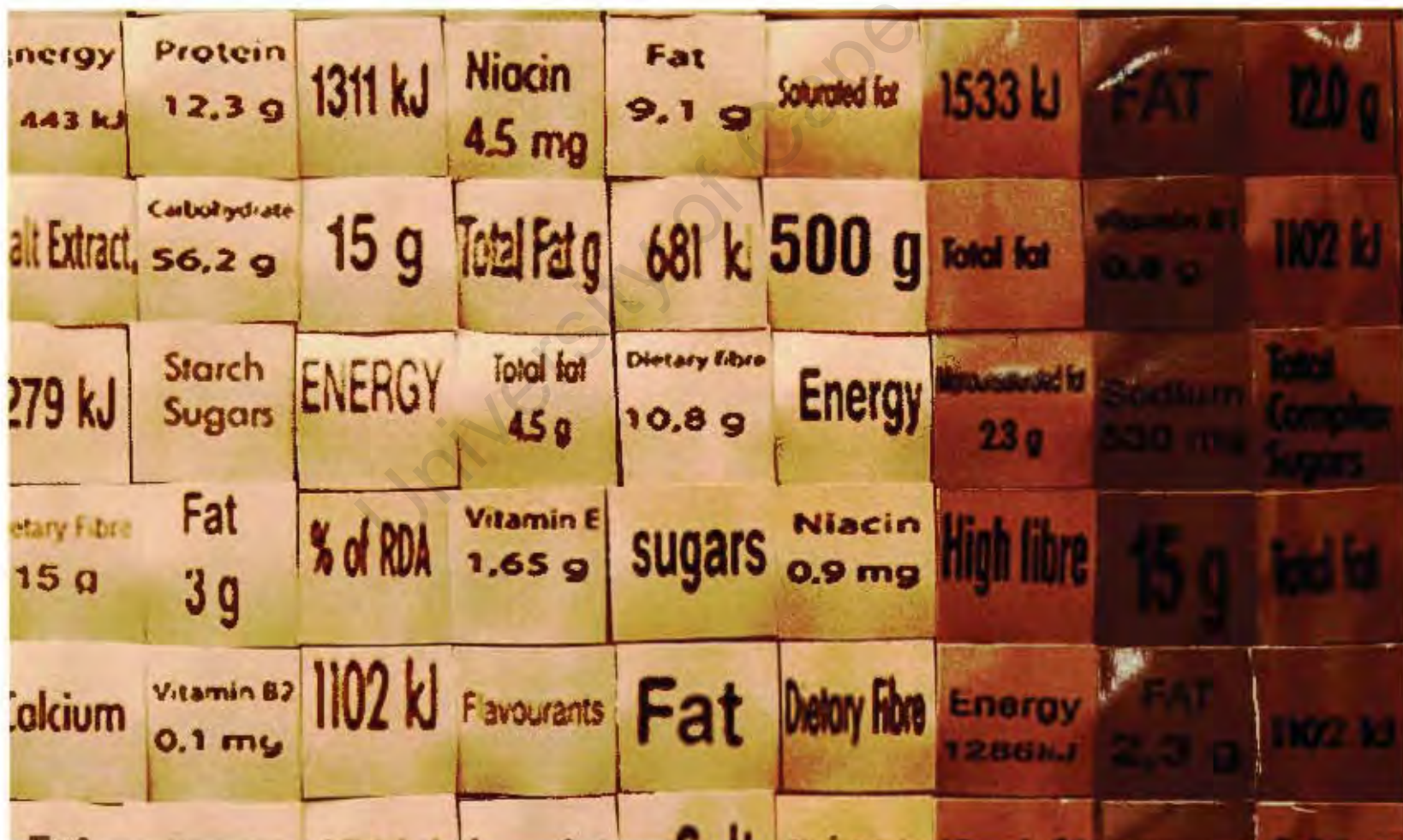


Figure 52. Pamela Stretton. 2004. *Recommended Daily Allowance* (detail).



Figure 53. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Help Yourself*.

Help Yourself

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

This work, generally of the legs, focuses on the knee in an otherwise fairly abstract image. Legs are body parts, like breasts, which can be regarded as assets to some women, and are often looked at by men in terms of defining an attractive woman. The legs, rather than being a part of the body which is problematic in terms

of flesh and curves, are often the parts, for anorexics, which show the destructive nature of the disease first, losing muscle, shape and strength, and raising suspicions about the condition. The encoded aspect of this work is drawn from self-help literature written on the subject of eating disorders. The often anecdotal nature of the titles of many of these books shed light on some of the obsessive and dangerous lengths that sufferers will go to when dealing with these disorders, and provide a different perspective from which to consider them, as opposed to the usual psychological and medical terms.



Figure 54. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Help Yourself* (detail).



Figure 55. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Shop Right*.

Shop Right

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

This work, similar to *More or Less*, is the curve of the hip and the top of the leg with a slight view of part of the breast seen over the arm. The creases appearing on the inside of the curve disrupt the otherwise

smooth appearance of the skin and enhance the idea of the uncomfortable position one needs to be in to view the body from this angle. Encoding in this image is provided by variations of one simple and recognizable icon, the barcode. The intention here is to bring to mind anything and everything to do with consumerism and the female body, from the consumption of food, to the consumption of media images, to the consumption of fashion and so on.



Figure 56. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Shop Right* (detail).



Figure 57. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Access Denied*.

Access Denied

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

The mouth, as an important part of the face rather than the body, is the focus of this work. While it is not understood, in the context of the other works, as a problematic body part, it nevertheless plays an important role in terms of an eating disorder and ultimately has an effect on the body. The ambivalent nature of this feature is in a sense the doorway to the

body, either allowing food to pass through it or not, and in some cases, allowing food to pass out again. In this case the mouth is closed, denying the entry of food, as is the case with anorexia as opposed to bulimia. A combination of iconography from two contradicting areas is what encodes this work, suggesting the often contradictory feelings towards food in the context of an eating disorder. On the one hand there are slogans and words used by advertisers to sell an indulgent food, and on the other hand there is the reference to slimming products and the words that strive to combat the temptations to eat that very indulgent food.



Figure 58. Pamela Stretton. 2005, *Access Denied* (detail).



Figure 59. Pamela Stretton. 2005. *Branded*.

Branded

Digital Inkjet Print on Shellac coated Azon semi-matt
180 g/sm Paper, Flexible Polyurethane Foam and
Medium Density Fibreboard.

1 500 x 1 500mm.

This feature, also part of the face, deals with the notion of perception, not only of oneself, but also of the world around us. The eye takes on a large amount of responsibility in perceiving things and then relaying to the body how it should look. The idea of scrutiny, and in the context of this work, self-scrutiny, is an

action carried out by the eye, which is why the eye in this particular work is looking down at the body. Looking at the world around one is a natural part of deciding how to look, what to wear and how to act. These things, relating clearly to one's appearance, give one a sense of belonging and acceptance. The fashion industry thrives on this notion of appearance, which is why it is focused on in this work. Fashion brands have become known and are linked with status and admiration. The bombardment of these brands in consumer society is what this work is drawing attention to.



Figure 60. Pamela Stretton, 2005. *Branded* (detail).

CONCLUSION



The intent of this paper has not been to investigate visual images and anorexia as a simple cause and effect scenario, but rather to focus on the body as a communicative mechanism, and as a means of expression. The focus on consumer society and fashion photography is therefore in the context of visual imagery, as a means to discuss the medium as an interesting form of feminine representation, as well as its relation to technology, rather than to put forward this phenomenon as a possible cause of anorexia. Art, in its many forms, is also a communicative mode of expression, and is extremely insightful in terms of the female body in this regard, which is why it has been necessary to discuss in terms of its influence and roles in terms of this subject.

In the case of most psychological therapy, psychologists and psychiatrists encourage their patients to continually express their feelings about things that worry them. This Master of Fine Art project, in a sense could be seen as a latent form of the actual body's expression. Looking at a personal experience in the context of this dissertation and in terms of the body of work has allowed for the arrangement, organization and ultimate documentation of thoughts and views in a manner that is open to endless creative freedom. A major underlying aspect of anorexia lies in the idea of self-perception and the unhealthy relationship between a woman and her body. This body of work sheds light on this phenomenon in that it depicts the body as seen

from a personal perspective. Making artworks of the body, and then being able to look at them on a wall afterwards (along with any other viewer), has made way for a better, and ultimately more relaxed attitude towards the body.

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