



Addressing Body Image Through Self Portraits Based on a Disability Aesthetic

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
Proficient Visual Arts

Keywords: Disability Aesthetic, Beauty Myth, drawing, monoprints, self-portraits, body image.

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: *Disability Aesthetics*, a concept and method in visual art studies, encourages people to open their view of what is beautiful and pleasing to see. This unit introduces disability aesthetic to high school students with two years of previous art experience during a portrait drawing lesson. Students will read and write about society's current ideals of beauty and beauty norms while creating a portrait that does not adhere to these standards of 'normalcy.' This will help allow students to redefine their personal identities as well as their personal standards of what is visually acceptable, especially in regards to the innate beauty of the human body. While investigating the idea that brokenness in the human structure can be equally or more attractive than the harmonious whole, students will also confront the notions of what it means to be 'human.' The background information covers disability aesthetics, beauty myth in western culture and around the world, and various relevant artists and writers. Students will journal about how body image and beauty norms play a part in their daily lives. Through reading excerpts, critiques of artwork, and Socratic seminars students will try to build a new concept of relevant beauty norms for the class.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 15 students in Proficient Visual Arts.

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Brooke E. Colby

Introduction

As a child I was exposed to a lot of body image stereo types through my father's part time career as a weight trainer and body builder. Although I now feel that many of my father's ideas on body image were skewed, he had an interest in the human body and how it worked, to such an extent that he collected skeletons of native and barn animals in order to put them together, or just to see the variation in how bones grew, broke, and healed. He was an emergency medical technician and frequently was called upon to help those that were infirm or had various medical problems. I vividly remember some of the community members that my father interacted with, George "the Indian," who, looking back now, was probably a veteran suffering PTSD; Clay the "guy on a bicycle," had been in a terrible motorcycle accident and was lucky to be alive, even if he had damaged parts of his brain; and Steve the blind video game arcade owner. These were people that many of my young school friends were afraid of, but my parents regularly interacted with as business owners in a small community. Taking my parents lead, I did not understand why these people were scary or a source of entertainment for my friends by making fun of them behind cupped hands. To me they were not any different than my grandmother or aunt who both suffered from polio as children and now had muscle deterioration and post-polio syndrome. Of course the fact that my father collected skeletons earned me my own place in which I could be made fun of. Children often just do not understand the implications of their actions until an adult steers them in the right direction.

Many children are never exposed to those with a disability until they enter school and even then it is a difficult topic to address. My goal is to allow students to explore their own body image, society's ideal body image, and how a person with a disability fits into that scheme of things. When teaching art my students always want to draw portraits but they are always complaining about being "ugly" or not drawing features so that they are picture perfect and I always wonder how any of them could not be happy with how they are all so very different, interesting, and beautiful. We see a similar idea expressed in *Disability Aesthetics* according to Tobin Seibers;

Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body-and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty- as the sole determination of the aesthetic. Rather disability aesthetics embraces

beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result. ⁱ

What if we tried to change our view of society's body image? What if we no longer bought into the lithe blond models with chiseled muscles and perfect eyebrows? What if students became anthropologists and explored just how much time they allowed image to take over their thinking and interactions? I know that even as aware as I am of how preposterous this ideal body is, I succumb to the pressure of creating a semblance of that ideal in myself. It is much harder for teen age students to fight against that norm when socializing with peers is a major part of their current life experience. Disability has a lot to teach about this fight against normalcy:

Disability is not an object – a woman with a cane- but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses. Just as the conceptualization of race, class, and gender shapes the lives of those who are not black or, or female, so the concept of disability regulates the bodies of those who are “normal. “In fact, the very concept of normalcy by which most people (by definition) shape their existence is in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather, the concept of disability is a function of a concept of normalcy. Normalcy and disability are part of the same system. ⁱⁱ

As an artist I have a love for the human body and primarily create figures as a part of my art making process. I find interest in the curves and twists and uniqueness of every individual. The landscape of the body is inherently beautiful. This in a way was inherited through my father's interests in body building, his idea of a perfect body, and my mother's inability to ever reach his goal. I, of course always saw my mother as the most beautiful woman no matter what her body shape was. I still see that beauty even now as her weight has led to other health problems which impede her from being as mobile as she once was. As an artist in college my roommate and I challenged a few ideas of what was beautiful in artwork on our campus and held women centered art shows, graphically displaying sculptures of the female genitalia at the Vagina Monologues that earned us some recognition/reputation. That was very liberating to me personally and I continue with figurative artwork that is non-traditional using multimedia and abstracting the figure/ground relationship. I also find the bones and organs to be visually interesting and transfer illustrations from texts into my watercolor paintings. I have been heavily criticized but also praised. My students would benefit from a confidence boost if they were able to have a similar experience of challenging the norm through creating non-traditional, imperfect representations of themselves, and rise above the social expectation with new outlooks.

Background

I have been teaching high school students for 7 years now and while some fads have changed since I was in high school other things have not. I regularly see students bullied by other students. Not always in a seriously hurtful or mean way, the students think they are “playing” with each other. The students are actually picking out small characteristics related to each other’s face, clothing, skin color or body type that do not follow the ideal we see in the American media. As the students interact in this way they sometimes not only pick on each other about looks but about their intelligence. Students call each other out, saying they are slow, if someone doesn’t understand the assignment immediately or makes a mistake. They would rarely make fun of a student with a disability in a direct and hurtful way, but by publicly pointing out flaws in their peers, who they see as nondisabled, a group of children inadvertently alienates any child that may have a disability. In my eyes and from my own experiences it does not seem like playing, it can still be hurtful. Any small comment can leave large scars. This type of playing can be unusually harsh when there is a student with a disability involved. Many times average students do not ever realize what they are saying or the impact of their actions. I see this taken to higher level in this age of social networking and instant gratification through the internet.

This type of teasing comes from a common, and very narrow, societal idea of beauty and aesthetics. Aesthetics track the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies. “A disability aesthetic does not recognize the beauty of an average body, it looks to embrace beauty that breaks the standards, thereby becoming more beautiful. By embracing and accepting disability we enriches notions of the aesthetic, while rejection limits the definition of artistic ideas and objects.” Daily we have discussion on problem solving and thinking outside the box in order to create new artwork or solve new tasks in some other discipline. Creative problem solving is a highly prized skill in the today’s workforce. People that can think on their feet and find a newer, bigger, brighter, better Idea are the people who will go the furthest in our high stakes competitive society. By opening students up to creating their own beauty ideal that goes beyond that of what the current social media pushes on them they will develop more open ended ideas of what is beautiful in art, in society and in themselves. By studying disability and disability aesthetics students will develop more open ended ideas about their own body image and look at the idea of a norm in a whole new light.

Where did the idea of the “normal” come from? The concept of a norm or average did not arrive in Europe until the Nineteenth century with the beginning of statistics.ⁱⁱⁱ Until then disabilities were just a part of life. People lived with a missing arm and made the most of it. Families took care of each other if there was deafness, blindness, or many other impairments. In early societies people born with cognitive impairments were not seen as being a burden on society or seen as being different from any one else. Everyone in ancient civilizations on the North American continent believed that each person was

born with a gift to contribute to the betterment of the entire society. Therefore a person with a club foot may be left in the village to help care for children while men hunted and women gathered.^{iv} That is unless the group was prone to war or of a warrior culture. In those instances then the men were expected to be of the most powerful and agile type. As more and more Europeans came into the American they introduced industrialization and independence where each person had a job in which they were paid for their services. A person that was incapable of labor and creating an income for themselves was considered disabled. As the work force became more segregated from the disabled less of the community were willing to put forth the resources to help, and laws were created to support those with disabilities. It is ironic to me that as we became more independent we had to actually create laws to support those who were supported by a traditional indigenous culture. As Nielson states, "In real life, however, just as in real democracy, all of us are dependent on others. All of us contribute to and benefit from the care of others... We are an interdependent people."^v Statistics were the key to tracking the numbers of healthy people or people with disability within society. This was when the norm of the "average" person began to develop. This can also be called rationalization.

Rationalization abstracts and simplifies us through bureaucratic structures. Things and people must fit into preexisting patterns and templates for modern information systems to process them. Rationalization appears in our everyday lives as ready-to-wear clothing, interchangeable parts, check boxes on forms, and social security numbers.^{vi}

Students are more apt to be susceptible to wanting to fit within the boxes that rationalization provides. They are just starting to figure out who they are and what they believe in independently of their parents or teachers and are hungry to make choices on their own, while still feeling the pressure to not push the envelope. As a society we are obliged to act, feel, and look normal at almost any cost; be it through clothing, cars, faces and bodies creating enormous commercial markets, fueling consumer capitalism.^{vii}

Content

Teaching a visual art class I stay mostly based in observational drawing, figure drawing, portraits, and design based off of nature. To me nature is beautiful. I see the beauty in how broken bones heal themselves, in how beaver and wasps can build elaborate homes from sticks and mud. I am always nervous when approaching portrait drawing with the students. Many times they are excited and yet very anxious. No one wants to draw an "ugly" picture. Mostly I have tried to move them away from exact likenesses through the use of gesture drawing, meandering lines, and alternative backgrounds on which to create. By changing up the medium and approach I hope to move away from what is "pretty" and what is not. I want them to create interesting thoughtful art. I have found that it is harder and harder to do that in this era of "selfies." Everyone can quickly take a picture, alter the color and filter, then post it to their choice of social media and hope for

as many “likes” as possible. Instagram and facebook breed a culture of sameness and perceived normalcy that further alienates any person with a disability or difference of any kind. It is hard enough to fit in without having a noticeable difference from others, or feeling as if one isn’t “quick enough to catch on to a joke or social structure.

Does body image play a part in fitting in? What part? Where do students who are different because of disability fit in? Do they overcome their difference or do they compensate in some other way to fit in with their peers? What areas do they feel most pressure to be “beautiful”? Is it figure? Body size? Face? Color? Personal adornment? Students constantly study each other via social media as well as their personal image ticking off where they fit in, who they fit in with, and where they rank in popularity. Students are constantly attached to their smart phone devices finding new ways to communicate and share their personal image. We are a culture that is enticing everyone to “look at me!” while at the same time alienating each other if a mold is not fit. “Spectacles elicit wonderment,”^{viii} and so the rise of YouTube and Vine. We encourage others to stare and look but only if we want them to do so, because we are trying to be appealing. Before a worldwide web there was art to make us stare and wonder and ask questions.

One of the ways that I hope to open students’ minds to the variety of the human face and form is through the writings of Lucy Grealy. Lucy Grealy’s writing of when she was a young girl with cancer of the jaw starts with a young child unaware of the importance of her appearance to the rest of the world. To her she is just special because she is receiving extra care and attention by being in the hospital. As she gets older and more aware of her situation as a teen age girl living with chemotherapy she becomes more self-aware of the part her appearance plays in the world around her. It is astounding to read in her autobiography that very few adults spoke directly to her about what was happening to her body and the final affects that it may have on her over all well-being as she grew older. Were they shielding her or were they unable to form what they felt were the proper words and dialogue to have with a child so young and yet not entered into the adult world of appearances being of high importance? Although teen age girls still placed high importance on their physical attractiveness to their peers I am afraid that modern girls have a heavier cross to bear when it comes to their appearances, and many are completely enslaved by making a “face” for themselves through social media.

In contrast to Lucy’s very real and sometimes humorous look at her early life, Anne Patchett wrote a book, “Truth and Beauty,” that chronicles their friendship after college. Anne talks much about how everyone at Sarah Lawrence knew Lucy and even cheered her on at her job at a movie theater as an usher and announcer. While reading I found it interesting how different groups of people viewed Lucy in different situations during her life. Twice Anne describes Lucy as a “mascot.” I wonder whether these groups of people raised her to that level because they pitied her the facial deformity from her cancer or because they truly saw past it. During Anne’s visit to see Lucy in Scotland

for one of the many surgeries a group of boys cajole and bully the two girls much as the children did when Lucy was in school. This cycle continues throughout the story, always with Lucy searching to really belong to someone as a lover. While this story is not totally appropriate for high school age children the contrast of what Lucy and Anne write about their life is a topic for discussion when thinking of social dynamics. Anne focuses on Lucy's constant search for belonging, needing reassurances that she is loved by Anne, all as a consequence of a lowered self-esteem from her illness and surgeries.

Naomi Wolf explains in *The Beauty Myth* that a male dominated culture is happiest to imagine a beautiful woman and an intelligent woman but only if they are at odds with one another creating a winner and loser. This I feel holds true also for men. We see the comic nerd in current sitcoms, the nice boy that isn't handsome and is therefore socially inept and unable to talk to let alone date a "beautiful" woman. He is beleaguered to only date woman of his own status. She also discusses at length the problem that the modern woman faces and wishes not, that her body image face, hair, and clothing weigh heavily on her mind and determine her actions throughout her daily life. Wolf goes on to state that "'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact."^{ix} The myth of beauty has not always been this way. In ancient times there were many matriarchal Goddess religions in which the women was powerful and took on young expendable men whose nice looks were only for sowing the divine womb. This aligns with the theory that ideals only belonged to the gods and were not worthy of the average human being. According to the Greeks both the Male and Female deities were created with exemplary bodies, not to be on the same level as the average human being.

The art of Diane Arbus is a wonderful example of finding average people and creating hauntingly beautiful photographs. Her artwork tends to scrutinize reality and upon that scrutiny reality becomes fantastic. She finds that gap between a person's intent and the actual effect they may have on others^x. She photographs people, regular people, "freaks," friends and finds that space between what the people intend with their appearance and having them photographed and how a viewer would perceive the subject and their world. This directly relates to the current trend of the "selfie" Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram. We all want to portray a certain aura and sense of self to the rest of society, only now we do that on a global level. This globalism should be opening our eyes to different ideas of beauty not narrowing it to further unattainable features of thinness, blondness, white and vanilla, bland beyond having a personality. By viewing and staring at people who are different from what we know, in culture, skin color, body shape, anything, we open our minds allowing for even more stimuli and new experiences.

When people with stareable bodies...enter the public eye, when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of the

bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies.^{xi}

Tobin Siebers book, “Disability Aesthetic” will be very helpful and lend reading excerpts for class discussion. I especially want to discuss with students the quote, “But all bodies are not created equal when it comes to aesthetic response. Taste and disgust are volatile reactions that reveal the ease or disease with which one body might incorporate another. Senses revolt against some bodies, while other bodies please them.” This is as simple as how one student may find the color green appealing, while another finds green repulsive. By breaking down aesthetics about art and body image into such simple terms I hope to help students overcome the ingrained aesthetic born of American media, which plays such an important role in teenage lives. Through the media and other cultural sources influence, we replace a natural reaction with idealist and disembodied conceptions of art. Disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken and yet is not less beautiful but more so as a result. Can I help my students change their aesthetics? And in doing so can I help them build their confidence in art making ability and over all confidence in themselves?

We will also explore the art of Niki de Saint Phalle and how she pushed the normal idea of female beauty with her Nana series. These large colorful figures were her embodiment of a positive female mentality. De Saint Phalle strove to interact with as large and audience as possible to engage people in carefree imaginative play. She hopes that this interaction would lead society into a better world bound by the principles of Love, Harmony, and humanity^{xii}. Niki also lends an interesting dynamic by way of her personal life. Not only did she start her career as a model for top magazines such as Vogue, but she was institutionalized for a nervous breakdown. It was during this time in recuperating that she discovered her love for art and creative self. By leading a discussion on how the pressure of keeping the norm in her career and creating non-norm following figures of women, students will be able to understand how a person can overcome influence.

I would like for students to create self-portraits that portray things about their personality that are important, or to even just take the idea of rearranging their facial features. I will be working with students in the Advanced and Proficient levels of Visual Arts. These students have had a minimum of two years previous visual arts experience and should possess a decent understanding of drawing concepts, proportion, rendering, etc. Specifically, students should be able to draw a person realistically, knowing the proportions and the proper way to created volume through shading and value. They should also have experience with the use of a variety of art materials, such as charcoal, watercolor, acrylic, collage, and printmaking techniques. The self-portraits should consist of multiple mediums applied to a canvas or board backing. In order to fully

develop the portraits the students will have to practice daily sketching of others faces, figures, as well as their own face or figure. I prefer to do this from observation than from a photograph as the photograph does a lot of the work for the student in determining how to create a three dimensional figure as a two dimensional artwork. In between sketching and drawing practice students would also experiment and create miniature artworks with a variety of media to determine what they are most comfortable and experienced at before they begin their final portrait. The research of various cultures as well as journaling and observation of their peers will hopefully influence the way in which students choose to portray their own image. The final self-portrait will focus on finding the flaw in the creation of the art and emphasizing it. This may be a “mistake” in proportion or shape that happened while the student was drawing and applying the medium. The emphasis could be an area of texture in the background that contrasts highly making the image distorted; or even using just one facial feature to be emphasized out of proportion or color or texture from the rest of the portrait.

I would start the unit with traditional proportions, but only as a reviewing the facial measurements, etc. I would continue with some gestural sketches, either from a mirror or allowing students to model for each other. Moving on from portraits the progression would next be figurative. Again I would use a model, slides of artworks and artists mentioned herein, and even magazine figures. I would start with the “traditional” proportions allowing student to study the relationship between limbs and torso. Studying these relationships typically helps students actually “see” what they want to draw instead of “know” what they are drawing. Analytically studying the figure and human body in its many variations, for me, is more interesting than the most perfect model. I hope to inspire that interest in my students through discussion of aesthetics and disability combined with art and literature excerpts. At this point it would be interesting to introduce the Greek Ideals exemplified in their sculptures of the gods. Greek sculpture may create a perfected body with chiseled muscles on men and thin waists with high breasts for women, but these were intended to be an Ideal, meant only for the gods. Humans were not expected to meet the same type of ideals. I would introduce the Aphrodite of Milos (Venus de Milo) and “Alison Lapper Pregnant,” along with the quote from Lennard Davis, “The concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm.”^{xiii} Both sculptures depict a woman missing arms, in white marble. The Aphrodite was the Greek Ideal of beauty, just that an Ideal not a norm, and yet that has developed into what Americans expect as a norm. Alison Lapper is a woman who was born without arms and with truncated legs, a condition called phocomelia. The sculpture of her has elicited a range of responses from interest to repulsion as it was displayed on the fourth plinth at Trafalgar square in London. Why is it that in our minds we replace the missing limbs on the Aphrodite sculpture but cannot overlook their absence on the sculpture of Alison Lapper?

During this time of vigorous sketching, checking proportions, undoing proportions, and loosening up our drawing skills, I will introduce some of the ideas about disability aesthetic and the myth about beauty in our culture. Students will take time to first discuss society and our beauty myths. We will examine the majority of advertising and discuss what audience was intended and how they are influenced by what they see in commercials. Students will be encouraged to discuss whether this notion of beauty is realistic or not. Students will also read and discuss selected excerpts from Lucy Grealy's autobiography. I would then have them practice journaling their day and how much of it revolves around their appearance. How many times a day do they check the mirror? How often do they or their friends discuss appearance? Do not forget to pay attention to their own home. How is issue of beauty and disability perceived by their parents? This would be an ideal time to introduce some ideas by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson about staring. As a society we take in most of our information through sight. Students will be observing their peers in person and most likely through social media. The popularity of social networking sights adds more emphasis on using our sight as a means of communication. In her autobiography Lucy addresses her reactions to people's stares. It is also a topic that Anne Patchett spends time discussing in her novel. Anne is protective of Lucy when going through surgeries while Lucy wavers from just accepting the stares to embracing popularity as a kind of mascot while in college. We also use the act of staring as a part of our social interactions among strangers as a way to categorize these people into safe or not safe. This is a delicate matter of sorting through a web of perceptual indicators allowing us to to categorize people so that we may know how to respond to them. This will be another aspect of journaling and watching that students will have to think about and record as they find themselves in the act.

After this anthropologic experience I would have them turn to students in the school with disabilities and where they stand in the scheme of society and our idea of what is a pleasing appearance. This year is the first year that my high school has had a self-contained Autistic Program and it has been interesting to watch the student's reactions. Some of the art students have independently embraced their peers with Autism and started a painting club. However, the goal is to focus on body differences and students may have to look outside of school and observe people in a variety of everyday actions and locations. This could be an observation about their own disability or a friend or family member. It could be an anonymous encounter they have observed at the mall or airport.

I would encourage students to look at both male and female stereotypes not only in our American culture but in at least one other culture or ethnic group. We can then compare and contrast the ideas of beauty and disability from those cultures with how beauty and disability is perceived in American culture. They would also be a difference between traditional culture of a country and how they younger generations are changing from that traditional stereotype. Students should draw conclusions about beauty and how it leads a society's interactions. I would like to focus on cultures such as the Maori and

some African tribes that use scarification of the face as well as piercings and lip or ear plugs to modify the body. We would discuss how these types of modifications represent beauty in these cultures. Then ask the question does a lip plug so large become a disability? Can tens of neck rings finally become too much a burden as the collar bones are slowly crushed into the thoracic cavity, to the women of northern Thailand? Can this modification hinder these women? Is it a disability created out of societies search for beauty? How can this be compared to the modern high heel, where higher is better? Or is there no disability in this culture because like indigenous North Americans there was no concept of disability until the European arrived? We should also examine the Nigerian Wodaabes, whose men wear make-up and compete through dance in beauty contests for the women of the tribe, the exact opposite of the American Beauty Pageant. Images from all of these cultures should be discussed as well as have the students find their own images from other cultures that raise the issue of what is the line between disability and beauty? Contemporary art and artists, such as Harriet Sanderson's "Cane Shoes" and Doug Auld's luminous photos of burn victims, can also be used as a discussion point on what current beauty conventions are actually disabling even when society does not think of them that way.

Students would also be exposed to the art of other students with disabilities using artwork from the VSA/Volkswagen arts competition (<http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/programs/momentum.cfm>). I have chosen the VSA/Volkswagen art competition because it targets artists within the age range of sixteen to twenty-five. We would discuss the competition the variety of disabilities among the students entered and then critique and discuss the artwork. I would also lead the students through discussions of how the artwork portrays the artist's identity through their artwork and their disability^{xiv}. The article is enlightening by presenting the students identity as both an artist and a person with a disability. Through the creation of art the participating artists feel as if they can celebrate their differences. Many also felt that art was the catalyst to help them claim an identity pertaining to their disability. They were often able to use art as a coping tool for the negative association with their disability, whether that be pain, fear, social stigma, or anxiety. Art creation allowed most of the artists to move toward the Normalization or affirmation identity for their disability. Each year the exhibition features a different theme within the artists are able to create. By focusing not just on their own interactions and ideas and trying to make a statement for the general good, young people learn to use their creativity outside of the norm.

Other contemporary artists that should be introduced would be Harriet Sanderson (www.harrietsanderson.com) and Riva Lehrer (www.rivalehrerart.com). Harriet Sanderson is a woman with post-polio syndrome and fibromyalgia which places her in a world of constant, chronic pain and muscle weakness. Her artwork is focused on the tension between keeping a public appearance that is functional and independent and the inner strife of dealing with chronic pain.

The public self, especially the feminist public self attempting to actualize independence through meaningful work and other rights of citizenship, butts up against the need to maintain a predictable and respectful privacy in personal matters such as grooming, eating and resting. The conflict creates havoc in forming a self-image of assertiveness when at the same time one is dependent on partners, caregivers or medications, all of which can be frustratingly unpredictable.^{xv}

Riva Lehrer is an artist born with Spina Bifida. Riva's work focuses on people's physical identity as well as political themes, especially in regards to disability. She has many different series each focusing on a different issue or theme. The Circle Stories creates portraits of activists, artists, writers, and actors with disability who are in turn making a statement about the role of disability in their lives through their own work and activism. Lehrer uses the style of Magical Realism to create a story like world for the subject and creates social or political commentary for the viewer. Lehrer uses the idea of the wheel from a wheel chair and the ongoing conversation she has with her subjects as she creates these portraits to act as the circle. Another series that will benefit my students will be the "If Body" paintings of herself. These paintings explore the idea of how we imagine ourselves and our bodies to be in the future. Does that coincide with actuality?

I wonder how many of us become who we have imagined. For me, my relationship to my body is in constant flux, depending on my evolving ideas about disability, and on what is happening to me physically and emotionally as I age. Periods of re-acceptance and deepening understanding of disability alternate with times of utter rejection and physical self-alienation.^{xvi}

This will flow perfectly with how I want to students to start to change their perception of self, image, and the norm.

Another interesting idea about using art as a way to express and identify with a disability is the concept of "Arts Based Resistance learning."^{xvii} The theory is to use oppressive experiences and turn the negativity into positivity through art creation and expression. The process is first to name what action or event is oppressive. Next is to explain of the oppression affects the individual. Third is to create an artwork or writing that portrays the experience and affectation. Fourth tame or transform the negativity to something positive. Next, act upon what positive idea by creating. And finally revisit the oppressor and feelings associated with that oppressor and reassess. This strategy is a good way in which students can work through anxiety of their differences, not just for students with disabilities. Students can use this to fight back at bullying they may have experienced or a feeling of self-consciousness over body image or clothing. They would be fighting against the idea that some cultural norms are considered good while others

bad. More so they would work to redefine how individuals assign good and bad labels to body parts. ^{xviii}

Activities and objectives

I teach High School Visual Arts - specifically Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced Placement Studio Art. This unit is written for these advanced visual arts students - those with at least two years of high school art experience. This level of experience is important because the goals and objectives are directly connected to the state content standards for Visual Arts in North Carolina. The program/department that I teach with recognizes the importance of tiered instructional practices. In general, students in level one or two visual arts are focused on learning the materials and techniques used to create art. They are developing observation skills and experimenting with how materials interact with each other. The level three and four students (Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced) are learning how to analyze and interpret the ways artists manipulate these principles to evoke response, communicate ideas, and make visual art that is both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

My school is average for our city. We have a diverse student body from a range of backgrounds. We do have 42% economically disadvantaged students. The school regularly meets growth expectations in Math, Science, and English. We run on a regular 185 day calendar year. Class schedules are a blend of four classes for 90 minutes for a semester each and eight 90 minute classes on an every other day basis. I aim to complete 8 projects minimum during a full class length of one year on an every other day basis. This means that each full unit will be about 1/8 of the full class instruction. For a class that meets every other day this unit would take me just over one month or 15, ninety minute class periods. I have written lessons that may or may not span two days. I find that some days we discuss more and other days we need more time to actually draw and practice. I like to have the ability to adjust a lesson and not feel crunched for time. This also allows for when students are struggling with a concept or new technique to have more time and feel like my schedule has to be reworked.

Day one and two

North Carolina Essential Standards, Proficient Visual Arts

P.CX.1.1 Understand the role of visual arts in United States history as a means of interpreting past eras within an historical context.

P.CX.1.2 Understand how personal perspective is influenced by temporal context.

P.CX.1.3 Exemplify contemporary art and artists.

P.CX.1.4 Understand how personal aesthetic responses to art are influenced by culture.

P.CX.2.1 Understand the influence of commercial design on personal aesthetics.

To start the unit on addressing body image I would begin with a reading selection from Naomi Wolf's book, "The Beauty Myth" on page 73-76 and follow up with a guided discussion using the following questions:

1. Describe the ways in which women are influenced by media.
2. Even though magazines try to allow women to be a part of a larger culture, how are they actually encouraging women's estrangement on one another?
3. How can that effect society over all? Through social media or bullying?

Another wonderful selection is page 81 to 85 on censorship in popular magazines geared toward women. After the reading I would share the video "Fotoshop by Adobe" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_vVUIYOmJM and "Dove Evolution" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U>. The first video is a satire on the unrealistic standards set for women in western, specifically American Society. The second video is an actual representation of a make-up commercial photo-shoot and accompanying Photoshop retouching for a billboard advertisement. Again we would follow up with a discussion about what the video is really saying about the beauty myth. Next I would share some specific images by Doug Auld and Diane Arbus.

Doug Auld

Rebecca and Louise (diptych), Oil on linen, 40" x 50" ea.

Jelani Oil on linen, 40" x 50"

Diane Arbus

Twin girls with downs syndrome

Old woman in glasses.

Again I would follow up with a discussion, Socratic seminar style, using the guiding questions:

1. Why are these artworks still beautiful and thought provoking without being perfected by Photoshop?
2. Do you think these people feel confident about their image? Why?

3. Where do the people in these artworks fit into this idea of American beauty?
4. Where and how do the people here and others with a physical disability fit into this Beauty Myth?

The final activity for this 90 minute class would be to have students create a collage about how they define beauty using current magazines. We must be sure to include examples of both male and female body image standards in the collages. We will share these either at the end of class (time permitting) or at the beginning of the next class.

I will assign a minor homework assignment for students to post their favorite “selfie” from any social networking website such as Instagram, Facebook, twitter, or Tumblr to our class Edmodo page. We would also introduce journaling as an anthropologist. Students will gather information over the course of a week about their peers, parents, and their own interactions in relation to body image and aesthetic ideals.

Day three and four

P.V.1.1 Use art vocabulary to analyze compositions.

P.V.1.3 Recognize contemporary styles, themes, and genres in art.

P.V.1 Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.

P.V.3 Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.

P.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

On the second day I would start by reviewing the collages of how the students identify beauty and share the self-portrait photos posted to the Edmodo page. We would take a moment to compare and contrast the students’ photos to see if they are confident in their beauty image fitting to their beauty ideal, or analyze how they alter their image to fit a beauty ideal. We will review the ideas presented by the videos in the previous class and decide whether we have realistic ideas about our personal beauty. As a class we should write our own new standard of beauty to work from for the unit.

I would assign some excerpts from the introduction of Tobin Seibers Disability Aesthetics and allow the students to then compare and contrast art from the Greek or High Renaissance with modern artists. Specifically Roman or Greek sculpture, focused on perfected bodies, such as “The Discus thrower” and “Aphrodite of Milos,” compared to art the sculpture “Alison Lapper Pregnant” by Marc Quinn. I will constantly reinforce the disability aesthetic as we begin our drawings.

How does disability aesthetic apply to the following artists and artworks?

Niki De Saint Phalle

Alberto Giacometti

Jean Tinguely

Henri Matisse

Discuss how creating artwork could have helped Niki De Saint Phalle while she was recovering from her breakdown? How could creating have helped her overall wellbeing? Compare and contrast Niki De Saint Phalle's above artworks with the images of her on the cover of Vogue, Elle, and Life magazines. What kind of tension could that have created in her life to be a model for an unrealistic beauty ideal and wanting to create images about women that adhere to a much different aesthetic? This raises the question of who are you? What do you stand for? I would start an activity in which the students partner up, one student is the questioner and the other answers. The questioner simply asks "Who are you?" then records the answers. After 5-7 questions I would have the students slide to the left so there is a new questioner/recorder. The reason for this is that students will sometimes portray themselves differently to different people and I want to have as many different possible answers. The second questioner would only ask 3-4 questions before the students switch and the questioner becomes the person answering "Who are you?" and we repeat the process. The students will collect their answers then try to draw conclusions about how they identify themselves and what possible symbols they could use to portray that identity in a self-portrait. I would relate this back to the journaling exercise and check to see if anyone had any interesting discoveries or interactions they wished to share.

The last activity of the day would be to sketch body parts like the nose, ears, eyes, hands using the operational formats found in the "Art Synectics" book by Rouke. The students should create 4-6 drawings in their sketch books in which the body part is manipulated into a spiral, branching, explosion, stress and flow, or progression. These sketches can be used later to create multiple monoprints as the background on which to draw their final self-portrait.

Day five and six

P.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

P.CX.1.1 Understand the role of visual arts in United States history as a means of interpreting past eras within an historical context.

P.CX.2.2 Understand how knowledge learned in other disciplines is used to solve artistic problems.

Students will continue journaling on the interactions they witness regarding aesthetics. Now they can start to draw conclusions using a disability aesthetic to guide them.

This day we would spend half the class in a computer lab researching a culture and their aesthetic ideals or traditional concepts of beauty that may be different from our American view. Students should be able to compare and contrast the aesthetics ideals of their chosen culture with a disability aesthetic. Where is the line between beauty and disability? Find an article online then pair with another student of an opposing article and teach each other. Tobin Seibers sections on Disqualification, Oppression, and Nazi art will also provide good talking points for the students to compare their culture. Seibers states, “Disqualification is produced by naturalizing inferiority as the justification of unequal treatment, violence, and oppression.”^{xix} Where in their research can they find an example of Disqualification? How does American Culture create Disqualification? Even within the confines of school culture is there an example of disqualification? Students should also find images of physical ideals of their chosen culture to use for inspiration and will add onto our beauty collage in their sketch books.

There may be or may be time in which to work more on the format sketches of body parts.

I would close with the article, “Body Ritual Among the Nacerima,” by Horace Miner^{xx}, asking students to journal about their reaction, and use this to help them keep an open frame of mind while continuing their anthropologic journal. The article describes bizarre customs and rituals of a society, leaving the reader to believe this is an unknown new society. Only at the end is it revealed to be the health practices of Americans.

Day seven and eight

P.CR.1.1 Differentiate between personal aesthetic response and objective critical response to art.

P.CR.1 Use critical analysis to generate responses to a variety of prompts.

P.V.3 Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.

P.V.3.3 Select appropriate processes and techniques to create art.

Begin the class with art by Alberto Giacometti. Journal and discuss student’s personal aesthetic reaction to his portraits and sculptures. Then introduce Lucy Grealy

through reading excerpts from her “Autobiography of a Face” as well as “Truth and Beauty: A Friendship,” by Anne Patchett. Include photos of Lucy before discussing student’s reactions to her story.

This day should begin portrait drawing of the students. Start with gestural, timed sketches of each other on very large paper using marker. If needed, take time to review facial proportions to help students realize why a drawing may not appear correct. Use these drawings to compare to a disability aesthetic. The drawings should be loose with many layers of line. After this quick warm up, have students use a mirror to start a drawing in sharpie marker. This drawing will continue until the sharpie is dead, so be sure to use new markers. Drawings in this style can be compared to Giacometti’s “muddy” style of painting by creating layers of paint without cleaning his brush and adding charcoal drawing between layers of paint. These will not be finished in a class period, much like the format manipulations of body parts, and can be a filler or an all day studio break from the reading and writing portions of this unit.

Day nine and ten

P.V.1.1 Use art vocabulary to analyze compositions.

P.V.1.3 Recognize contemporary styles, themes, and genres in art.

P.V.2.2 Recognize how personal experience influences the perception of the environment.

P.V.2.3 Understand the relationship of creative expression to the development of personal style.

P.V.3 Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.

P.V.3.3 Select appropriate processes and techniques to create art.

Open with art from Harriet Sanderson, asking the students how does she identify herself? Does her art exemplify a disability aesthetic? This is a good time to review semiotics. What types of symbols are used in her artwork? In the artwork “Scurs,” Sanderson uses altered wooden canes to create high heeled pump shoes as well as to cover the seat of a chair making quite an uncomfortable place to sit, but then standing in the shoes would also prove difficult, if not painful. In this artwork Sanderson explores the difficulty of having chronic physical pain that requires certain accommodations that are not visibly apparent to other people. She is making a statement about the conflict between either constantly 'outing' yourself publicly or privately experiencing pain.

Riva Lehrer's Circle Stories and If Bodies would also provide a journal point for students to explore the symbolism used in her paintings. With Circle Stories I would ask student sto compare a painting with their knowledge of classical renaissance portraiture. What do the objects and poses symbolize? How are the paintings circular or cyclical in nature? If Bodies I think will have an even stronger resonance with the students. Lehrer explores the relationship people have with their body and how they expect to see themselves in the future. She is constantly exploring periods of re-acceptance and deepening understanding of disability alternate with times of utter rejection and physical self-alienation. Can my students relate to that? Even going through adolescents do they have periods of confidence and awkwardness? How does this affect them socially and in their school work?

From this point students should work on combining the monoprints of facial features with their portraits. When drawing I would encourage students to use charcoal or another medium that is difficult to erase. I want them to preserve all the marks to allow for a "muddy" palette. While drawing the class will also discuss emphasis on one feature. Maybe a mistakenly larger drawn eyeball or ear or nose and use that to guide our composition into following a disability aesthetic.

Day ten through fifteen, or end.

Students will be required to create at least two portraits. One portrait may be smaller, 9x12 for practicing the techniques and extra time sketching. The final artwork will have to include 2 or more monoprints of the sketched altered features, as well as be done in charcoal or sharpie to include all marks made. During this time I would constantly reinforce the disability aesthetic by introducing more artwork or re-looping the previous information. I would also encourage students to still journal about how they view beauty in the world around them. We can discuss at the end of the assignment if their ideas of beauty have changed. Are they more likely to be confident in themselves? Are they more open to others and how they look?

The last thing I would do is have the students display their artwork as a gallery show. It would be interesting to include some of the artwork from our autistic program as well as portraits from all levels of the Visual Arts Department. Students would write an artist statement about the process they went through and the information they learned, as to what affect was made on their opinion of beauty, ideals, and disability.

Conclusion

In a global society we must be able to communicate and relate to people of all cultures and all walks of life, even those within our own society that may be different from us. Whether it be skin color, economic status, or a disability that makes a person "different" it is more important than ever to be an open communicator to ensure success. When

students are given the opportunity to explore new ideas or places they will immerse themselves as long as they have a leader to guide them and help them feel secure in the journey they are taking. I believe this unit will benefit my students by giving them the structure and frame work to look at an aspect of themselves and everyday life that can be a scary subject to navigate, how am I supposed to look? The answer is exactly as you are.

ⁱ Siebers, Disability Aesthetic, p.3

ⁱⁱ Davis, Enforcing Normalcy, p.2

ⁱⁱⁱ Davis, Enforcing Normalcy, p.26

^{iv} Nielsen, A Disability History of the United States

^v Nielsen, A Disability History of the United States

^{vi} Garland-thompson p.30

^{vii} Garland-thompson p.30

^{viii} Garland- Thompson, Staring, how we look, p.3

^{ix} Wolf, The Beauty Myth

^x Arbus, An Aperture Monograph, p.2

^{xi} Garland-thompson, staring p.9

^{xii} Schunk, Outside-In

^{xiii} Davis, enforcing normalcy, p.29

^{xiv} boeltzig, sulewski, hasnain

^{xv} www.harrietsanderson.com

^{xvi} www.rivalehrerart.com

^{xvii} Thorley, Art, Disability, learning and the dance of my life.

^{xviii} Davis enforcing normalcy, p.129

^{xix} Seibers, Disability Aesthetic

^{xx} Macionis, Seeing Ourselves, Classic, Contemporary, and Cross-Cultural Readings in Sociology.

Bibliography for Teachers and Students

Arbus, Diane. *Diane Arbus*. Millerton, N.Y: [Aperture, 1972.

I picked this book because it has the most complete artist statement I could find. It also has the most images to pick from.

Benokraitis, Nijole V.. "Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacerima"." In *Seeing ourselves: classic, contemporary, and cross-cultural readings in sociology*. 4th Canadian ed. Toronto: Pearson Education, 2013. 16-19.

The article on the Nacerima will help students take themselves out of the picture when acting as anthropologists. I read this article in college and found it completely fascinating and surprising when I realized who the author was really studying.

Davis, Lennard J.. *Enforcing normalcy: disability, deafness, and the body*. London: Verso, 1995.

This book was interesting when helping to define why society has a norm and where that norm came from.

Grealy, Lucy. *Autobiography of a face*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

I really enjoyed this book. Lucy's experiences as a child were eyeopening and insightful. Her transition into adulthood will be great for my high school students to read while they work on developing a disability aesthetic.

"Harriet Sanderson." Harriet Sanderson. <http://www.harrietsanderson.com/> (accessed October 15, 2013).

Harriet's artwork was very useful as a contemporary artists addressing disability as part of her subject matter.

Nielsen, Kim E.. *A disability history of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.

An interesting history of disability and how it has changed in the United states. This goes very well with *Enforcing Normalcy* and *Disability Aesthetics* when examining why society classifies people.

Patchett, Ann. *Truth & beauty: a friendship*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004.

While this book did not address a disability aesthetic directly, it did give the viewpoint of a close friend of Lucy Grealy. There were only a few moments that I feel are really useful to discuss about Anne and Lucy's relationship.

Phalle, Niki de, Stijn Huijts, and Netherlands Heerlen. *Niki de Saint Phalle: outside-in*. Heerlen, The Netherlands: Schunck, 20112011.

I loved reading this book (the parts in English). Niki was very interesting and the images of her artwork are wonderful. It helped me pick out the works I wanted to use

with my students.

"Riva Lehrer." Riva Lehrer. <http://www.rivalehrerart.com> (accessed October 8, 2013).

Riva's artwork is so profound and inspiring. Not only does she express her own experiences but she has multiple series based on other artists and disability activists.

Roukes, Nicholas. *Art synectics*. Worcester, Mass.: Davis Publications, 1984.

Synectics is a system for developing creative out of the box ideas for art inspiration. I use this book constantly to help me address weaknesses in students' work as well as how to develop and introduce a new lesson.

Siebers, Tobin. *Disability aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

This book was instrumental in helping me to focus my students' view of aesthetics, then go about opening their view. I focused on just a few chapters but the entire book is fascinating and could be referred back to all year long.

Sulewski, Jennifer Sullivan, Heike Boeltzig, and Rooshey Hasnain. "Art and Disability: Intersecting Identities among Young Artists with Disabilities." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2012): 1-21.

The article was interesting even if there was not any definitive outcome of the study. It will be insightful for the students to read about people their own age creating art and living with a disability.

Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: how we look*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

This was a great book that investigates why people stare. I found that the examples used were relevant to high school students. It was also an enjoyable read.

Thorley, Faith. "Art, Disability, Learning and the dance of my life." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 51, no. Special Edition (2011): 205-212.

Wolf, Naomi. *The beauty myth: how images of beauty are used against women*. New York: W. Morrow, 1991.

This books specifically addresses current media and the issue of a beauty myth formed above and beyond the norm. The book does focus more on women specifically and I wanted to be able to address men and women equally. There were also a few chapters that I felt were not high school appropriate.

Reading List for Students

Benokraitis, Nijole V.. "Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacerima"." In *Seeing ourselves: classic, contemporary, and cross-cultural readings in sociology*. 4th Canadian ed. Toronto: Pearson Education, 2013. 16-19.

Grealy, Lucy. *Autobiography of a face*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

Patchett, Ann. *Truth & beauty: a friendship*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004.

Wolf, Naomi. *The beauty myth: how images of beauty are used against women*. New York: W. Morrow, 1991.

Appendix 1: North Carolina Essential Standards Proficient Visual Arts

Note on Numbering: P - Proficient High School Standards, V - Visual Literacy, CX – Contextual Relevancy, CR – Critical Response

Note: Students at the high school level will have the option of studying an individual arts discipline as an area of interest, or specializing or completing a concentration in studies to prepare them for further education and/or a career in the arts. The Essential Standards communicate what students should know and be able to do as a result of instruction at each proficiency level: beginning, intermediate, proficient, and advanced (9-12).

Proficient High School Visual Arts standards are designed for those students who have achieved intermediate level Visual Arts standards at the high school level.

Visual Literacy Essential Standard P.V.1 - Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.

Clarifying Objectives

P.V.1.1 Use art vocabulary to analyze compositions.

P.V.1.2 Understand the relationship between personal expression and design.

P.V.1.3 Recognize contemporary styles, themes, and genres in art.

P.V.2.2 Recognize how personal experience influences the perception of the environment.

P.V.2.3 Understand the relationship of creative expression to the development of personal style.

P.V.3 Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.

P.V.3.3 Select appropriate processes and techniques to create art.

Contextual Relevancy Essential Standard P.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

Clarifying Objectives

P.CX.1.1 Understand the role of visual arts in United States history as a means of interpreting past eras within an historical context.

P.CX.1.2 Understand how personal perspective is influenced by temporal context.

P.CX.1.3 Exemplify contemporary art and artists.

P.CX.1.4 Understand how personal aesthetic responses to art are influenced by culture.

P.CX.2.1 Understand the influence of commercial design on personal aesthetics.

P.CX.2.2 Understand how knowledge learned in other disciplines is used to solve artistic problems.

P.CX.2.3 Understand the value of collaboration with peers to arrive at effective solutions to artistic problems.

Critical Response Essential Standard P.CR.1 Use critical analysis to generate responses to a variety of prompts.

Clarifying Objectives

P.CR.1.1 Differentiate between personal aesthetic response and objective critical response to art.

P.CR.1.2 Critique personal art based on reflective inquiry.

The North Carolina State Essential Standards for Advanced Visual Arts addresses the need for students to be able to now apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression. The clarifying objective within this standard asks that students create original works of art in response to artistic problems, experiences, and observations to represent individual perspectives. The Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced Placement Studio Art students are expected to make use this knowledge to create works that are both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

Students participating in this unit will need to address each of the main standards in order to understand disability aesthetic, how it can be used in art, and how they can start to change their traditional views of beauty. Students use the visual literacy when they are looking at the artwork of Niki de Saint Phalle and Doug Auld and trying to understand what the artist is saying through their images. While the contextual relevancy will be important as we study our own culture and the other cultures in their ideas of beauty and what is normal. Critical response will be important especially while the students are trying to create their own self portrait that exhibits a disability aesthetic. They will have to continually reassess their own artwork as well as discuss the examples of artwork in class.