



VISION 2020

What Do
You See?

A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 98

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



Mass media and technology are almost inextricably linked with both our understanding of the contemporary world and our self-perception. Over the last century, and particularly over the last few decades, visual media has saturated our culture. Advertisements, magazines, television programs, websites, and social platforms have become intrinsic components of our society, often defining and distorting how we see ourselves. Researchers studying this issue find that “even a 5 min. exposure to thin-and-beautiful media images results in a more negative body image state.”¹ The artists in *VISION 2020* use their work to grapple with the impact of visual media and technology on body image in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A few of them also consider how globalization has contributed to an increasingly universal imposition of Western beauty standards in the consumer market. Collectively, their works encourage conversation about beauty ideals, gender, self-perception, and agency in mass media.

Throughout art history, gender and sexuality have impacted societal characterizations of both the artist (typically male) and the subject (often female). Although body ideals affect human

behavior across the gender spectrum, women are more frequently subject to a distorted lens. Often, they are marginalized or sexualized as objects of desire or pressured to conform to a narrow definition of beauty. In what ways do the artists in this exhibition address or perpetuate these problems?

Increasingly, technology contributes to a warped perception of the human form and enables individuals to actively reimagine the body. About forty years ago, artist Elizabeth King became interested in the intersection between artificial and physical representation. Her sculptures appear eerily similar to human bodies, testing distinctions between real and fabricated forms. Inspired by images of herself, her mother, and her grandmother, King’s works give power and voice to female figures in her life. Sonia Landy Sheridan also worked with technology in the second half of the twentieth century and experimented with distorting her own body. Sheridan became the first artist-in-residence for 3M Company and used their new office technologies to create prints that challenged contemporaneous understandings of the body and its parts. In *Sonia through Her Bra*, Sheridan used a 3M VQC photocopier to capture a layered image of her face, hands, and bra. Through the machine, her face becomes enmeshed with a socially constructed symbol of femininity. Do King’s and Sheridan’s applications of technology foreshadow the now-ubiquitous use of digital tools to manipulate and idealize bodies?

Recognizing commercially imposed beauty standards, Wardell Milan, Chike Obeagu, Yi Chen, and Richard Lindner reference beauty paragons in consumer media as a means to question their validity. The artists explore magazine culture—images that demand attention at supermarket checkout lines, pile up in waiting rooms of doctor’s offices, and now even permeate websites and apps on electronic devices—as symbols of commercial society. While these consumer products may seem harmless, researchers find that advertisements referencing beauty ideals can directly affect body image and impair cognitive and behavioral functioning.

In their works, Milan and Obeagu use magazine imagery and text to explore the effects of beauty stereotypes and sexualized bodies on urban social culture. Inspired by semipornographic

magazines scattered around the streets of Harlem, Milan developed a series that grapples with the influence of hypersexualized depictions of women in mass media. His work raises questions about not only the agency of the subject but also the consumer's gaze. Obeagu contends with similar issues in his portrayal of Nigeria's capital, incorporating phrases from magazines and newspapers that promote beauty aspirations: "All You Need is Great Hair," "Great Expectations," and "Asking for it?" Language, like visual media, has the power to distort how we imagine the body. What do these phrases assert about social constructs of beauty? How does race factor into the global beauty and fashion markets?

Chen also considers the effects of a globalized consumer market and the imposition of Western standards of beauty. He uses oil paints, rather than appropriated magazine images, to produce amalgamations of abstracted and distorted forms. In a statement for the Chinese American Arts Council, he expressed that his "collage works meld together facial features of models and media figures to create characters that form a new hybridized vision of the human race." By doing so, he challenges the notion of a universal and narrowly focused set of beauty ideals. In *Easy, Breezy, Beautiful, Cover Boy-Refurbished*, Chen also mimics the well-known CoverGirl cosmetics slogan and directly references the role of gender in consumer beauty markets.

Decades before researchers concluded that the normalization of thin-and-beautiful ideals in mass media can lead to body image disturbance, Lindner parodied fashion illustrations to contend with issues of dysmorphia. After working for magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Fortune*, he left commercial media to create his own interpretations of the human form. In *Untitled (Two Figures)*, he defies the ideal type that consumer outlets promote and, like Chen, presents a more androgynous vision of the body. What is the role of gender expression in Chen's and Lindner's respective work?

Tony Oursler, the final artist featured in this exhibition, also grapples with issues of self-perception. In an interview in 2011, he stated: "I love the idea that you could somehow technically describe human behavior—there is an absurdity to that, but at the same time something fresh about the desire to understand ourselves."



Two decades into the twenty-first century, the influence of mass media and technology on individual and societal perceptions of the body seems to be ever increasing. Psychology researchers have become progressively aware of correlations between media consumption and mental health, noting how the celebration of hyper-idealized bodies in visual media can shape judgments of ourselves and others.² Advances in technology and the pervasive nature of consumer culture have tainted our vision in 2020. Through different media and means of distortion, the artists in *VISION 2020* explore the effects of socially imposed and predominantly Western beauty standards on the human psyche. Have any artworks in *VISION 2020* transformed your perception of human behavior in relation to visual media? Have any altered how you see yourself?

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NOTES

1. Yuko Yamamiya et al., "Women's Exposure to Thin-and-Beautiful Media Images: Body Image Effects of Media-Ideal Internalization and Impact-Reduction Interventions," *Elsevier, Body Image* 2, no. 1 (2005): 74–80, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1740144504000737>.
2. Brit Harper and Marika Tiggemann, "The Effect of Thin Media Images on Women's Self Objectification, Mood, and Body Image," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 58, no. 9–10 (2008): 649–57, <http://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs11199-007-9379-x.pdf>.

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Milan, Wardell, and Tiffany Smith. "Faculty Member Wardell Milan in Conversation with Tiffany Smith." Faculty Highlights, School of Visual Arts website, October 20, 2016. <http://www.mfaphoto.sva.edu/alice/2016/10/20/faculty-member-wardell-milan-in-conversation-with-tiffany-smith>.

TateShots. "Tony Oursler—Studio Visit." YouTube, January 10, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?-time_continue=12&v=luWozY8NIS0.

CHECKLIST

- Yi Chen, Chinese, born 1974
Easy, Breezy, Beautiful Cover Boy-Refurbished, 2004, oil on canvas
Anonymous gift; 2018.37.37
- Elizabeth King, American, born 1950
Idea for a Mechanical Eye, 1988–90, cast acrylic, wood, brass
Purchased through the Virginia and Preston T. Kelsey '58 Fund; 2008.37
- Richard Lindner, American/German, 1901–1978
Untitled (Two Figures), 1967, lithograph on paper
Gift of Joan A. Sonnabend; PR.977.194
- Wardell Milan, American, born 1977
Smooth Girls No. 11, 2008, mixed media
Anonymous gift; 2018.37.238
- Chike Obeagu, Nigerian, born 1975
City Scape and City Dwellers II, 2015, mixed media; painting and collage
Purchased through a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Hazen, by exchange; 2015.16
- Tony Oursler, American, born 1957
BLA, 2004, acrylic and collage on paper.
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2009.76.1
- Sonia Landy Sheridan, American, born 1925
Sonia through Her Bra, 1970s, copy art; 3M VQC on paper
Gift of the artist; MIS.2004.84.364

The exhibition *VISION 2020: What Do You See?*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, January 11–March 1, 2020.

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Cover: Yi Chen, *Easy, Breezy, Beautiful Cover Boy-Refurbished*, 2004

Inside left: Richard Lindner, *Untitled (Two Figures)*, 1967.
© Richard Lindner

Inside right: Tony Oursler, *BLA*, 2004.
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul

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