

matthew schiavello

# Brave or Beautiful?

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# Brave or Beautiful?

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# 01:

## Overview of the project.

This project, 'Brave or beautiful?' aims to create an opportunity for the viewer to explore their own prejudices about body shape and to reflect upon the impact of these prejudices.

This is done by presenting naked\* bodies (and a few clothed ones), and asking the viewer the question- 'are the models brave for baring all, and/or are they, in their nakedness, an object of beauty?'

This question prompts the viewer to examine their thoughts and beliefs. The implicit is made explicit, and in this process the viewer can examine their internalised process of assessment and judgement, and also gain an awareness of the possible impact/s of that judgement.

\*Why choose to use the work naked, over nude? For this project I will use both, but I prefer the term naked. The word 'nude' conjures imagery of art, of culture, safety and of certain socio-economic classes. I have never been 'nude' in the shower or stood 'nude' as I changed my clothing. 'Naked' on the other hand is raw and suggests vulnerability. Many people I know, myself included, feel vulnerable in their nakedness.

# 02:

## How to get the most out of this book.

This book is designed to give the reader the freedom to engage with it in their own way. It can be read in a linear fashion, or you can select pages or sections at your leisure. The book isn't written in a way that preaches the right or wrong way to perceive the body. Instead it offers up information and suggestions, leaving you to process this information and to use it in a way which feels best for you.

Some people find nudity confronting. This is why each image has an alternate focal point. It is a safe place for the eyes to rest for those who may need time to slowly engage with the nude aspects of the image. The alternative focal point is usually something brightly coloured and attention grabbing: a florescent watchband, a big floppy colourful hat or a bunch of flowers.

A title, or the name of an image can become a focal point, a distraction. They can draw a person in and much time can be spent pondering their relevance. Because of this, none of the images in this publication have names. They are labelled for identification purposes only, with the image number and date.

# 03:

## Our points of reference- do they work for us, or are they outdated and in need of modification?

Our points of reference can be considered templates for our accumulated knowledge, experiences and beliefs. New thoughts and experiences are compared to these templates so that one can quickly decide how they will react to, or how they will use, this new information or experience. In some fields of psychology this is referred to as 'schema'. If we had to think and analyse every single new thought we had, everything we saw or heard, it would be hugely time consuming to the point where walking down the street would be mentally exhausting.

An example: We step outside, feel the warmth of the sun on our faces and we smile without thinking too much at all. There is a template inside of us for 'good' weather, and we instinctively compare what we are experiencing to this template. Using this established reference point is much quicker and easier than stopping and having to analyse all of the sensory information we receive in that moment.

Where do our reference points come from? For some of my own, I vaguely recall being told as a child what to like, what was considered good or bad, and how to behave in certain situations. I also recall specific experiences which helped shape some of my points of reference, but for the most part, I am unsure how they came to be. Yet, even though we may not know how our points of reference came to be, we hold on to them, sometimes dearly while they shape the very way we think and act, each and every moment of our lives.

For example, you meet someone new at a social event. You may want to quickly decide: 'Is this the kind of person you are likely to enjoy being around?' You notice that they smile a lot and are very chatty and 'up beat'. There are other elements about them that you collect (often without realising you are doing so), and you compare this to one of your reference points. You then act or react based on the outcome of your comparison. In real terms this means, you either stay and chat more with them, or you make your excuses and move on to meet someone new. This mental and subconscious short cut is far easier and quicker than collecting more information, shifting through it, analysing it, hypothesising outcomes and developing plans of action.

This example, aims to demonstrate that we are filled with reference points, beliefs, expectations, prejudices etc. These mental rules rule our lives. This in turn raises questions such as: where did these 'rules' come from? Do they work for us or against us? Are they still valid? Our reference points for the new person we meet socially are likely to come from our past experiences with similar people. Being a mental 'short cut' means that we make judgements and assessments without knowing all of the facts. This can lead to erroneous decision making, yet, a question that we rarely ask ourselves is: 'are our reference points still relevant or do they need to be modified?'

How does this relate to this project? Sit for a moment and ask yourself: 'Where did my thoughts on 'What is beautiful' come from?'

Now ask yourself 'Why do I make a judgement on what is beautiful?' and 'Does doing this, make my life better?'

No-one is saying that you cannot personally define what is pleasing to you as an individual; the question being asked is 'How does judging another's body benefit you as an individual?'

How often do you look at a person and make a judgement on their body shape as being acceptable or unacceptable? Have you ever made a judgement on what you think they are like as a person based on their body shape? For example, have you ever assumed that heavier people may be lazy, or that thinner people may be more sociable and fun to be around, or vice versa?

Are you even aware you are doing this? Or do you only become aware once you have made the judgement, if even then?

How do you communicate this judgement to the other person? Would your judgement in any way affect the person it is directed at? How do you benefit from this interaction?

# 04:

## The impact of body dissatisfaction.

Before we begin to talk about the impact of body dissatisfaction, I want to make an important point. This project is not saying that it is okay to have a weight that puts your life or health at risk. If you were concerned about someone's health, I would hope that you would talk to them and offer them the support that they would want from you. Perhaps this project may assist you in having a respectful and empowering conversation with them. In particular, it is hoped that you will gain an increased awareness that the way you communicate to someone about body issues can affect their mental well-being and mental health. You may already be very aware of this and have well developed and respectful communication skills and strategies.

Much has been written about the relationship between how a person feels about their body and their mental well-being. There is a relationship between a person's poor sense of their body image and mental health issues such as depression, eating disorders, low self-esteem<sup>1,2,3</sup>, substance abuse and suicide<sup>4</sup>.

Body image has been broadly defined as a person's feelings, thoughts and perceptions about their body<sup>5,6</sup>.

If you think body image is a female only issue, think again. The number of males affected by body issues is on the rise<sup>7</sup>. A study of college students found that of two groups (one containing 1440 students and the other 1072 students) over two thirds of females and around a third of males were affected by body issues<sup>8</sup>.

Where do our beliefs, on how our bodies should look like, come from? It is hard to see where it all started from, but media, friends, family and the wider society perpetuate the ideal that attractive women are thin and attractive men are muscular<sup>9</sup>.

The media is seen to play an important role in the creation of cultural and social rules of beauty and thinness. It also encourages people to strive to attain these ideals of beauty and thinness<sup>10,11</sup>. Those around us, such as family and friends, reinforce the body ideals that the media promotes<sup>12</sup>. Several studies suggest that the more exposed a person is to thin body shape ideals, the more likely they are to have body dissatisfaction<sup>13</sup>.

While females and males both have pressure to be thin, males also have pressure to be muscular<sup>14</sup>. This pressure has led to another health issue for males, the use of anabolic steroids and other drugs to help them become more muscular<sup>15,16</sup>.

It is important to point out that the information presented here sits within a western cultural framework and may not reflect non-western cultural values and expectations on body shape or image.

Who benefits from the promotion of a beauty ideal? We could go into the relationship between advertising sponsors (i.e. the beauty industry) and the media, promoting images and ideals to lure people into purchasing particular products, but much has been written about this already. This publication doesn't attempt an in-depth exploration of the multi-billion dollar beauty industry's presentation of the beauty ideal; an ideal which transcends magazines and television, and has made its way into the homes and play toys of the masses.

Since the mid-twentieth century, male action figures are becoming more and more muscular as are male models<sup>17</sup>. Toys for young men, such as certain trademarked and popular, army action figures and space-based action figures, have changed from having average body shapes to muscular bodies that could only be attained by becoming a body builder on steroids. Young boys are exposed to these ideals before they have had time to develop the ability to question whether these body shapes are relevant to them or even attainable<sup>18</sup>.

Similarly, young women are often exposed to dolls with thin waists that would equate to 16 inches for a real person. Not only are the average weights of beauty pageant contestants decreasing over time, but the winners, on average, weigh even less than the losers<sup>19</sup>.

What does this mean? Men and women are comparing their bodies to unattainable and objectified ideals<sup>20</sup>. Did you know that the 'model' or 'ideal' for the 'thin body shape' or the 'muscular body shape' that the media portrays, is achievable by less than 5% of the population<sup>21</sup> Because these body types are unattainable for the vast majority, it is now expected that young men and women exposed to these unattainable body ideals, will be anxious about their body shape during puberty. Alarming, it is now considered normal for females of all ages to be unhappy about their bodies throughout their lifespan<sup>22</sup>.

A further impact of these unrealistic ideals is that men and women are more likely to be constantly comparing and contrasting their bodies to the 'ideal', and will ultimately wind up in an almost constant state of dissatisfaction. Women consistently rate the ideal body to be much thinner than their actual body shape whilst men typically rate their ideal body shape<sup>23</sup> much thinner and/or much less muscular than their own<sup>24</sup>.

For men, body image is a significant predictor for psychological well-being<sup>25</sup>. A positive sense of body image is a predictor for a psychological well-being. A poor sense of body image is unsurprisingly a predictor for poor psychological well-being. All of the research I have read suggests that it is no different for women.

A 2012 study of 1,902 young adults, with a mean age of 25, found that eating disorders were common in young adults and were significantly related with hearing hurtful weight-related comments made by family and significant others. This was true for both males and females<sup>26</sup>. What is disordered eating? The literature considered included such behaviours as using weight loss pills, skipping meals, prolonged and extended exercising and self-induced vomiting. These actions have the potential to lead to extremely severe eating disorders, depression and several other mental health issues<sup>27</sup>. Minimising a person's concerns about their body image can also have a negative effect on their well-being<sup>28</sup>. An example would be comments such as: 'You are over-reacting; you aren't that big'.

The questions that arise from all of this and which beg to be answered are: 'How do we make a cultural shift away from trying to achieve the unattainable body ideal and shift towards being happy with who we are?' How do all people, regardless of age, shift away from judging their bodies against imposed ideals, and instead, celebrate and be proud of who they are and how they look?

An aim of this book is to create a space to raise awareness and to hopefully create change or, at least, plant a seed for future change.

# 05:

## Bringing the pieces together.

It is true that when we see a body, we judge it. We compare it against our points of reference, or ideals for beauty and we make judgement. We may not even be aware that we are doing it. Does this body meet the ideal? Is it beautiful? Is it ugly, is it too thin or too fat?

Take a moment to think about what the ideal body looks like. How many people do you personally know that have achieved this ideal? Where did this ideal come from?

Think about which body types you find pleasing to look at. Which ones do you find displeasing to look at? Why? Do you have any prejudices when it comes to body shapes or size? What are they?

This project is not making a judgement on you and your likes, dislikes or prejudices; rather, it invites you to become aware of them. It is hoped that you will find a safe space to explore the content of this book and use this as a catalyst to have an internal and honest conversation.

# 06:

## How are your loved ones affected by the body prejudice of others?

Sometimes ideas or concepts, can remain abstract or abstruse, until we can put them into practice or until we can experience them in a way which makes sense to us. Following are exercises which aim to give you an opportunity to safely explore how body prejudice may affect those you love, and in turn, yourself. These exercises also aim to explore any differences there may be between the way you treat others and the way that you would want your loved ones to be treated.

## Exercise one: Someone you cherish.

I would like you to think of the person you cherish most. Imagine that they are walking towards me. Imagine that I find their body shape offensive. Imagine that I want to communicate this to your loved one.

How are you feeling?

What thoughts are running through your head?

Now, I want you to picture me there, communicating to your loved one that I think their body is offensive. Some of this will be done verbally; a lot of it will be non-verbal. Picture me giving your loved one looks of disgust and contempt, particularly at the area of their body which offends me most.

How are you feeling at this point?

What are you thinking?

Now picture once more, your loved one, the person you cherish most in this world, I have just communicated to them that I think their body is offensive: how do you imagine that they may be feeling or thinking?

How does this make you feel? Why?

Take a breath and if you are feeling upset or anxious, find your calm. Once you have reclaimed your calm, I invite you to try this:

## Exercise two: A stranger.

I want you to picture yourself walking down a quiet street. There is no one else in the street except yourself and a stranger who happens to be walking towards you from the opposite direction. You find yourself reacting to this stranger's body shape. It is offensive to you. The more you look at this body, the more you find it offensive. How do you respond? How do you react and why?

Is the way you responded and reacted any different to how you wanted me to react or respond towards your loved one? If there was a difference, consider why this may be. Should there be any difference? Why or why not?

Though this project is titled 'Brave or Beautiful?' and asks the question 'is the model brave for posing or are they merely sharing a beautiful body?', it is really asking a much deeper question of 'who is to say what is brave, beautiful or ugly?' It also, very importantly, asks you to uncover where your own prejudices and points of reference for beauty come from and to consider how relevant these are to you today. It also asks you to consider if and how you benefit from these points of reference for beauty? As well as bringing to light the negative impact of body prejudice on peoples mental well-being and health.

When you are ready, look at as few or as many images in this book as you feel comfortable viewing. As you do this, take some time to become aware of your feelings, thoughts and of your points of reference, which guide how you are reacting.

## Notes for section four (pages 10–11)

<sup>1</sup> SL Sinclair, & JE Myers, 'The relationship between objectified body consciousness and wellness in a group of college women', *Journal of College Counseling*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2004, pp. 150–161.

<sup>2</sup> GE Good, JB Morrison & D Tager, 'Our bodies, ourselves revisited: male body image and psychological well-being', *International Journal of Men's Health*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2006, pp. 228–237.

<sup>3</sup> LD Burlew, & WM Shurts, 'Men and body image: current issues and counseling Implications', *Journal of Counseling & Development*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2013, pp. 428–435.

<sup>4</sup> L Robertson, & D Thomson, "'BE" ing a certain way: Seeking body image in Canadian health and physical education curriculum policies', *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'éducation*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2012, pp. 334–354.

<sup>5</sup> S Grogan, 'Body image and health contemporary perspectives', *Journal of Health Psychology*, Vol. 11, no. 4, 2006, pp. 523–530.

<sup>6</sup> Robertson & Thomson.

<sup>7</sup> SJ Norwood, M Murray, A Nolan & A Bowker, 'Beautiful from the inside out: A school-based programme designed to increase self-esteem and positive body image among preadolescents', *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2011, pp. 263–282.

<sup>8</sup> KY Forrest & WL Stuhldreher, 'Patterns and correlates of body image dissatisfaction and distortion among college students', *American Journal of Health Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2007, pp. 18–25.

<sup>9</sup> Norwood, Murray, Nolan & Bowker.

<sup>10</sup> UJ Yu, 'Deconstructing college students' perceptions of thin-idealized versus nonidealized media images on body dissatisfaction and advertising effectiveness', *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2014, pp. 153–169.

<sup>11</sup> LM Groesz, MP Levine & SK Murnen, 'The effect of experimental presentation of thin media images on body satisfaction: A meta-analytic review', *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–16.

<sup>12</sup> HIA Qazi, & H Keval, 'At war with their bodies or at war with their minds? A glimpse into the lives and minds of female yo-yo dieters—The curtain has lifted in UK?', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013, pp. 311–332.

<sup>13</sup> Yu.

<sup>14</sup> Robertson & Thomson.

<sup>15</sup> H Pope, KA Phillips & R Olivardia, *The Adonis complex: The secret crisis of male body Obsession*. Free Press, New York, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Grogan.

<sup>17</sup> Good, Morrison & Tager.

<sup>18</sup> Pope, Phillips & Olivardia.

<sup>19</sup> ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Good, Morrison & Tager.

<sup>21</sup> Robertson & Thomson.

<sup>22</sup> ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Forrest & Stuhldreher.

<sup>24</sup> TA Ryan & T Morrison, 'Factors perceived to influence young Irish men's body image investment: a qualitative investigation', *International Journal of Men's Health*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2009, pp. 213–234.

<sup>25</sup> Good, Morrison & Tager.

<sup>26</sup> ME Eisenberg, JM Berge, JA Fulkerson & D Neumark-Sztainer, 'Associations between hurtful weight-related comments by family and significant other and the development of disordered eating behaviors in young adults', *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, vol. 35, no. 5, 2012, pp. 500–508.

<sup>27</sup> ibid.

<sup>28</sup> JK Bosson, EC Pinel, & JK Thompson, 'The affective consequences of minimizing women's body image concerns', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2008, pp. 257–266.







“If you  
can't trust  
a person  
with their own weight  
what can you  
trust them with?”









“you need to eat”

“you need a good feed!”

“do you ever eat?”

“you’ve stacked it on! what happened?”

“No wonder you are still single, look at you”, they say as their eyes stare at my stomach

“gee you’ve put on weight”

**“You need to go to the gym”**

“Are you carrying a spare tyre on you?”

“What’s with the flab?”

“Looking very prosperous mister”

“When are you expecting?”

“no wonder you’re fat, look at the crap you eat!”









Some friends and I went shopping  
to buy dresses for a special occasion.

We are all on the larger side.

**At one store we went into,  
my friend asked the sales assistant  
for some help regarding sizes.**

The salesperson looked us up and down and said

“there is nothing  
for you here”

“I have stopped just  
wearing bathers  
because of my body.

Now I always wear a singlet or a T-shirt over my  
bathers, when I go into the water at the beach.

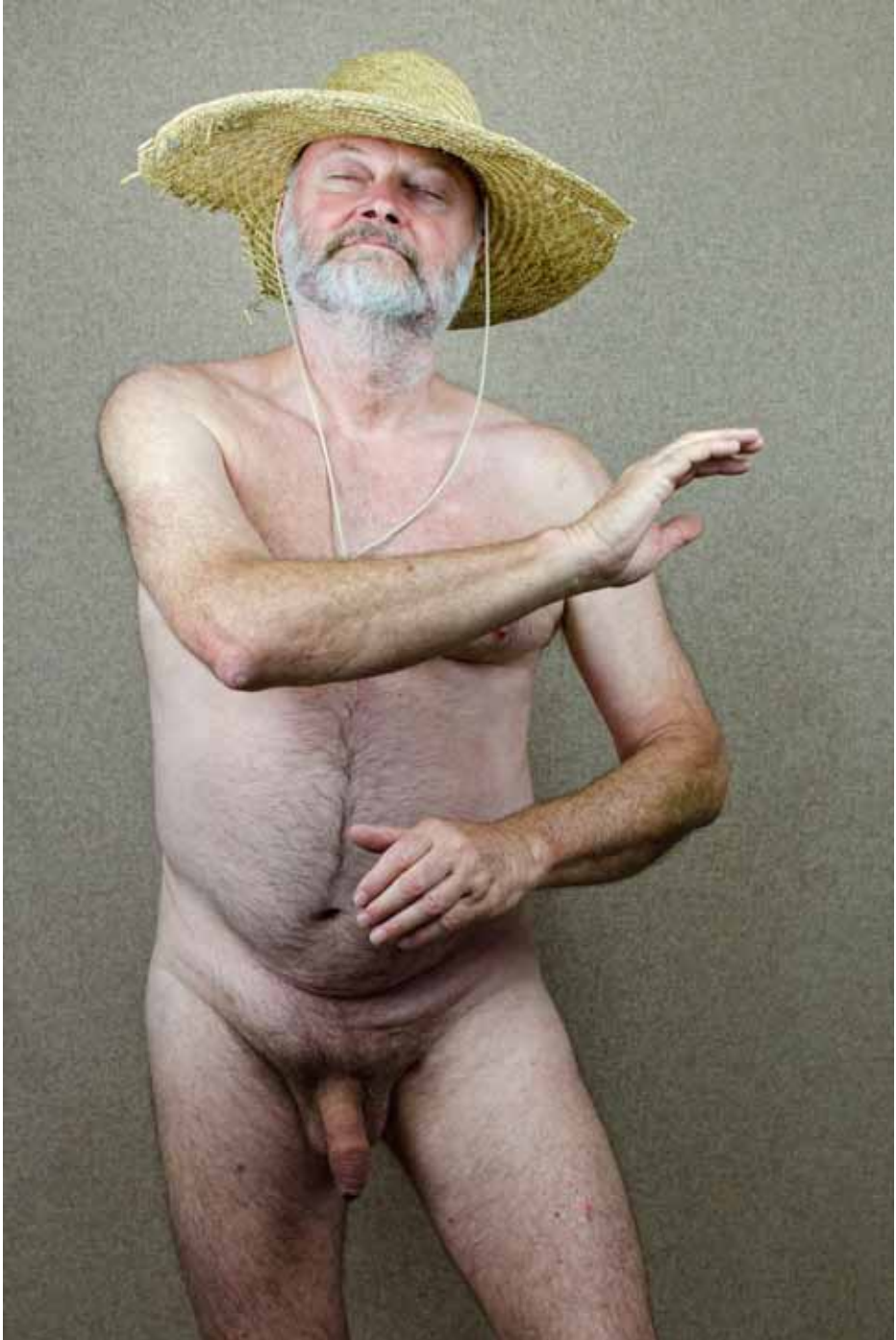
I used to swim at the local swimming pool,  
but stopped because people were always staring at me  
when I would wear my T-shirt in the water.”

















“He would always compliment other women who were thinner than I was. Sometimes he would ask me, in front to them, ‘Don’t you think she is beautiful?’ There were times where he would add ‘you could look like that if you wanted to’.

**It was so humiliating.**

We talked about it once,  
when I couldn’t take it anymore.  
He said he was just trying to help.”













“I would do my supermarket shopping  
really early in the morning  
when the shop was opening and  
when there was hardly any others there.

I didn't want people looking at me and judging me  
on what I was buying.

**I always felt judged.**

If I had to go out, I would try and time it,  
so that there were not as many people about.”







“I would have been about 18 or 19 and we used to hang out at this local pub in Ballarat drinking,

There were these old guys who were long time regulars in the bar, and I got to know a couple in particular for chitchat.

I was really offended when one of them told me

I would make  
a good footballer  
because of the  
size of my thighs

(I am female)

**I could barely talk to the filthy, insensitive bastard again!”**









“When my self-esteem is at it’s lowest,  
my yo-yoing weight, seems to be at it’s heaviest.

All the comments I get on how I NEED  
to lose weight,  
doesn’t tell me anything new or different,

**It just feeds into my low sense of self,  
and my belief that I am  
unattractive and unwanted”**

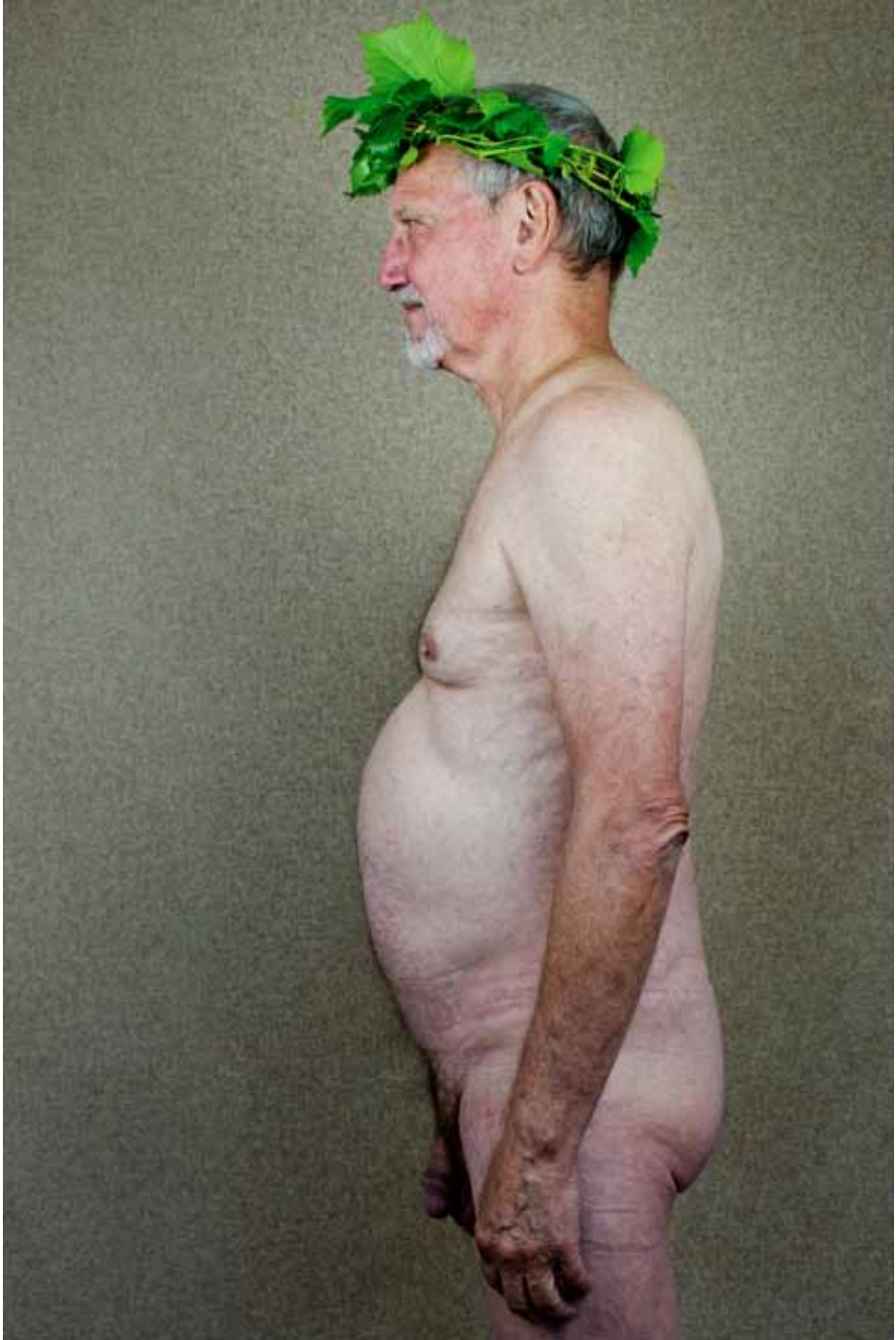


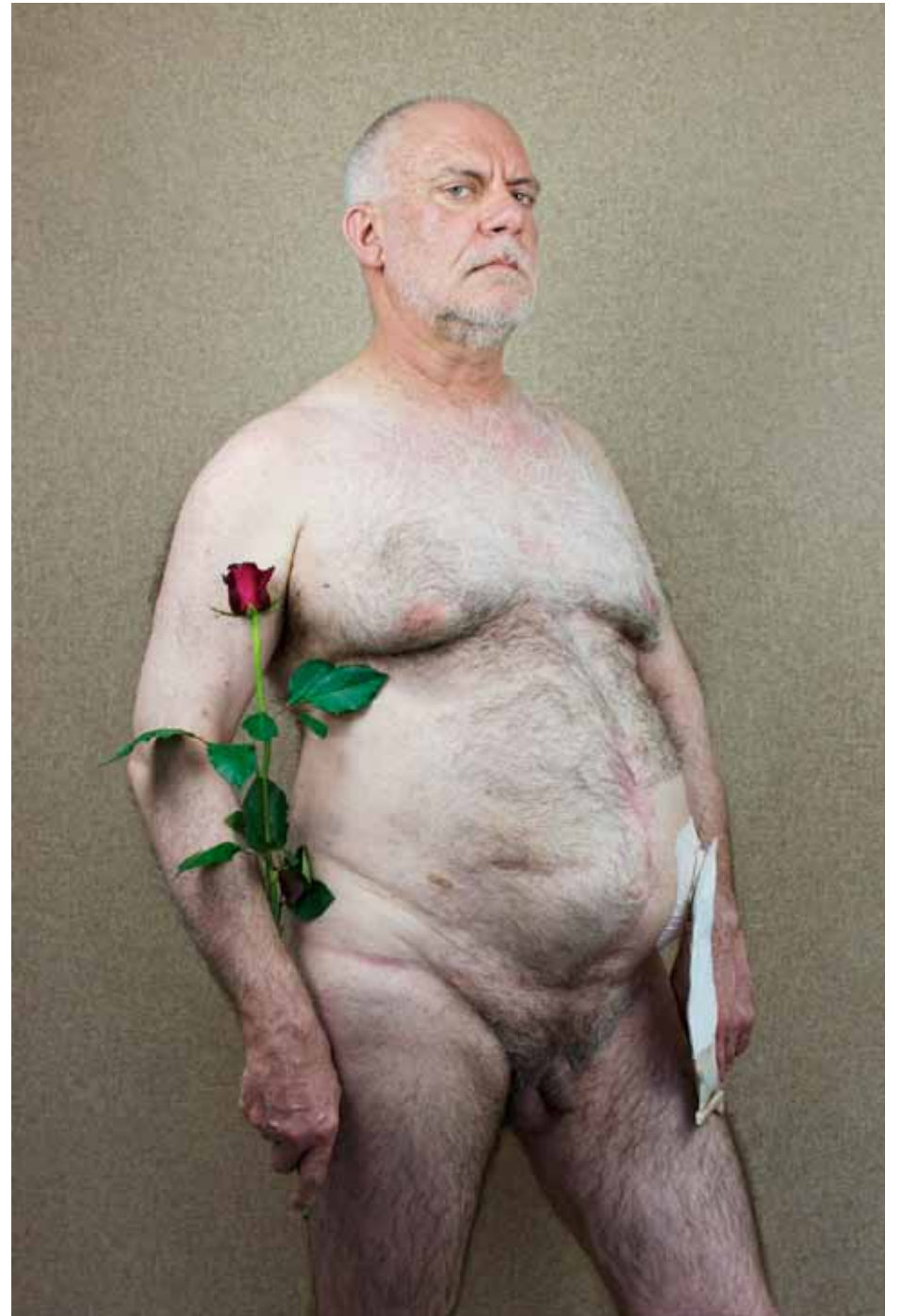




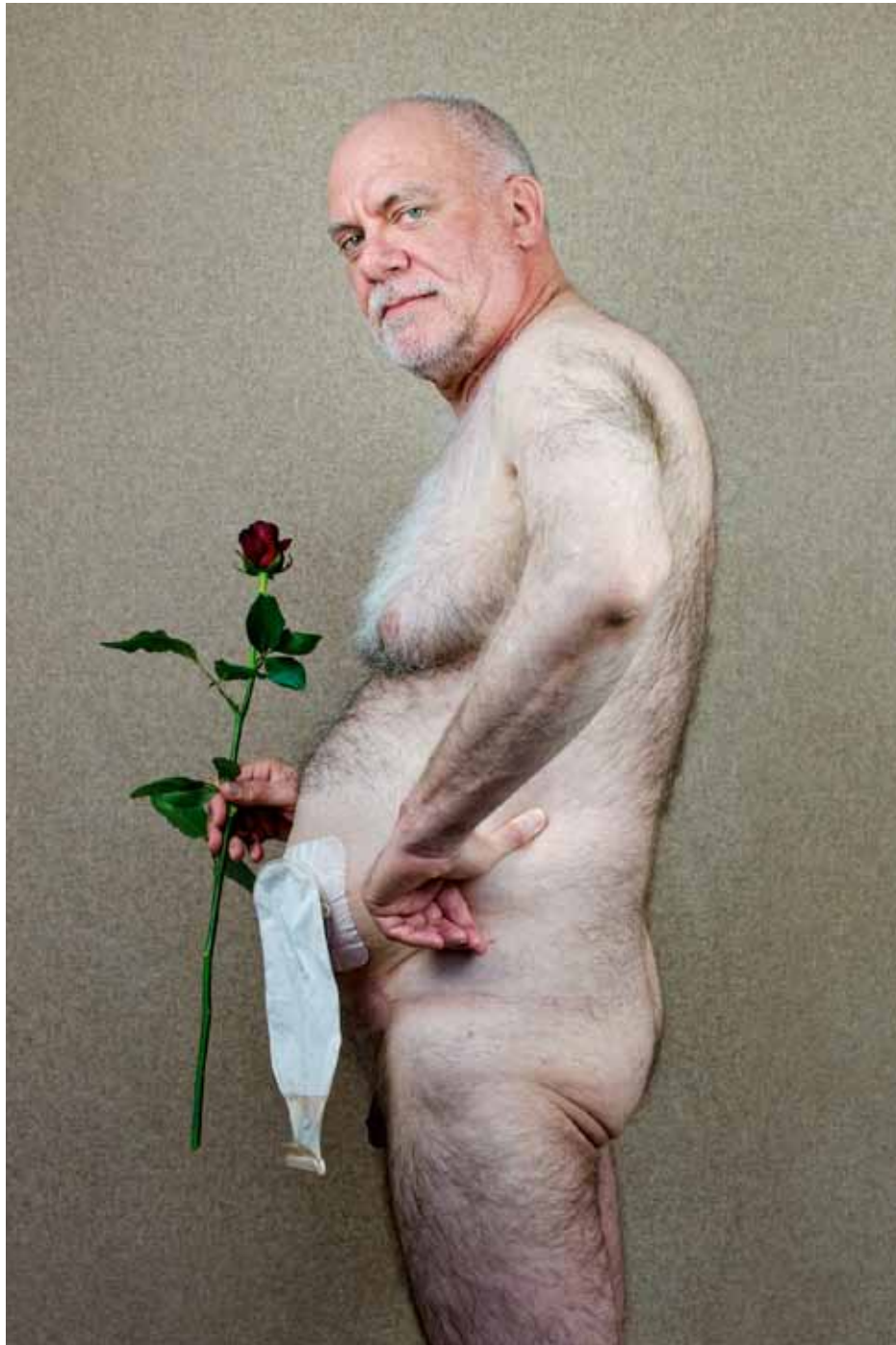
“I noticed very clearly that people who lived on my own floor in my apartment building did not speak to me to even say ‘good morning’ all the years I was fat, but when I took the weight off, they began to say ‘hello’ and ‘good morning’...I know exactly why they did not speak with me when fat. When I was fat, I was very big and perhaps threatening looking and I was not attractive and people like attractive...people simply prefer attractive looking people and try to avoid contact with unattractive people.”











“I have no qualms about being seen naked.  
I’m not a cover model for a magazine.  
I have a spectacular collection of surgical  
scars and an ileostomy to boot.

**But if anyone  
has a problem  
with any of that,  
then that’s just it:  
their problem,  
not mine.”**



## Details for images used in the book

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