WITH THANKS  This project is dedicated to my parents who have been there for me every step of the way. I could not have accomplished this without your constant support and encouragement. Thank you.
Many current media images of women have underlying messages that effect our psyche in a negative way, whether or not we are aware. These images convey an unrealistic, distorted view of ideals and perfection, which create an unattainable model to live up to. As women, we should be cherishing our uniqueness, but, rather than celebrating and accepting ourselves, we are taught to judge and conceal.

This project seeks to address inner beauty as a reflection of our energy, vitality, wisdom and the mental, as well as emotional, engagement in our lives. The terms perfection and imperfection will be redefined and applied to inward rather than outward appearance. Through a photographic study, this project will emphasize the value and beauty in aging. In the end, I would like to encourage my audience to not only recognize but also understand and accept the difference between media images and their own self-images.
Like many adolescents, I began to feel self-conscious about my appearance. I was dealing with weight issues, only not the kind we are used to hearing about. At 5’9” and 95 lbs I was one of the skinniest girls in my high school class. I tried everything to gain weight and look normal but nothing seemed to work. I even remember wearing sweat pants under my jeans to make them look more filled out. During this time, the constant feeling of imperfection resulted in a lack of self-esteem and confidence.

And this is just my story; most of the women I know have their own. I’ve had girlfriends in my past who struggled with eating disorders. One admitted that her initial attraction to be around me was because of my size. If she couldn’t be skinny she at least wanted to be around someone who was. The majority of women at some point in their lives have dealt with issues concerning their body image. Everywhere we look there is a media image of the perfect woman. These images prescribe what is beautiful and what is normal. But what they don’t tell us is that in reality only 8 out of 3 million women actually look like this. So we become envious and are made to feel bad about the way we look.

The negative media images and messages sent to American girls and women are getting worse every year. Even though we are more aware than ever that this is occurring very little is being done to change it.

I have slowly worked through my own issues as an adult and have begun to accept myself. I can now see beauty in all aspects of life and people, not just the physical appearance. Still, occasionally I pick up a magazine and am reminded that I don’t look exactly the way the media tells us is right and beautiful. Feelings of inadequacy still briefly fill me and I am saddened and angered by the effects that it still has over me. I have now been given the opportunity as a visual communicator to help girls and women understand what inner beauty is and why it is the only kind that matters. I hope to help them realize that all women, at any age, have unique qualities and vitality that naturally radiates from inside. We just have to learn to recognize it in each other.
400-600 advertisements bombard the average consumer everyday in magazines, on billboards, on TV, and in newspapers. One in eleven has a direct message about beauty, not counting the indirect messages. The media pushes an unnatural body-type, making it difficult for us to accept natural beauty. Many studies have directly linked these media images to the rise in eating disorders and the decrease in self-esteem.

Women are constantly comparing themselves to the models that appear in the media. The same type of woman is seen throughout the media on a regular basis. She is young, thin, tall, large breasted and has a small nose and pouty lips. She is what we are made to believe is the ideal, perfect woman. And since everywhere we look there is an advertisement, this body image is perceived as normal and average. But in reality, the average American woman is 5’4” tall and weighs 140 lbs, compared to the average American model who is 5’11” tall and weighs 117 lbs. (The National Eating Disorders Association) And the gap has grown in the last 20 years. Models used to weigh 8% less than the average woman, now it’s 23% less.

On top of this, what numerous women still don’t realize is that many times the so-called perfect image has been digitally altered. We are essentially comparing ourselves with something that doesn’t even exist. Most images are “...an illusion created by makeup artists, photographers, and photo retouchers. Each image is carefully worked over. Blemishes, wrinkles, and stray hairs are airbrushed away, and teeth and eyebrows are bleached white. In some cases the picture you see is actually made up of several photos. The face of one model may be combined with the body of a second and legs of a third.”

For many women, these features are unattainable, but they continue to strive toward them at damaging costs. Women often turn to plastic surgery or eating disorders to help them reach their goals. Between 1996 and 1998, teenage cosmetic surgeries nearly doubled, from 13,699 to 24,623. And approximately 7 million females struggle with eating disorders today.

As if these statistics weren’t disturbing enough, it now seems that we are seeing younger and younger kids affected by eating disorders. “Children are more dissatisfied with their bodies than about getting sick, losing a parent, or dying from an atomic bomb”, according to Dr. Ira Sacker, co-author of Dying to Be Thin. The media is definitely a major contributor for children taking these actions, but to be fair they’re not alone. There are now second-generation eating disorders: parents teaching children by example. Parents obsessed with their own weight or body shape may be sending a dangerous message to their kids.

Even with more awareness than ever to this issue little is being done to change this damaging trend. A few companies have started to take other approaches and use more socially conscious marketing plans, but not nearly enough. Some of the most creative and artistic people in our country are using their skills to work in this area. Many of these professionals are trained to persuade people through their concepts, writing, and visuals. And we are seeing them use these skills to sell a product no matter what it takes. Designers are playing a role.

Throughout my research I found studies that showed that not only are women and girls affected, but also men. But according to these statistics, the damaging results of the media hit women the hardest. I decided to contain my creative project to women with the understanding that both genders and all ages can learn by this focused example. I also felt more comfortable concentrating only on women for this project because I am a woman and can continue to draw from my own life experiences.

One main idea that I found through my media analysis is that only youth is beautiful. “By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits. And it’s no accident that youth is increasingly promoted, along with thinness, as an essential criterion of beauty. If not all women need to lose weight, for sure they’re all aging, says the Quebec Action Network for Women’s Health in its 2001 report, Changements sociaux en faveur de la diversité des images corporelles. And, according to the industry, age is a disaster that needs to be dealt with.”

The girls that do make a career out of modeling are usually out of a job in their late 20’s because this is considered too old. So the message that is being sent to women 30 and up is to conceal your true age. Force your youth to stay as long as you can by purchasing concealing makeup, hair dye, plastic surgery, etc. Because when you can no longer conceal it and your real age starts to show, your life might as well be over, right? This is what they want us to believe and we can see how well it’s working when we look at the billion-dollar beauty industry. They will continue to sell these ideas because women are buying into them.

If we believe the media’s standards that beauty is only found in youth then this argument suggests that the ugliest women would be the oldest. They do have the most visual imperfections after all. So many, in fact, the concealer’s don’t work anymore. If I could show the beauty or present a different way to look at beauty through these women then maybe I would start to question more readily what the media says is beautiful and perfect. Maybe I could stop comparing myself to the media’s idea of beauty, and form my own ideas that I could try to live up to. Perhaps other women that feel similar to the way I do can learn from this study along with me.
The work I produced for my creative project is a visual commentary about the perceptions and the research I have discovered related to the media. What I believe that we need to see is the idea of beauty from a different angle or perspective. I do not plan to focus on the damaging results the media is causing. I have limited my study to images of women in the media for the simple reason of time and focus. This does not mean that men are not affected by the same body image issues and that they can’t learn from this study and apply it to their own lives. I will not assume to speak for all women, or even Western women, but to address a problem of a considerable portion of the population.
When first considering a thesis topic I recognized an opportunity to bring awareness to a social issue, and offer a new perspective or angle. I started by making a list of possible topics.

A topic of particular interest on the list included the fast food industry in America. Obesity in children is on the increase every year and yet the fast food industries continue to sell their products directly to them. The packaging, marketing, and bonus toys are made to reel in children. Many studies have been conducted in this area showing the poor eating habits and health problems of youth, but the fast food industry is concerned only with a profit.

On this list was also the topic for my thesis: the way women are portrayed in the media. I initially became interested in this topic because I was aware of the photo manipulation that occurs in magazines; ads creating an unattainable model for women to live up to. But even though most women are aware of photo retouching they are still comparing themselves to this model. I chose to focus on this topic because I had personally witnessed this and felt the insecurities that went along with it. I watched friends struggle with eating disorders and battle emotionally to fit into this perceived norm. As a woman I wanted some answers and as a visual communicator I wanted to understand our role and the potential changes I could initiate.

This topic already had a lot of attention. So at this time I asked myself if there would be anything new to bring to this subject? I think that most people are aware of this but not nearly enough is being done to make a substantial change. We need to continue talking and providing awareness. One cannot bring too much awareness to a subject that is still so damaging to many. I believed that I could create a visual that would be based on my personal perceptions, making a unique contribution. There are so many negative images already present in the media, I hoped to add positive images back in a visual commentary. In addition, I saw this project as a way to directly confront and examine my own belief systems about personal appearance.
Providing a springboard and justification for my visual statement, I started by reviewing research and statistics relative to the study. I began a collection of images in the media that I see on a regular basis. I often get so used to seeing these types of images that I become numb and I am no longer shocked by their impact. But according to Jean Kilbourne, even if we don’t consciously take notice our subconscious does. After I collected a variety of media images, I stopped and evaluated each one. What other ideas are being sold along with the product? I saw many messages sent to women in our culture, the biggest message was the idea of what is and is not beautiful. The media portrays beauty in a very narrow minded manner, completely dependent on outer appearances. The media tries to teach Americans a norm by mainly showing one type of person.

At this point I felt I had established enough background on the problem. I did not want to focus on the statistics or the damaging results of the media in my visual statement but I did feel it was important to have an understanding of the issue.

Visual sub-problems were the next step in bringing me to the realization of what form my creative project would take. This was a transition period, which took me from the verbal realm into the visual. Since all of the emphasis in media images is placed on the tangible, physical level, I wanted to explore the intangible and inner being. I started by making a list of some internal qualities besides just her physicality that make up a woman. This list included:

- self-confidence   - independence
- freedom           - strength
- peace             - acceptance
- self-embrace      - frustrations

Sub-Problem 1
I then focused on frustration and the idea of trying to live up to an unattainable standard. I decided to express this concept through a photographic exploration. I tried to show anxiety, desperation, and loss of control that goes along with this frustration. I also included in these photographs subtle indicators such as smeared makeup and tearing at the hair, which to me represents the futile striving to look like media images.
Sub-Problem 2
After I reached a final image that I felt expressed my intentions I started to think about how the image communicated on its own, without a verbal explanation. I wondered what would happen to the meaning when another image was juxtaposed to this first with still no verbal explanation. I tried this with several other photographs that I had taken. By pairing the images together the initial concept would often strengthen but other times an entirely new meaning would be created. Through these studies I realized it is possible to strengthen the intended meaning of an image when juxtaposed to another. But there is always room left for personal interpretation. I found it necessary to include accompanying text to communicate a specific idea.

Together the images show an emotion of despair. The person in image 1 may be reacting to a death. Together they put forth a feeling of loss.

Together the images show an emotion of confusion and overwhelmingness. The person in image 1 seems anxious alone but when placed next to image 2, this feeling is provoked even further.

Together the images play off one another. Image 1 shows what the man in image 2 might be feeling but he is using constraint. Both images feel confined, trapped and claustrophobic.

Together the images show an emotion of disarray. Everything is falling apart around both subjects. It appears that life is just barely being held together.

Together the images show an emotion of despair. The person in image 1 may be reacting to a death. Together they put forth a feeling of loss.
Sub-Problem 3

The next sub-problem investigated is self-titled “The Art of Imperfection.” I started to look at sock imprints, the impression left on the ankle from wearing socks all day. I wondered if such a small thing as a sock imprint could change the way that one interprets a photograph. Would we consider the photo imperfect or would it give us a little more insight to the subject. This study brought me to question the definition of the terms perfection and imperfection and how they are applied. The dictionary definition of “perfect” is “having all the qualities, excellences, or elements that are requisite to its nature or kind; without defect or lack; supremely excellent; complete.” But my question is, “who sets the standards of excellence?” A standard or norm is usually set by the majority. If a person has an aspect that falls outside of this standard then it is either considered an imperfection or an excellence beyond the standard. The models of today are taller and thinner than the average person setting them outside the standard but on the perfect side; heavier women are considered flawed placing them on the imperfect side. In the past the opposite was true. Heavy women were considered voluptuous and healthy, and thin women were thought of as sickly.

This shows me that perfection and imperfection are relative ideas and change in cultural context. How we classify things under these terms changes from generation to generation. Today something might be considered imperfect, but in ten years it might be considered perfect.

After I created the “sock imprint” image to my satisfaction, I again thought about how juxtaposing this image with another image could strengthen the message. I juxtaposed an image of a landscape with a single, slightly crooked tree in the middle. The interesting thing that I saw when placing these two images next to each other was that this pairing showed our connection with nature and that we are both alive, doing the best we can with the elements that life throws at us. Most importantly it questioned whether an imperfection makes the object ugly or beautiful in its uniqueness.
Sub-Problem 4

Another sub-problem was to look at the shoes people choose to wear. Asking the question, “Can shoes alone tell about someone’s personality and who they are?” In my opinion, after looking at the final photographs I acquired a slight sense of a possible personality, but could not see any further insight by just viewing the attire. Judging by fashion alone assumes too much and continues to place the focus or importance on outer appearances.

Sub-Problem 5

The final sub-problem that I explored was dance. I thought about dance as an expression of one’s inner soul. If I could capture this on film, I thought true personalities, with no inhibitions would shine through. For me, this started to express the beauty inside a person rather than just looking at outward appearance. I started by photographing myself and thought about a series, but when I saw my photographs I realized that this was still placing too much importance on the body.
After completing these sub-problems I felt it was time to start thinking about the scope of my project. I started to question the words “perfection” and “imperfection.” The most important realization for me was that I did not want to focus on the body, where too much attention is already placed. I wanted to explore a different beauty, that is found in every individual. I wanted to show that the only kind of beauty that matters is from the inside: our soul, our essence, and the radiance that we see in each other by taking the time to get to know one another. I’m not saying that beauty or feeling beautiful and attractive isn’t important, it is. It’s how we manage the outside world and protect ourselves. It’s when outer beauty becomes our primary concern that we loose our ability to grow and progress as a individual.

At this point, I needed to clearly define my intention. I defined this as the means to communicate the importance of inner beauty vs. the media’s teachings of the importance of outer beauty. But using a phrase like “inner beauty” can mean many different things to different people. I define inner beauty as a natural radiance that comes as a result of mental and emotional involvement in life. Personal traits that I believe fall under “inner beauty” are our: • quirks • personalities • fantasies • desires • contributions • sense of humor • talents • hobbies • kindness • fears • love • vitality • wisdom • beliefs

Throughout my research I’ve identified three major issues that come from the media’s definition of beauty. The first is weight, where we see a direct message that super thin women are the most beautiful, often resulting in eating disorders. The second is age. Women are taught that aging is an ugly problem that needs to be dealt with. The third issue is the objectifying of women. We too often see bodies turned into objects, dismembered, packaged and used to sell any variety of products. Self-image is deeply affected and self-esteem plummets with the belief that female bodies are objects, and imperfect ones at that.

For the focus of this project I have chosen aging. I feel out of the three the media’s attitude toward aging seems to receive the least attention as negative and more important, is an issue that women have come to passively accept and believe without challenging. Loss of beauty with age is viewed as the truth, something that many women dread, and something we all expect to deal with when the time comes. If we continue to send the present negative message about aging through the media then this cycle of self judgement will continue. Those of us who grew up learning to dread getting older, may pass this on to our children.

I thought about the media’s standard of beauty when it comes to aging and realized that if youth is beautiful, the furthest away from this standard is the elderly. I felt that if I could show the beauty in women ages 65 and older then maybe we would all start to question the media’s standard. I expected these women to have many different thoughts and experiences about how they viewed themselves at this age and how their perceptions of female beauty changed through-out the ages. After hearing their thoughts and getting to know them I hoped to photograph them and show beauty in a different light than we are used to seeing.

I decided from my past sub-problems that I was not going to focus on the body; portraits would communicate my message. I believed a portrait was appropriate because every line in a face, a smile, and the eyes tell a thousand stories.

Finding the Subjects
The first place that I chose to photograph was the Little Sisters of the Poor, an order of nuns. I had met these nuns while working on a project in the fall semester of 2002. I remembered that they took care of the elderly and would probably welcome my involvement once again. I spoke to the head sister, Sister Raymond, on the telephone and explained my project to her. She was delighted to hear about it and asked me to come and meet some of the residents at a Chinese dinner night so they could get to know me and feel comfortable around me. I did this and went back a few other times to just casually talk with the residents. I was told that I could come and go as I please, and just walk around and knock on the doors to ask if the resident would like a visitor.

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This plan sounded great but actually was quite uncomfortable when I went back to start my project. I found it hard to find people home and when I did, it was difficult to explain to them what I was doing. I ran into Sister Raymond in the hallway. She was wheeling another sister, Sister Alodie, who was 100 years old to her room. Sister Raymond stopped and told me to visit with Sister Alodie for a while. So I sat with her for an hour and listened. She couldn’t hear me well so I couldn’t explain what my project was about or ask questions. She just started talk-
ing. I tried to follow, but one minute she was telling me about when she became a Little Sister and how her mother hated her for it and the next about a boy who was sitting in a tree eating blueberries. I was thinking to myself that I wasn’t going to be able to leave with anything useful for my project. But she seemed to enjoy talking so I just listened with a smile. When she finally took a breath after an hour I asked if I could take her picture and without hesitation she said yes. I didn’t expect that. All older people that I’ve known from my past didn’t want their pictures taken. So I rolled her over toward a lamp for more light and took a few shots. With the digital camera I could tell none were really coming out well with the low lighting or the flash, so I called it quits after about 6 shots, thanked her and went home.

I started to feel really anxious on this drive home. I didn’t get to ask any of my questions and the shots weren’t coming out in the low light. I got home and looked at the shots on the computer and started to play with one that was really dark. When I adjusted the levels, this portrait came to life before my eyes. I saw that it was absolutely beautiful. I thought, “Wow did I luck out.” Now I definitely wanted to include this shot so I started to think about all the things she told me and who she was. One thing that really stood out for me was when she told me that she took care of the dying for 5 years of her life. I thought, “What an amazing person she must be to do this kind of service: definitely not something that everyone could do.” And now when I look at her, I see that she’s switched roles. It’s incredible to think about the circle of life. I decided to include her photo and my meeting with her in the study.

Initially, I didn’t think that I had anything to include in my study because my meeting didn’t live up to my expectations. However, when I looked beyond this to the actual experience that I had, I saw how her portrait and her lifetime commitment to helping others started to show a deep compassion and caring heart.

Sister Alodie

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Interviewing and Photographing the Subjects

I contacted another assisted living home, SunRise Assisted Living, to have the option of photographing at more than just one place. I explained my creative project to the director, Ruth D’Alessandro. I was hoping to work with people who were older but still very clear-minded and self-sufficient. I sat with Ruth and explained my project. She thought it sounded great and said she would ask the ladies if they would like to participate, and offered to set up appointments for me. I felt much more comfortable in this setting because the ladies understood what my intentions were to start with. I also thought that this assisted living home was more along the lines of what I was looking for because the woman all had their own apartments and took care of themselves. Most people stayed there because they were alone and looking for a community atmosphere.

The methodology that I followed for interviewing and photographing the ladies started with setting up the appointments. I then talked with and interviewed residents individually. During the interview I went through a list of questions in addition to the flow of conversation. I taped all of the interviews with a tape recorder so I wouldn’t have to write notes, I felt this would be a distraction and make the ladies nervous. This also allowed me to listen to the interviews as much as I needed. I would then take portraits of each woman in her environment to reflect our conversation. After I felt I had enough photographs to work with I would go home, download them and make any technical adjustments that I thought were necessary. I would then choose one that I felt best captured the subject’s personality. I listened to the entire tape of the interview and identified key points that showed a reflection of her inner beauty and self-image. I wrote text for each lady that I felt strengthened my reading of the portrait. The text is written in the subject’s voice that was either taken out of the conversation as a direct quote or pieced together from different parts of the conversation.

Before meeting with the ladies at SunRise I went back through my questions and finalized the list. When I met individually with the ladies I told them that the questions were to just frame the conversation but they should feel free to add whatever they wished. The questions that I asked at the interviews are as follows:

**General Questions**
- What’s your name?
- Married? Kids?
- Where they’re from - where they call “home”?
- Did you work/have an occupation?

**Activity/Being in the World**
- Did you have any hobbies?
- Have they changed?
- What do you enjoy doing the most now?
- Do you consider yourself an outgoing or shy person?

**Spirituality**
- Has your spiritual life grown with age?
- What do you feel is the greatest gift one can give to the world?
- Is there a saying or phrase that someone once told you that you never forget?
- What dream did you have with you throughout your life?
- Who are your heroes?
- Do you look at female beauty differently now than you did when you were young?
- If you could give any advice to young girls what would it be?
- What do you think makes a woman beautiful?
- How have you changed with age? What has gotten better with age?
- If you could pass one thing on to others what would it be?
- If you could go back, would you change anything?
- Do you want to tell me your age?
When I went to my first appointment at SunRise I met a woman who was shy and very religious. She answered my questions without elaboration but did answer all of them graciously. After asking her the first few questions I could have predicted the answers to the rest. Somehow she was able to answer “Jesus Christ!” to about 80% of the questions. This did give me insight into who she is but I hoped that all of the ladies didn’t answer in this same way.

Then the next two ladies I met offered something completely different and stressed individual points that they wished for me to pass on to young women. At that point I felt the project really took off. It seemed like every time I went back for another appointment each meeting became more interesting. I would think, “Nobody is going to top this lady” and then the next person would. I was meeting travelers, ex-models, writers, painters, poets and even a clown. They all had such incredible life stories to tell and somehow we became completely comfortable talking to one another, as if we had been friends for years. They were telling me about private, joyous, and difficult periods in their lives without hesitation. I was very surprised by this openness. But because their lives were so interesting to me and they were so honest I found it very easy to get off track and forget the reason I was there. Three women in particular reminded me and brought me back to what I was initially trying to research, the issue of beauty and self esteem.

Beulah LeFoe, 84 years old, was a farmer’s wife for most of her life. She told me that she was “born during World War I, worked during World War II and will die during World War II.” This tone seemed to frame all aspects of her life. She explained to me that when she became pregnant she had to quit working because it was too dangerous for her to drive the long distance from Richmond to Quantico, as a result she missed a 5-year retirement package by 3 months. This, she said, was the story of her life. When I was listening to her I was thinking of how easy it is to focus on the negative aspects of life and that we so often forget how blessed we truly are.

Continuing through my list of questions I asked, “What do you think makes a woman beautiful?” and her answer was “I’m not sure what makes a woman beautiful. I think I get uglier everyday. I was never that pretty to start with so I just never dwelt on it.” I guess I should have expected this answer because everything was negative but it still made me sad to hear it.

I thought about her on my drive home and figured that I just wouldn’t use her in my project. When I got on the computer and started looking at the portraits of her, one really spoke to me. She looked so beautiful to me in this portrait and I thought it was a shame that she never saw what I just saw. And this made me realize how important this project could be. I thought if I saw this, perhaps others will too, and then with her words beside her portrait, maybe some women will see a little bit of her in themselves. And maybe learn a little self-acceptance from Beulah.
Bernelle Goodman, 86 years old

When I first saw Bernelle all I could focus on was her badly bruised face. She had recently slipped in the bathroom and landed right on her face. Again my immediate thought was that I couldn’t use her in my project because of those disturbing bruises. I see now that every woman that I thought this about actually had the most to offer in terms of conveying a sense of inner beauty. I just needed to look a little deeper: the exact message I was trying to communicate to others.

Bernelle had a stroke a year and a half ago so she was difficult to understand at times because of her slurred speech. But when I started to ask questions about beauty she made sure that I understood exactly what she was saying. She told me that now she sees beauty as the whole person and that their soul makes up beauty more than their physical being. She said, “I didn’t consider beauty until after I had a stroke, and then I recently fell in the bathroom and bruised my face. After that I realized how I took such simple things for granted. As long as I have a warm heart, I’ll always feel beautiful.” She went on to say how “you just have to take life as it comes and make the best out of it. It’s not always what you want but deal with it the best you can. That’s all you can do.”

Margaret Pinner, 96 years old, also stands out in my mind as someone who truly understands the term “beautiful.” When I asked her the question, “What makes a woman beautiful?” her first response was “depends on what you mean by beauty - physical or inner?” She then just began to talk, very easily and clearly about the subject. She said, “Any person that lives a life is beautiful. Just the fact that they can take it and make something out of it, that’s beauty. Life is still beautiful to me. I see beauty in some of the people that live here, even though they’re ancient. I see beauty in the trees, the snow, and a child’s smile. Love makes a woman beautiful, especially if she can exude love.”

She did exude love in every word that she spoke. As far as the physical beauty that she mentioned, when I looked at her I saw that every wrinkle on her face was exactly where it was supposed to be. These so-called imperfections couldn’t have been any more perfect on her. They showed the laughter and experiences that she had lived in her life. She looked like an angel to me.
These women are pointing out the many different ways there are to view beauty in life, others, and themselves at any age. Contrary to what the media tells us these are some of the most beautiful women I’ve ever met in my life. When I would leave them I looked at the world and the people in it a little differently from when I arrived. They made me realize how superficial I could be at times and they showed me that the outer features that I had coveted on the models in the past were unimportant and don’t make a woman the beautiful person she is.

After my interviews with these women I started to think about how their messages would reach the public. Their portraits and words in a book could show us that women at this age have a lot of wisdom to offer. But I wanted to bring the project back to the media, magazines, ads, etc., that is sending the negative messages to begin with. It was important to make this connection. Putting my project back into this media would be a way of making a direct commentary on the messages sent to women.

After thinking about the many different types of vehicles such as billboards, advertisements, and brochures I felt that the fashion magazines are doing the most damage to a woman’s self-esteem of what makes her beautiful. I decided that presenting my work in the medium of magazines would make the strongest statement.

I considered three ideas. The first idea was based on the subscription cards found in magazines. These cards that always fall onto my lap could have a new purpose. I would use the subscription cards as a way for my audience to no longer subscribe to a magazine but to subscribe to a new way of thinking about beauty. Each card would present a different principle – one card for each of the ten women interviewed. So the card would be redesigned to have her portrait and her words with the principle stated as a headline, for example: Subscribe to Self-Acceptance.

Another idea was to design a new magazine that addresses all of the concerns women have regarding the media. Using this vehicle I would start by writing a business plan that would allow me to realistically launch a magazine. This plan would need to include the concept, contents, the audience, competition, advertising, circulation and budget. I would then create a mock-up version, including a few inside spreads and cover designs. This would allow me to present the work I have produced so far as a proposed article.

But the more I thought about and researched this idea I felt it was the wrong avenue for me. I started my thesis project with the need to address the media’s narrow-minded portrayal of beauty and the unrealistic standards that they set. And because there are a few different subjects within this I chose to focus on one: the idea of beauty found only in youth. I would like in the future to address other subjects such as weight concerns which result in eating disorders, and objectifying women resulting in self-esteem issues: the one particular issue of beauty and self-esteem in which I had been focusing my research was too narrow to fill a monthly magazine. I wasn’t prepared to take on more than one primary concern at this time.

In conducting the research on magazines for the previous idea I found several successful magazines that are already on the market. These magazines are geared towards independent, intelligent, self-accepting women. A few examples are Ms., Bust Magazine, New Moon, Radiance Magazine, and On the Issues. And these are just the ones that are in print; there are many more e-zines that are along the same lines. In learning about these magazines my thoughts turned to not producing another one, but adding a running series of special inserts to a fashion magazine such as YM. Choosing a fashion magazine as a vehicle allows for a direct commentary about the images of women and messages that are sent into the public.
Final Portraits and Text
I think a woman’s beauty glows from the inside out. It particularly shines from her eyes and the way she speaks. Determination, courage, and strength are the most beautiful features a woman can possess.

Anastasia Roberts
I became a Little Sister of the Poor when I was 20 years old.

I dedicated my life to God’s word and helping others.

Five years of it were spent caring for the dying.

I’m now 100 years old

and the Little Sisters of the Poor take care of me.
I didn’t consider beauty until after I had a stroke, and then I recently fell in the bathroom and bruised my face. After that I realized how I took such simple things for granted. As long as I have a warm heart, I’ll always feel beautiful.

Bernelle Goodman, 86 years old
I never did look at female beauty, as far as outer appearance goes. I looked at what was inside, which was always very apparent to me even as a child. If you have a good heart and are kind then beauty takes care of itself.
Florence Woody, 92 years old

We all look the way God wants us to; every part of us is pieced perfectly together to make us each original. This shouldn’t be our focus. The most beautiful women are those that take the time to help others in need, in any way that they can.
I love living and I love being involved in life, I always have. I notice the unique qualities found in people more now than I did when I was younger. I’m glad I finally found the time to do this.
Betsy Terry, 78 years old

"Poppy the Clown"

I was a magician and clown for 26 years. Now and then I'll get dressed up and put on a show for the elderly. I love making people happy. A smile and laughter is what makes a person beautiful to me.
I think I get uglier everyday.

I'm not sure what makes a woman beautiful.

I think I get uglier everyday.

I was never that pretty to start with

so I just never dwell on it.

Beulah LeFoe, 84 years old
Any person that lives a life is beautiful. Just the fact that they can take it and make something out of it, that’s beauty.

Life is still beautiful to me.

I see beauty in some of the people that live here, even though they’re ancient. Margaret Pinner, 96 years old

I see beauty in the trees, the snow, and a child’s smile.

Love makes a woman beautiful, especially if she can exude love.
Jean Bailey, 86 years old

I’m a romantic and a dreamer.
I modeled for a while when I was young
but this wasn’t what made me feel beautiful.
Writing is my real passion, it’s how I release
my soul and inner beauty to the world.
This is where I let my imagination soar.
I’ve had a few books published
but that was never the point.
I did it for my own satisfaction.
I still do.
Colors Magazine: Colors themes often present social issues alternating between serious, challenging topics and showing that values are shared between all cultures.

Tibor Kalman: Kalman directed Colors Magazine when it was founded 10 years ago. Within his own design work “Kalman combined his desire to break new ground visually with a passionate commitment to social causes.”

Jamie Lee Curtis: Recently Curtis decided to have herself photographed with no lights, no makeup, and no retouching. This image is juxtaposed to “glam” Jamie. Curtis wants everyone to understand the difference between celebrity illusion and real-life. She has also written children’s books about self-esteem. The most recent book published is I’m Gonna Like Me: Letting Off A Little Self-Esteem.

Barbara Kruger: Kruger used the techniques of manipulation that she learned from advertising to create her own sexual, social, and political messages. This challenged the stereotypes of gender roles, social relationships, and political issues found in the mass media.

Benetton: Their use of models is an encouraging step for the fashion industry. Their models do not fall into society’s stereotype of beauty. Benetton focuses on portraying natural, diverse beauty and their models reflect this attitude.

The Body Shop’s “Ruby”: As the founder of the Body Shop, Anita Roddick has made ethical issues a primary concern, she has dedicated part of her website to the issue of low self-esteem and advertising. She has also made social statements about body image with her doll, Ruby.

Girls Incorporated: An example of an organization that is trying to teach girls how to sift through the advertising and media and recognize stereotypes is Girls Inc. They then teach girls how to see the difference between those stereotypes and their own lives. Their message to girls is to be “strong, smart, and bold.”

Guerrilla Girls: For 18 years this feminist group has been working to expose and bring awareness to sexism and racism in politics, the art world, film and the culture at large by producing printed materials and staging demonstrations.

Jean Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion: A book that provides facts and a background to advertising’s use of the female image and shows the damaging results. Kilbourne has spoken about this issue for most of her working life trying to bring awareness. She is best known for her award winning documentaries Killing Us Softly and Slim Hopes.

Eileen Fisher: As a fashion designer Fisher is taking the opportunity to “inspire women to celebrate who they are.” She uses real women who are making a difference in the world to model her clothes.

Adbusters: Adbusters is a not-profit magazine that offers incisive philosophical articles, activist commentary, ecological issues, and ad parodies. They often make a direct media critique throughout the magazine.

Ms. Magazine: Ms. was launched in 1971 as a sample insert in New York magazine. Since then they have become “the landmark institution in both women’s rights and American journalism.” Ms. was the first magazine to write about delicate women’s issues of the time such as abortion and sexism. Now Ms. is shown to have “the most extensive coverage of international women’s issues of any magazine available in the United States.”

Cindy Sherman: Sherman examines female identity and the body in American culture. She also explores self-image by assuming different characters.

Robert Frank, The Americans: This book shows Frank’s travels through America between 1955 and 1956. Frank was able to capture the realistic daily life of these times through his photography.

Rineke Dijkstra: Dijkstra is able to expose her subjects vulnerability through her revealing portraiture.

Leo Divendal: Divendal’s portraits tell a story about the subject by his sensitivity to light and shadow.

Dorothea Lange, The American Country Woman: This book examines the life and struggles of American women living in rural areas through a photographic study.

Margaret Bourke-White, You Have Seen Their Faces: During the Great Depression, this book was written and photographed to document the lifestyles of very poor Americans living in the rural south.

Joyce Tenneson, Wise Women: Tenneson traveled throughout America and interviewed and photographed older women to express their value and wisdom.

Benjamin Hoff, The Tao of Pooh: “…a particular way of appreciating, learning from, and working with whatever happens in everyday life. From the Taoist point of view, the natural result of this harmonious way of living is happiness.”
CONCLUSION
As a designer, in the past I have always had a fairly clear idea of what the end product would communicate and look like before I even started. This is probably because I would be given a specific problem by a client and asked to come up with an appropriate design. But I found myself using a completely different method for my creative project. This was the result of being asked to not only find a solution, but also discover the problem itself. Looking back I would have never guessed that my creative project would contain portraits of elderly women. By not having a concrete solution in the beginning I allowed myself to openly see other issues that I became aware of through my research. I allowed my research and discoveries to guide me to an appropriate response rather than forcing an initial response to continue to fit.

My initial definition of the problem was to use young girls as subjects to create a direct response and alternative to the girls we see in the media. When I did not do this I felt many people thought that I made a wrong turn somewhere. However, I do not see it as a wrong turn, just an unexpected focus that I felt offered a different angle on the subject.

This process was much more intimidating to me than the way I’ve worked in the past because I was not sure what the outcome would be and if it would be successful in the end. I felt like I was taking a risk with every decision. Now, comparing the two processes I feel the one I used in this project was much more rewarding in the end. There were more struggles, but with this came unexpected revelations. I feel this project has a more unique solution than what my initial response would have been.

In the future I will take this process with me to other design problems. I’ve learned that by doing a little more research other issues will surface that could lead to possibly more creative and compelling solutions. This process also allowed me to consider the concept more thoroughly and form a more concrete outcome, which keeps design interesting to me.

My final solution is not a direct statement on what beauty is or how it should be viewed. I discovered that by not making a direct commentary there is room for questions. I hope the viewer will think more deeply about the issue, relate it to their own life, and then form their own opinions. I believe this form of communication involves the audience more and asks them to become a participant in the work rather than just an observer. After the project was completed I realized that I was presenting questions as a statement because I didn’t have the answers and was trying to discover them within myself as I went along.

Throughout this project I answered many questions and had realizations regarding beauty. The first one is that there is no set definition of beauty. I assumed there was, but have begun to see with this project that these thoughts were assumptions and not truths. I now realize that people create standards and the media perpetuates just because one idea spreads, doesn’t mean it’s the only good idea. Beauty is an ever-changing concept, which I had not considered in the past. I witnessed this through the responses given by my subjects. I saw this in my research by how the standards change throughout history. For example, in the 1950’s Marilyn Monroe was considered voluptuous and beautiful and only one decade later Twiggy, a model, became adored for her beautiful, ultra thin body.

This project has also begun to help me see the difference between self-image and body-image. I have not always separated the two as much as I now believe I should. I noticed when I focus on my personality and unique qualities rather than what I look like, I don’t feel the need to live up to anyone’s standards except the ones I set for myself. But I struggle to do this because every time I look in a fashion magazine or watch the latest ultimate makeover show on TV I start noticing how I don’t exactly fit the media standard. I’ve learned that I have to ignore these types of magazines and TV shows to continue to feel self-confident. This shows me that the media has more power over me than I thought. I just never paid attention to exactly how much before this project. Now when I start to catch myself falling for or believing in a negative message, I am aware of it and can stop it by changing my way of thinking before it gets too far.

The difference between the subjects in my project and myself is that they no longer struggle for self-acceptance or compare themselves to the media’s model. I have learned from their experiences, and understand and accept their views, but I see now that it might take a lifetime to unlearn what I have been taught by the media since I started watching TV. Or perhaps, my subjects never “forgot” at all, but just traveled so far from the standard that they saw no point in trying to achieve the impossible. However, this sounds as if they have given up and that cannot be the case because not one person showed regret or disappointment regarding the loss of “beauty.” I believe they have simply been through so many extraordinary experiences in their lives that they have come to realize that it is a waste of time to focus on such a trivial and insignificant aspect as outer appearance. A young person could never understand this fully because they simply don’t have the life experience for comparison and they do not yet understand how fast time flies.

I believe that this project has aided me in learning something beyond my years. This lesson is not something that I have easily acquired or will easily put into practice, but it is one that I will strive to make a part of me and my perception of myself and others.
**FURTHER DIRECTIONS**

In the future I would like to continue to produce two other informational inserts in the series. The other inserts would continue to focus on other negative messages that women are receiving from the media. They would concentrate on the media’s harmful teachings of weight which result in eating disorders, and objectifying women resulting in self-esteem issues. These next two inserts would follow the lead of the first by continuing to present positive images and by learning from real people and their personal experiences. I would also explore other ways to distribute the inserts in addition to magazines to be sure these messages are reaching the women that are most in need of seeing different perspectives about beauty and self-image.

**EVALUATION**

Stepping back now and looking at my creative project, I can see choices that I made that are working and others that could have worked better. The majority of the statistics that I found did address weight issues and eating disorders, but I chose to focus on beauty in aging. I do feel they are all equally valid subjects and are in need of desperate attention and change, but I see now that it may have been a smoother transition from the background research to look at weight issues first. At the time of this choice I could only choose one, I hadn’t yet realized that I planned to create a series of informational inserts.

I initially thought that my chosen subjects would have the most to offer because they had been through so many stages in life. They did have many experiences – more than I actually expected – but if I were to continue I would also like to hear from women in other stages including those just starting to see themselves as getting older. Although, I believe I chose the right age group to start with. These women have reached a point of total self and body acceptance. They also had the ability to put their realizations into words with more clarity than I had ever expected. All women at any age can learn from their insight and wisdom and start to see beauty in a different light now, as opposed to late in life.

I now feel the interview questions should have had more about self-image. They often spoke about beauty of women in general but did not always hit on how the women interviewed perceived themselves. When some women did discuss this, I found this to be the most beneficial for other women.

I believe that taking close up portraits was the right decision compared to shots of the entire body. When we are so close to a person, we are forced to look directly into their eyes which can be a little uncomfortable, but also very honest and revealing. These types of portraits invite the viewer to travel past the outer appearance and start to see the radiance that comes from within. The full body would have been more of a distraction from my message. It would be too easy to focus on clothes, surroundings, and aged bodies, which is all part of the outer appearance. I did notice that some women kept talking while I was taking the portraits. These photographs in my opinion are some of the most interesting because the subject appears less posed, and more relaxed. In the future I would try to take more of the photographs in this fashion.
A N N O T A T E D  B I B L I O G R A P H Y


This book contains writing and photography from the Great Depression to document the lifestyle of very poor Americans living in the rural south. Most of the photographs are portraits taken to communicate hardships and struggle in each individual's life. I used this book as an example that a person's face can communicate more than just their features, a portrait can also communicate their life.


This book is a collection of full length, frontal and centrally composed portraits of kids at the beach. Dijkstra was able to penetrate to the core of each of her subjects, we experience as viewers the subjects vulnerability. This helped me by making me aware of the techniques she used to get at her end results, which I tried to bring some into my own photographs.


This book is a series of black and white photographs, many of which are portraits. I used this book as an example of how the photographer controls shadow to strengthen the message of the portraits.


This book is a collection of portrait photographs by 72 women photographers. It showed me the many unique styles that can be used when taking a portrait. I saw that each different style had a different impact on the communication about the subject.


This book shows a photographic journey through America between 1955 and 1956. Frank was able to capture a realism of the times unique to the current trend in photography. Frank's ability to shoot with available light and create beautiful photographs is what I studied from his work.


This book is a collection of works from Kalman's entire career. He questions the common understanding of the role of graphic design. Kalman's visual statements often included social commentaries that brought awareness to a particular concern. Because I was also trying to bring awareness to a social issue I studied his work and techniques to learn from his successes.


This book tries to educate about the dangerous messages toward women and girls found in advertising and the media. Kilbourne persuades women, educators and parents to take a stance and start resisting these negative messages. Kilbourne's work is important to my creative project because it provided me needed background and statistics.


This book examines the life of American women living in rural areas. I found this book useful as another example of how an artist shows emotion through her photographs.


This exhibition in a book, it displays the work from 100 international contemporary photographers. It showed me the current trends of today and where photography may be headed.


This book surveys two decades of Cindy Sherman’s career. Her work is very important to me because it examines female identity and body-image in our culture.


This book teaches how the structure of the book works and it presents alternatives. I found this book useful by teaching book standards and examples of where these standards or rules have been broken.


This book is a collection of portfolios by various photographers. Each photographer displays an extremely different style, using unique techniques. When deciding whether portraits were appropriate for my creative project I enjoyed viewing this book as an example of the many different paths that other photographers had explored in the past.

Tenneson traveled throughout America and interviewed and photographed older women in what she calls “the third phase of their life.” She revealed through her photographs and their words that the women were “vital, energetic, and deeply beautiful, inside and out.” I discovered this book amidst working on my creative project. I was first upset there was a project so similar to mine that had already been done but when I viewed the book I felt there were vast differences. Tenneson’s photographs are staged with theatrical lighting in a studio. She also uses some camera effects to create illusions. This book encouraged me to strive to portray the women’s “real” personalities, with available lighting, in their home environments.

Websites
This website presents a study that addressed media images contributing to the rise in eating disorders. I used this website as a way to understand current issues regarding my subject matter.
http://womensissues.about.com/library/blbodyimagestats.htm
This website addresses women’s issues and provides statistics about body image acquired from The National Eating Disorders Association. The statistics were useful to me for background knowledge in approaching this subject.
www.antaroddick.com
This website presents Roddick’s, The Body Shop founder, dedication to social issues and the action she is taking as an individual. I learned about the doll “Ruby” from this website.
www.asaenet.org/sections/comm/article/1,2261,3671,00.html?headline=Communication+News&searchstring=
This website presents a comprehensive business plan to launch a magazine. I used this website when I was considering a magazine as the vehicle for my creative project.
www.eileenfisher.com
This website shows the latest fashions from the designer Eileen Fisher. It’s of interest to me because Fisher chooses to use women who are community activists to model her clothes. Fisher is an example of someone who is trying to promote positive messages.

www.media-awareness.ca
This website promotes media awareness to the youth of Canada. I found it useful because it displays studies that are relevant to any culture that is affected by the media. It provided me with background statistics.
wwwpbs.org/thisnewnewself/showstats_self_image.html
This website displays the summary of a PBS TV series called “In the Mix”, which is information for teens hosted by teens. One of the issues that they addressed was self-image. They provide current body image statistics on the website which I used for my background understanding.
www.thebodyshop.com
Thebodyshop.com contributes one section of the website to issues of body image and self-esteem. I found the website to be a useful example of a company that has chosen to send a positive message to the consumers.

Articles
This article is about The Body Shop making social statements by means of their advertising opportunities. I found this article useful because it is an example of a company in the beauty product industry that is trying to sell positive messages along with their products opposed to the negative messages that we too often see.

This article addresses the issue of how advertisements, even more than parents or teachers, teach our youth about morals, sex, love, etc. This article provided me with background statistics.