

VIEWPOINTS

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COMMENTARY

Seeing through the illusion: reflections on self-esteem

By NAOMI LAKRITZ

CALGARY — Gloria Steinem is turning 76 and she's upset that women still haven't achieved equality. One place we women could use equality is in the world of marketing, which seems hell-bent on convincing us we are so shallow that our self-esteem is instantly jeopardized by pictures of models. I am not talking about women suffering from eating disorders due to serious emotional problems. I'm talking about ordinary women. What would equality look like here?

Well, marketing researchers would stop telling us ordinary women that our self-esteem hangs by a thread — if we're thin and view photos of thin models, we feel great because we identify with them and feel smaller than heavier models; if



faces and the light in their eyes that reflected the solid sense of self-esteem arising from a life spent accomplishing things in the real world, helping others, making a difference in people's lives in low-key, everyday ways.

"After exposure to any model, self-esteem of the low (body mass index) people increases, but the self-esteem of high BMI people decreases," Smeesters said, of his study. This self-esteem, by the way, was measured by showing the women the photos and then having them complete sentences beginning with "I am" or having them view words related to fatness or thinness.

My women friends and I don't think about models. If you asked us for the names of any of the current crop of top models, we'd draw a blank.

models we look at.

Dutch researchers reached these weighty conclusions after showing volunteers photos of models of various sizes and proportions, and testing their self-esteem "in unconscious ways," whatever that means. According to Dirk Smeesters, a professor of marketing at Erasmus University, "If (the heavier women) are exposed to heavy models, they think they're heavy because that's the way they look. But if they're exposed to a thin woman, they don't look like that, so this means they also think they're heavy."

I've got news for you, Dirk. Heavier women already know they're heavy because their scales tell them so, as do their clothing sizes and their mirrors. My self-esteem is based on something more substantial than the images I see while flipping through glossy magazines. I'm not really all that dumb, Dirk. I know those photos are airbrushed so that what women are being fed is pretty much illusory anyway. We women know that the realm of super models is so far removed from our own daily lives as to be in the stratosphere. That's why we rarely ever think about it, if at all. We probably think about it as much as we ponder the orbit of the planet Neptune — my apologies, by the way, to any women astronomers who may very well be thinking quite seriously about Neptune's orbit.

I saw a photo not long ago of some women who were far more beautiful than any of the airbrushed babes with pouty lips and long, skinny legs who can be found in the

other type of models. Our self-esteem does not rest on whether some doe-eyed chick with her hair blowing in an artificial breeze, dressed in ridiculously expensive clothes, and posing with some fake backdrop meant to suggest an exotic destination, is thin, fat, or anything in between. We don't care.

We're also smart enough to know that nobody is perfect. Those of us who are over 40 are probably battling some form of middle age bulge. We know we'll have bad hair days, bad complexion days, and not-enough-sleep/way-too-much-stress days. And to all that, we say: So what? That's just life happening. And the great thing about being over 40 is you finally reach a place where you accept yourself just as you are. Isn't that the real battle women have been fighting all these years — the battle to be true to themselves?

When will we get to declare victory? Certainly, not while marketing researchers conclude that our self-worth is so tenuous it rests on a momentary glance at a magazine ad.

And, by the way, Neptune takes 164.79 years to orbit the sun, so on July 12, 2011, it will finish its first orbit since it was discovered in 1846. Hopefully, it won't take 164.79 more years before the average woman achieves equality and is treated like the intelligent person she is.

■ Lakritz writes for the *Calgary Herald*.

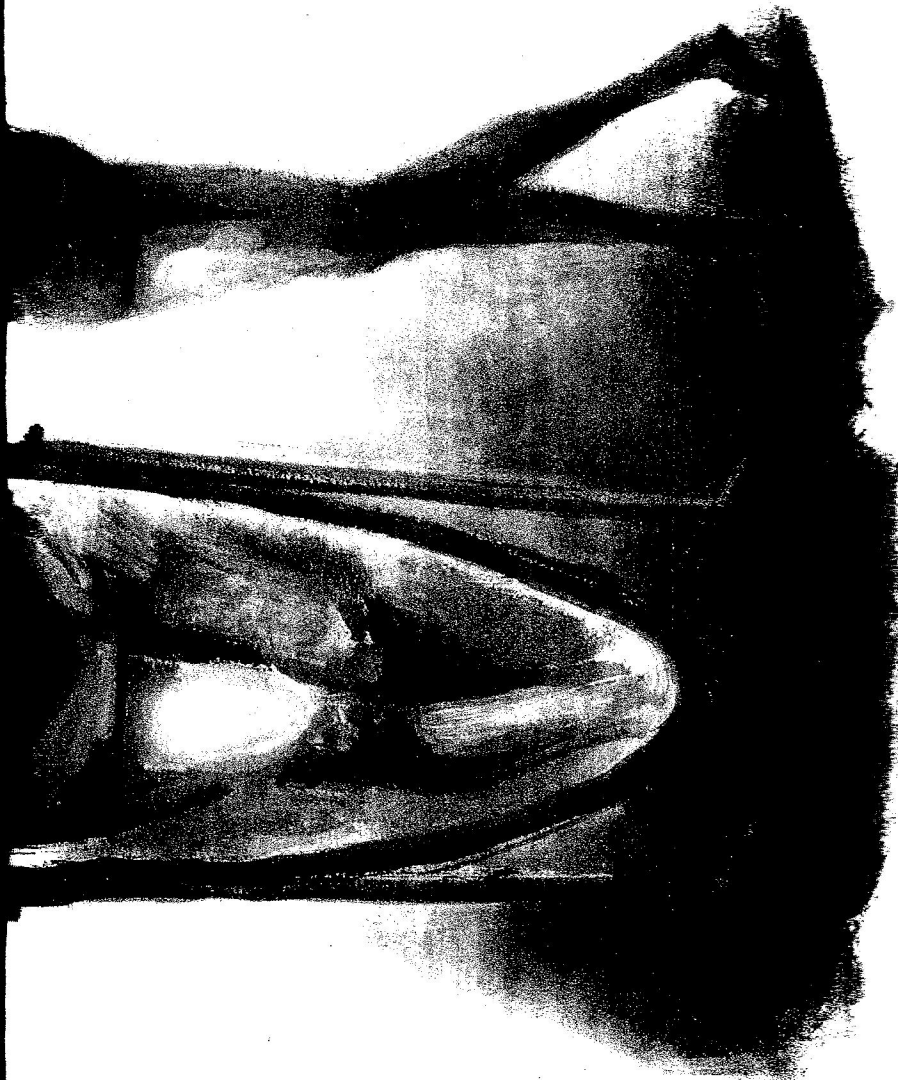


Illustration: Paul Gilligan, *Ottawa Citizen*.

pages of a magazine. They were nuns from a convent in Washington state, all of them in late middle age, none wearing any makeup, a couple with some serious problems with zits, most falling into the category weight-wise which could be labelled frumpy or matronly. Their clothing would never be considered the latest fashion. But what made them beautiful was the character in their