

Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes

by Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin, Books in Focus.

—review by *Candida Albicans Royale*

What can I say about *En Large* that hasn't already been said? A mouthful.

Sure, it's big—it's beautiful, it's hot, it's hokey, it's touching, it's disturbing. Showing fat nude women just *being* is confrontational to those of us who are (and who isn't?) unused to seeing imagery of fat women au naturel. Butch women, straight women, femme dykes, mothers...plus one or two youngin's thrown in. Kudos to those who made such a huge first step in putting photos (and stories) of fat women out there.

Some of the portraits are particularly stunning. (And I found myself squirming in my seat at some of the stunning models as well, but I was talking about the photography here.)

The personal essays/stories in the book are an intense tease—the photos already left me hungry for personal information on the models and their lives. Photos of women hiding, flaunting, folding, dancing, just letting it all hang out... (no photos of women fucking, sorry, but a couple of them brought me back to the atmosphere of very memorable encounters...) This book is full of

photography that inspires and intrigues you to want to know more about the models (many of whom were pictured in their own homes).

But aye, there's the rub. Whereas the photography speaks for itself and leaves you wanting more, Debbie Notkin's writing has a way of making you wish she'd leave the contributors' voices alone. In one chapter, she pieces together several short excerpts contributed by the models; these are powerful, moving, well-written personal accounts, some of which gave me goose bumps. But in her narration, Notkin annoyingly (and inaccurately) paraphrases the contributors, and in the process seems to "not get" the main point behind what these women are saying. Her commentary manages to discount and dismiss what I found most moving about some of the accounts—which are all about these women and how they define themselves in the world.

For instance:

Queen T'hisha: "I was born in the San Francisco Bay Area. I found out that I was a girl at age eight. I found out I was African-American at age fourteen. I was told I was fat at age twenty..."

I had plenty of romantic relationships with people raised outside this society, or who didn't adhere to its sexist standards of beauty. They affirmed my sanity and gave me a worldly perspective, not

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Queen T'hisha and Robyn Brooks

photo by Laurie Toby Edison

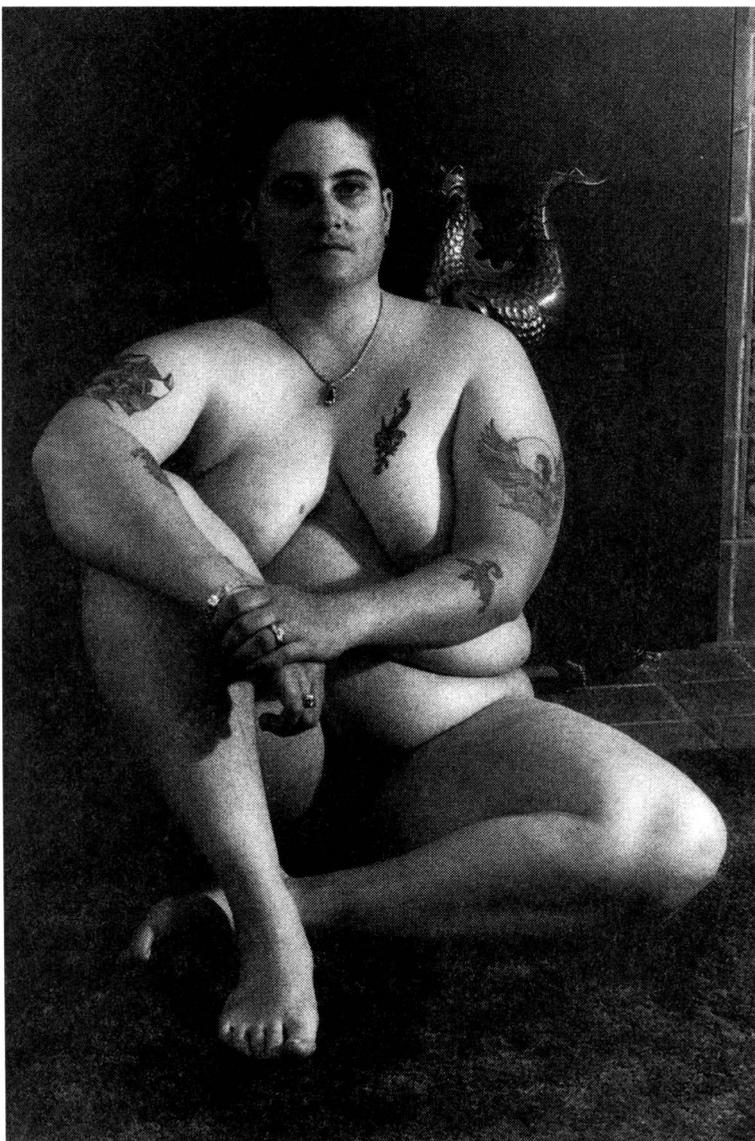
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one limited by white racist misogynist American culture. I'm tall, African-Nature, fat, smart, and deserve all the things I want."

Notkin, immediately following: "And that's the best possible transition: from a teenage girl (fat or thin, but obsessed with her weight); to a young woman fat or thin, but learning how to live with her body, whatever size and shape it may be; to a woman who can look in the mirror and see *herself*..."

Hello? Am I missing something, or is there some possible way to read T'hisha's segment and summarize her as having been a weight-obsessed teenager? How intrusive, to sum up someone's story with your own (negating) version. And how strange. Notkin purports, in her introduction, to include women from various cultures and backgrounds, but then tries to impose her own (white-washed?) vision of them over what they have to say themselves, about where they came from and where they are.



J Kellan Dewey-McCracken photo by Laurie Toby Edison

Another example:

Our own luscious April Miller talks frankly about accepting herself and her sexuality and how she demands to be taken seriously as deserving of wonderful things:

"I have a voluptuous body and a very sensual nature. Acknowledging my sexuality makes me feel powerful, desirable, and in control. I have more fun. I get hassled less. I believe that we should all glory in ourselves and share our best with the world. I'm creative, intelligent, charming, and lush. What's not to like?"

Notkin, in response: "Most of us aren't as outrageous as April, but one way or another we do find an accommodation that works for us."

Yes, how very outrageous that such a woman should demand and expect people to treat her as powerful and desirable. Thanks for dismissing her self-respect as outrageous. (April, as many fat activists have come to know, certainly can be outrageous; but to follow such a frank and empowering statement with the label of outrageous is either dense or rude.)

Go out and beg, borrow or buy the book anyway. It's well worth it for all the gems that shine through the poor editing. And the story of how this book came to be published against all odds makes for an interesting read as well. ✨

Women En Large is available from Books in Focus, 1-800-463-6285.

A model speaks

I really enjoyed modeling for *Women En Large*. I respected the artist, enjoyed the photo shoots, and was honored to be part of such a history-making, stereotype-shattering project. I was even flattered to be asked to write my personal "fat sexual liberation" story for publication in the book.

And then the book came out.

When I was asked to write a piece about sex for the book they said they thought my voice was important. And then they discounted everything I had to say.

Don't mistake me. I am still honored to be one of the models in this book. I still think it's an important publication and I recommend that you buy it. But with one line: "Most of us aren't as outrageous as April..." they tainted my experience and dismissed all the power of my words, my life.

Outrageous. Courageous. Spot the difference.

—April Miller