

BIGGER THAN BARBIE, STRONGER THAN KEN

Just Out looks at women's body image traumas and triumphs

BY ORIANA GREEN

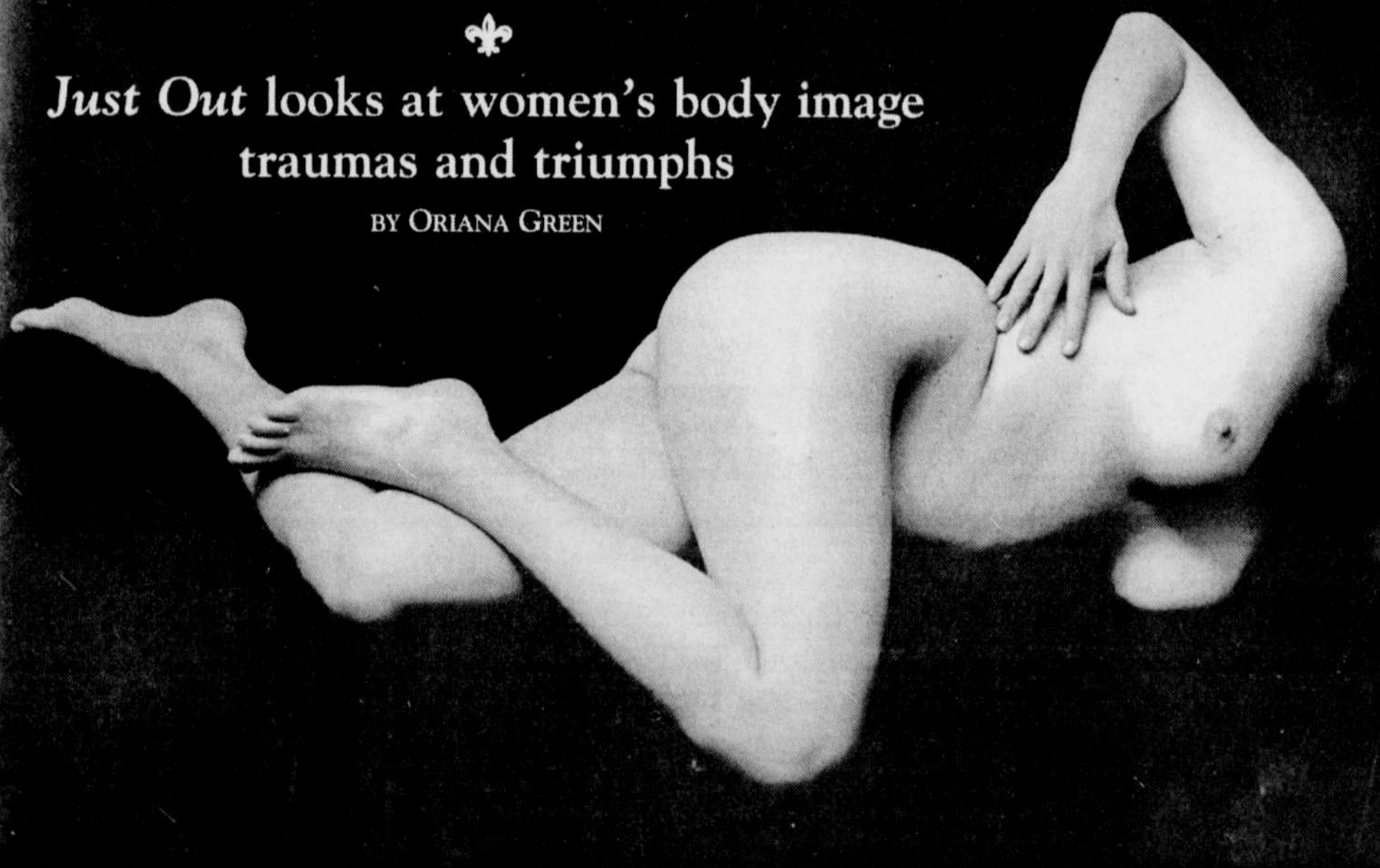


PHOTO BY TAMARA LISCHKA

At 51, I've looked at life from both sides now. Though I'm all lesbian now, in my 20s I occasionally identified as bisexual, and at times I passed as a straight woman—not surprising, since it was the confusing and turbulent late '60s and early '70s. During those years I even subjected my hair to hot rollers every weekday morning, then painted on a happy face. Though I still own a few palettes of eye shadow and a wicked plum lipstick, I have to hunt for them every Halloween.

In addition, for the first 40 years of my life I was quite slender without much effort. But that also meant I was flat-chested, which caused me plenty of pain growing up in the va-va-voom era. During my 41st and 42nd years I doubled in size, and I've been fat ever since. I spent another five or so years fighting it, but I eventually grew to accept my expanded physical reality. The fact that I'm a tall, big-boned gal helps me carry it, but it's also useful to look at photos of my stout grandmothers in middle age and realize that perhaps some genetic destiny is at work.

What I know for sure is that whatever kind of body you live in at the moment, it's a whole lot easier to love yourself the way you are. I stopped caring what anyone else thinks of my body long ago, and that was one great libera-

tion. In writing this article I tried to include as many points of view as space allowed, but obviously there are as many opinions as there are women.

So here's the myth: Straight women and gay men are more concerned with their body image than lesbians or heterosexual men.

But studies show that both lesbians and straight women report greater dissatisfaction with their bodies and more dieting than men of all orientations.

"Lesbians are more likely than gay men to have negative body images," says therapist Jennifer Stock.

And why not? Another Portland therapist, Serena Barton, makes this observation: "We're all raised heterosexual—lesbians aren't

immune—we're all exposed to society's standards of what's attractive."

According to registered dietician Ruth Carey, 80 percent of 13-year-old girls are dieting and 80 percent of 17-year-old girls say they're too fat—while government studies show only 10 percent are actually overweight—yet the current thin-yet-big-busted ideal is only a very recent trend. All you have to do is crack open an art history book to see a wider range of female shapes, and it wasn't until the 1960s that ethereally thin models became fashionable.

I recently spent an hour in a mall consciously looking at hundreds of women, and it didn't take long to appreciate that damn few of us look anything like the airbrushed, digitally altered images fed to us every day. So it's no wonder most of us enter adult life with feelings of inadequacy or some hang-ups about our bodies. As Barton puts it, "It's just hard to grow up without some injury to our healthy narcissism."

To pass or not to pass?

That is the big question facing most women who step out into the world as lesbians—do I want everyone I meet to read me as queer, or do I want to hide behind the veil of "heterosexual normalcy"?

There are many ways in which we can announce our deviation from the mainstream standard, and whether or not to wear makeup is one choice.

Sarah, a 43-year-old office worker, has given this a lot of thought.

"I figure I save several hours a week, maybe 200 hours a year not putting on makeup every day," she says. "That's eight extra days I have to enjoy life. Plus I have all that money I saved to spend!"

She also notes that her skin is healthier because her pores aren't constantly clogged with gunk.

Of course there are "lipstick lesbians" who, for various reasons, prefer the glam look.

Karen Frangos, a naturopath with a practice in Portland, has observed women in this category and believes they are under a lot of extra pressure.

"If you're passing, it can be even more important to stay thin," she explains.

While some women pass for convenience's sake, others do so to remain in the closet, and that can cause all kinds of havoc.

"I know lipstick lesbians who'd die if their partners gained five pounds," Frangos notes.

For some women who are just naturally more butch, passing isn't an option. Andy (nee Andrea), 42, is one such woman who, despite toting around a pair of obvious C cups, is often mistaken for a man.

"I don't mind if some lesbians can pass, but they don't understand what it's really about to be queer," she assesses, measuring her words but failing to disguise years of pain around the issue.

Theresa, 38, sums up an oft-repeated edict: "I would never date a woman who wears lipstick. I couldn't trust her... And I'd wonder if she wasn't on some level still catering to men."

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—Theresa, a 38-year-old gardener

Krista, a 27-year-old waitress, has always worn makeup, on and off her job, even after she came out to herself and the world.

"I think I'm kinda plain without it," she says. "I like how it makes me feel, more confident, I guess."

She pauses, then laughs recalling some days when she skipped the routine because she wasn't feeling well.

"I'm positive I get better tips when I wear makeup," she says. "And it sort of goes with

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