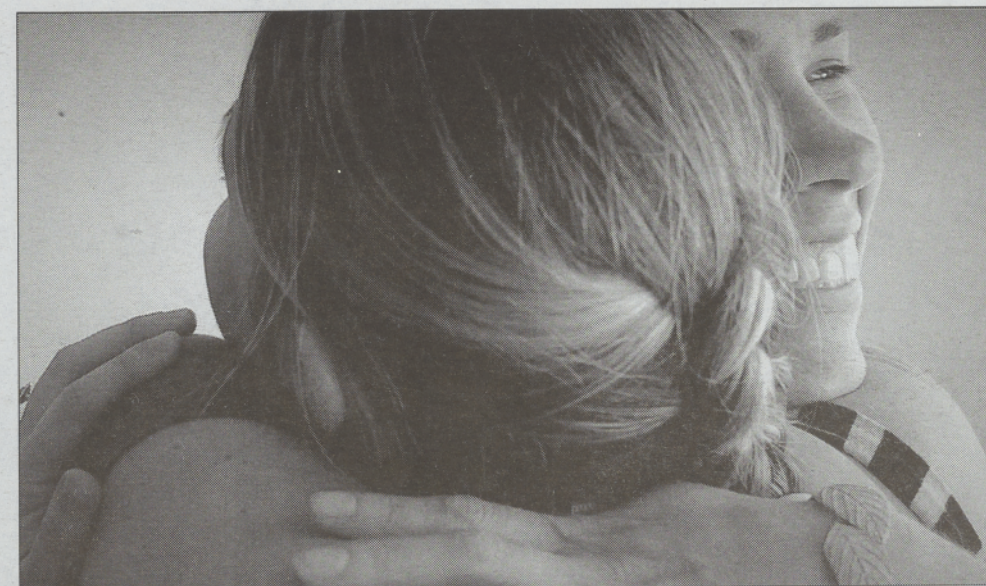




Arkady Brown is photographing the vulvas of dozens of women who are participating in The Vulva Art Project. The anonymous photographs will be revealed early next year.

PHOTOS BY JET EVELETH / FROM "THE VULVA ART PROJECT INTERVIEWS"



Photographer Arkady Brown, front, embraces a participant of The Vulva Art Project.



Arkady Brown, left, is the creator of The Vulva Art Project. Sophia Treyger is an intimacy coach who provides emotional support at the photo shoots.

NO MORE SHAME

Photographer Arkady Brown believes unhealthy body image starts with the vulva. The Vulva Art Project aims to heal, empower and end the stigma.

"It's from a very young age, when you don't teach a child about this part of their body, to love it and that it's sacred, it sets us up to look at the rest of our body in a very judgmental way."

ARKADY BROWN,
CREATOR OF
THE VULVA ART PROJECT

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

Arkady Brown, a fine-art boudoir photographer, has set out to create a project that rejects body shame and encourages women to love and know about their bodies — especially their vulvas.

The Vulva Art Project grew from a conversation between Brown and a friend who would become the first project participant, Sophia Treyger. Brown was photographing Treyger for a boudoir shoot, and Treyger said she would like to have her vulva photographed. Brown took that idea and grew it into The Vulva Art Project.

For Brown, who has her own personal history with body shame and eating disorders, this project is about women moving toward healing, empowerment and self-love, and she views the vulva as a point of origin for a lot of body shame.

"I feel like, for many women, we are not taught about our vulvas and how to love them," she said. "Shame starts very young with that part of the body with lack of education. My mother — it's not her fault; it's just generational — she didn't teach me about that part of my body; she didn't tell

me to explore that part of my body. So I grew up knowing that this part of my body looks funny, it smells, it bleeds, all these different things.

"So it's from a very young age, when you don't teach a child about this part of their body, to love it and that it's sacred, it sets us up to look at the rest of our body in a very judgmental way. Like well, one lip is longer than the other, I have a belly, one boob is smaller than the other, it just goes on from there."

The first step was to recruit women, so Brown posted about the project on Facebook. The positive response was overwhelming. Brown was able to sign up over 40 women, and each woman's story was different.

A woman who asked to only be identified as Liebe is one of the project participants. She is the survivor of a 16-year abusive marriage, in which she was sexually controlled and repressed. She was shamed for wearing anything form-fitting or at all revealing, and was made to wear clothes that were five sizes too big.

"I was sexually repressed, so this means a lot to me, maybe a lot more than to a woman who grew up free in herself," said Liebe.

"Because I wasn't free in myself. I didn't feel right about it, there was no freedom there for me."

Healing from that experience has been a multilayered process for Liebe, and having her vulva photographed for this project was an important part of it.

"Doing something like this, it's very healing for me to be able to show the world this part of my body," Liebe said. "It's healing for me because I can do it without shame now."

Some of the women who participated in the project were like Treyger — comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality, and eager to be photographed. Others were not. One 40-year-old woman Brown photographed hadn't looked at her vulva until age 38. Some, like Liebe, had experienced physical or sexual trauma.

Brown wanted to create an intentional environment that held space for women who might have those experiences, so she brought in Treyger, who is a trained therapist and a sex and intimacy coach, to be present at the shoots as an emotional support.

"It was really important for me to have someone there during all the sessions that

can be that person, because it is such an intimate thing; it is triggering and emotional," Brown said.

The women waited to be photographed together in a lounge with food, drink and their children invited. As they waited, they shared their experiences, supported one another, and exchanged numbers. The actual photography session was only one to two minutes per woman, but many women described it as a freeing experience.

"I saw how much it really allowed these women to own their bodies and to own their experience, and have it not be the only time they're opening their legs is to have sex or to give birth or to have a medical procedure," said Jet Eveleth, the project's videographer and a project participant. "It was to open their legs just for fun. And anytime I think that something's fun, there's freedom in it. And so we're connecting freedom now with the human body."

There is one experience that is conspicuously absent from this project — that of trans people.

"I know that transgender men and women, they have a very different story around their vulva and what it means to them, especially if they've had to buy it, and

get surgery for it," Brown said. "That's a huge story, and I'd love to have that represented."

However, Brown hasn't had any response from trans folks. One specific challenge, she said, is that she would need multiple people from that community so that they could remain anonymous.

"I have a couple women of color who are very distinct shades, and I've had to tell them, 'Just so you know, you're going to be recognized,'" Brown said. "And so they have to be OK with that. There are a couple redheads. They're going to be noticed. There's a couple women who are very blonde. They're going to stand out."

The biggest challenge The Vulva Art Project has dealt with so far is finding funding and an exhibition space. Brown was surprised when many venues turned her down because they said the project was too controversial, too sexual, inappropriate for children or pornographic.

The project did finally find a venue; the Clinton Street Theater will host a one-day event in February that will begin with an hour for the participants of the project only and VIP ticket holders, as it will be the first time the participants are seeing the photos

of themselves. The event will also include a screening of a documentary about the process, and potentially personal stories from participants.

Meanwhile, Brown and the other participants continue to raise funds for the exhibition. They've been turned down for grants they've applied for.

"The only reason why every part of our body is controversial and a distraction is because it's been over-sexualized, and that's all it's viewed for, is sex. And damn it, I want that to change," Brown said. "In a society where a president is allowed to say, 'Grab 'em by the pussy,' we have to take that back."

Taking that back often includes parents teaching their children to love, respect and know their bodies.

"The mothers and mothers-to-be who are being photographed, who are teaching their daughters to love themselves, that's the healing part," Treyger said. "That is the most important. They're leaving this self-love legacy."

Arkady Brown is a freelance photographer whose work has appeared in Street Roots.

IF YOU GO

What: The Vulva Art Project Reveal

Where: Clinton Street Theater, 2522 SE Clinton Street, Portland

When: Feb. 17

Tickets: Information will be announced later.