

Just call me fat: New York fat activist Substantia Jones

Sarah Catherall 10:07, Jun 21 2016



MONIQUE FORD / FAIRFAX NZ

Substantia Jones in Wellington with Massey University fat studies lecturer Dr Cat Pause. Jones is here for a fat studies conference hosted by Massey.

"Well done, I'm so proud of you," Substantia Jones gushes, when I ask her how long she has been - em, fat? Dressed in a tight-fitting orange dress with flaming orange hair, the New York photographer is beaming. I have made her very happy. I called her fat. Not well-covered, or voluptuous - but fat.

It has been nine years since the fat activist first picked up her digital camera and began taking naked selfies and photographs of her nude and semi-nude overweight friends. In New Zealand for a fat studies conference at Massey University, and to exhibit her controversial photographs on the walls of Palmerston North's Te Manawa Museum, she has taken thousands of images of fat people in her career. Showing a parade of "happy, naked fat people" on a slide show at a Wellington lecture, she has had 11 million visitors to the website since she launched her Adipositivity Project in 2007.

Without judgement, the images are artful and striking, reminiscent of Renoir paintings, flesh curving and folding over limbs. Many of the fat

Adiposers - or fat posers - look blissfully happy and comfortable within their bodies.

READ MORE:

[* American fat activist will photograph 30 nude New Zealanders](#)

[* The real reason everyone is fat](#)

[* Fat fertilisers - why overeating is not making you fat](#)

New Zealand is the farthest the 56-year-old has travelled to photograph nude fat people, and while here, she will snap about 30 New Zealanders. In Auckland, she photographed one couple - a fat person and a thinner partner - along with four other overweight people. Her goal is to help us accept fat people, to bombard us with positive images to make fat people visible. "Visibility is extremely important for everyone. But thin people get it in spades, in our culture, in our media. Fat people are denied it. I wanted to demystify the fat body," says Jones.



SUBSTANTIA JONES

Jones photographed these fat women in a New Jersey garden.

Also working as a commercial photographer back in New York, Jones hasn't always been fat. As a child, she was so reed thin that her nickname at school was "bones". Substantia Jones is also, she laughs, a "non de plump". Born Kimberley Massengill, she wasn't comfortable when her thin body began curving in new ways as she went through adolescence. Lying on the beach, she loved it when her bikini stuck out on her hipbones. "I liked being thin. I freaked out about my body changing, and I started dieting very

young."

But as a thin woman who thought she was fat, Jones was miserable. In her twenties, she married and over the decade piled on 100 pounds. At that time, she began experimenting with photography too, and won an award in an art show. As she went on one diet after another, her weight yo-yoed. It was only when she embraced her fat body that Jones actually felt happy with herself.

Taking naked selfies of her body back in 2007, and firing those and ones of her friends on to the internet through her Adipositivity Project, helped her quest for self-acceptance. Fat bloggers noticed, word spread, and Jones became inundated with requests from fat people to be part of the project. "The primary goal is that I want people to love and respect their bodies."

Through the self-funded guerilla-style operation, Jones has photographed people in homes, city streets, parks, an Ivy League library bathroom, in front of a police precinct while the police watched, in a horse stable, bars, a construction site, swimming pools, and in the bed of a gay Buddhist monk. "I photograph anyone as long as they're fat."



SUBSTANTIA JONES

Substantia Jones, of the Adipositivity Project, hopes to promote fat acceptance through images like this one.

Jones radiates incredible warmth, and that is part of the reason why she has managed to get timid, shy people out of their clothes and before her camera shutter. A black woman lifts a naked fat leg in a yoga pose, while

half a dozen fat women lounging naked are photographed from above. Fat women of different hues are captured from behind, their dimpled backsides spilling over a row of chairs in a New Jersey garden.

Would she be thin again? "My weight stopped fluctuating many years earlier, when I stopped dieting. I've weighed the same for 20 years. My weight isn't something I hide. I'm completely happy with my body. I love my body. It moves me around and gives me belly laughs. I never have any desire anymore to be thin. It wouldn't be me."

In Wellington, Jean Sergent, a sociology Masters student and actress, stripped down for the project. Last week, Sergent was an Adiposer in the dressing room of Bats Theatre - her second home, where the actress last performed with the theatre troupe, The Bacchanals. "I felt so very alive and so connected to myself," she says. "Substantia is the warmest person I have ever met. She was so lovely to work with, and we spent a lot of time laughing. It was the most unique thing I've ever done."



MONIQUE FORD / FAIRFAX NZ

Jean Sergent, an actress and Masters student, sat naked for Jones in Wellington.

Playing the role of Nancy Wake in a New Zealand Festival production, *Page Turners*, this year, Sergent is about 20 kilograms too heavy for TV work. She frequently gets judged and criticised for being overweight. "Not a day goes by when I don't have a negative reaction about my body. I've got a long history of eating disorders."

So what does she hope to achieve by others seeing her naked image on the internet? "I hope that people in my position will see me and say, "Oh that's what I look like". It's about moments of recognition. Substantia's work is a statement against the Western ideals of body shape, and the pictures of me will be part of that. I believe in her work - body positivity isn't worth anything if fat positivity isn't part of that."

The health issues about fatness are contentious. Jones refers to studies which she says make no direct link between weight and morbidity or mortality, such as in the Journal of American Medical Association and the Journal of Obesity which she says have been unable to find a causal connection.

But she personally gets hate mail, and, she says, death threats, for promoting body positivity. A sign of the ire she draws was a reaction to a news story about her visit, which drew 150-plus comments on Stuff. A registered nurse expressed outrage about the photo project, saying she works in a medical rehabilitation ward, and sees "the tragic consequences of obesity every day". Some of the patients are on 15 to 20 drugs, with obesity-associated comorbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, gout, heart failure, renal failure, and some types of cancers. Their obesity causes issues for the staff trying to treat them in the hospital.

Jones attacks the US\$66 billion weight loss industry. When asked if we can publish her photographs, she nods - as long as they're not beside a diet advertisement. "85 to 90 per cent of dieters fail. We go back to the trough and support the weight loss industry more. You have to consider that the industry has a huge financial interest in making us hate our bodies, and believing that fat people are not worthy of love, are worthy of ridicule, and of believing that fat is unhealthy."

Judging by the feisty reaction to her visit on Stuff, the Palmerston North exhibition is bound to be controversial when it runs from July 1 to August 28. Chief executive Andy Lowe says the nude and semi-nude images of fat people will inspire discussion on body image, size and acceptance. "Provoking dialogue on topical issues and allowing people to express their ideas and stories is a crucial role of inclusive museums and galleries," he says.

The Ministry of Health on obesity:

According to the Ministry of Health, almost one in three adult New Zealanders (31 per cent) are obese, and one in ten children. The Ministry

says that obesity is associated with a long list of health conditions including Type 2 diabetes, ischaemic heart disease (IHD), stroke, several common cancers, osteoarthritis, sleep apnoea and reproductive abnormalities. The World Health Organisation describes the prevalence of obesity as an epidemic.