
ARTICLE

Dressed For Success

by Bailee Grissom
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What makes you feel powerful? Your job? Your car? How about your clothes? In "Trappings: Stories of Women, Power & Clothing" (Rutgers University Press, 2007, \$29.95), Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki conducted interviews with women across the country over the course of six years, asking them what clothes made them feel powerful, culminating in a collection of real-life tales by women from all walks of life. Ludwig and Piechocki chose 61 of the 500 women they spoke with, and created a multi-platform media project, consisting of their [Web site](#), exhibitions and now a book.

How did you get the idea for your book?

Piechocki: Tiffany and I met in 2000 when we were both working in New York City on an arts conference together. When we met, we really enjoyed working together, and we decided that we wanted to make an art project together as well. So we spent about a year on the phone, talking about the common denominators in our work. ... We were really interested in doing a project about women that would reach a wide range. We were also not interested in doing a project that was like our own work. We really wanted to make something new. Once we had all those things down, we, as feminists, were really interested in talking to women about contemporary women's issues, but that can be a very polarizing topic. We identified clothing as a vehicle that women use for self-expression, and we developed the question "What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?"... that could access real stories about real women, and talk to them about how they define power and present power, or not, through clothing.



What were the most challenging aspects of the project?

Ludwig: A pretty challenging aspect of this project was raising the funds to do it. We were self-funded from the beginning, but once we got our footing and established a track record with the project in its interview stage and then at some of the early exhibitions, we started to receive some really nice grant money from organizations around the country to conduct interviews for these exhibitions.

Piechocki: It's interesting that Tiffany's answer is not about meeting women because that was really easy. We never had trouble finding people who wanted to participate, so that was great. And I think definitely the most interesting part is getting to meet these women. It is really an honor to hear their stories and hear their responses to our questions. It wouldn't exist if women didn't come to an interview session, so their compelling and exciting stories definitely make the book and the exhibition fantastic.

Are you satisfied with the outcome, or would you go back and do anything differently?

Ludwig: I'm very satisfied with the project and with the outcome. I think when we both got the book in our hands, we couldn't stop smiling because there is something unique about a book as opposed to an exhibition or the Web site.

Piechocki: You know, it's been more than satisfying to have been a part of this. I think I would have invested in better luggage. The number of suitcases that I have blown through in all this time is pathetic, and I should have just bought better luggage.

Tell me about the ladies you spoke with in Mississippi.

Piechocki: We got to interview about 15 women in Mississippi; it was toward the beginning of the project, which was in October of 2002. Two of the women from Mississippi are featured in the book. Clara Lee Arnold is one. When we met her, she was training to become a professional boxer. ... She brought three different outfits to the interview session: One to talk about her physical boxing power, another to talk about social power, where she brought an evening gown. The third outfit was a negligée, so it was kind of about personal sexual power. The second person was our youngest participant; at the time, she was 4 years old. Her name is Anna Laurenzo. Anna talked about being a tomboy, and about how a lot of her power came from her identification of what she thought of as boy's things, her soccer shorts and Star Wars flip-flops.

What do you hope your readers will take away from the book, both men and women?

Ludwig: What you said there was exactly right: for men or for women. It's a project that talks to women in the interview phase, and the stories are all by women. But the book and the results of the project are really for anyone, and it's a conversation that tends to fall apart on gender lines. Men have come up to us and described that they really have attached themselves to the project question and kind of invested in thinking about what it means to them—what is power in their world based on their masculine perspective.

Piechocki: I hope people come away seeing someone who they think they're going to know, or learn something different or meet somebody in the book that they might never encounter in real life. I hope they just expand their own feelings about what power really means and what you bring to someone else's appearance.

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