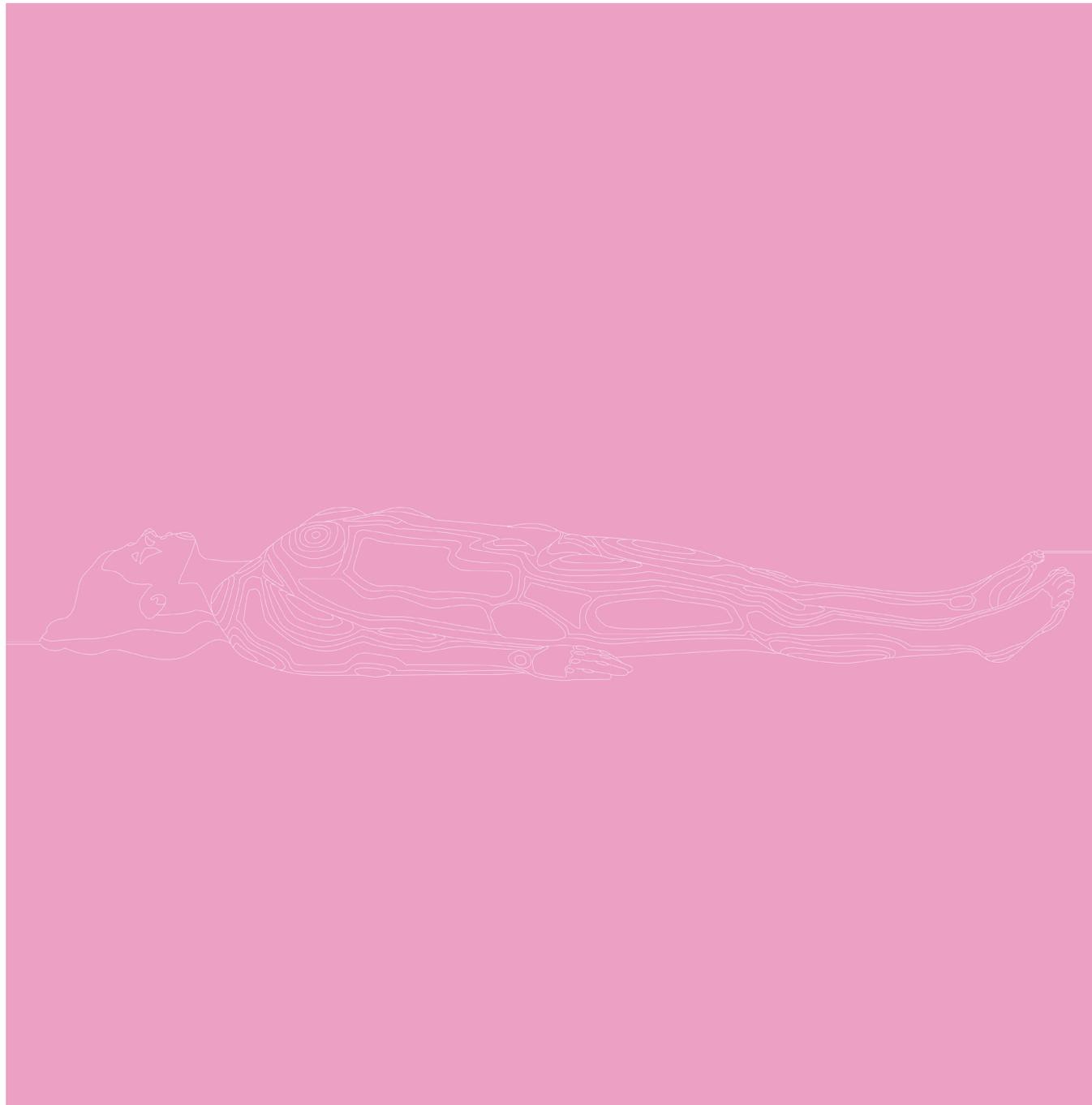


# The Body Project

Looking at the body  
as topographical form

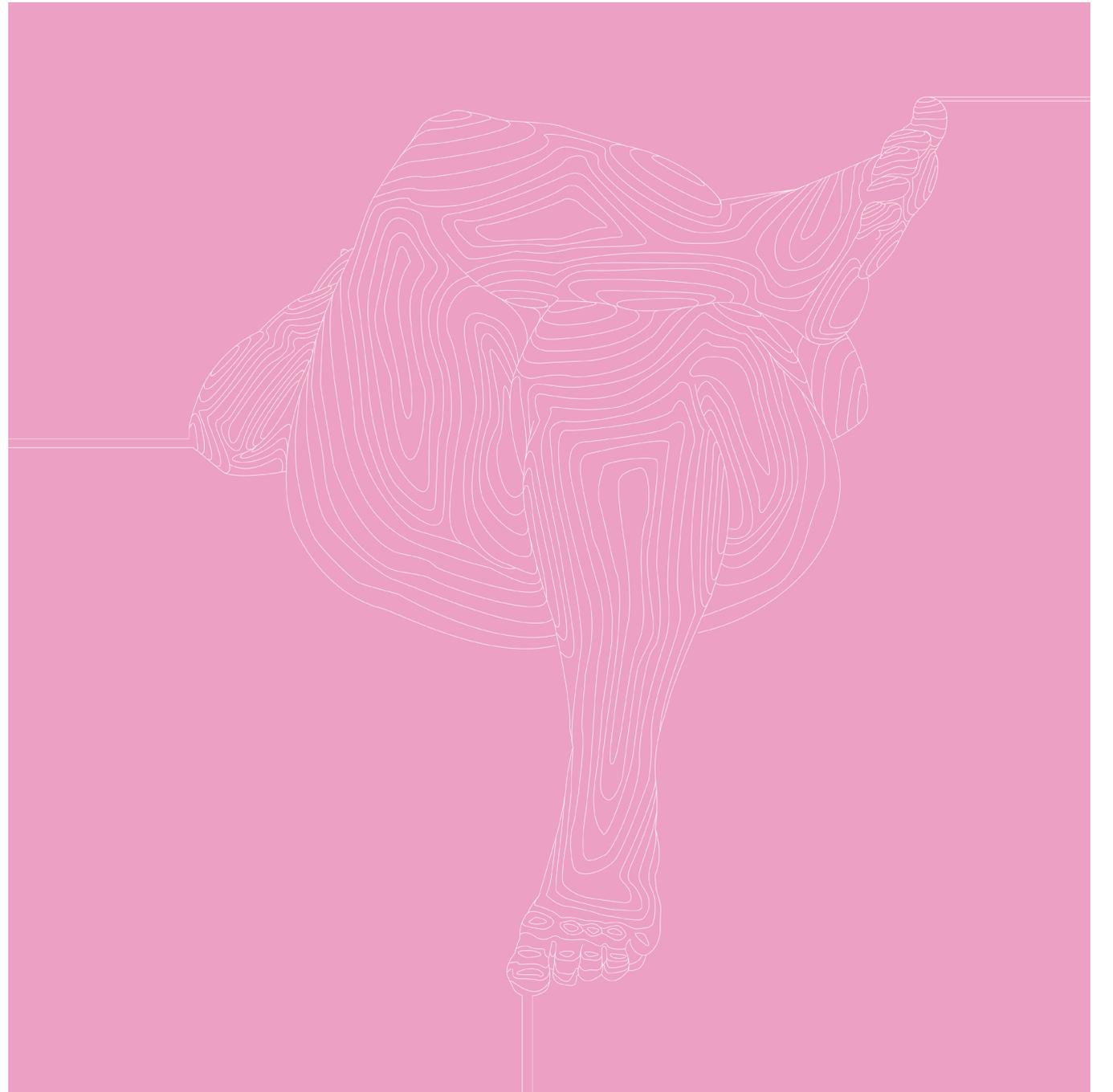
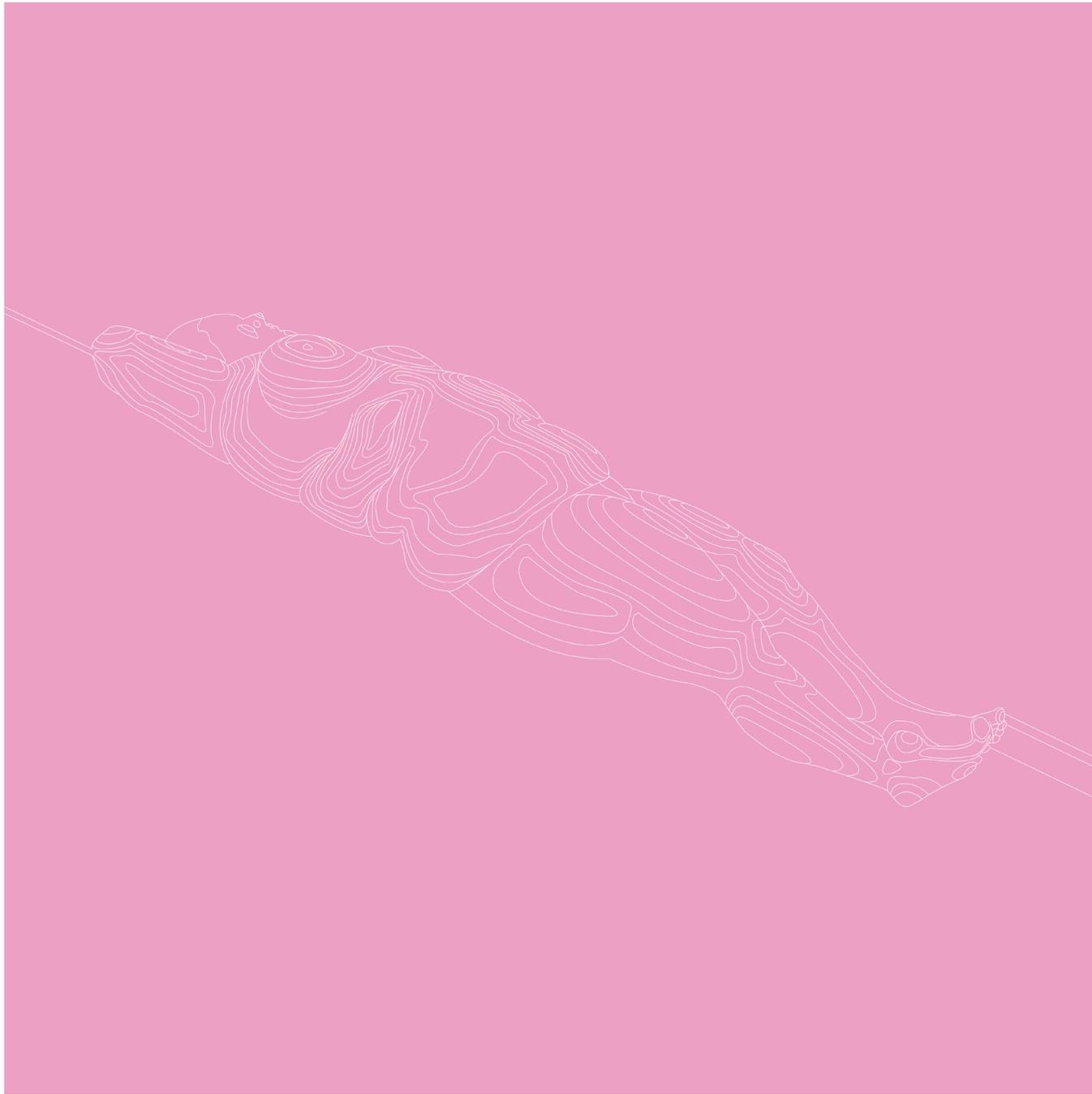
When I lay in bed, my soft lumps and skin settle, spilling out onto the surface. After losing over 200 pounds my body has changed and continues to change rapidly, in some ways which are difficult to accept. Lying there, I analyze my body, dissecting it into pleasant features and unpleasant features; soft skin and hard bone; loose skin and firm muscle; areas that are high and areas that are low. This isn't an uncommon experience for most people—to look at their bodies in this purely analytical way. We break ourselves down into pieces, looking at our bodies in a completely subjective way. Sometimes this is seen as cruel, but this is just the reality of the human experience.

Relating this analysis to that of how we analyze topography in land was incidental and was largely inspired by the end pages of 100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design.



White lines against a red field undulate across the pages in various widths, appearing similarly to a topographical map. Topographical maps analyze the variations in land in a very objective and scientific way. In the same way, I realized I could analyze bodies in order to output a purely graphical image of a body that was separate from subjective observation. At first this was my only intention, but then I began to question my role as the observer of another person's body.

As the analyzer of another's body, it was important to me that I approached objectiveness in a sensitive, yet consistent way. Additionally, it should be stated that while *The Gaze* is often linked with males (hence, the term "the male gaze"), as a female analyzing female bodies (who happens to be sexually attracted to female bodies) I think the Gaze could have been a potential flaw in my plan to look at bodies objectively. In order to combat that, I started to consider ways in which the subjective experience of each person could be expressed in order to honor that as an equally important part of the work. Eventually I arrived at the choice to include a personal statement along with the work, which would honor the individual experience of each participant.



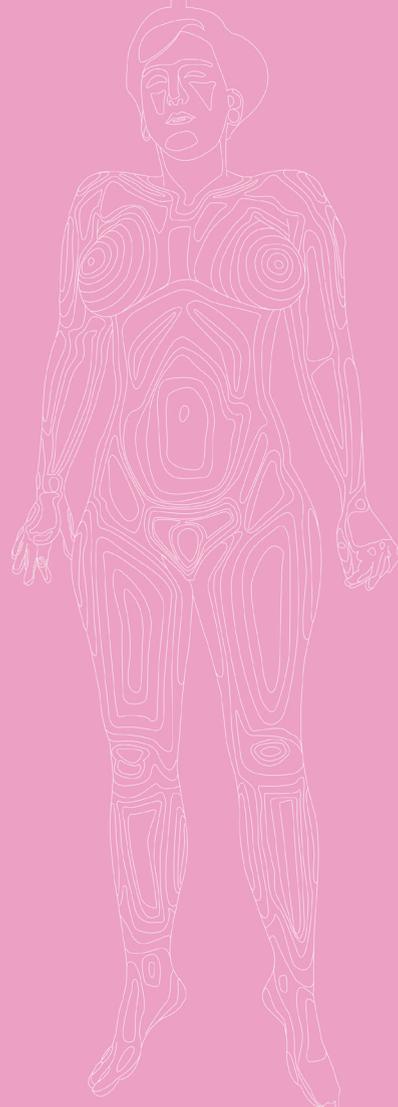
As it progressed, I discovered that it wasn't so much the product of the work that was the goal, but instead the process in which it took to get there. In other words, it is a holistic experience that is offered to the viewer instead of various parts of a whole in which to be digested.

As the maker of the images, it was my goal and duty to observe, analyze and dissect the bodies in a very objective manner. I had to disregard my desire to delete lines because they didn't fall where I wanted them to as well as I had to disregard my desire to leave out details in order to preserve feelings. It wasn't my goal to make anyone feel any differently about their body in particular way, but instead to just look at the body as any designer would look at a total composition, analyzing and dissecting variations of line and shape. I did this by observing differing levels of height and shapes in the body structure as well as defining characteristics of the individual's body.

The subjective experience of existing inside of a body is universal. A body's story is as linked to its environment and experiences as the mind is. To deny the impact or importance of this experience would be futile. In our current media landscape with the body positivity movement going full-tilt,

we are bombarded with the message of, "Your/My Body Is Beautiful," suggesting that no matter the shape, size, color, complexion, etc. that the collective experience of human beings is that they are and that they should feel beautiful. This is regardless of their experience in how they feel or what they've been told. This is a difficult dichotomy to exist in, especially if an individual does not feel comfortable in their skin. To assert that they should feel beautiful because that is the opinion of another person places a very strange expectation on a person who has otherwise accepted things about themselves, regardless of whether society can collectively agree upon those decisions or not. Additionally, it places the observer in a position of authority over another person's body. Even if this is done in a well-meaning way, it also invites the question of whether the people who say negative things about specific body qualities are therefore also valid, and not to be questioned in the same manner.

While it is a noble pursuit to encourage others to feel positively about their bodies, we cannot do so by demanding they should feel that way on the basis that we disagree with their personal experience. This is also problematic because if this logic is true, it implicates the understanding that the observer's opinion is definitive.



If you're beautiful because they say so, you're also ugly if they say so.

Another aspect of our society that stands in the way of self-acceptance is the commonly held belief that if individuals wish to improve themselves, they do not like themselves. That notion that the impetus to change always comes from a place of negative self-image is absurd, because I would argue that so often the desire to change (especially in regards to weight) is actually a result of increasing self-value. But to be fair, the desire to change can come from feeling inadequate in the face of societal expectations. In any event, society at a large seems content on this mode of thinking, boxing people into projections of insecurity. This is another dichotomy that people get trapped in unwittingly. We do not allow people to feel confident while also feeling the desire to create change in their lives simultaneously. To admit the necessity for change implicates the person into a culture of self-hatred. Conversely, it seems that is one is contented and confident in their conception of personhood and parts of them are contrary to popularly held beliefs, they are often attacked as being uneducated, unmotivated, and worse, perpetuating a problem.

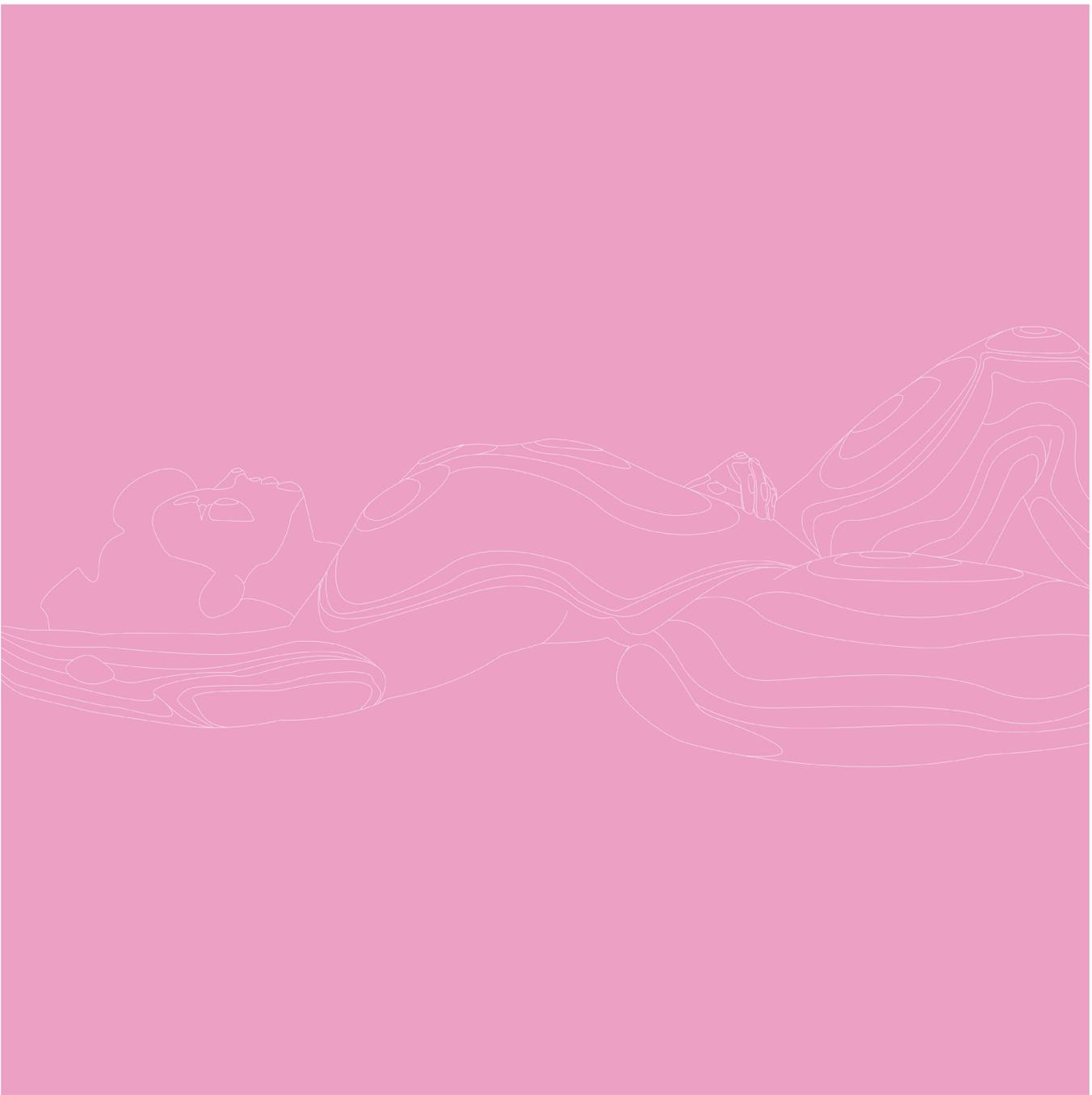
This can be directly observed with the #effyourbeautystandards campaign and similar movements, where plus-size individuals make it clear that they are proud and confident with the way they look despite greater society telling them that they shouldn't. Those same people insist on attacking and dismissing those who assert their positive self affirmations by saying they aren't educated on the medical implications of being fat, that they are just too lazy to change their habits, etc. We exist in a society that makes it very difficult to accept yourself as you are.

To make a very clear and direct statement regarding the use of the word 'fat' in this essay. As a self-professed fat girl, it is used in the interest of embracing it as a defining characteristic of a person, rather than the negative physical quality as it is often observed.

I began this project by observing my own body and extended it to include the bodies of others. I invited every gender to participate and got the interest of many different people. However, in the end, it was only women who decided to participate.

After a few of these compositions were completed, I started to notice that through this objective observation, very beautiful forms were emerging. The irregularity within a single form and the diversity that existed between forms was compelling. So often in our subjective experience of bodies we take these irregularities and create our insecurities out of them. Through this objective observation, I started to question the validity of beauty and whether it can be purely subjective or objective. Is beauty purely visual or can beauty be a way in which a person simply exists? If beauty can be defined differently from individual to individual based on personal aesthetic preferences, can it also be stated that there are measurable ways in which we can define beauty? More to the point, if we took time to dissect and analyze our own bodies and the bodies of others in objective ways, could we find attributes that were aesthetically pleasing, even if typically that person is what we wouldn't define as beautiful?

And perhaps even more interesting, could we objectively observe flaws in people that we previously believed were already beautiful—and would those flaws change our perception of them? I would argue that the answer to this would be, or should be, certainly not. However, if we insist



on defining beauty in such rigid terms as we have, the only logical progression of that process would be to value that body less simply because we've realized that it doesn't fall into our preconceived notions of beauty after all.

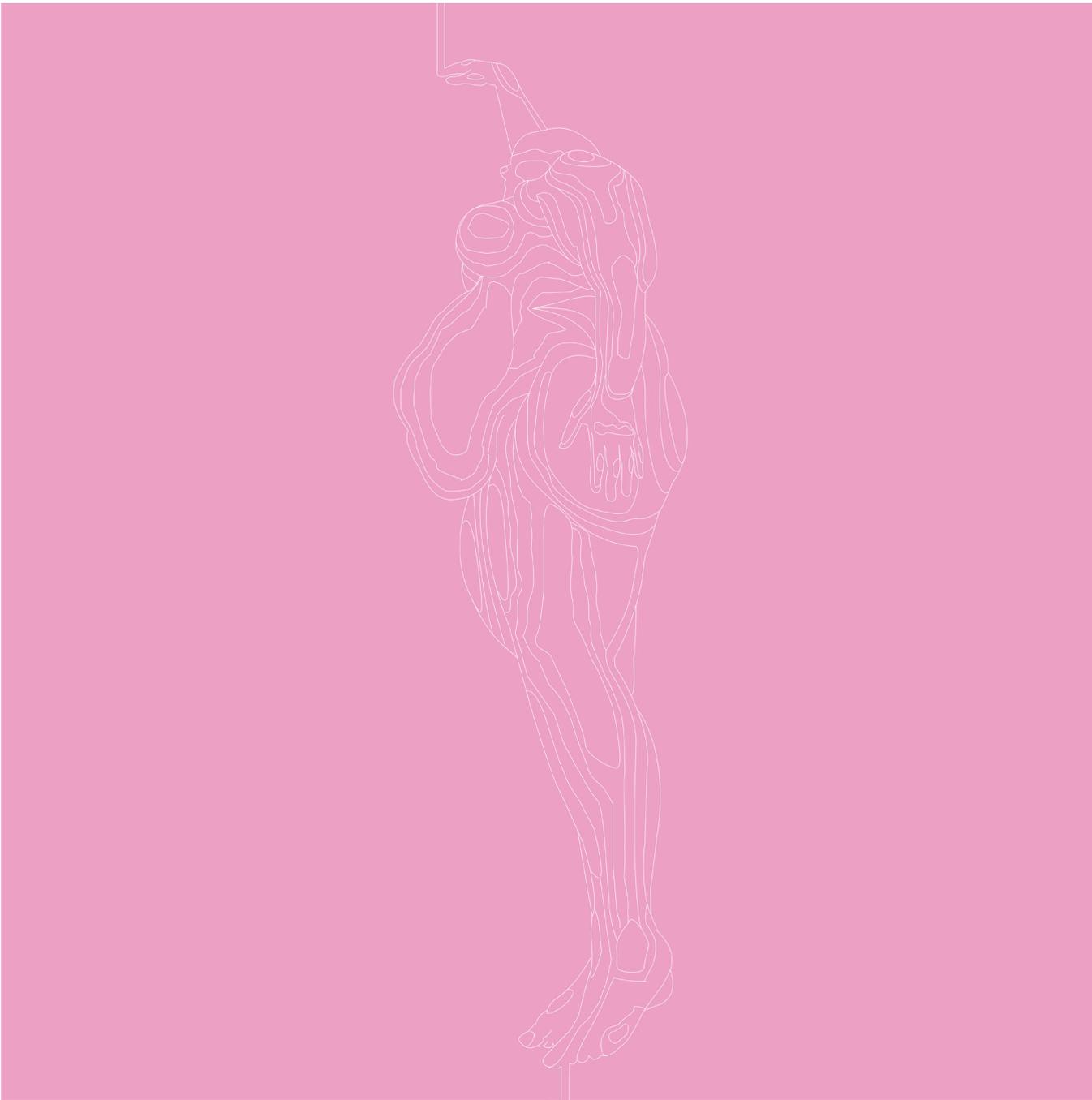
The study of beauty is an incredible collection of knowledge, beginning in the days of early man. We have put beauty on a pedestal, letting our culture influence the way we see it and value it. From the Venus of Willendorf to paintings by Ruben's to Barbie, we have and continue to develop beauty as a standard in which every body is suppose to participate and value equally. As stated before, variations in the definition of beauty are often regarded negatively and met with criticism.

To return to my point, I would say that in my experience of objectively observing a myriad human bodies, there was an undeniable beauty in the form of each of body and that beauty is evident in the final result of the composition. However, in saying this, I do not wish to project my own notions of beauty onto the women who participated in this project, nor is it my desire to say that they should feel beautiful if in fact they do not. Which is why it is important to include a statement about the subjective experience of

the individual along with their contours. By this process, the maker and the viewer of the body are somewhat created obsolete. The work is simply meant to honor the person in which it observes, which gets to the heart of my point.

To allow a person to reflect on how they truly feel about their body is unique; so often we deny people this basic right. When given the opportunity, if a person says something that they know as a personal truth and we happen to feel at opposition with it, we deny them the validity of their statement. For example, if a person asserts, "I am fat" as a descriptor, so often it is followed up by, "no you're not!" And why is this? The same goes for the word "ugly", which coincidentally is often seen as existing simultaneously with the word "fat". Meaning, the two aren't mutually exclusive in our common definitions of beauty.

Without focusing on fat politics, it is an interesting question to ask why we have such a visceral reaction to the word "fat" so specifically. Would it be that way if our culture and society weren't so deeply ingrained into the cult of thinness? To the point, by denying people their voice and experience, we create an environment that denies the humanity of embodiment. We, perhaps



unwittingly, contribute to the notion that beauty is a set of homogenous features when in reality I would assert that beauty lies within the variations of individuals and the qualities that makes each person unique.

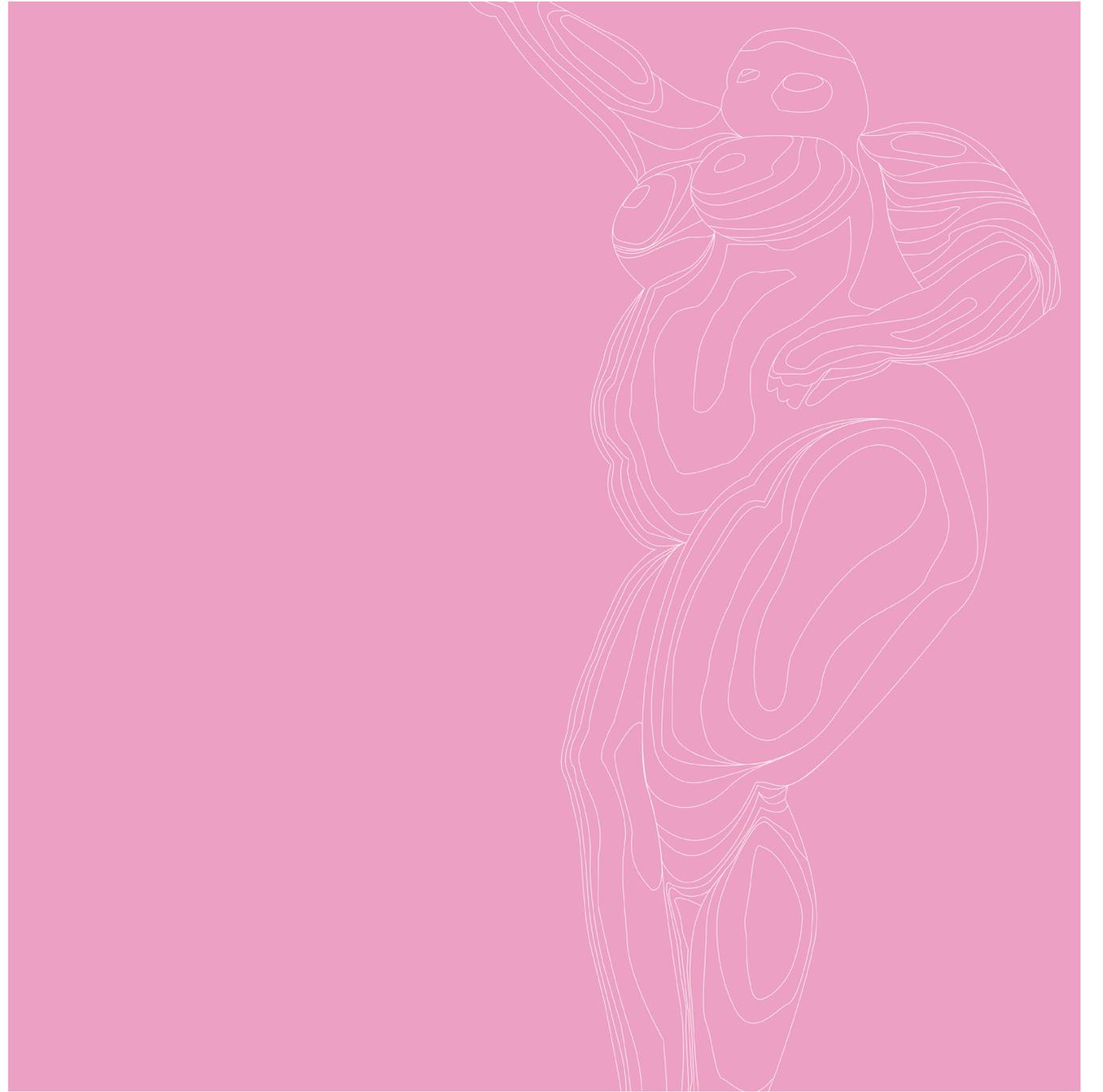
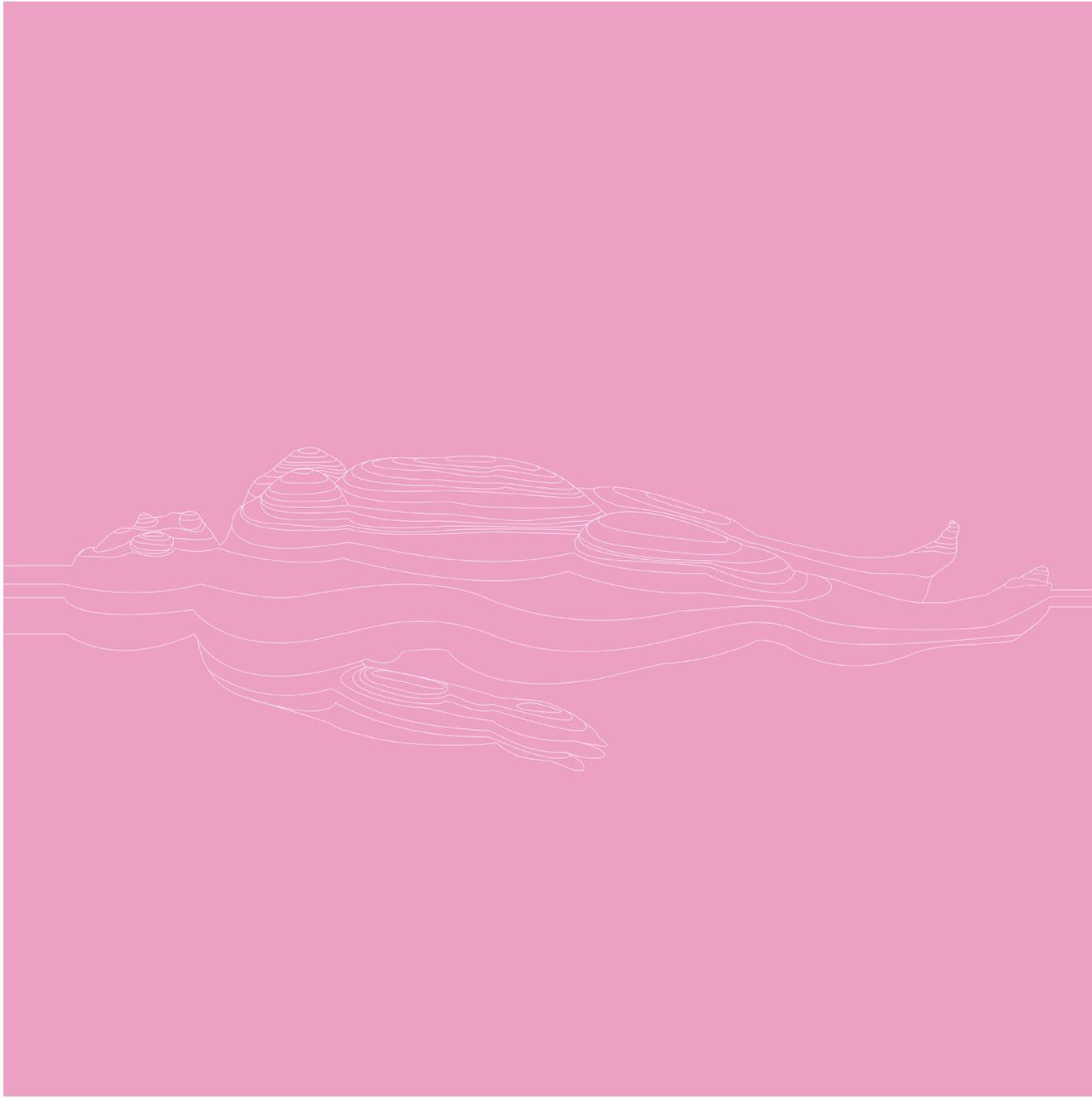
This juxtaposition between the culmination of the observation being a direct result of objective observation of body and the statement being about the subjective observation of body is what I mean when I say that the work is more about the process than it is about the final product. In allowing a person to explore and share their own humanity while simultaneously allowing another person to objectively analyze their body, it allows the viewer to reflect on traits that they wouldn't ordinarily define as being attractive: uniqueness, flaws. In providing their statements, they are being given a very public voice and they are also leading the viewer into seeing them in a very specific, subjective way after they've invited them to view them in a very objective manner. It allows the viewer to place themselves in the position of these women, who were brave in the face of vulnerability. Ultimately, this puts those women back in control of their own humanity by allowing them to voice whatever way they want to feel about their bodies independently of how

others view them. It creates an experience for the viewer that deeply illustrates that the process of observation—whether objective or not, does not mean a person is beholden to what the viewer believes is attractive or unattractive.

A person can feel (and will feel) whatever they want to feel about their body. It is in the push and pull of these notions of the subjective and objective that the work lies.

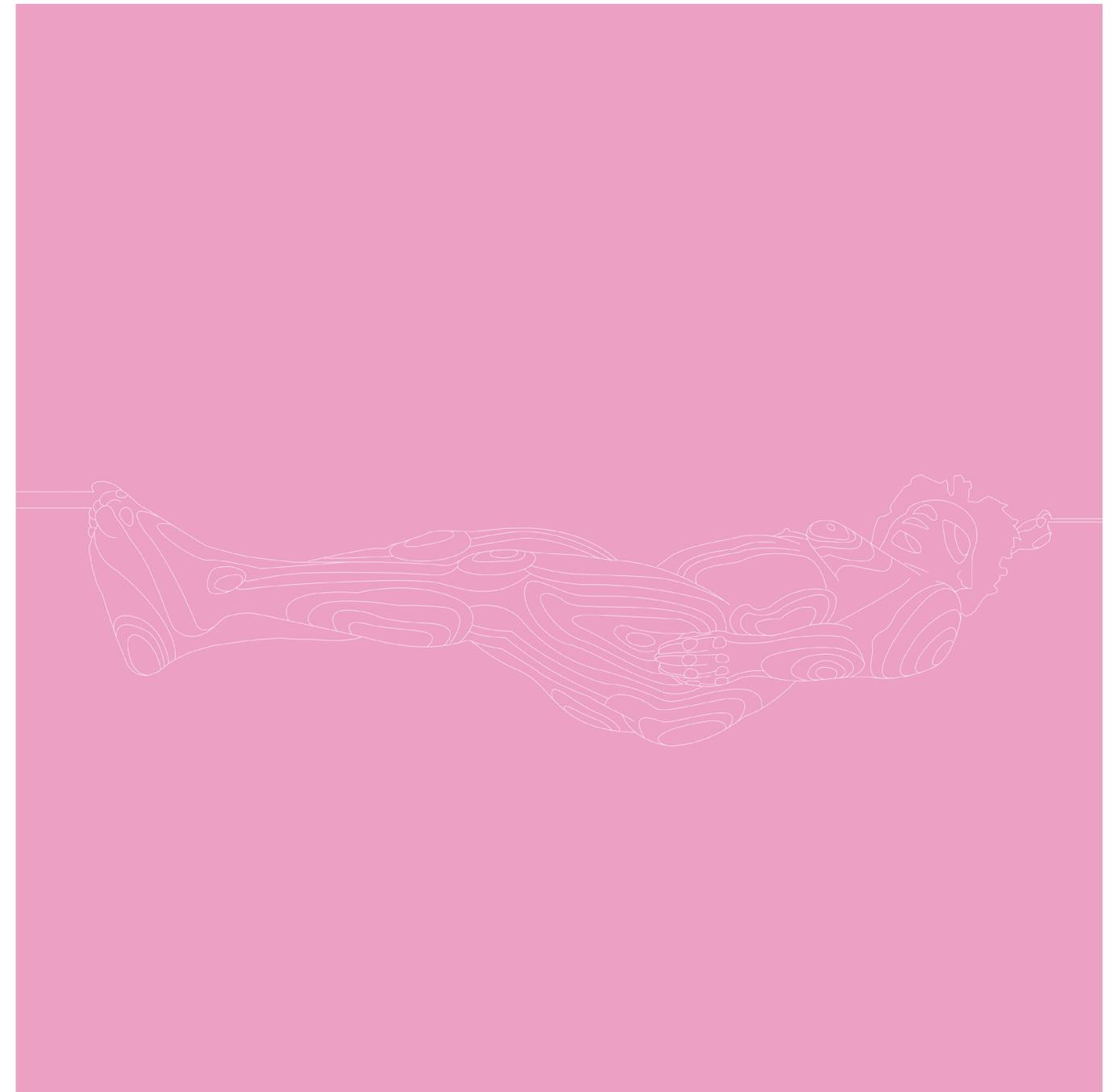
This project is beginning to start many interesting conversations. One of which I find deeply compelling is what would people really say about their bodies if they were given the chance and why do we continually deny people the right to feel the way they want to feel in their own bodies. What is it about embodiment, which has such a fluctuating and ephemeral reality that we insist upon forcing homogenous and exacting terms on it?

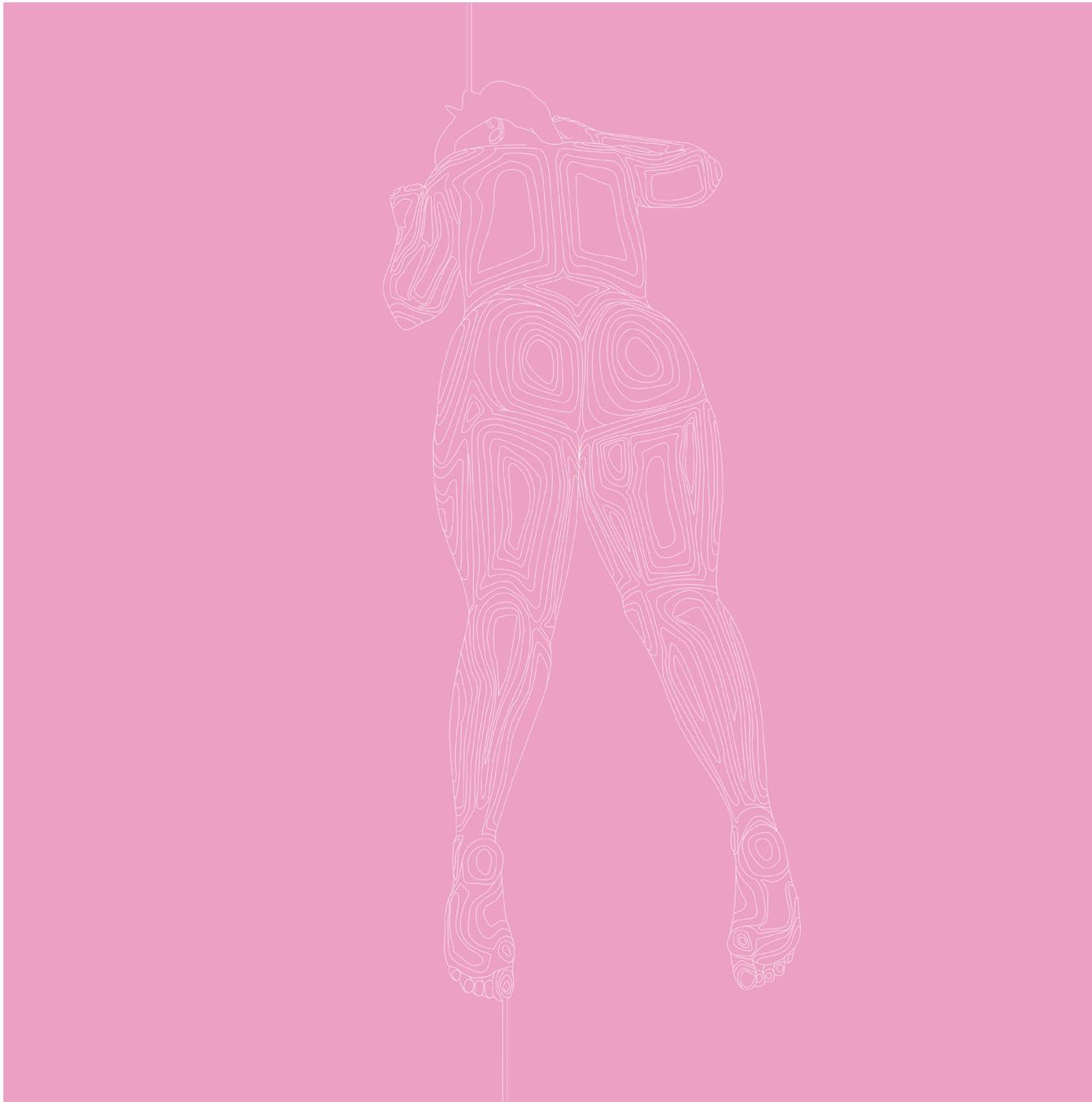
Many of these women were able to step away from their subjective experience enough to begin to relate their embodiment to set cultural values. They understand that in today's climate that it is rebellious accept their bodies as they are because many of them have remarked that this belief is in direct opposition to what they are being told.



Others admitted their struggle with self-acceptance as a result of this as well. These brave, strong women are at the forefront of a conversation about self-acceptance, about what beauty ultimately is and whether or not beauty should even be important, at least in culturally stringent terms.

One of the first things I wrote about this project was written quite blindly, as I didn't understand the true intentions of what I wanted to do with this body of work. Which proves, in essence, what I've been saying all along—that it's the process more than the product that makes this work unique. I wrote, "If I was to make the stretch to imbue this work with concept, I could write about how a body is like the land, shaped by both external and internal forces." Continuing, I wrote, "I see this series more as an analysis of my body and the analysis of others bodies with a designers viewpoint." I didn't realize the important direction that this work would ultimately take, and the tipping point it would create in the direction of my research. What I cast off humorously as a false take on higher concept ultimately became my underlying point.

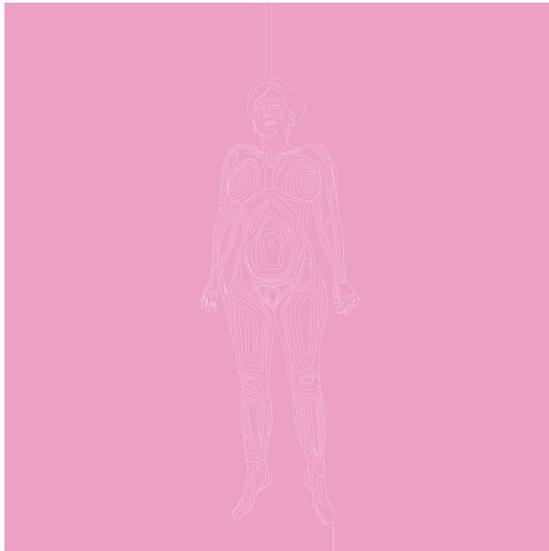




By creating a set of standards that every body has to place into, we create an environment where failure is inevitable. By extension, we create a toxic environment in which self-acceptance is rare, because the message we send is that they can't accept themselves in ways that don't fall in line with what other people commonly agree upon or are uncomfortable with.

If we go on letting society at a large define how we should see ourselves, we ultimately deny individuals the opportunity to seek out their own potential. As I move forward with this research I wish to question how it is that we've built this type of society and what we could gain if we were to start designing our environments to be more accommodating to the variety of people that exist in it—both in terms of physical structure and social structure. As I've learned, through both personal experience and observed experience, that it is as much about the physical ways in which we shape people's perceptions of themselves as it is the mental and emotional ways. We can only gain as a society when we allow people to express and experience their own humanity and through acceptance of others and ourselves we will be able to culturally heal and positively impact future generations.

## Amy Caldwell

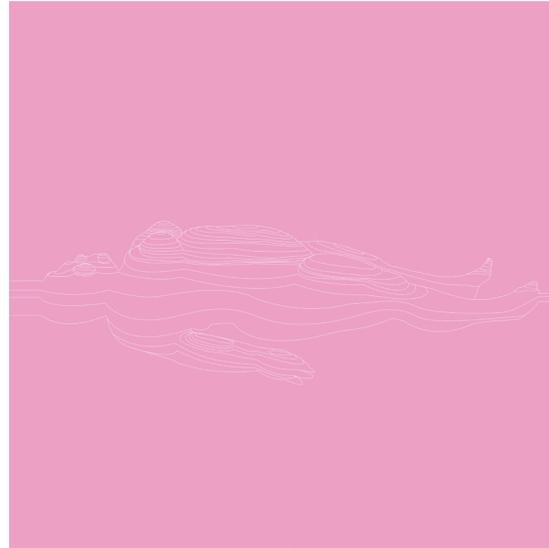


After struggling with an eating disorder throughout my adolescence, I am very proud of where my mental state and physical appearance are now. I am at a point where my health is far greater than any number on a scale. I workout, not with hate and disgust, but with determination and love.

I ran my first 5k this past year, and I adore the strength I feel within myself though my body hasn't changed. I am so much more than my weight.

My imperfections are what make me.

## Terri Frew

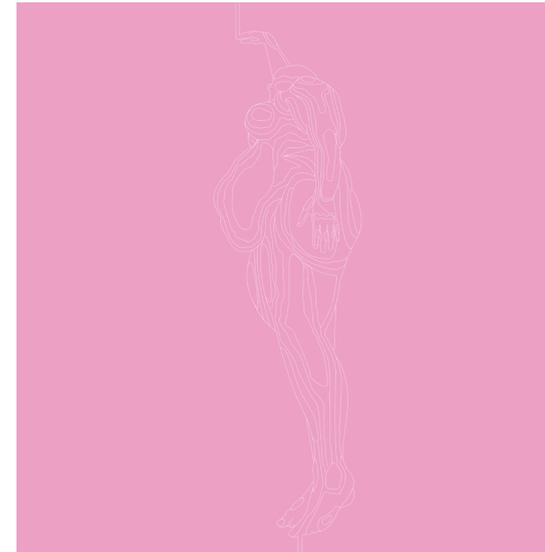


Some see the body as a vehicle. I would agree- if indeed we're talking about a mystical and strange vehicle: full of mountains and chasms; light and darkness; the familiar and the uncanny.

My body is alive. There's a heartbeat beneath all of this flesh. If I listen hard, I can hear her refrain, echoing through my chest: "I am... I am... I am..."

Continuing, of course, until one day I am not.

## Sam Flora

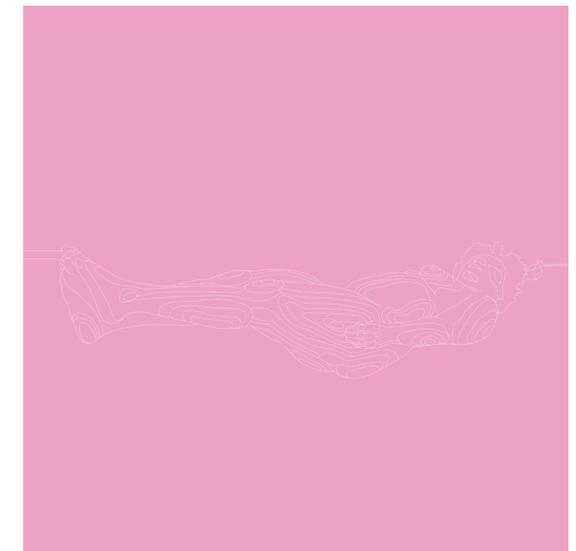


These are my essential truths:  
My body has fought it's way back from the dead. My body has carried and nourished the life of the most genuine little boy. My body is home to my heart and resiliency of spirit, which provide e the capacity to love, love, love and keep loving in spite of fear, disappointment and heartache.

My skin sags, my breasts are a 6 at best, I have lovely cottage cheese thighs and an ass that just keeps getting bigger (like honestly, it's magic). I have eyes that set hearts on fire. I have an infectious laugh and a bold, bright smile. I have hands that can translate thought into image and a mind capable of complex, original thought. I am brave. And I am beautiful.

These things were true when I weighed 450 pounds and they are true now at 250 pounds. My body isn't more or less valuable because of a number on a scale.

## Jill Hardaway DeVoge

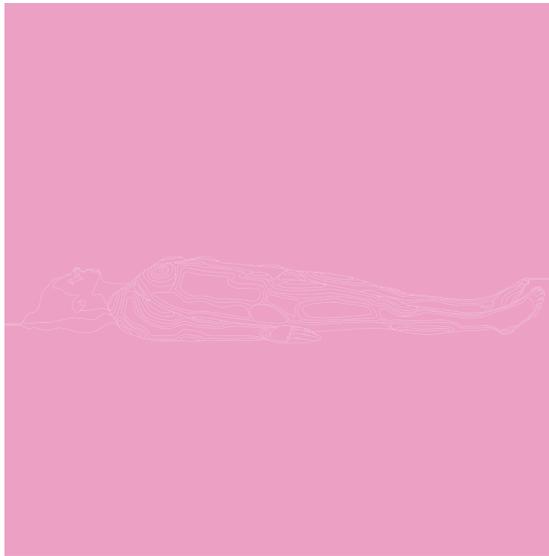


From the moment we are born our lives are defined by milestones. We are praised for the things our body can do. The amazing feats we accomplish, from crawling to walking; cooing to talking; and from grasping with our hands to writing full sentences.

It is unfortunate these astounding accomplishments we are praised for are put asunder when we are older, simply based on what our bodies look like.

The body is a work of art, we should appreciate it in fullness.

## Lauren Koshak



I am finally at a place in my life where I feel I have a deep appreciation and love for my body, which is a terrifying truth for me to speak. I have never thought I could feel this way.

This body has been violated, abused, hurt, weak, and unloved. It's also made love and carried our baby. It has breastfed, lifted weights, felt the ocean, traveled to far away places, and gives me the future.

So for every stretch mark and every scar, whether it be physical or mental; thank you for leaving your mark.

Without you, I would not be.

## Courtney Matthews



My body [and every body] is beautiful because it is uniquely its own. Every curve, dimple, stretch mark and freckle will never be duplicated on another person. Love the body you have. Cherish it. Worship it.

I refuse to be defined only by the size of my belly or thighs.

## Kim McMullen



My body. It has always been a point of turmoil for me. Growing up, especially through puberty, I so wanted to be pretty and skinny like my friends. To me, at the time, they were one in the same.

Even now I struggle with its size and shape. But I have learned some key things about this body of mine.

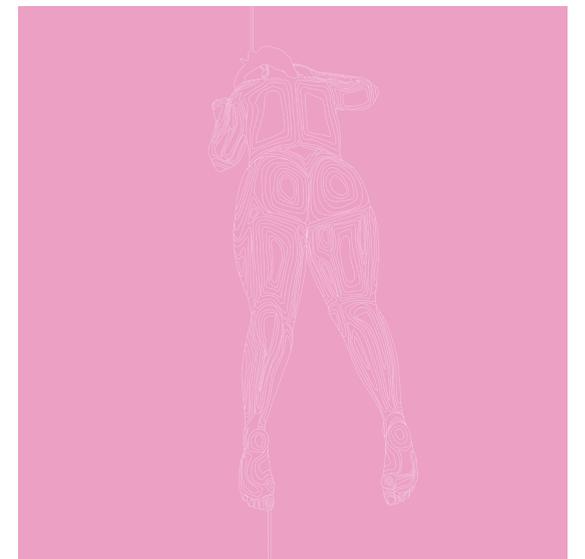
It is sensual.

It is strong.

It can comfort, protect and it can support. I have laughed, cried, and loved with this body.

With this unique body that is all my own, I push forward.

## Katie Jo Wright



My body is strong and adaptable. It is always reinventing itself. It's intuitive and patient, ever changing but always reliable. It is the Golden Retriever of bodies, and as long as I show it love and give it nourishment it will love me unconditionally just the same.

**A special thank you to these  
amazing people who contributed  
and continue to inspire the  
growth of this project:**

Amy Caldwell

Terri Frew

Sarah Flood-Baumann

Sondra Graff

Kim Green

Jillian Hardaway DeVoge

Lauren Koshak

Katie Krcmarik

Courtney Matthews

Kim McMullen

Sereina Rothenberger

Katie Jo Wright

