

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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It has long been said that clothes make the man.  
But what about the woman?

After all, women are generally far more fashion conscious than their male counterparts. With this in mind, two artists began asking the question, "What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?" to groups of women in 2001. And since then, the answers -- more than 500 of them in all -- will either surprise, amuse, provoke and perhaps even shock visitors to Regina Gouger Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University's Purnell Center for the Arts.

That's where the exhibition "Trappings" presents the five-year project through an ambitious array of audio, video and photographic presentations.

Trappings is the product of Pittsburgh's own Renee Piechocki and Tiffany Ludwig, of Glen Ridge, N.J. The pair, known as Two Girls Working, have gathered women and girls in groups -- 67 in all, ranging in age from 4-92 -- and interviewed them as a national public art and performance project.

The artists say they were dismayed by a lack of dialogue about feminism and women's issues by diverse groups, and initiated "Trappings" to explore individualized approaches to power through interview-based community dialogue.

From housewives to hockey players, cowgirls to CEOs, and everyone in between, the women, representing 15 states from every region of the country including Western Pennsylvania, were asked to respond to the question.

Although the question is a fairly simple one, the answers are anything but. With responders talking about everything from cultural heritage and social class to personal transformations and experiences, even business and economics were part of the mix.

"Power is a very active word, and it brought up conversations about what is power, or why do I need power, and is it useful, abusive or what," Ludwig says. "But it also opens up conversations about identity, presentation and public performance in that way, which is why we created the question in the first place." For example, Kathy Freise, an instructor and home-based Web designer from Albuquerque, N.M., addressed the question head on in a 2005 session and interview, saying, "Power, as I think about it, comes out of personal confidence and personal power."

But Ludwig and Piechocki say most did not address the question directly.

"That's the only scripted question. That's the only question that is enveloped in the project," Ludwig says. "After an interview got started, if they just began speaking about something else, we'd go on whatever tangent they began to go on and just ask questions based on what it is that they were revealing to us."

"This is not a statement about fashion," Ludwig says about the project. "The tangents were really the goal. It's not about fashion, it's not about clothing; it's about looking at these tangents and opening up conversations about them beginning with a pretty easy question, which just so happens to do with clothing."

Interview sessions were modeled on a Tupperware or Mary Kay house party, deliberately using a format that historically has allowed women the opportunity to gain work experience and financial independence. "Having contemporary conversations about power structured around an old-fashioned model interested us conceptually," Piechocki says. "The house party is that model, but instead of selling lipstick we are talking about power and identity."

Ludwig says the home-party model also allows people to feel at ease amongst an audience of friends, colleagues or new acquaintances. "For decades now, it has also been very much about groups of women coming together and having conversations outside of their everyday dialogues," Ludwig says.

The exhibit includes photographs and interviews by many Pittsburgh women who participated in the project.

For example, in one interview, Cecile Springer, retired scientist and head of her own consulting firm, talks about how she feels about wearing a gold pin that was a gift from her late mother-in-law, the well-known union activist Maida Springer-Kemp.

"I often would wear this pin because, for me, it transformed me into not only a powerful person but an articulate person," Springer says.

"Pittsburgh women are part of the exhibit, and we believe this is the perfect city to debut our exhibition," Piechocki says. "We couldn't have asked for more enthusiasm, heartfelt answers and sincere insight from the women of Pittsburgh during our time here."

Having completed interview sessions from Alaska and New Mexico to Massachusetts and Mississippi, the artists plan to travel the exhibition to each of the 15 states where they have done interviews. So far, the next scheduled stop is Central Wyoming College in Riverton, Wyo., where the exhibition will run from Nov. 2-Dec. 13. That was made possible in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. With both artists having backgrounds in digital, installation and performance art, they say they hope to engage nontraditional arts audiences as well.

As Piechocki says: "Clothing is something everyone engages with. With it you can either present your identity or you can hide your identity."

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A video titled "France Garrido" is part of the multimedia exhibit "Trappings."