

'What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?'

Arts - Exhibit

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Two feminists ask a large variety of women the \$64,000 question, receiving an equally varied batch of responses



BY RUTH BRILLMAN

For **Gillian Alessio**, the answer is decidedly Freudian: it's the gun, the badge and the boots that give her power. While some women, including her eldest daughter, feel most at home in "lace and frills," Alessio's comfort zone lies inside a pair of rugged jeans and her sergeant's uniform.

This isn't surprising. Growing up, Alessio had dreams of becoming either Starsky or Hutch, rather than one of Charlie's Angels. But for all the danger and aggression that her job as a police officer connotes, Alessio can still separate power from force.

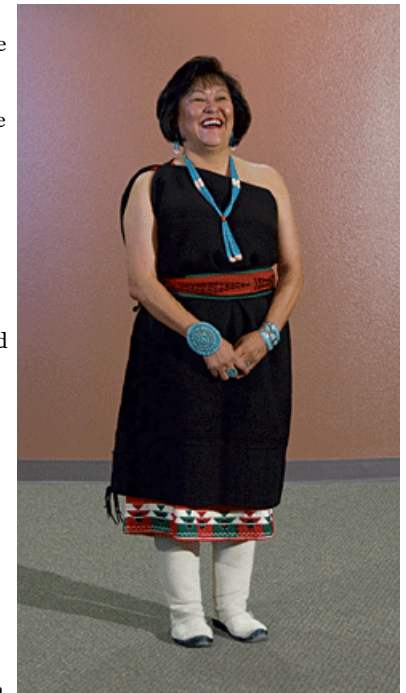
"Real power comes from knowing when to pull back, knowing when to be sensitive and knowing when to step up and say you will do what I tell you to do and you will do it now," Alessio said in a recent interview. "It's having the confidence in yourself to step up and say, 'You know what? I'm not a female, I'm a police officer.'"

Brisa Gonzales' power outfit has two parts: a bright floral skirt festooned with a rainbow of pinks and greens, from neon to baby to muted, and an unlikely accessory, her soccer ball. She's a talented player — she qualified to play in a tournament in Holland a few years ago — but Gonzales isn't the only pre-teen girl featured in *Trappings*, the latest exhibit at **516 Arts**, who links power with talent. **Sativa Cruz**, 11, associates power with her violin and mariachi outfit. **Stowe McMurry**, 12, cites her swimsuit, "not because I feel powerful when I'm wearing a swimsuit, but because I feel powerful when I'm swimming."

Finally, **Debra Garcia y Griego's** power suit parallels a feminine trifacta: heels, the color black, simplicity. She's a 13th generation New Mexican whose heritage and history contribute to her sense of power. She doesn't wear a lot of jewelry, she doesn't believe that words can take one's power away and she doesn't consider herself a feminist. She's just happy to be comfortable in her own skin.

These five women constitute less than 1 percent of the people interviewed by **Tiffany Ludwig** and **Renee Piechocki** for *Trappings*, an art project-cum-social commentary which began years ago when the duo asked a small group of women the \$64,000 question: "What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?"

Trappings is an installation in four parts, each one illuminating different aspects of the answers. There's a website containing a public archive of every interview conducted, a traveling exhibition that helps organize the information compiled and displays it in an easily accessible light, a book containing interviews and images and a documentary, set to be released in 2009.



The exhibit is a progressive and unprecedented look into modern gender roles and feminism. Ludwig and Piechocki don't just want to know which outfits empower women, they want to know why. There's a stereotype that says you can tell a lot about someone by looking through their closet, and *Trappings* attempts to understand an entire gender by asking a radically diverse group of individuals to reveal the contents of a collective wardrobe.

The most fascinating portions of the installation stem from the dichotomies. A woman who dons her "Yes Dress" when she wants to coerce a fellow male executive into agreeing with her in the boardroom, versus the woman who dresses in cuff-links and a collar to achieve the same goal. This juxtaposition poses a myriad of questions about sexuality and feminism. Is it right for women to use seduction as a business tool? What results when sexuality is used as a weapon? How does power relate to femininity?

Though the women in charge of the project are feminists in their own words, many interviewed don't claim the same belief. While the statements themselves don't always deal with female empowerment, each voice is infused with an air of competence, beauty, intelligence and authority. It is female capability — a subsection of power — that emerges as the project's overarching theme.

To find out more about *Trappings*, including audio interviews and photographs, visit twogirlsworking.com

Trappings

By *Two Girls Working*
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 516 Arts|
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 Gallery hours:
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