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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

POWER

Courtney Wilson was one of eight Pittsburgh participants in Renee Piechocki and Tiffany Ludwig's "Trappings."

DRESSING



"If you're having people talking about you, that's power. You're impacting their lives for maybe a minute, two minutes. It's still powerful."

Courtney Wilson

By Monika Kugemann
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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

In an exhibition on PAT buses and an accompanying video screening, women from Pittsburgh can be seen and heard this month as they answer this deceptively simple question while wearing their power outfits.

Renee Piechocki of the North Side and Tiffany Ludwig of Jersey City, N.J., bring their national project, titled "Trappings," to Pittsburgh. Since the two artists started their collaboration in 2001, they have interviewed 350 women from 10 states about what they are wearing.

"We came to clothing as something that everyone does: Everyone gets dressed, everyone identifies with clothing," says Ludwig. "And we looked at power as a way to open up really diverse conversations."

But "Trappings" is not only about the clothes women like to wear to feel powerful. "It is also about exploring the preconceived notions that we develop about people based on appearance," Piechocki says. By stimulating an open conversation about women's roles in society and the way people perceive themselves and others, the artists hope to raise awareness of prejudices and encourage digging below the surface of first impressions.

In interviews with women from diverse backgrounds, Ludwig and Piechocki found out that the dimensions of power that women identify in their lives are manifold. "Women's responses to our questions show that they engage with the idea of power in a very wide variety of places in their lives: in the workplace, in the home, in the bedroom, on the street, at church," Piechocki says.

To capture these diverse facets of female self-images, the interview subjects speak for themselves, on prints displayed in buses and video installations, without censorship by the artists. "We were interested in activating conversations for other people, not just for ourselves," Ludwig says.

The Pittsburgh installation of "Trappings" is a combination of various art elements "both in the conceptual framework of the project but also in the execution of it," says Ludwig. Interviews taken in seven private homes and workplaces in Pittsburgh in June of last year and in January will be featured in

bus prints and a one-hour documentary film.

Watch PAT buses for photographs and accompanying quotes of eight Pittsburgh participants that will be exhibited this month on 100 advertising spaces. Pittsburgh is the first city to make this kind of presentation possible, through the help of ProArts and the Sprout Fund.

Because the project is being created as public art in a nontraditional setting, it should also be presented that way, Piechocki says. "You're sitting on the bus, surrounded by advertising. Isn't it great to have a print on the bus that asks you a provocative question?"

The second part of the exhibition is "Trappings: Pittsburgh," a video composed of the local interviews that will be presented free at the Pittsburgh Filmmakers' Melwood Screening Room on March 31 at 6:30 p.m. and on April 3 at 1 p.m.

Just like the bus prints, the screening targets a wide variety of visitors. While reading the question and the individual answers, men and women are challenged to ask themselves what their responses would be. "Artwork is about the question; it's about questioning people around you and questioning yourself," explains Piechocki.

Feedback from earlier exhibitions has revealed that "Trappings" has made visitors aware of others that are different in terms of gender, race or cultural background. "It's about sparking the dialogue," says Ludwig.

Support and interest is encouraging and challenging at the same time, says Piechocki. "We are constantly meeting people who want to participate."

The 48 women interviewed in Pittsburgh will become part of the national discussion. Their responses, together with those of other women, will be presented in a final documentation of "Trappings" next year.

Until then, the artists are looking forward to an ongoing dialogue.

"Our goal is to raise consciousness among women about how they engage with power," Ludwig says, "and among people at large about power and preconceived ideas based on identity."

For more information on the project, visit the Web site www.twogirlsworking.com.

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The public art project 'Trappings' presents women discussing clothes and empowerment