

Magazine

ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT & LIFE ... ARTFULLY TOLD • Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Section
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• MONDAY, JULY 10, 2006



VWH Campbell/Post-Gazette

Renee Piechocki works on setting up the "Trappings" exhibit at Miller Gallery in Carnegie Mellon's Purnell Center.

POWER SUILTS HER

**CMU exhibit shows
what **WOMEN** wear
when dressing for
more than success**

By Sally Kalson
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

If you think you know what the phrase "power suit" means, a new exhibit at Carnegie Mellon University might expand your definition.

Artists Renee Piechocki and Tiffany Ludwig, who collaborate under the sobriquet Two Girls Working, traveled from Alaska and New Mexico to Massachusetts and Mississippi asking females from all walks of life a single question: "What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?"



This portrait of Tara McComb is in "Trapping: Stories of Women, Power and Clothing," a multimedia exhibit.

The answers gathered over five years turned into sociological discourses on power — what it is and isn't, how one gets it, what one does with it — as opposed to simply fashion. And the speakers, including basketball players, police officers, octogenarian belly dancers, lawyers, cowgirls, young professionals and urban teens, turned out to have plenty to say.

The 500-plus interviews form the basis of "Trappings: Stories of Women, Power and Clothing," a multimedia exhibit at the Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University's Purnell Center for the Arts.

If "Trappings" sounds familiar, it might be because two segments showed here last year — a card installation on Port Authority buses in March and film screenings at Pittsburgh Filmmakers in March and April. But this is the first time all the components are assembled together, including film, photos, audio and interview archives.

The show opened on Friday and runs through Aug. 4. Then the artists will take it on the road, with hopes of exhibiting it in all 15 states where they conducted the interviews.

Participants were assembled in groups along the method of a Tupperware party, with hosts inviting other women to attend. That way, the interviewees would be far removed from the artists and less likely to conform to any particular set of characteristics.

"The idea came from wanting to do public art about women and feminism," said Piechocki. "But you can't just ask people what they think

"We wanted a broad range of ideas on power and identity. Everybody gets dressed, so that was a way into the subject."

Renee Piechocki

Exhibit explores how clothes empower women

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about feminism because then they're either like you or not like you.

"We wanted a broad range of ideas on power and identity. Everybody gets dressed, so that was a way into the subject."

Added Ludwig: "It's a huge amount of work, but it never gets old. We never have a bad session, and we're always learning something new."

The exhibit features a number of women from the two cities where the artists reside — Ludwig in Glen Ridge, N.J., and Piechocki on Pittsburgh's North Side (her day job is director of the city's Public Art office). Among the 50 or so interviewed locally:

- **Jan Gallaway**, a member of the Pittsburgh Puffins recreational hockey team, feels powerful in her uniform — and also when she takes off her helmet to reveal the 40-something mom underneath to the shocked boys at the ice rink.

- **Cecile Springer**, retired head of her own consulting firm, feels it wearing a gold pin that was a gift from her late mother-in-law, the well-known union activist Maida Springer-Kemp.

- **Heather Arnet**, executive director of The Women and Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania, feels it in the purple cape she bought with her own earnings at age 16. The cut reminds her of the purple sash worn by suffragists like her great-grandmother, not to mention Wonder Woman, her childhood heroine.

- Teen-ager **Dana Jacobs** of Philadelphia, interviewed at YouthWorks Inc., feels it in slacks and a sweater because in them, "I'm ready for anything, you know, for job interviews and if you go in a store, ain't nobody going to watch you."

- **Rebecca Newlin**, posing with a hammer, feels it in her Habitat for Humanity T-shirt because "women can put up a drywall and that's what really gives me a lot of motivation."

- And **Valerie Archier** feels it in the



Portraits of LaTasha Mayes, left, and Jan Gallaway are part of the "Trappings" exhibit. The show is about the clothes women wear to feel powerful.

blue suit her mother bought her for job interviews because "it totally transforms me when I put it on."

Others said they felt powerful in spike heels, toe shoes, plunging necklines, big jewelry, carrying a Prada bag or reveal-

ing their tattoos. One woman paints her face blue and dons a gold lamé cape; another says "Don't mess with me now, I've got on the black lace bra."

Participants mused, variously, that power comes from standing out or from

If You Go

For more information on the show, go to twogirlsworking.com.

The Purnell Center is next to Warner Hall on the Carnegie Mellon campus near the corner of Forbes and Morewood avenues. Hours of the Miller Gallery are 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday-Sunday, and by appointment. Phone is 412-268-3618.

fitting in; from how you feel, or how others perceive you. Power, they said, is projected confidence, or sexuality or competitiveness. It's control, or creativity or faith in God. And it may or may not have anything to do with clothing.

"The show is about getting the stories out of our studios and out of the participants' heads and into the public domain," said Ludwig, who works as a consultant on Web design and technology.

The women met in 2000 when both were working on an arts conference in New York City. They hit it off immediately and stayed in touch, trading ideas and slides of their work until Two Girls Working and "Trappings" were born.

The first two years of the project were completely self-funded, but since then they've received numerous grants that allow the work to break even. That, they say, is the definition of "success" in the art world.

The next step is to make it self-sustaining, which, they say, is "success" in the art world, too. Toward that end, they are now re-interviewing women they met a few years ago. Those updates will be part of a book to be published next year by Rutgers University Press. Next up, they hope, will be a feature film.

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