

## Girls strike back at pop culture's beauty ideal

By Gail Rosenblum, Star Tribune

June 5, 2008

Olivia Nofzinger, 11, has a friend who likes to ride horses and a friend who likes to protest. She has lots of friends who draw and one who hopes to become a fashion designer.

So Olivia, a fifth-grader at St. Anthony Park Elementary School in St. Paul, gets angry when she sees how simplistic and sexual many media portrayals of young women are. Those girls aren't anything like Olivia or the girls she knows.

That's why she is jazzed to participate in an edgy new art show called "Project Girl," opening Friday at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis. The show features professional artists and the wide-ranging creations of a dozen local girls -- expressing their frustration, intellect and wit through painting, writing, poetry, film and dance -- as well as hands-on activities and workshops.

"I really don't like it that you have to wear these clothes and be this person and, if you don't, you aren't cool," said Olivia. "The skinny thing really bugs me. I have friends who struggle with that."

Project Girl was founded in 2006 by visual artist Kelly Parks Snider and videographer Jane Bartell, both Madison, Wis., mothers who watched their own children struggle to meet media-driven expectations.

Project Girl sponsors monthly workshops, mentorships and partnerships with schools and organizations nationwide, including the Girl Scouts and YMCA. Locally, they've collaborated with the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council, the Emily Program for eating disorders, and Perpich Center for the Arts.

While media celebrations of beauty and thinness are hardly new, Bartell said things are reaching a boiling point. "It's not our imagination. Things are getting worse," said Bartell, 51, the mother of a 14-year-old son.

When her son was born, advertisers were spending about \$6 billion annually on adolescent marketing, Bartell said. "By the time he was in kindergarten, that number had more than doubled. Today, it's a \$15 billion industry. That is alarming growth."

She's quick to emphasize that censorship is not their objective. Enlightenment is. "We need to give girls the tools to deconstruct these messages, to be informed consumers. If they make a choice to play along or not, that's their choice."

Parks Snider, 43, concurs. She incorporated rats into her collage, "Corporate Curriculum," which will be on display. "I'm not saying that marketers are rats," she said with a laugh. "But I think back to the old saying, 'I smell a rat.' Be suspicious. Be more

critical. Connect the dots."

While girls are their focus, the two women plan to create a similar program for boys. Girls experience the "boxing-in of the beauty ideal," said Parks Snider, the mother of three daughters and a son, but media messages are equally damaging to boys. "What does it mean for them to be successful? It's that he with the most stuff wins -- the biggest car, the most money. Boys are being pressured into thinking, 'I'm not worth anything unless I have this, this and this,' and it changes every month. The pressure on boys is excruciating."

The young artists

Olivia, who takes art classes at school, usually likes to draw, "but I tried something new this time," she said. Her piece is a framed, 20- by 30-inch collage featuring two Olivias. On one side, she's dressed in Abercrombie & Fitch; on the other, she's dressed more like the "real" Olivia, ready for camping or rock climbing. In addition, the young artist has incorporated photographs and magazine images of hypersexualized models, contrasted with images of women such as Janis Joplin, Tina Turner, Hillary Clinton, Yoko Ono and Judy Chicago.

"I'm pretty much the activist," said Olivia, who has an older brother, "but my mom usually comes with me because I can't drive."

Dedrian Davis, 14; Daryll Berg, 16, and Bao Yang, 15 -- all from St. Paul -- also will be featured in Project Girl. The three teens produced a 10-minute film, made last summer as part of the Youth Intern Program at the St. Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN), a community-based cable access center ([www.spnn.org/youth](http://www.spnn.org/youth)).

"They come from three different cultural backgrounds -- African-American, European-American and Hmong-American -- but what they found in common was that the media is saturated with images that make them feel bad about themselves," said youth programs coordinator Andrea Lehmann.

Like Olivia's work, the film contrasts idealized images of girls with more realistic views. It includes interviews with midlife women recalling stereotypes they faced, and with Nancy Gruver, publisher and founder of New Moon, a Duluth-based magazine for girls that promotes girls' uniqueness.

Despite the Herculean task ahead of them, Bartell remains bullish that Project Girl will become a national movement. Success, she said, "is when one our girls reported that she really didn't want to face, first thing in the morning on her way to school, a huge billboard for Abercrombie & Fitch of a well-sculpted model with his pants falling off. Now she knows that those images are being used strategically to sell sexy clothing to girls her age, and that makes her mad.

"There's danger in letting this just wash over you and saying, 'It's OK with us' because it's not OK."

Gail Rosenblum • 612-673-7350