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Photography

Thein's Thinly Veiled Message

'Thirty-Two Kilos': Weighty Look at Society Starved for Beauty

by Gary Tischler

It takes a while to digest the full impact of the stark, dramatic, distorted photographs on the wall at the Goethe-Institut. They're part of "Zweiunddreißig Kilo," or "Thirty-Two Kilos" in English, a small yet heavy collection of large, in-your-face, digitally altered black-and-white photographs by young German photographer Ivonne Thein.

What do they show? They are images of young, shockingly starved female models, in various poses. And it ain't pretty.

But then again it's not meant to be. The subject, or one of the subjects, is anorexia — and the all-consuming, destructive desire on the part of many young girls today to attain a kind of perfection, often in the form of being dangerously thin. Perfect — in the eyes of many teenage girls but also women and men — is the kind of stick-like body presented most often by fashion models, those runway stars who present themselves in ways that seem unnatural in relation to daily life.

The title is actually inspired by the weight of a French model — 32 kilograms, or 70.4 pounds — who posed for ads condemning anorexia after nearly dying from it.

German photographer Thein herself has never had problems with bulimia or anorexia, but she was motivated to construct this project when she discovered a frightening world of what are called "pro-ana" sites on the Internet — Web sites that engage participants in discussions on diets, looks, lifestyles and such. In fact, to many young girls, anorexia (if not its companion bulimia) is simply a lifestyle choice — harmless self-starvation — not a medical problem.

"I was shocked," Thein said. "I had done some work with fashion models, and photos on that, but this made me think in a somewhat different way. Eating disorders, and the whole question of anorexia and body questions are a serious problem in Western Europe and Germany. So I was basically commenting here. I was not promoting, although what happened is that some of the pro-ana sites ended up publishing photos on their sites, which I had not intended."

The exhibition is provocative because, to put in ungentle terms, it sticks your nose into the implication of what is becoming a Western (and sometimes Asian) obsession — the urgency of achieving the perfect look, body image and style. Usually, the bodies are ultra-thin to the point of being practically translucent — and deadly for many young females.

"I meant these photographs to be interpretative, to be open enough to cause the viewer to think about what's going on here, not to promote thinness," Thein explained.

Thein's models are highly, but not impossibly, exaggerated using digital manipulation. Although Thein has worked with runway and professional models before, she used her friends as models for this project. What she produced are

ideas about flesh and bones, but not the reality of them.

You see bodies that seem to contort themselves in impossible ways — for instance a photograph of a girl caught in flight, as if she's disappearing into oblivion. None of the models' faces are shown, nor do they seem to show any signs of bone structure, with the exception of one shot in which a collarbone stands out like a bleached skeleton bone.

The search for perfection here seems to be a kind of preparation for battle, because perfection is hard, if impossible, to attain. There are models with their faces and hands wrapped in what appear to be bandages, as if they've suffered some impossible wounds that will never heal in their lifetimes.

Some of the photographs also bear the appearance of sensuality, vaguely referencing the type of pictures you see in fashion magazines, as the emaciated models don pretty silvery undergarments, stiletto heels and an abundance of shiny, well-coiffed hair.

The hair is a contradiction to the bodies, which appear trapped in the flimsy, ill-fitting, super-tight clothing that makes the models look like princesses imprisoned in their own bodies. It's difficult to imagine them breathing, adding to the feeling that they're close to death.

It's powerful, even artful, imagery, and disturbing to boot — disturbing because in a world where everyone and every body is on constant display and judgment, we can each somehow relate to the images, which have a repulsive attraction to them. Their has managed to push buttons with uncomfortable images that remind us how important it is to be comfortable in our own skin.

Gary Tischler is a contributing writer for The Washington Diplomat.

**Thirty-Two Kilos
(Zweiunddreißig Kilo)**

through March 6

Goethe-Institut

812 7th St., NW

For more information, please call (202) 289-1200 or visit

www.goethe.de/washington.
