

The Washington Post

'Thirty-Two Kilos': A Stark Look at Anorexia

By Rachel Beckman
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Thursday, January 8, 2009

The most common reaction to Ivonne Thein's photos is horror. The women in them are emaciated, wrapped in medical bandages and contorted. Hipbones, elbows and shoulder blades jut out as if begging for release from their diseased bodies.

The wall text offers some comfort: The photos are digitally manipulated.

The exhibition, which goes on display today at the Goethe-Institut Washington, is titled "Thirty-Two Kilos," which refers to the weight (about 70 pounds) of a French actress who posed naked for ads condemning anorexia.

Thein's decision to obscure the models' faces forces the viewer to focus on their bodies, particularly the exaggerated limbs, says Al Miner, a curator at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, who will be on a panel tonight at the Goethe-Institut to discuss "Thirty-Two Kilos."

"It's clear that she's mocking or appropriating poses that we see in edgier haute couture editorial work. . . . They look uncomfortable and bizarre. The poses are a reminder that they're a critique of the fashion industry and not just weight loss."

Thein, a 29-year-old German photographer and student, was inspired to create the series of 14 photographs after reading about "pro-ana" (or pro-anorexia) Web sites in a magazine. People on these sites, which have been around since at least the late '90s, argue that anorexia is a lifestyle choice like any other. Their fellowship revolves around encouraging one another's starvation and offering weight-loss tips.

"It was a real shock for me," says Thein, who has shot commercial fashion photography for European magazines. "It's important for people to know that every teenager can get this information on the Internet."

In a twist that perhaps could have been anticipated, some of the pro-ana sites have embraced Thein's work. On these sites, images of skeletal women provide "thinspiration." One pro-ana blogger posted Thein's photos and received mixed comments:

"Those pics are so, so beautiful! I want to look like them! They look so fragil [sic] and like an angel."

"I still think that some of the models have a big [rear]. How distorted am I?"

Other commenters were aghast:

"you are crazy! go eat something! your brain cells are fading away with your bodies!"

"seriously these girls, if they were as skinny would either already be dead or would die very soon! Where is the point in being [skinny] when [you're] dead!!!!"

When creating the photographs (which feature her friends, not professional models), Thein worried about this very outcome.

"That's not what I wanted," she said. "It's important for me that if I show my pictures, there's a statement that it's a critical position and I don't glamorize anorexia."

Lynn Grefe, chief executive officer of the National Eating Disorders Coalition, calls pro-ana Web sites "competitive, sick environments" and points out that anorexia has the highest death rate of any mental illness.

"Those pictures, that's what they're aspiring to because they can never be thin enough," Grefe says. "It's not a mind-set that most people can even understand."

Miner -- who as a painter himself creates work that deals with gender and body issues -- hopes that tonight's conversation addresses the question of what responsibility artists have to their audiences. He doesn't think that Thein is accountable to the (mostly) young women on the pro-ana sites because "it would never end if we tried to censor what we put out there for their sake."

Thirty-Two Kilos, at the Goethe-Institut Washington, 812 Seventh St. NW, through March 6. Free. Gallery hours are Monday-Thursday 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Friday 9 a.m.-3 p.m., Saturday 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Panel discussion is 6-8 tonight. RSVP to 202-289-1200 (Ext. 168) or rsvp@washington.goethe.org.