



Liz Lance: Beauty, Body Image and Femininity in Nepal

Liz Lance is an American [Fulbright](http://www.fulbrightnepal.org.np) Scholar in Journalism who has spent the last eight months in Nepal working on a documentary photo story on what beauty, body image and femininity means to young women in Nepal and how it is influenced by the mass media. Recently she showcased her multimedia presentation at a [photo.circle](http://www.photocircle.com.np) event combining still photographs and audio, with actual narrations by the five Nepali women she interviewed—a Miss Nepal pageant contestant, Miss Tamang pageant winner, a mountain biker, an up and coming singer and a student. Liz has completed bachelor's degree in South Asian Studies from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, completed graduate work in documentary photography at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Portland, Maine, and was a participant at the Missouri Photo Workshop in 2007. She begins her master's degree in Journalism at the University of Missouri in August, 2009. *V.E.N.T! Magazine* talked to Liz about beauty, body image and femininity.



Tell us a bit about yourself.

I was born in Pennsylvania. When I was growing up, we moved a lot, we lived in Chicago, Texas and Memphis. I went to high school in Memphis so there is definitely a lot of 'southerner' in me. When we moved to Memphis, I was in the seventh grade, in a catholic school with 23 girls in my class. There were these ideas there, about being a girl, that you need to look a certain way and act a certain way...it seemed like there was no room to be feminine unless you were a girly girl, you know, like you wear makeup and paint your nails and wear a size 4 and look cute all the time, and that's not where I was at all. So in middle school and high school I had a really hard time because of the American-Southern idea for beauty.

What was it like growing up?

I have an older sister (Ann), and she is 6'4", taller than I am and she has always been thin and beautiful and everyone told her to model...Also, my father's family is from the South and there is a southern influence from his family, and somehow when I was growing up, there was this sort of idea that you were either smart or pretty, but you can't be both, and...Ann was the pretty one and I was the smart one and you know...I skipped a grade and I thought if I am the smart one, I can't be pretty, and I think that she thought, because she was pretty, she could not be smart. So that also was really challenging to have these sort of conflicted ideas on what beauty meant, what femininity meant and to have a sister who is practically a runway model, and I was overweight and it was hard to find clothes, and maybe I guess I was a kind of a tomboy...I just wanted to cover my body so I always wore these loose, baggy-like clothes.

You first came to Nepal in 1998. Tell us a bit about your experience then.

When I first came to Nepal (11 years ago), I was 20 and I came here on a study abroad program by the University of Wisconsin and I lived here for 10 months. It was over those 10

months when things really changed for me. On the one hand, I lost a lot of weight from just living here and the other thing is that you know how here in Nepal, there is no 'gray' area. At that time, you are either a man or a woman, you are either feminine or you are not...it was kind of interesting that I sort of discovered my femininity a little bit when I was here, and you know, not always in the best way because I would get a lot of attention because I was tall and blonde, you know, lot of unwanted attention from men on the street...and while I didn't welcome that, at the same time, that sort of made me understand sexuality and femininity.

That's interesting that you say that your stay here made you understand sexuality and femininity. Can you elaborate?

I think a lot of it is probably because I lost weight. When I was growing up, my mother was always on a diet; I grew up with the women of my family always talking about weight and my mother always telling me that I would look prettier if I lost 30 pounds...I never thought I was pretty and I didn't think that you could be pretty if you were overweight. I thought they were totally mutually exclusive ideas. So I never had any sense of confidence about what I look like. I mean I had confidence on other things, like I thought I had a good sense of humor, and I was smart, and I was a good writer, and I was also fine with other stuffs like public speaking, but I was never confident on my appearance. I felt like, being raised in the South, with that idea that because of what my appearance was, it wasn't worthy of having confidence...but when I came here, for better or for worse, people started noticing me for how I looked, not because I looked a certain way but because I was six feet tall and I had blonde hair; like I stood out just you know from looking different from anyone else. Then I started to understand my appearance in the context of where I do not look like the people from this country. Maybe that was a part of it too. Part of it too is because I lost a lot of weight.



Liz Lance

Would you say that your personal experience sparked your interest in conducting this project?

The ideas of beauty and body image and how it is affected by media messages is something I've always been aware of. I remember taking this journalism class in my Freshman year in college and seeing the

tape of a lecture of some woman who at the time was very well-known for picking apart violence in print advertising with women. She would show this ad...she would deconstruct them and that was the first time I really started looking critically at print advertising. By just having a woman's leg in ad instead of her whole body...that's objectifying her. It's turning women just into a leg that can be desired and it's somehow connected to selling alcohol. After that I started becoming a really critical consumer of media. And sort of having had the baggage of having body image issues, growing up in the South, getting messages from my mother to have to look a certain way, seeing my sister praised for her beauty, all that sort of came together with the idea of this project because it's something, obviously, that's close to my heart...I came back to Nepal from 2001-2003 and then came back again and that's when I started to see this stark difference in Kathmandu— how girls dressed, how they talked, how they presented themselves. The media landscape, all of a sudden there were six television stations instead of just Nepal Television. All these things have changed. I just saw all these differences and all that kind of "gelled" into the research idea.

What did you find out?

I'm a journalist and I'm doing this as an anecdotal series. I'm not doing this as a academic research or social study. But this other hypothesis that I had is that western media has been here since the 80s and Indian media has been here, like Bollywood, but I feel that it's really only been since 2002-2003 when Nepal had its own explosion of media that women can

now personally identify with the people in television: she's Nepali I'm Nepali. I think that's had a greater affect on women too. I say this based on some preliminary research that I've been doing. In the states, eating disorder incidents among African-American communities on the whole are much lower because the body image the black culture holds is different. It's much healthier than the white body image and part of the reason that's been argued in a lot of papers I have read is that because of the absence of black women in the media. It's like Heidi Klum, these white, skinny girls in the make-up and clothing ads and not many black women are represented in the media. Some studies have made correlations saying that because young black women aren't identifying with the images in the media so it's not having any effect on them. So, I was thinking, wait a minute, so there's been bay watch and all that crap since the 80s and there's been Indian media the whole time with their stupid wet saris scene and all that and why does it seem like just recently, you know, what are the factors in the past 5, 6, 7 years that seem to be having a greater effect?

What are your thoughts on that?

I feel like one of them has to be because now it's Nepali women who are in these advertisements and it's Nepali women on television and so now the identification that people have with it. There's the rise of consumers, disposable income. Women are working more and even if they're not working, there is the rise of the middle class and more disposable income and women have more buying power. They want to go and spend the Sunday at Bhat Bhateni and it's now a family activity and I feel like that's sort of adding to the empowerment of women in some way...the industries that are targeting women are now taking advantage of that. It's like, women have this extra pocket money so now we're gonna try to sell them Fair and Lovely or this shampoo. You also see these ads for weight loss clinics now.

How did your "subjects" feel about beauty, body image and femininity?

Based on the lot of interviews that I've done with women, they believe is that, many women have said this, if the woman is pretty, she'll get a job and they talk about, the mountain biker she said male bosses looking to hire a female secretary are looking to hire a pretty girl because the first thing when they step into an office is to see pretty girl, that's what people want. No one has said unattractive women cannot be successful but they have all said that if you meet the society's standard of beauty, you will have an easier time professionally. And when you talk about marriage, in Nepali society they value fairness and they don't want a bride who's too dark and the kinds of things that we've been hearing for years. The interesting thing is that in all these interviews that I've done, all these young women kept saying this is what society believes but they're never saying they agree or disagree with it. Maybe it's my failure to follow up and ask that question but women seem to be very, very aware of what society values are.

What difference do you see in Nepal from when you were here 11 years ago?

In the states, it's pretty clear what the society values from a young age and I feel like here it's kind of a new phenomenon. I don't think 11 years ago when I came here people spent so much time worrying about it or caring about it, especially not young girls. One of the Tamang contestants told me that three weeks before the contest, she starved herself so she could lose three kilos for the contest. In the morning I had two *rotis* (bread) and a little bit of *tarkari* (vegetable) and I was hungry the whole time and I was like why would you do that? She said that the contest is over now so she eats like normal. I sat down and ate with her and she had so much rice...she's a teenager and for her to tell me that she had only two *rotis* and a *tarkari* and tea...She seemed to think that she needed to be thinner for the contest. I heard that from other contestants that they needed to lose a few kilos.

I see it here. This one girl I interviewed for the multimedia piece; she said she wants to be thin but not too thin and now that she's super thin she wants to gain weight again because everyone tells her how thin she looks and now she's derogatively being called thin. But do I believe that she wants to gain weight? She probably doesn't. I hope she doesn't lose any more weight because she's skins and bones as she is but then again that's her choice. As a friend, I can try to tell her that I don't think that's healthy or to try to instill in her some confidence that's not based on her weights but based on her achievements and hope there's other people doing that for her too but it seems that now a days, especially young kids now that they have boyfriends and girlfriends, which is a pretty new thing here for

teenagers to have that, some of the younger women I interviewed, the teenagers they say they (boys) don't want to be your boyfriend if you're fat. And then the thing is why would you want to be with a guy who only values his girl being thin?



Liz Lance presenting her multimedia piece at a photo.circle event.

What were your assumptions before embarking on this project?

I've definitely thought a lot about ideas about femininity and body image and obviously my own experience definitely colors the work that I've done here but again the thing that was hardest for me was

coming into this with a lot of assumptions and lot of like "I'm gonna show these Ms. Nepal contestants that they're being exploited." All these assumptions and judgments before I even met them but it's ultimately not my place. I can't condemn these women for contesting in Ms. Nepal and I can't condemn women for wearing Fair and Lovely because ultimately it's their choice. Isn't that what our mothers fought for and the women's liberation movement is that women could make their own choices without judgment so I can't judge them, I can't condemn them for that. But I can condemn Hindustan Unilever for marketing a product that creates a desire in society to be fair or I can condemn whatever company that makes diet pills for creating a demand for women to be thin. I can condemn musicians or pop stars for hip hop, these totally exploitative uber-sexualized images of women in music videos. That's what I condemn. That's what I judge. That's what I think is wrong. But if a woman chooses to do that, I can't condemn a woman for that.

How do you feel about the contestants now?

When I walked into the Ms. Nepal contest I was intimidated by women half my age and I was like why? Just because they're pretty, thin and made up...and why would we be intimidated by short skirts and thin girls? I think we all get intimidated. To them that's femininity and then I started to think more about femininity and the struggle I've had. Like in high school, I wanted to cover up my body and wore loose clothing...it's also the message I got from society that you don't want to look fat; you do your best to look thin and small. I didn't want to draw too much attention to myself based on what I was wearing so I'll wear kurta and pants because I didn't want to show off my curves, and then I started to feel like I was losing touch with my femininity because I wasn't showing off my body, because I was wearing loose fitting clothes. It started to bring back these ideas that I wasn't feminine or pretty enough...I started questioning where my idea of femininity comes from and in-turn how I am relating to all these women and where they're coming from. I can't fault them for wearing make-up and cute little dresses because frankly I do too because I want to present a certain appearance.

So, what do you think is the solution?

A company has the right to within FDA (Food and Drug Administration) or whatever the equivalent is in South Asia, regulations the lawful ability to create a product and market that product and sell that product and market that product how they see fit to maximize their bottom line because they're a business and any woman has any right to purchase that product so yeah, what do you do? You can't condemn a woman for wanting to buy into this society's standard of beauty because the fact of the matter is that if you do buy into it to some degree, and follow it, it's going to have positive repercussions for you. You will find a better husband because society says you will find a better husband if you look a certain way, you will probably find a better job because the society here values those things. And also there are no discrimination laws like they have in the states. Here if you apply for a job you show your photograph, you could never do that in the states. That kind of stuff is totally illegal in the states so what do you do? I think you really need to train people to be critical media consumers. I think that is the most important thing and to pick apart messages.

What kind of messages do you see in the



Nepali media?

For six months, I subscribed to both English and Nepali dailies and clipped ads of any visual images of women, both western and Nepali that were portraying or conveying some kind of sexual message. U 'n Me snack foods there's a round one. I saw this ad and there was this girl's tongue, not even her whole face, just her tongue and she has the ring inside her tongue. Tell me that's not the most sexual suggestive ad you've ever seen...it's not the whole women, all of a sudden you've turned this woman into a tongue. Even ekantipur when they re-launched their website, that says, "Get your bytes really fresh" and there's a picture of, again, not the whole face, this girl biting into a red, juicy apple. That to me is a sexually suggestive pose, hands down. I feel like it's important for women and men both to be able to deconstruct these messages and to see and to better understand the message that's being sent there.



Liz Lance presenting her multimedia piece at a photo.circle event.

Maybe the media is not aware of the messages that they're sending?

How can they not be? And then it's like who's laying out the papers? In THT (*The Himalayan Times*), there's always the pretty white girl in the top left hand corner. A model or an actress or some runway model, not always white, but usually skinny, pretty, foreign girl, always there. You finally get through the variety page and there's all this pictures of Britney. Who's laying out these pages? Men are.

What is the problem with portraying women in this way?

The biggest problem with all this is when you portray women this way in the media you are boiling them down to their outer appearances only. When that girl on Saturday (at the photo.circle event) asked me why I think beauty pageants are wrong and she disagreed with me. I said it boiling down a women's to simply worth her physical appearance and that's what I disagree with. Oh, but there's a talent portion. Yeah, there's a talent portion but are you telling me that she's not winning because she's fair skinned and thin? C'mon, and I think that's the problem I have. Then again it's like this what does feminism respond to prostitution? If a woman chooses to be a sex worker then and in some cases they do, and don't get me wrong, most of the time, they are forced into it but when you look at a place like Nevada where prostitution is legal women are choosing to be sex workers. They are choosing to use their bodies in that way within legal limits and if they're choosing to do that can I say that's wrong but then I don't really agree with it. I don't think that that's right because I was raised with a certain set of values. So, it's the old age question. We're supposed to think that women can be beautiful no matter what she look like and that women shouldn't have to be forced to look a certain way but then I put *gajal* (eyeliner) on when I left the house today and I've lost 20lbs since I've been here and I'm happy about that. It's totally hypocritical.

What do you mean by hypocritical?

Recently I stepped on a scale and the first thought was, I just need to lose four more pounds and I was like where did this come from? It's still there. Why is it there? I think every woman goes through that. I think every women says oh no no no I don't care because they think I'm not supposed to care because they think that if they care that means they're buying into the media's message and then you don't want to be those things and then no no no it's okay for me to look however I want but no chocolate cake for me. We all do it. We're all a bundle of contradictions and that's the conclusion I've come to.

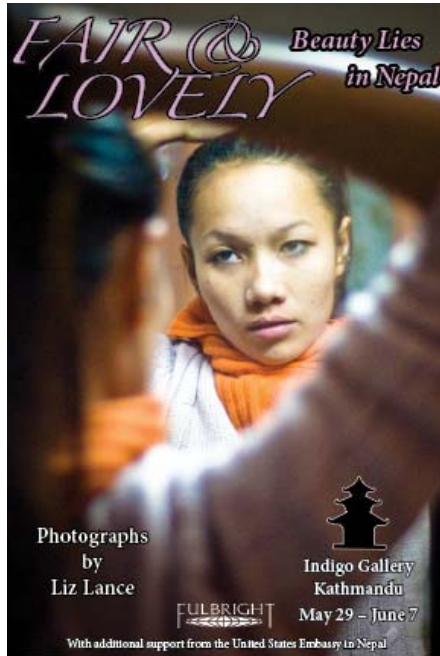
Liz Lance's written works and photographs have appeared in international and local publications including *WAVE Magazine* (<http://www.wave.com.np>), *Himal Khabar Patrika* (<http://himalmedia.com>) and *Nepali Times* (<http://www.nepalitimes.com.np>). She is exhibiting her work titled *Fair & Lovely: Beauty Lies in Nepal* at Indigo Gallery, Naxal from May 29 to June

7. Her work is also available for viewing online at fulbright.lizlance.com

(<http://fulbright.lizlance.com>).

Interview by [Yuko Maskay](http://www.ventzine.com/about-us) (<http://www.ventzine.com/about-us>) and photography by [Shreyans](#)

[Tamang](#) (<http://www.ventzine.com/about-us>), *V.E.N.T!* Magazine.



pushpa (May 31st 2009, 09:21 PM) says:

hi, i really like what you have said because it is a reality...if a girl is thin than everyone except...it.....it not than she is rejected from every where...great work...pushpa

[Khushbu](http://medreamer.blogspot.com) (<http://medreamer.blogspot.com>) (May 29th 2009, 01:23 PM) says:

The interview is great. I love the way Liz describes her perspective on femininity and beauty...i agree with everything she has to say..a wonderful read!

sajju (May 29th 2009, 08:34 AM) says:

hey liz.. u didn't mention .. how funny u r :P

Molly (May 28th 2009, 11:22 PM) says:

Great interview! I am particularly fascinated by the hypothesis that body image is constructed by images we see in the media that we identify with as being a representation of us. The I'm a white person she's a white person concept. There's a lot to that idea. When I was in Nepal with the U of Wisconsin, College Year in Nepal program 1998-1999 the concept of dating was emerging. Where did that come from?

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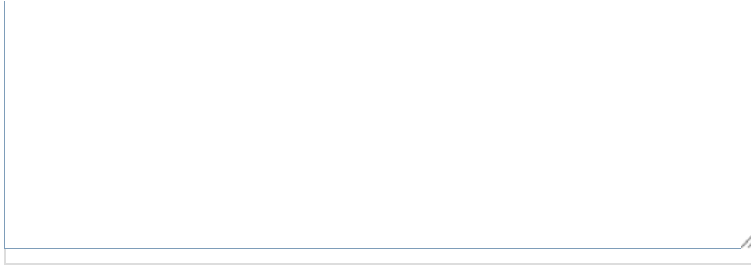
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