

The Harvard Crimson

'Body of Work' Breaks Down Body Image

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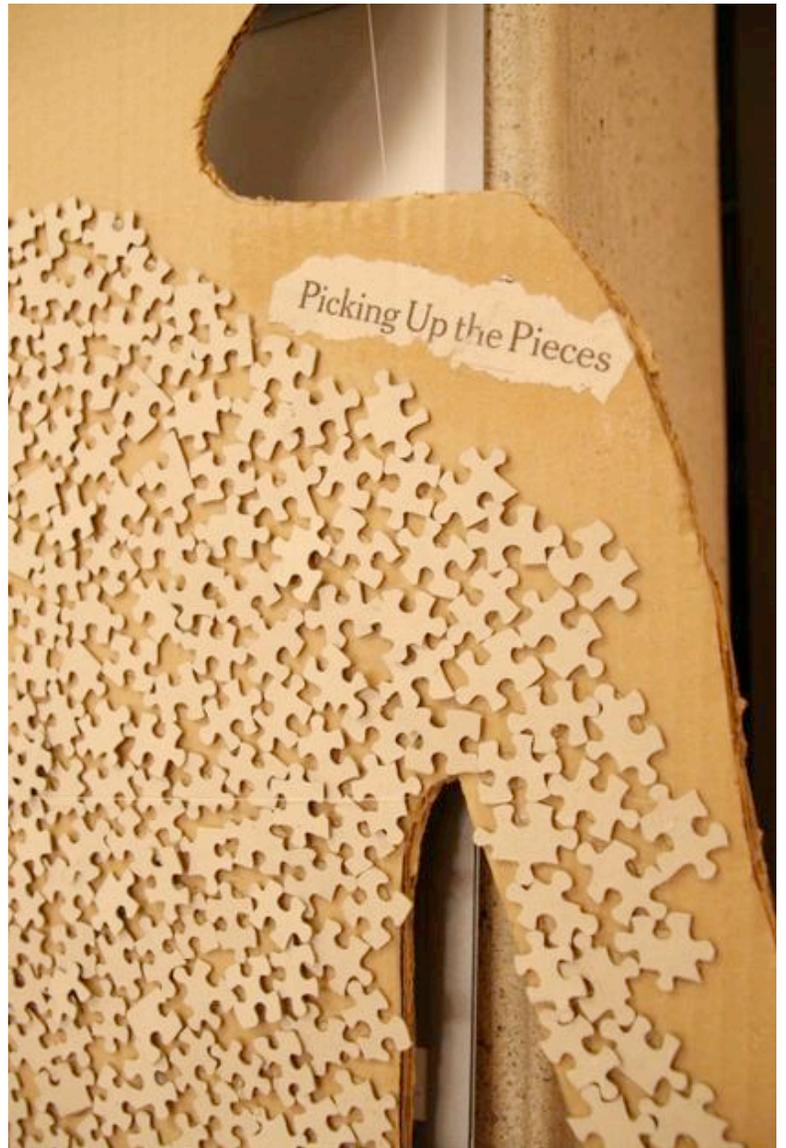
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There is a tenuous balance between self-image and the body as it appears to the rest of the world. For some, maintaining that balance becomes an ongoing battle, an obsessive and consuming compulsion to remain in control of what is displayed to the public: the reflection in the mirror.

For artist Judith Shaw, whose exhibition "Body of Work" came to the Student Organization Center at Hilles last Thursday through the Eating Concerns Hotline and Outreach, the Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, the Peer Contraceptive Councilors, and Sexual Health and Education and Advocacy Throughout Harvard organizations, that inner conflict manifested itself in a 15 year struggle with anorexia. When she could finally admit that she needed help, she found that creative self-expression brought her closer to being at peace with herself. She began creating sculptures and cutouts that reflected the stages of pain, acceptance, and confrontation that she experienced during her recovery—a recovery that remains a work-in-progress much like her burgeoning catalogue of work.

"Recovery is not something that's over and done with," Shaw said during the speakers' panel that followed the opening of the exhibition in the penthouse of the SOCH. Continuing to create art, Shaw added, helps keep her focused on moving forward.

"We each have the opportunity to create ourselves and create our lives," Shaw said. To Shaw, recovery also means recreation—a chance to start anew, rediscover equilibrium,



Body of Work, an art exhibit by Judith Shaw that opened in the penthouse of the Student Organization Center at Hilles, explores eating disorders and body image through art.

and discard feelings of worthlessness, feelings she had chosen to mask with the numbness that anorexia cultivated. Her art developed along parallel lines with her therapy. The first piece she created during treatment, “Running on Empty,” features cut-out words and phrases that expressed the inner turmoil that accompanied her throughout her battle with anorexia contained in a life-sized cardboard cutout of her own body. A newspaper clipping saying nothing but “Help wanted” glared out from the collection of words—it is something Shaw found herself unable to say for 15 years.

“What I wish someone had said to me was, ‘I miss you,’” Shaw said. She recalled feeling isolated and uncertain, emotions reflected in similar cutouts filled with puzzle pieces and boxes peppered with holes that represented the lack of connection and acceptance Shaw felt in the throes of anorexia.

Some Harvard undergraduates who attended the event also believed that people should be more open to having a discussion about self-image issues despite the sensitive nature of the topic. “I think it’s rarely talked about on campus, so an art show is a really beautiful way to open up a conversation about it,” Madalyn S. Bates ’14 said. Hearing speakers talk about their personal experiences with eating disorders and creative expression also revealed new ways to think about the relationship between art and self-perception.

“One of the speakers phrased it in a really interesting way that I hadn’t thought of, which was that your body is yours—but also exists in the outside world—and it has expectations from other people,” Bates said. “It’s a meeting place between who you think you are and who the rest of the world thinks you are, so to see this meeting place represented in art is very meaningful.”

Sara S. Lytle ’13, who contributed to the student exhibit and spoke at the event, noted that the artistic representations of that meeting place between art and self-perception are capable of addressing more than eating disorders. “These issues are not just about eating disorders. They’re also about what it means to be human, to be flawed,” Lytle told the audience, adding she believed that creativity comes out of imperfection. “A moving photograph—a beautiful one—does not have to be of a perfect image.”

Lytle’s photography was accompanied by sketches, paintings, sculptures, and other photographs produced by Harvard students. Each piece conveyed a message about various ideas of self-image, including gender identity and self-alteration as well as eating disorders. Though the media and messages of the student work and Shaw’s pieces may have varied, the common themes of self-acceptance, and the forward movement towards inner peace remained.

“In my experience, [recovery] is more of an art than a science,” Shaw said. According to Shaw, the creation of art thus becomes more than a way to express and move past the suffering that an eating disorder entails: it is also an expression of hope, an optimistic view of a new future, and a reminder that even recovery—with its own setbacks and obstacles—is an imperfect journey.

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