

In conversation with Stephanie Sutton, the artist recalled the liberating moment of “coming out” as, in her preferred words, a “fat person,” and the relief that came from rejecting cultural norms that privilege the thin body. To eliminate the anxiety accompanying the burden to lose weight, Sutton stopped focusing on external pressures, which for her come less from glitzy advertising images than from more subtle messaging: for instance, conversations about yo-yo dieting and impolite stares received at the grocery store.

Instead, Sutton turned her attention inward. Most revelatory were her visits to a sensory deprivation tank, essentially a cavernous space filled with salt water in which the body floats and is deprived of stimulation like light and sound. In this buoyant environment, engulfed by silence, Sutton could feel and hear her heart beating and her own drawing of breath. Detached from the garish noises of the outside world, and weightless, no longer subject to gravity’s pull, Sutton was a blank slate. These moments of freedom were the impetus Sutton needed to redefine expectations of her body, to accept and celebrate her own body type.

This enlightenment inspired an exhibition that draws upon a reconstituted awareness of her body as it takes up, and performs in, space. The videos displayed at the Georgia Museum of Art disclose this acute body consciousness, specifically *Movements*, a work in which Sutton’s bare upper chest is revealed. In the aftermath of physical exertion, her bosom heaves as she breathes in and out, and sweat trickles down her chin and neck. Complementing the images is an automated voice that describes the way a fat body negotiates space. For instance, at one point the voice says “thighs make audible swishing sound as they rub together.” The robotic voice makes no assessment of the pronouncement by way of inflection, instead narrating the fat body’s movements clinically, devoid of judgment that so often attends the human form.

Sutton also affirms the fat body as a producer, equal in ability to that of a thin one. In her video *Grass Piece*, the screen is filled with bright green grass, accompanied by the familiar hum of a lawn mower. Emerging from the top left of the picture plane, Sutton pushes the mower across the grass, moving back and forth until the entire patch of grass has been mowed. The hypnotic side to side motion regulates the spectator’s gaze, urging the viewer to share the artist’s vision of an adept fat form. Sutton denies the stereotype of the fat body as one that is sedentary and lazy, instead presenting a fat body capable of work, of effort, of discipline.

The triumph of Sutton’s work is not, most plainly, its appeal to change opinions about the fat body, but rather that she does so by shifting the burden of self-consciousness onto her audience. Using her own experiences as an example, Sutton’s work evokes the act of becoming aware, a liminal space fueled by the desire to both endorse and justify the body.

Brooke Leeton

Ph.D. Candidate in Contemporary Art at the University of Georgia