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## LIFE

## Naked truths: Photographer's This is Beautiful project celebrates the female form in all its shapes and sizes

Caroline Skelton

Times Colonist

Friday, August 27, 2004

As I write this, I am a size six. Maybe an eight. About a 30 around one place, 34 around another, and about 130 when I'm standing on our twitchy bathroom scale.

But last Sunday, I and 16 other women weren't any numbers at all. We had no clothes to define our size, and no critics to point out our rolls or scars or fading tattoos.

And because we had no one to tell us otherwise, in the cocoon of the Lynda Raino studio we felt beautiful, just as we were.

We were just 17 of the 175 Victoria women who responded to Seattle photographer Amanda Koster's call for participants in the first Canadian location of the This is Beautiful project.

Now on its third location (there are two locations in Seattle), Koster's project draws together female participants of all shapes, sizes and backgrounds for a nude photo shoot and following gallery exhibition.

Her hope is to send these photos blazing into North American society, pushing the images of normal women into the cultural mainstream. Eventually, she hopes to produce calendars, a documentary and a book of her images.

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In the age of twiggy supermodels and reality shows that carve normal bodies into walking Barbies, Koster says many women are getting fed up.

"They're so ready to let go of all their body issues," she says. She hears from the women in *This is Beautiful*, "I'm here and I'm alive and I'm existing, and why am I not in my own culture?"

The CEDRIC Centre, a community eating disorder counselling centre in Victoria, invited Koster to visit after seeing her in an interview with Q13 Fox news in Seattle.

"There's such a lack of real images of women's bodies out there," said Brooke Finnigan, communications and administrative co-ordinator for the centre. And for many women, these images help to "create an unbalanced relationship with their body."

"We all have to learn the hard way that we're fine just the way that we are."

The women, who asked not to be identified by name, trickled in Sunday from a grab bag of lifestyles: Nurses, youth workers, media members, retirees, full-time mothers. One had terminal cancer, while another was pregnant, near her due date.

Two brought their babies -- another brought her sprightly four-year-old daughter.

They all came for different reasons. For some, a violent past, sexual abuse, rape or eating disorder. For others, persistent struggles to love their bodies, despite worldly judgments.

Koster, now 33, had experienced both rape and bulimia before the age of 21.

But while in the studio, Koster asked us to dwell on the happy present, not sad pasts. Bring upbeat music, dance and have fun, she implored.

When robes started falling Sunday morning, I retreated to the change room, where I spent as much time as possible. After a night of restless nervousness and too much coffee, the thought of shedding my teddy bear bathrobe had about as much appeal as jumping out the studio window.

When I emerged, the bright studio was terrifyingly crowded with naked bodies. The women, leaning against the ballet bars and standing with crossed arms, looked like they were guests at an awkward cocktail party. The question seemed to hang in the air: Where do you look when you're talking to a naked woman?

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