Spring 2011

Le Nouveau Cirque

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Masters of Art Thesis Report

Le Nouveau Cirque

By

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B.A Northern Illinois University, 2009

Submitted to the Committee of Advisors

For the Degree of Masters of Art

College of Art and Science

At

Governors State University
University Park, IL 60484

2011
Abstract

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COLLEGE: Arts and Sciences

MAJOR: Art

CONCENTRATION: Printmaking

ACHIEVEMENT: Documentation of Graduate Thesis

TITLE: Le Nouveau Cirque
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Exploring traditional circus and contemporary circus has lead me to my current body of print work titled *Le Nouveau Cirque* simply meaning *The New Circus*. In my studio work I use printmaking to create my art. My focus on printmaking began with this body of artwork because of my interest making multiples of images and using old and new style processes of printmaking going hand in hand with my interest in old and new types of circuses. The connotation of creating multiples relates to old circus lithographs when artists would make many fliers and banners to advertise a show. In my work I portray aspects of traditional circus and contemporary circus because I find they always reference each other by various acts and characters, such as a circus clown. The images used in my art are all clown girl portraits or the girls performing a circus act. As my ideas evolved, I realized the inspiration of combining circus and female portraits in my work stemmed from my experience as a color guard performer (Fig.1). I chose to represent circus over color guard for my work because of the mystery of the overall imagery of old to new circus. Also, more modern indoor color guard is becoming very
closely related to contemporary circus in the aspect of theatrical performance, character and dance so showing the ideas of contemporary circus is correlated. Being on a color guard team of predominantly girls, I always felt a sense of sisterhood and outlet, which became an important aspect to my work. I show the importance of being on a team and how success is only achieved through working together. By finding positive ways to live life, it becomes more important in the girls everyday life the more involved they become in an activity. Each girl is posed in a somewhat alluring manner showing her newfound confidence and playing with the perception of women and the importance of beauty in society. Beauty can be socially defined and what is accepted in each individual’s world but that definition can be broken based off of the individual’s personal idea. Exuding beauty and sexuality is not about perfection but rather showing a confidence about being content with one’s self both physically and emotionally. My work portrays female circus performers in a character driven approach by showing the strong nature of sisterhood, outlet and beauty.

Traditional circus is described as entertainment that included a traveling troupe of acrobats, clowns, riders, exotic animals, biological oddities and wild animal acts (Durant 2). The word also describes the performance that is given, which is usually a series of acts that are choreographed to music. A circus is held in an oval or circular arena with tiered seating around its edge; in the case of traveling circuses this location is most often a large tent called the Big Top (Webster’s Dictionary). The essence of the circus described by Paul Binder from The Big Apple Circus is “by human aspiration,
flying with high style in the face of danger, suspending yourself by your teeth in full view of an audience. Juggling-keeping things moving at all costs-was a metaphor for survival. No juggler could juggle, no acrobat leap, without a certain illogical and witty self-assurance (Simon 15-16).” One of the most popular traditional circuses is Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey (Fig.2) they coined the term “The Greatest show on Earth” which made people want to see what the circus was all about. They would portray their banner advertisements for shows with various images on them such as female circus freaks. In my print in (Fig.3) titled “Welcome to my Circus” I show two twins connected together walking outside of a big top they represent the idea of circus freaks females at that time and the thoughts of traditional circuses. Circus freak females were not held to the same regard as a female who had physical prowess. Basic categories of the human and social oddities were shown by the presence of freaks, as well as by their isolation and exclusion. During the industrial revolution, the circus and fairs became a main target for the moral taming of the lower classes causing the circus to undergo transformation. As for the performers rather than being shown and exhibited they were now performing, instead of being nature’s wonders. They were now being perceived as human, like their audience and displaying and playing their bodies rather than their disfigurement (Carmeli 157). The circus had also been recognized in the late-19th century as a subject of avant-garde art in the U.S. Some artists at the time focused on the darker aspects of circus life, where as others focused on capturing the female tight rope walkers/trapeze artists grace and courage. (Durant 188). Now that women were shown as beautiful figures, I found the women that were held in a superior regard were most
fascinating to me and I began to create more art work with alluring looking girls. The image “Send in the Clowns” (Fig.4) shows an attractive girl that would be considered the star of the show with the image of trapeze artists in the background from an old lithograph image from Calvert Litho Co. from 1890. Although the screen printed image is from the old circus the image is just as prevalent today as it was then because trapeze as well as various other acts are still very popular, this image showing the balance of traditional and contemporary circus.

Contemporary circus is a performing arts movement that developed in the 1970s, at once in France, Australia, the West Coast of the U.S. and the U.K. There are no animals in this circus and influences are drawn from both contemporary culture and circus history (Webster’s Dictionary). Some popular contemporary circuses are Circus Oz, Cirque du Solei (Fig.5), and The Pickle Family Circus. What I was drawn to by these circuses were the characters that were portrayed and the intense makeup and costuming of their performers both female and male. I was drawn to the different circus acts such as plate spinning and what the acrobat performers were able to do in the air. Some examples of all female circuses are, The Women’s Circus from Melbourne, Australia (Fig.6), Circus Finelli from San Francisco, CA Circus Artemis from Portland, OR, and Vulcana Women’s Circus from West End, Brisbane. I was inspired by what these circuses stood for because they would take in women off the streets, in domestic violence situations and allow them to join their circus as a positive outlet and safe haven. They could focus their energy into something positive and life changing while enjoying
themselves by being around other women who were from similar situations. Many of the women from the Vulcana Women’s Circus would join for empowerment, health and well-being and perform with a skilled highly respected team. I created the print titled “Women’s Circus” (Fig.7) in response to the female circuses mission statements. I was inspired by what they stood for and decided I wanted to create my own women’s circus. The women are shown as bruised and beat up but then the girl on the tight rope shows how she prevails from the situation and lives a more positive life now that she joined the circus. Many old books and photographs from Barnum & Bailey, old circus posters and banners were strong influences in my pieces because of their direct imagery and lifestyle represented. Images from artists like Toulouse Lautrec and more present images from working contemporary circuses like Circus Oz and Cirque du Soleil were prevalent in my work. In the piece “Women’s Circus” I screen printed an old picture of the real Barnum & Bailey Circus in the background as a remnant of the past and the importance that the influence of old circus had on new working contemporary circus.

Modern circus builds upon some traditions, possibly old fashioned values but these new practices are being reasserted through contemporary education advocates (Rogers 90).

Balancing Traditional and Contemporary circus is a good example of how any show business has grown and flourished by finding a comfortable middle ground. Even Barnum and Bailey have taken steps to add a more modern approach to their traditions. Today the circus also includes the style of the off Broadway revue (Holden 11). Circus popularity has extended to general recreational activities and education, even adding
circus schools to colleges (Scmidt 140). The circus over the centuries has always been a multi-cultural character. The circus has always been a welcome haven for people of all nationalities, ethnic groups, and social classes. There are so few vehicles so well suited for involvement of everyone “Outside the Mainstream” today (Rogers 90). In a personal one on one interview with Molly Shannon a world leader in comedic samba from the Circus Finelli (Fig. 8) I asked her how she felt about performing in an all female circus and she quotes “Performing, like any high pressure job or situation, by its nature creates very strong bonds. When you regularly perform together, due to the stressful situations of performing (being in front of an audience, things going wrong that you need to deal with in the moment, all the logistics of putting on shows, etc) you form strong bonds, whether it is men or women or mixed. An all female company may be a little different in terms of the more emotional openness woman tend to have and share with each other, it is the art and life of performing that builds the strong bond.” I found this to be a very interesting because it is the love of living the life style of an entertainer everyday that holds these groups together. The feeling of having an emotional connection and sisterly bond between teammates is an important aspect to my work.

The circus as recreation and team building contributes greatly to its fundamental message of happiness and cheer. Through the circus women learn the four foundations of social bonding including attachment, commitment, involvement and belief.

Attachment accentuates caring about other people, mutual expectations, and shared aspirations. Commitment shows the great deal of time, energy and self into learning a
positive behavior. Involvement expresses the enjoyment of doing activities. Belief refers to a set of norms and values which society deems worth instilling in women (Rogers 90).

In my prints, I show girls working as a team or representing friendship. The best example of sisterhood in my work is two detail images from the larger scale “Circus Banner: Sisterhood” and “Circus Banner: Preparation” show in (Fig.9 & 10). In Fig. 9, there are two performers hugging; they are looking out to their audience to allow them into their close friendship and relationship they have built while being on a team. They both wear the clown nose and appear very young in age as if just starting out this journey of the circus together but holding onto each other as sisters. Being on a team myself I have learned the importance of the individual in relationship to the group and as part of the group. The feeling of a strong community is one of the most important paths to happiness. In number there is safety and only through united group effort could dreams become reality and desired goals be attained. It is while playing on a team that many of the techniques for successful group life for now and later are best learned (Vannier and Poindexter 6). Being on a team a person can find happiness with in a close group of teammates and realize that working as one is the true way to success. In Fig. 10, I represent the bond of sisterhood, which is being attained by a strong socializing value that is inherent while being on a team. This wood relief print shows two girls on high bikes giving each other confidence by holding hands before they go out to perform. They are behind the curtain waiting to go on while other girls are practicing or just hanging out backstage. Inside the banner the words read “Vulcana” which is an Ode to
the Vulcana Women’s Circus and the sisterhood values they hold. They believe in a shared physical language for people of all backgrounds to express, explore and build connections. The circus can be a genuine asset to learning, self-fulfillment, cooperative teamwork, and a sense of accomplishment for women (Rogers 90). I think building connections and expressing yourself in a unique way is a key element for all performers and if you are happy doing what you love then everything else in your life will fall into place.

Along with sisterhood and friendship comes finding a personal outlet and making that outlet your everyday reality. For me sisterhood and outlet go hand in hand because it takes a love for your sport and for the people you are with to make what you do enjoyable and fun. Finding an outlet is important because it keeps you happy and mentally and physically healthy. Once you find your outlet it becomes something that is more and more apparent in your everyday life and becomes just as important as the work you do. I asked Molly Shannon how she related outlet to her everyday life and she said “For us the circus is our everyday reality. The clown work is our work. It is an everyday reality in which the door to your imagination is constantly open, because that is the work, but it is what we do everyday. All aspects of it are work, from the creation of acts to all the business behind everything.” Because of her love for what she does circus has become her life and is no longer just an outlet for her. For many people they have a separate career from an outside activity but that activity can shape a persons life in a positive way. In (Fig. 11) titled “Run Away” I ask the question, “Is it too late to Run
Away and Join the Circus?’ Basically asking ‘is it too late to better your life?’ In my new work my intent is to challenge people to think about doing something different to make a positive change in their life. Learning to use a positive mindset is one of the most powerful life strategies there is. Using powerful positive thinking techniques, visualizations and positive statements that become true, makes it is possible to achieve whatever you want. My intent is to challenge all people to engage in an activity to better their own life in a positive way. I want my work to inspire people to find their own personal outlet to feel most confident. In my work I show the positive change of outlet by creating the girl’s individual portraits. I show their faces in full makeup and no longer bruised or hurt. They carry their confidence through their face and hold themselves in respected manner.

The female body has been a spectacle to men and women forever but now women are more able to take control of their own body and how sexual or not they want to portray themselves as. Women have always been the favored subject at the end of any transformation process, especially when it comes to dressing up. (Mulvey135) In the case of the circus, peepshows, burlesque type of shows women are able to transform themselves into confrontational figures. In my work I do not portray all of the girls as provocative but I do give them a sexual appeal. As shown in (Fig. 12) is my etching of naked woman laying down with just a drape of cloth across her she is a circus performer but is representing a darker side to female performers as if it’s an old time peep show and her audience must come to her. Women may not mind being these types of
performers but they mainly did it for the money. With old time peep shows they were usually viewed as entertainment through a small opening or magnified glass and were usually surrounded by theatrical scenes and very erotic poses of the woman (Webster’s Dictionary). In this piece I surrounded the woman with circus patterns and titled it “Come One Come All.” She is laying down in a pose that is closely related to odalisque women. An odalisque woman was described as a female slave or an assistant to the concubines and wives but she had the ability to become one of them. If she was extremely beautiful or had exceptional talents in dancing, singing or the sexual arts she could possibly train to be a concubine (Stephen 12). In my circus I want these women to come across in very seductive and exude sex appeal therefore they have the ability to lure in their audience. When they perform they can transform into someone else and portray a different person. Each woman gets to stand out in her own way and it is through over exaggerated makeup and costumes as well as how well they move when they do their show.

Circus Peep Shows girls are not hookers because they do not sell their bodies, this was a way for them to be in the industry without having to prostitute themselves. Live peep shows during the traditional circus days were popular because it was a way for men to fulfill a sexual desire that may not be accepted elsewhere. Men would browse each woman, pick one and goes inside of her booth, closing the door behind him. She would then enter her side of the booth and close the door behind her while the man dropped his token coins in a machine on the wall.(Goodman 1) Even today peep shows
still are still going on because sex shops offer “One way mirror” peep shows where performers cannot see their customers. There are also “Custom Peeps” where a customer can call, and request a girl for a specific show (Goodman 1). In the screen print (Fig.13) “Step Right Up” I portray a girl looking slightly over her shoulder wearing green gloves with her finger in her mouth looking out with a simple gaze in her eyes. She is a tease and plays off of her innocence trying to draw in a crowd through her sexuality alone. She could be considered in the category of peep show women because of her innocent demeanor. A more complicated thought, this piece is an example of the woman who delights in being the object of the objectified gaze this delight could not be understood as a feminist as is disrupts the thought of a patriarchal system (Cahill 42).

In the terms of everyday life and not in show business, some feminists may argue that the phenomenon of female beautification is a crucial and oppressive moment in overall male-controlled society. Feminists have often even encouraged women to throw off the demands of the beauty in order to gain social and political equality. However in more recent years some feminists also believe that embracing the beauty is an evolutionary force, and an avenue for feminine power. By challenging the ideals of both, feminists are finding ways to create a communal experience by shaping each other’s experiences and desires (Cahill 43). The reasons I embrace the ideals of a communal experience is the process of getting “dressed up” can be very pleasurable especially when there is a special occasion or performance, beauty is brought to the forefront. Feminists may also argue that beautification is an “art of disguise” by which women
cover up their deficient or defective bodies but I see beautification as a means of self-expression and self-transformation (Cahill 43-47). Much of the pleasure of beautification has to do with the mastery of techniques and materials and by beautifying one’s self it is about creating a variety of images and appearances, and to understand one’s self as an artist (Cahill 59).

I am drawn to the persona of females in circus because of the sense of confidence they portray to their audience. Female performers are described as being the more passive gender, and fantasy figure that are simultaneously looked at and displayed as an erotic spectacle. With female sex appeal comes a woman having to hold herself to a standard that makes her feel most beautiful not what someone else would consider beautiful (Mulvey 19). These female circus performers have mastered their skills and know how they are being portrayed to their audience and are performing based off of the whole package portrayed. Again, beauty is not necessarily about fitting a social norm of society however, when you are a performer it is your job to get your character across and wear a lot of makeup and fancy costumes on stage as part of the act. So the beauties I define in my characters are similar in stage makeup, hair and the emotional mystery they portray to their audience. In (Fig. 14) the wood relief “Lady Ella B,” the title named after the last “fat lady” in the real Barnum and Bailey Circus, female clown portrait with the clown make up on, swirls in her hair and her glancing over her shoulder. Her beauty is not defined by any specific model other then the over stylized circus makeup but she is still attractive because of her unusual look. Playing a character
with heavy makeup and costuming and an alluring demeanor is fantasy but what is real is the person inside that shines through that character which overall makes them striking.

Women are taught at a very young age that the way we come into this world is not the way we ought to remain. Women are pressured to conform to the current ideals of physical attractiveness and to reject one’s natural self. I agree with the feminist perspectives that celebrate diversity among women, including body size diversity and resisting cultural messages that define beauty and who gets to be beautiful because wearing makeup and costumes should not be done to hide who you truly are; it should be done to enhance what is already there (Rubin 34). Girls and young women are constantly bombarded with certain images of beauty, and are being taught that they should and must have it (Ruth 266). On an everyday basis girls should feel free to dress and act in whatever way they want and not feel pressured to fit a stereotype. When performing for an audience it is different because the audience comes to see a show and escape to a fantasy world like the circus where they can be entertained. The women being held to a standard in show business is the appropriate because they have to wear stage makeup and costuming as part of their job and with stage makeup a performer is not trying to fit a social norm.

The difference with performers is to beautify and paint one’s body out of self-defined love and play of color is self expressive and healthy. So to wear heavy make up in theater is different then trying to over compensate your natural beauty with heavy
makeup on an everyday basis. Stage make up is different then everyday makeup (Ruth 266). In the screen print “Faces Full of Paint” (Fig 15) this was an image of me becoming one of the women in the circus. I show my self as a performer getting ready and the idea of being behind the scenes before the show, in the mirror getting ready. Make up enhances the face on stage and when all skills have been perfected, the performer must then rely on their body and in particular their face to project the role to the audience. (Bushman13) Stage makeup is worn so that an audience can see the performer through the bright lights so their face does not get washed out from far away (Bushman14). In my artwork a common theme throughout each piece is the white face clown on all of the girls. The basic white face used by circus clowns is a mixture of powdered zinc oxide and vegetable shortening. (Westmore 53) The white face clown that I used on all of my girls is the leader clown. In a personal interview with Leonard “Dimples” Isemonger the treasurer for the Midwest Clown Association he described the white face clowns as “the boss clown, they are fancy, well-tailored and the leader in the ring, and they also never get a pie in the face and were the jesters in the ruling court.” The girls in my circus are clowns and are the leader clowns because they lead their own lives and the success they choose to achieve.

The most common themes amongst my work are the clown nose, triangle eye and circle cheek makeup, swirls, harlequin diamonds, and Big Tops. All of these decorative elements add to each piece a cohesive element that is prevalent through the entire body of work. The clown nose as described before is an element that represents
sisterhood in my work. In real circus, no two clowns look exactly alike but they all have similar features. The clown nose being one of them, but in real circus they are all painted on or put on differently with variations in size and shape. Once a clown originates a facial decoration they have a moral copyright on it to protect other clowns from being jealous. (Durant 236) Although none of the girls in my circus look exactly alike, I use the nose and make up as a common bond between the girls. As seen in Fig. 15, the triangle eye and circle cheek makeup was inspired by Day of the Dead La Calvera Catrina female imagery meaning “The Elegant Woman (Brandes 1). I have always been fascinated by the look of these women because they wear makeup all over their face from eyes, nose and chin to represent a stylized version of the human skull. These Catrina figures are a reminder to enjoy the sweetness of life and that human life is joyful and passionate (Brandes 1). I created my own version of that face but made it a clown instead of skull representation because my girls represent a new positive life style and living life to the fullest.

The swirl shape seen on many of the images, but especially in many of the girl’s hair was inspired by a top side of a carousel ride in a gold embellishment that I saw one summer walking around a carnival. The shape was feminine and simple so I recreated it in different ways throughout my prints. In my linoleum cut with mono print image titled “Harlequin” (Fig. 16) I show the swirls peaking through the bright yellow color that was inspired by bright theater lights. More predominate is the large harlequin diamond shapes that run down the side of the piece. There were many aspects to the
circus, carnivals and theater that were used to provoke an emotion from an audience. A fun house was an attraction in an amusement park that featured various devices intended to surprise, frighten or amuse as well as were admired for their aesthetic beauty (Kimball 5). In my print titled “Fun House Girls” (Fig.17) I showed funhouse mirrors, the clown makeup, different circus patterns as well as a content emotion of the girl. In the hair she’s has the blue swirls and the same diamond shape collaged onto the bottom of the piece as well as on her tights. The harlequin diamond shape stems from the Harlequin character in commedia dell’arte, and is usually masked, dressed in diamond-patterned tights with contrasting colors and carrying a sword or magic wand. Harlequins were represented as a clown or comedian, but they are most known for their diamond shaped pattern on their tights. (Green and Swan 1). 

In my prints, I show some girls performing circus acts, some just in a space with circus patterns and some on a typical circus arena such as a Big Top. The first, three -ring circus tent was created by Barnum and Bailey in 1881 to compete with other circuses. It was a debate by circus lovers everywhere whether it was a step in the right direction or if it was too large according to some viewers. (Durant 78-79) In my lithograph print (Fig. 18) “Le Nouveau Cirque” I show a large green circus tent. I choose to use green as a different color then what normal tent colors were typically reds or striped to create my own spectacle out of the tent. This piece can be read as coming into the circus or leaving the circus. The Big Top is unique in its self but appears calm on the outside and on the inside is a completely different world full of excitement and fantasy. On the outside of
the tent is a banner that reads “Le Nouveau Cirque.” Circus banners (Fig. 19) were one of, if not the most important way of communication for a show to be advertised through the imagery on the banners as well as text (Werkin 96). Although the text promised something like “The greatest equestrian that ever lived” I was inspired by the imagery mostly on circus banners because looking at the strong images made it easy to tell what was coming to town without being obvious. Large Banners really made a person stop and look at what was being advertised because of the bright colors and different spectacles shown on each. Side show banners were created to catch the eye with their striking depictions of the different wonders to be seen inside the side show tent. These banners in the past were painted on white-washed canvas and were latched to poles and stored often because of the weather conditions. They could run from 216ft and made up of eighteen Double Decker Banners. (Werkin 96)

In my own work creating something large scale to get people moving around and through the banners was important to me. Making people feel as if they were in a real performance space was my intent on creating banners. I wanted the viewer to look up to the ceiling and down to the floor like in a real circus. In the circus there is always something happening up high in the sky to down low in the ring and your eye never stops moving. My own series of banners (Fig. 20) came to life on canvas like the original banners from working circuses by combining all of my ideas from each previous print. Using the form of wood cut, I carved four blocks each with a different image. As described before two of the Circus Bannerprints in (Fig. 9 &10) were created to represent
sisterhood and preparation for a show. They correlate with the last two banners, Circus Banner: The Performance in (Fig. 21) and Circus Banner: Her Journey (Fig. 22). In Fig 21, there is a performer on a tightrope balancing with her umbrella while the thinner other girls are images in the shadow hanging on rings. The girl on tightrope is plus size and breaks the ideals of social norm for a performer to be doing the tightrope. This image shows the audience a different angle then most of the other prints by allowing the viewer to feel the height she is at in the air. In each top image of the banner represents the name of the piece even though they interchange sixteen ways four blocks per four banners. Each banner is painted a different solid color but they unify through simplicity and imagery. I did not put any text in these banners other than the word “Vulcana” to represent all female circuses. In Fig. 22, I show the audience a more vulnerable female portrait with her eyes closed feeling the journey that she just entailed while joining the circus and going through everything from finding a new outlet while empowering herself. Female empowerment is used in two broad sense the general and specific. In the general sense, it refers women to be self-dependent by providing them access to new opportunities they may have been denied before. In a specific sense, female empowerment refers to bettering yourself in the power structure of society (Panigrahy18). In my banners, I show each girl bettering her life for her own pleasure and the audience’s pleasure of watching. The banners sum up everything that Le Nouveau Cirque is about from sisterhood and outlet to performance and journey.
In my print work I focus my attention on creating multiples of the same images as well as creating variations upon the same image. The very first circus banners and posters images were created through the use of lithograph. In all of my prints I used the processes and materials of wood cut, linocut, screen print, lithography, collagraph and monoprint. All of my prints are originally hand drawn but I used each printmaking process to create different effects in my work through color, texture and imagery. Through the use of lithography and etching, I was able to control full scenery by drawing directly to the surface I printed on. With wood relief and linocut I could carve the images of the girls and get a high contrast look to the girls, which made it easy to add color with paint or monoprint in the white areas to give the prints a story coloring book effect. The images that were screen printed allowed me to draw on the computer and give the girls a cartoon look as well as an old antique poster look. Monoprint and collagraph allowed me to give the prints texture as well as a painterly look. If I needed to add something to my prints to look like makeup monoprinting allowed me to add colors on top of what was already there and look like a painted print. The overall look of my print work is very feminine and beautiful like the girls represented in them.

Le Nouveau Cirque portrays the girls of traditional and contemporary circus in a character driven approach by showing the strong nature of sisterhood, outlet and beauty. Through the mission statements of the all female circuses I found the circus to be creative way to represent female empowerment. The girls represent confidence and exude a female power through stage performance by taking ownership of their own
destinies as women. Le Nouveau Cirque is all about girls finding a personal outlet through circus performance and taking on a persona in a way that makes them feel most beautiful and confident.
Fig. 1

Fig. 2
Fig. 3

Fig. 4
Fig. 8

Fig 9
Fig. 18

Fig. 19
Fig. 22

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