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'Trappings' brings out the power in every woman

New book features JC women wearing clothes with confidence

By: Mary Paul, Reporter staff writer

Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki brought their ongoing project *Trappings* full circle to the Jersey City Museum for a book signing and lecture on Nov. 8.

In 2001, they held the first interviews for the book there, and in 2004, they exhibited video, audio and print results of their feminist art project at the museum. Next year, they hope to see *Trappings* realized as a feature on series.

Ludwig and Piechocki (known collaboratively as Two Girls Working) posed this question to women all over the country: "What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?"

The book, *Trappings: Stories of Women, Power and Clothing*, features answers from women from all walks of life, who told their stories of personal power to Ludwig and Piechocki. In all, they interviewed 536 women, 61 were included in the book. Their goal was more art than sociology, yet it allowed women to express their opinions on the "trappings" they don.

Artist Anne Barry, of Jersey City, had a unique answer, which was included in the book. "I don't give a hoot about clothes, and they don't make me feel powerful," said Barry in an interview at the book signing.

Interview house parties

Over five years, Ludwig, 32, and Piechocki, 35, sent out invitations to universities and organizations. After hearing back from interested parties, the pair gathered groups of women together to record casual interviews - 66 sessions in all, across 15 states. The interviews were conducted in private homes, offices, classrooms, places of worship and others.

A dozen of the women interviewed for the book live or work in Jersey City, Ludwig's hometown. The interviews are first-hand accounts of clothes and power, including Kathleen Ferguson, who teaches Middle Eastern culture and dance to seniors, and France Garrido, a visual artist.

Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, a curator at the Jersey City Museum, received a package in the mail about the project. "I thought the content was really interesting," Aranda-Alvarado said.

Her answer centered around gifts she received from women she admired and items she found in thrift shops, which is why she donned a shawl her grandmother crocheted and a Jordache faux fur jacket that makes her feel "like Linda Evans from *Dynasty*."

Sheelagh Cabalda, 35, who was a NYU educator at the time of the interview and now works at a cancer support organization, wears her laughter to feel powerful, which matches her other source of power, a T-shirt that says "Angry little Asian girl."

"I was attracted to the project and what it attempted to address, and its ability to relate to so many different people on so many different levels," said Cabalda.

Debra Carrion, 45, an administrative assistant at Dress for Success in Jersey City, is featured in the book as well, and she has enjoyed being a part of the project.



PROJECT ON THE PAGE –
Tiffany Ludwig and Renee
Piechocki (bottom picture)
interviewed women across the
country for their book about women
and power. The cover features Clara
Lee Arnold, of Oxford, Miss., a
boxer who feels powerful in evening
gowns.

"They're amazing ladies," said Carrion. "It's a beautiful book."

Two Girls creating

Ludwig, an artist and media consultant, met Piechocki, an artist and public art consultant, at a conference in New York for the National Association of Artists' Organizations in February, 2000.

They've been the dynamic duo ever since, keeping in touch via e-mail when they aren't working in residency or at a conference together, which is how they were able to put more places on their Trappings map.

When asked if they chose places such as Laramie, Wyo. for any special reason, they explained that they weren't gathering examples of people from particular places or walks of life, and location was mostly where they happened to be, wanted to go or had been invited.

"The purpose of our project is to break down those barriers," said Piechocki. "We are trying to bring light to those misconceptions. We weren't looking for archetypes or stereotypes. We were looking for everyday women to tell us what they thought."

Through it all, they listened to varied opinions of the women. In the interest of their art and objectivity, they've never revealed what makes them feel powerful.

"As artists, really early on in the project, we decided not to answer that question," said Ludwig. "We weren't trying to prove a thesis. We think that if we did answer, it would put a right or wrong answer on the question."

Trappings is available in the gift shop at the Jersey City Museum (\$29.95, Rutgers University Press).

Responses to this story can be sent to current@hudsonreporter.com.