Tallulah Stroud

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Peter Paul Rubens and Fatness: Aesthetic, Fetish, and Language

Peter Paul Rubens was known for diplomatic presence and allegorical, baroque oil paintings in the 17th century, but his love of full-figured women created a legacy he never intended. Through historical, cultural, and visual context, I argue that despite Rubens's adoration for fat women within his work, the long-term impact of his representation has held back the ability for fat bodies to be discussed in contemporary portraiture. The term "rubenesque" describes the "rounded and alluringly plump"[1] women in Rubens's paintings, and examples of scholarship using the term "rubenesque" for contemporary portrait artists underscore how the word works to reduce body types to a sexualized artistic aesthetic instead of accurately describing bodies.Through exploring the aesthetics, fetish, and language surrounding Rubens's women and fatness with a fat-feminist lens, I hope to interrogate the term Rubenesque, identify how the term has been misused, and offer an alternative way to move forward linguistically.

Throughout a full academic year, I dedicated a semester each to researching contemporary, fat, female portrait artists Jenny Saville (b.1970) and Laura Aguilar (1959–2018), and I quickly discovered that Rubens's linguistic ghost haunts the scholarship of both. My first encounter with the term "rubenesque" was while researching Saville, a UK based contemporary, neo-expressionist, portrait artist. Her debut series was highly controversial as she painted massive portraits of nude, fat women, in a way that unabashedly confronted the viewers internal biases against fatness and flesh. Nevertheless, she was also an instant success and has since sold a piece from her debut that was the "top price for a living female artist" at $10.9 million.[2]

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[1] Harper Douglas, "Etymology of Rubenesque," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed March 3, 2026.
[2] Colin Gleadell, "New York Uplift." *Art Monthly* no. 472 (Dec, 2024), 42-44.

One piece within this series directly addresses Rubens by name, *Ruben's Flap* (see fig. 1). The vertical composition collages together three identical figures in different positions, and while the three heads and three stomachs are easily distinguishable towards the top and the bottom of the painting, the middle becomes an inseparable amalgamation of folded flesh and hanging breasts merging into one body from another. The head of the far left figure presses and folds the fat of its chin against a cut off arm before melting from the cheek into the middle head which stares directly at the viewer with mouth slightly agape. The third figure's head is reclined back on the shoulder of the middle figure, mouth agape, and staring off into the distance above the viewer's gaze. The positioning of the mutilated figures is not one focused on visual pleasure, but of visual discomfort. Saville's meticulous use of oil paint to replicate flesh positions her as a successor to another artist Lucian Freud who painted flesh in a similarly eerie way (see fig. 2). Freud's artistic methods of painting position him a successor of Rubens, and by following this string of influence, Saville's figures being labeled as rubenesque is supported.

Then I encountered the term a second time while researching Laura Aguilar (1959–2018), a contemporary chicana photographer who worked mostly in self portraiture and dealt largely with political activism, community documentation, and body politics. Her breakout series from 1996, *Nature Self Portrait Series*, was a black and white, 15 part series capturing Aguilar's nude body against the desert landscape of the American Southwest. The series explored several themes, including reconnection to land, cyclical grief, and the voyeuristic lens of photography. However, the series was also a way for Aguilar to allow herself to view her fat body in a neutral way. In *Nature Self Portrait #13* (see fig. 3), Aguilar is in the middle ground of the photograph facing away from the camera and folding in towards her core with 3 boulders in the foreground. Desolate ground consumes the rest of the composition due to the high vantage point of the camera. Because of the greyscale pallet, the folds of Aguilar's fat and dimpled flesh mimics the rough surface of the boulders. Her curled position creates the same silhouette as the rounded boulders which allows Aguilar to become part of the landscape. This series is in

conversation with several feminist photographers including Ana Mendieta and Judy Dater, but the connection to Rubens is initially unclear. Despite their difference in medium, objective, and approach, in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, “Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell,” curator Pilar Tompkins Rivas refers to Aguilar’s work as “images celebrat[ing] the Rubenesque beauty of a woman.”[3] Unlike Saville, Aguilar did not share a medium with Rubens, nor a similar style of composition, nor use of color. The only similarity I could draw between the two was a fat, female nude. It was while researching this series that my questioning began. Are these women rubenesque or are they just fat? And what is the difference? To answer that question we have to go back to the source of the term rubenesque: Peter Paul Rubens.

Born in 1577 in Germany, but practicing mostly in Antwerp, Belgium until his death in 1640, Peter Paul Rubens was exceptionally famous during his lifetime for his revolutionary understanding of flesh, light, and emotion. Rubens had a close relationship with the archduchess of Spain as her advisor, and through her gained popularity and was commissioned frequently by the Spanish court. Through his sponsors, Rubens was able to take on enough apprentices to form a “painting factory” where he was able to “oversee the production of over three thousand paintings, engravings and woodcuts.”[4] His oil paintings often depicted biblical or mythological scenes that reflected his beliefs as a Flemish diplomat. The soft, female subjects almost always pleading with the muscular, male subjects to avoid war and conflict to be with her. Despite his exceptional success during his lifetime, the legacy that succeeds him is one of a man who loved full figured or “rubenesque” women. Rubens’s figures were heavily influenced by women in his life, including his first wife, Isabella Brant, but more so his second wife, Helena Fourment. After his marriage with Helena in 1630, Rubens’s painting featured exponentially

[3] Pilar Tompkins Rivas, “Foreword” in *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017), vii
[4] Svetlana Alpers, “Creativity in the Flesh: The Drunken Silenus” in *The Making of Rubens*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 146.

more nudity, especially his new wife, who often posed nude for Rubens and can be spotted in numerous paintings.

The word itself, “Rubenesque,” was coined in 1815, and later had a brief rebranding to “Rubensesque” in 1834. Rubensesque was created as a short-lived attempt at correcting Rubenesque’s linguistic failing of dropping the “s” when combining Rubens and the French suffix “-esque”, but was abandoned quickly, as Rubensesque rolls off the tongue significantly less than Rubenesque. The terms by definition are identical. In 1877, a new term, “Rubensian,” was coined. “Rubensian” is used more so to discuss relation to Rubens’s work outside of discussing the figures. The development of a new word to speak to the composition and process rather than the bodies within them underscores the idea that “Rubenesque” is a term reserved for figures. Oxford English Dictionary described rubenesque as, “[c]haracteristic or suggestive of the paintings of Rubens; esp. (of a woman's figure) full and rounded,”[5] while Rubensian is described as “of, relating to, or characteristic of Rubens or his work.”[6] By these definitions, Saville’s work aligns more closely with Rubensian rather than Rubenesque, as they are connected primarily through process. What is fascinating about the definition of “Rubenesque” is that the more accredited dictionaries, including Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam Webster, state that Rubenesque simply is in relation to Rubens’s figures, but less accredited dictionaries, including Wiktionary, Collins Dictionary, and the Google AI overview, begin to add terms such as “sensual,” “voluptuous,” and “pleasingly plump” to their definitions. These less accredited dictionaries are often pulling information from online content and are based on how the term is used rather than accredited dictionaries that are the standard for how the words *should* be used. The open-sourced dictionaries inform us that the usage of the term took a detour into sexualizing figures and away from the painterly relation to Rubens as an artist. In *The Making of Rubens*, Svetlana Alpers, a leading Rembrandt scholar, uses Rubens

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[5] Oxford English Dictionary, “Rubensesque (adj.),” December 2024.
[6] Oxford English Dictionary, “Rubensian (adj.),” July 2023.

painting *The Drunken Silenus* (see fig. 4) to assert that art historians have retroactively oversexualized the women in Ruben's painting. *The Drunken Silenus* depicts a nude male figure with a fat, rectangular build being held up by the figures around him as he stoops forward. Rubens demonstrates his signature use of fleshy oil painting to build the folds of Silenus's body, but as a man, Silenus's figure would be an example of Rubensian rather than Rubenesque, which has become a gendered term. Silenus's male body is a showcase of Rubens's painterly ability rather than an alluring figure. Alpers asserts, "flesh as he depicts it is something in common between men and women."[7] In challenging this gendered viewing of Rubens's figures and referring to Silenus directly as "fat," Alpers affirms that "Rubenesque" is reserved for his women.[8]

The definition of "Rubenesque" only holds value if one is familiar with the female figures in Rubens's paintings. By comparing notable portraits by Rubens, including *The trial of Paris* (1606-08) (see fig. 5), *Three Nymphs with a Cornucopia* (1625-28) (see fig. 6), and *Venus, Mars and Cupid* (1630-35) (see fig. 7), we gather visual information by boiling the painting down to similar characteristics. I have specifically selected two of the pieces that were created before Rubens married Helena Fourment, as nearly every painting following their elopement includes her nude figure, and to boil down the meaning of Rubenesque, we need to observe multiple bodies. Even still, they all fall within a particular silhouette. Across the three, the figures' fat distribution lies in the lower abdomen and upper legs, giving the figures rounded stomachs, hips broader than the waist, and convex thighs that arch away from the body.[9] The figures also showcase folds and creases of fat underneath the bust or on their sides around their waists. His figures range in bust size, but their chests are narrower than their hips, making the hips the

[7] Svetlana Alpers, "Creativity in the Flesh: The Drunken Silenus" in *The Making of Rubens*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 130.
[8] The history of fatness defeminizing women because it takes up space should be an essay of its own.
[9] Much more can be said on the shift of the ideal body weight for women in history, but the social standard of thin, waifish figures didn't come into style until after the first world war. Before that, it was a symbol of status for women to be fatter as that meant they were wealthy enough to have excess food. At the time Rubens was painting, many of his contemporaries were painting similarly shaped figures, and his women's weight was only slightly higher than other artists at the time.

broadest part of the body. Simply speaking, Rubens's figure had rounded stomachs, creases of fat on the abdomen, and the broadest part of their bodies were their hips.

While Rubens's role in the development of "Rubenesque" is up for debate, the word's effect on art historical language is not. The term originated as a reference to the painter's affinity to flesh and figure. However, as seen in my research on Jenny Saville and Laura Aguilar's work, it has become a placeholder for a word art historians refuse to say: fat. Rubens's figures are a specific kind of fat, one that is sensual and appealing, and fat in "all the right places." The sexual connotation of the term Rubenesque then makes the use of the word on non-sensual figures not only inaccurate, but reductive. It implies that fatness is not allowed to be acknowledged unless it serves the viewer. Both Saville and Aguilar's work is built upon confronting the viewer with their own internalized ideas of body, so labeling either as Rubenesque completely negates their efforts.

To further understand the difference between rubenesque and fatness, one needs to familiarize themself with the concept of body types. For the purposes of this essay, I have selected Rubens's Venus within *Venus, Mars, and Cupid* (1635) as the pinnacle of Rubenesque women (see fig. 7). The painting showcases an intimate domestic scene between Roman mythological figures Venus and Mars with their son, Cupid. Venus sits in a slightly reclined position to the left of center, fully nude, except for the blue fabric draped across her lap and a sheer white fabric wrapped around her upper arm. Her left arm is crossed diagonally across her torso while her right arm is bent to allow her to grasp her breast between her pointer and middle finger. Her gaze is turned towards the nude baby, Cupid, crawling into her lap by grasping her left arm. Three thin lines of white depicting breastmilk cascade in a downward arch into Cupid's mouth, and behind the intimate moment between mother and child, Mars, dressed in full metal armor, watches his son. Hidden in the red hues behind Mars, another figure works to untie Mars's chest plate. Jennifer Scott wrote about this piece in the Rubens and Women Dulwich Picture Gallery exhibition catalogue as turning "the tension between peace and war – into a

relatable domestic moment."[10] On top of Venus's allegorical representation as the goddess of beauty, desire, and fertility aligning closely with what I have come to understand as the meaning of Rubenesque, her slightly reclined position allows the viewer to fully take in her figure. Her hips are the widest part of her body, her stomach folds over her lap, and her breasts weigh upon the arm that is supporting them: checking all the boxes of the quintessential Rubenesque figure.

Another famous depiction of a fat woman given the same name is *Venus of Willendorf*, a fertility totem dated 30,000 years ago and discovered in Austria in 1908 (see fig. 8). The 4.4 inch tall, nude statuette was carved from limestone and resembles a female figure in a slightly reclined position. She is carved with two breasts that lay against the abdomen and reach down to the belly button, arms resting atop her breasts, convex stomach overhang on the sides of her abdomen, and inward turned knees. The figure does not have a face, but does have detailed carving to highlight the shape of her vulva. She is believed to be one of many figures carved in honor of a fertility deity with exaggerated sexual features believed to help women in possession of the totem get pregnant. The statue's figure does have a rounded stomach, but her waist is wider than the hips, unlike any of Rubens women.

The two figures carry their weight differently because of the individual structure of their bodies, or, body types. Body types, as shown by this graphic from an Instagram account claiming to be "#1 Resource for Everything #Prom"[11] (see fig. 9), is a concept mostly used in fashion as a way of assessing how to dress the body in a way that is most flattering, or creating an illusion of thinness. According to this diagram, which in itself refuses to depict fatness despite body types including weight distribution, Rubens's Venus would be considered a pear shape with a narrow waist and broad hips, while Venus of Willendorf would be considered an apple, whose waist is the broadest part of the body. Even though both figures have above average body fat percentages, and could accurately be described as fat, their fat distribution affects their

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[10] Jennifer Scott, "Catalogue" in *Rubens and Women*, (London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2023), 167.
[11] The Prom Guide (@thepromguide), "#1 Resource for Everything #Prom," Instagram Profile Description, https://www.instagram.com/thepromguide?igsh=MXkwYXJhZWpzZmowMA==

silhouette. Fat held in the upper legs, buttocks, and breasts instead of the abdomen creating the pear or hourglass figure has historically been the standard for women in the West. Venus of Willendorf's weight is held mostly in her abdomen creating a round silhouette: the opposite of the Rubenesque aesthetic. Through observing Rubens's other work, we are able to see that the concave waist that accentuates the broad hips, either pear or hourglass, are essential to the Rubenesque aesthetic. By this standard, Venus of Willendorf cannot be considered Rubenesque.

Keeping body types in mind, reflect back on Aguilar's *Nature Self Portrait #13* once more (see fig. 3). Although she is not in a neutral position, we can see by the relationship of hips to waist that Aguilar's body aligns more closely with Venus of Willendorf than Rubens's Venus. Therefore, she does not qualify as Rubenesque, and yet bears the title. This allowed me to realize the problem: art history does not currently have the linguistic capacity to accurately describe fat women because of social bias against fatness. Art history is a woman-dominated field, almost all of which have had their own encounter with diet culture, beauty standards, and aesthetic oppression. The label fat feels harsh, something you would never say about someone, so it is repackaged as "large," "full figured," and "voluptuous" to soften the blow. However, a fundamental part of art history is visual description: the ability to objectively describe the components of a composition to build visual evidence for your analysis. But with fatness, art historians instead use language antithetical to the purpose of visual description such as "large," which is a relative term typically used to describe scale within a composition. A large body is large compared to what?

With roots so ingrained in social issues, how are we to move past this as a field? I argue that the future of visual description in art history utilizes the feminist concept of "body neutrality." Body neutrality was created as a countermovement to body positivity, so to fully understand,

body neutrality "must be contextualized within its ideological foremother: body positivity”[12] Body positivity originated during the fat activist movement in the 1960s that drew inspiration from the civil rights movement. The purpose was to encourage the broadening of the idealized beauty to include all marginalized bodies instead of the historically white supremist ideals. While in concept body positivity was created to uplift self esteem, it still upheld the patriarchal systems of aesthetics. Body neutrality instead asks, why does my body need to be attractive to be valued? This neutral standpoint was developed by Anne Poirier, a body image coach, in her 2021 book *The Body Joyful*[13] to help her patients see the value in their bodies outside of what they look like. Further developed in eating disorder specialist Eleanor Clark’s 2022 book *Body Neutrality: Finding Acceptance and Liberation in a Body-Focused Culture*, Clark emphasises that while “[b]ody positivity ultimately aims to transform society’s definition of beauty, [...] body neutrality aims to transform society’s values away from a focus on beauty.”[14]

While body neutrality has been critiqued for its limited usefulness as an individual mindset for marginalized bodies, especially within black feminist scholarship, I believe if we strip body neutrality to the essentials and remove it from its individualistic use and shape it into a framework of visual description, art historians would be able to describe fat bodies accurately without the shadow of social bias. What this would realistically look like when applied to visual description would be describing the body as objectively as possible, as if it were anything but human, in an attempt to avoid altering language to protect the image of the subject. In my research, I frequently see fat replaced with “plush”, “full-figured”, “curvy”, “plump”, “thick”, “large”, “curvelicious”, and of course, “Rubenesque”. Most of these terms have a sensual or tactile connotation that favors the experience of the viewer. Alternatively, instead of describing the figure as a whole, it is easier to describe elements of their bodies and how they interact

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[12] Kristin Denise Rowe, “Positioning the Body: Black Womanhood, Beauty and Exploring Body Neutrality” (*Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*: 2025), 42.
[13] Anne Poirier, *The Body Joyful,* (Norwalk: Woodhall Press, 2021)
[14] Eleanor Clark, *Body Neutrality: Finding Acceptance and Liberation in a Body-Focused Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2023), 5.

objectively; for example: stomach overhang, rounded stomach, dimpled legs, cellulitic thighs, rolls of fat, or folds of flesh. These terms do not reduce or fetishize like the previous list of terms. The relationship between art and beauty is fundamental, but when dealing with fat female portraiture, art historians tend to focus on the status of the body within the composition as beautiful and not how the figure contributes to the success of the piece as a whole. This restructuring of language around the body allows for Aguilar's photographs to be properly interpreted. Only by acknowledging the fold of fat and dimpled skin can the audience realize her body mimics the texture and silhouette of the boulders before her, integrating herself into the landscape and reclaiming the land in a successful, beautifully captured composition.

Social biases affecting language happen in more cases than just fatness. Defaulting to "female" or "male" figure as a base description rather than the individual physical attributes is exclusionary of genderqueer or intersex figures. I have encountered scholars describing skin tones exclusively as a spectrum of tan, as if black and brown are offensive. Physical disabilities, on the other end of the spectrum, are often written about as deformities. Art historians write about what their body is missing instead of what is there. These marginalized bodies are written about from the perspective of someone who writes relatively to an assumed default of thin, white, cis, able-bodiedness

Beyond fatness, this restructured application of body neutrality and moving away from idealized Western centered language will allow for all marginalized bodies, including bodies of color, gender non-conforming bodies, and disabled bodies to be more accurately described by art historians, as their language will no longer be restricted by social biases. These issues are larger than just the field of art history, but interrogating these norms through the lens of a visual field may help shift larger conversations of aesthetic oppression. It is about time art historians get back to what they're best at: looking.

fig. 1 Jenny Saville, *Ruben's [sic] Flap*, 1998-99, Oil on canvas, 120 x 96 in, The George Economou Collection. © Jenny Saville, Courtesy Gagosian

fig. 2 Lucian Freud, *Reflection (Self Portrait),* 1985, oil on canvas, 20 x 22 in, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts.

fig. 3 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #13*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 14 × 18 ⅞ in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California

fig. 4 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Drunken Silenus*, c.1616-17, oil on canvas, 83.4 in x 84.4 in, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany

fig. 5 Peter Paul Rubens, *The trial of Paris*, 1606-08, Oil on Canvas, 35 x 45 in, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

fig. 6 Peter Paul Rubens, *Three Nymphs with a Cornucopia*, 1625–28, 12 x 9.5 in, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Dulwich, UK

fig. 7 Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus, Mars and Cupid*, c.1630-1635, oil on canvas, 77 x 52 in, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, UK

fig. 8 *Venus of Willendorf*, oolitic limestone, 4.4 in, The Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna, Austria

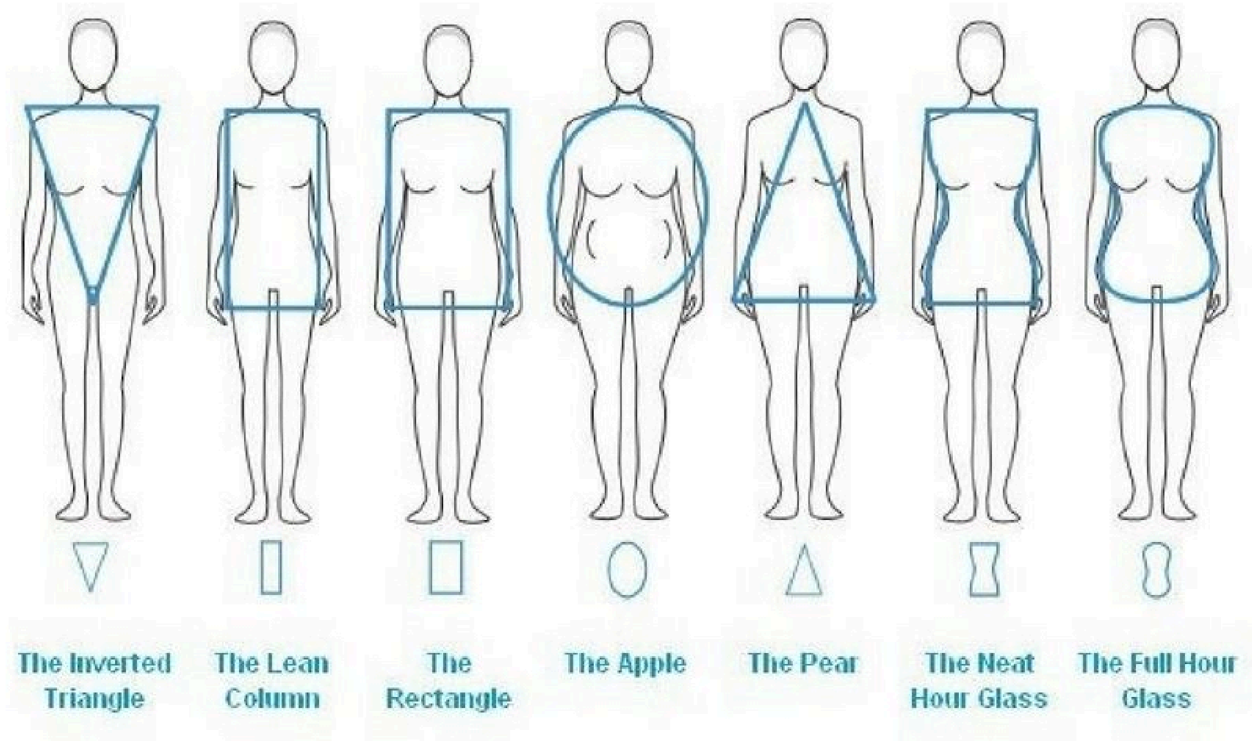

fig. 9 The Prom Guide (@thepromguide), women body type diagram, instagram post, October 5, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BojsRhMBxJt/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet

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