

ESSAYS

“Look at Those Double D’s!”

HAZEL GRANT



PHOTO: Double *Daphne*. © Hazel Grant



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“Jess! Look Jess!” I waited until our pole teacher Jess had finished talking to a pupil across the room before calling for her attention. She immediately gasped when she saw me and exclaimed in pride: “Yessssss!!!”

I had been practicing a *Daphne* and had achieved it for the first time. The pole move – probably not inspired by Scooby Doo, but it always brought the red-head to mind – involved holding onto the pole with only your thighs, and then straightening out your body and placing your hands back on the pole, one hand above your body and the other under. At that point, all you need to do is push your chest forward, bend one knee and let your head fall back in a relaxed expression. Simple.

When I first saw the move it appeared as if the pole dancer had a euphoric freedom coursing through their veins, throwing their head back and basking in their beauty and femininity in that moment. It appeared to be the embodiment of the commodity feminism image we had come to examine in Goldman’s (1992) work. Commodity feminism explores how commodities are advertised and sold to women as a way for them to achieve the hyper feminine ideals of their culture, and become the “ideal woman”, breeding a culture of acceptable female objectification. The dancer appeared to hold everything consumers of beautification commodities were seeking: grace, beauty, sex-appeal, confidence, and femininity. All pulled together effortlessly by the perfect woman.

However, viewing the dancer as only the image they create does not take into account the person performing the *Daphne*. And as the person in that *Daphne* for the very first time, I could vouch that there was so much more depth to that image.

There was pain, unbelievable amounts of pain. The skin on my thighs was burning from the friction of the pole my contracting muscles were causing in their mission to crush the metal into smithereens. In addition, there was the strain on my core muscles to keep my upper body straight making my torso quake, and the cramping of my clammy hands clutching the pole. The pain in my thighs was by far the worst; it was a very intense and intimate pain. I had in the past attempted running and core workout, and so knew the ache and pull of unhappy muscles, however, I was yet to encounter any exercise that called for tough inner thighs. Jess had “reassured” us that after a while pole dancers had thick thigh skin and “couldn’t feel anything there anymore”, but for now my delicate skin was angry and bruised for days after; making stairs (and walking in general) the bane of my life.

The physical strain was also just the start - my mind was locked in an old Western film style stand-off with my body. My limbs and muscles were calling to let go and end this madness, but the very real possibility of slipping and falling froze up my body with unadulterated fear. The signs of this internal struggle were blatant on my sweating brow and scrunched-up red face.

But against all odds, all the pain and fear, I was calling Jess over because I was in a *Daphne*. Likely the worst *Daphne* she had ever seen, but it was a *Daphne* and I was holding it long enough for her to jump up and down and call someone over to take a photo. I was radiating happiness through my rosy skin, feeling so proud of myself and my body in that moment.

“Wait, wait, why don’t we do doubles?” I looked up at Jess, still mid-*Daphne*. “What?” Doubles in pole dancing is where two dancers use the same pole at the same time, but it wasn’t anything I had seen in person before. “Let’s do a doubles *Daphne*! Get down a second!” I slid (or more accurately fell) down the pole and Jess immediately flew up and got into a perfect *Daphne*, then called for me to join her.

Although apprehensive, the other students and instructor encouraged me to go up the pole and struggle into my second ever *Daphne* under Jess. The class whooped and cheered us, taking photos of what they proclaimed to be “Double D’s”. I kept having issue of spinning away from the camera, as my body was getting tired and I couldn’t hold my sweaty hands in one place, but I lasted until the photos were done and fell to the floor, triumphant.

For the rest of the night, even after class had ended and we had limped out into the real world I was buzzing with pride. It was the only thing I would talk about as I met my friends and boyfriend later. When Jess sent me the picture of the “Double D’s”, I was instantly sending it to my friends and waving it in my boyfriend’s face.

Looking at the picture again weeks afterwards, I feel a little disappointed it isn’t as amazing as I remember it - and the immediate comparison of Jess’s *Daphne* doesn’t help. I see now how my legs could have been straighter, the arch of my back more exaggerated and how I was almost falling off by the time the photo was taken. There were a hundred differences between mine, and my teacher’s *Daphne*, from the point of our toes to my tomato-coloured face, but overall, that wasn’t what was important in the picture. I had achieved something, trained myself to do something that I had not thought possible before, and there I was, with my pole teacher and “pole family” – (the term for communities and classes of pole dancers) smiling at the wall behind me and feeling on top of the world.

When I showed this photo to my friends and boyfriend, I knew (at first at least) I was seeing a very different image to them. My friends said how alarming it was, my boyfriend grinned and told me how sexy I looked, and overall they focused on how my body appeared in the photo. In talking about how commodity feminism constructs women’s relationships and autonomy over their bodies, Bae (2011:29) summarises that

Women use autonomous control over their bodies and appearance to build a construct that will eventually be objectified by the male gaze. Thus[...] this feminist search for value and the meaning of women’s emancipation through sexuality and bodily appearance constitutes pseudo liberalism.

To some extent I understand how this was what my friends and my boyfriend were seeing: me building my body towards achieving the perfect feminine image; and how, although I was taking control over my body, it appeared as though the only way I could express this control was by aiming towards this image. But I cannot adhere to Bae’s point fully, as I see this image in such a different light. I don’t feel or see myself aiming for any “perfect feminine image”. I see what I was experiencing in that moment - that improvement, strength, pain and pride I had worked so hard for. It did not feel like pseudo liberation, and when my friends and boyfriend asked me questions about the photo - about how I was holding myself up, how much I trained to do this, how big were the bruises I had gotten from it - they began to move away from Bae’s perspective too in their dialogue and see where I was coming from. This photo wasn’t about anything other than my body, my goals and my inability to remember how painful it is to rub yourself raw when dreaming about when I could next try it again. And that is why I will continue to walk to and limp from class until I can achieve the perfect set of double D’s.

References

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