


# Exploring the **Beauty Within** ONE EXPAT ARTIST'S QUEST TO REDEFINE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE BEAUTIFUL

“Hello, Beautiful!” is how artist Erik Hagen greets good friends at the door to his sunny studio, located in his Hague home. He’s not joking - Hagen believes in beauty, so much so that he has created an art initiative named *The Exploring Beauty Project*.



*The Exploring Beauty Project* is a series of images paired with inspirational words from the models. The project aims to redefine the perceptions of beauty beyond age and size, both in Europe and the United States. Launched in 2009, it has grown at an amazing rate, attracting the interest of many different types of women. “The response has been so positive,” Hagen says, “and the interest keeps growing, entirely by word of mouth.”

“I have been thinking about this idea for years. It wasn’t until I moved to The Hague that I started to implement it,” Hagen, an artist and photographer originally from Washington DC, moved to Den Haag two years ago with his spouse to fulfill a shared dream of living in Europe. “Before I came here, I was happy doing outdoor landscape painting. Here, I found myself in a new studio in a new country, and it was very solitary.”

“I’d come from an office environment,” he continues, “and I missed the daily interactions with people. And while the landscape painting was really nice, it didn’t have a strong connection to people and didn’t have a social aspect. I thought this new project would be a great way to meet people, to connect with the community and do something that made a difference.”

“It’s really audacious to think we can actually change beauty standards,” Erik tells. “And at first I didn’t think we’d be able to do that. But I’ve come around. I’ve started to see how this project is making a difference and *can* make a difference. After 30 volunteer models and a volunteer content-driven website, we’re starting to connect with people all over the world.”

Tanya, 27



Tatiana, 56

The volunteer models are mostly from the US and from Holland. When reading their statements, one is struck by the similarities in their perceptions of beauty. For Hagen, it was unexpected. "I am surprised at how similar the responses have been. It's more OK in Holland to be a normal size than it is in the US. Women here are the tallest in the world, and are larger naturally, and it seems more accepted to be curvy here. However, they still look at the same thin fashion models and still feel some of the same inadequacies. So we're all in the same boat when it comes to self-perception."

Hagen sees the project as a collaboration with the models. "I have never used live subjects before; it is new to me," Hagen says. "I am very conscious of the 'male gaze,' so I gave some direction, lots of color and texture, but then left it up to the models to choose how they are most comfortable posing. Each shoot is memorable because there is a very focused interview before the shoot, then there is the shoot itself, about two hours in total. By the end, I feel like I have made a connection with each person, like I've made a friend. Some women

stand out for their interviews, some are extremely emotional. Many women don't feel comfortable or beautiful, but they come to the shoot to move out of their comfort zone. There was one woman who did not feel beautiful, is rubenesque, has stretch marks from childbirth, is older, and she decided to pose nude. Through the process of coming to the shoot and then seeing the results, she has come to feel differently about herself and her relationship with her body. It's a compelling image and beautiful story."

When Hagen started the project, the focus was on women over forty, of non-traditional size. Since then it has evolved to include women as young as 25 and as old as 61, with every age and body type in between. "I didn't want to say no to people who had a strong opinion on what beauty was and wanted to contribute to the project. I didn't want to constrain the project - I wanted to see where it would go and how it would evolve. I have never said no to someone who wanted to contribute and the project is the better for it."

Hagen is starting to receive notes from others who have been impacted by the project. "I received an e-mail from a

Li, 40



woman in the American Midwest. She feels that beauty is elusive, and has been troubled by it for most of her life. She believes the project is important to people like her who are finally accepting their own beauty.”

The project has also changed Hagen as an artist. “Prior to this project I wasn’t aware of the ability of art to reach so many people and change so many lives. For me, art has always been a very personal and inward-looking experience. Art occupies an interesting place in society. It can change our cultural expectations, taking us in directions and we usually don’t go. I see new possibilities opening up for me as an artist, from oil painting to photography, to the Internet and digital media. It is empowering and incredibly liberating.”

The Exploring Beauty Project started as an idea, a response to the negative feelings so many women have about their own bodies. “Now we have a blog that gets updated weekly with new images and interviews,” Hagen says. “We have more volunteer models, we have shows planned in The Hague, we are part of Holland’s Kunstweek in November, we’re in the process of publishing a book on the project, and we’re developing a touring schedule for Europe and the United States. It’s thrilling to create art that matters and that people care about.”

For more information: [www.exploringbeauty.org](http://www.exploringbeauty.org)