

REAL BODIES MANIFESTO

Jenny Ton from Retrofit Republic styles the models as others look on.



The Real Bodies Manifesto is more than just a fashion look book. It's a statement by Asian Americans about their struggles and achievements, revealing who they are not just on the outside but on the inside. It's breaking stereotypes and highlighting the diversity of the community — the body types, the sexual orientations, the occupations. It's for real.

It's a labor of love by collaborators Lisa Lee and Lynn Chen of website Thick Dumping Skin, and Jenny Ton and Julia Rhee of clothing line Retrofit Republic, reflecting their mutual mission of self-acceptance and celebrating people of all sizes. Through an online contest, eight individuals were chosen to participate in the photo and video shoot at San Francisco's Pigment Studios last June.

"In the perfect world, this is what fashion would be like. It's highlighting real people, it's highlighting fashion that's affordable and sustainable, and it's individual and personalized to everyone's personalities," says Lee. "I think that's something Retrofit Republic does so well — they really get to know you, what you're like, and they really dress you the way your personality is."

As an outlet for storytelling, the Manifesto seeks to inspire. "We have models trying to summon up the courage and vulnerability to talk on camera about their lived experiences and confronting everything that has happened to them," says

Rhee. "If this project inspires people to be vulnerable, it's a huge success on our end."

The models consist of four men and four women who challenge the status quo, like Oakland native Mary Trieu, co-founder of the blog *BigGirlsRun2.com*. "I'm a runner, I do yoga and I stay active, but at the same time there are still people who believe that because you're

larger sized you're not active and you don't take care of yourself," says Trieu. "But in reality, there are people like me who do love themselves and take care of themselves."

However, loving yourself is an ongoing process, especially when you're part of a minority. "Even as an empowered woman, it's very difficult to avoid ways in which the oppressive dominant cultural standards impose that I have to look a certain way to be beautiful or be valued," says law student Laury Thammavong. "I'm constantly trying to decolonize my mind and my body, and appreciate and be self-accepting as I am."

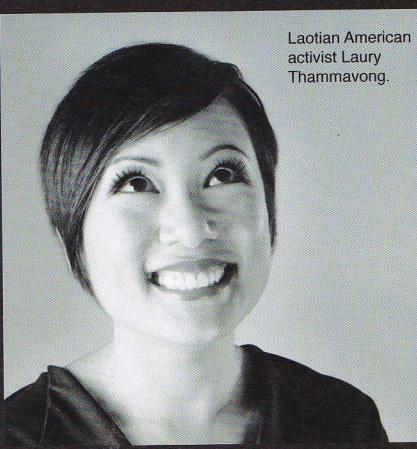
Through the project and by making valuable connections with fellow models and coordinators, these community leaders found that they could stand up to the challenge together while still claiming their individuality. Manish Vaidya, the coordinator for the queer/trans-people of color-centric arts organization Peacock Rebellion, struggled with anorexia for years and wanted to tell his story while allying with others in a similar boat.

"I think things get better when we shift from survival strategies, to combining survival strategies with strategies to thrive, and when we organize and build community together to change the relations of power," says Vaidya. "The fact that every person here is an Asian person who's fierce is taking action to change the story and change the conversation. It's tremendous." — *Karen Datangel*

Makeup artist Sarah Maeann.



Laotian American activist Laury Thammavong.



Jenny Ton, Julia Rhee and Lisa Lee.