

500 Strong: celebrating older women's bodies in menopause and beyond



The images shown here are a selection from the *500 Strong* exhibition by Ponch Hawkes, first exhibited in Victoria, Australia, in 2021. Photographer Ponch Hawkes' career spans over 50 years and her works, which explore feminism, gender, identity, ageing, and human rights, among other themes, are collected internationally. *500 Strong* was part of a larger art exhibition called *Flesh after Fifty: Changing Images of Older Women in Art*, an artistic examination of older women in art through the media of photography, video, sculpture, painting, and prints. *Flesh after Fifty*, which was initiated by gynaecologist Martha Hickey and curated by Jane Scott, explored and challenged negative images of ageing in women and created emotive, affirming, and realistic portrayals of older women. A parallel health programme addressed menopause, body image, particularly for transgender and gender diverse people, women's safety, and mental health; the event was captured in a video essay and podcast.

Powerful and joyful images of naked older women are rarely seen. For

500 Strong, cis and trans women older than 50 years from across Victoria were invited to participate through networks, health and women's groups, social and traditional media, and community organisations. Asking them to pose naked without photoshopping or adornment was a challenge for all involved. All were invited to cover their faces for anonymity, but many wanted to be identifiable. The models are from diverse background ethnicities, sizes, ages (50–93 years), and included people with disabilities. *500 Strong* aimed to celebrate the diversity and reality of older women's bodies and display their strength. What emerged was so much more. Those who took part shared their pride and shame about their bodies and life stories made visible on their flesh. All challenged themselves to let the world see their reality. The success of *500 Strong* exceeded expectations. More than 50 000 people have viewed this work, which will culminate in an exhibition at the Museum of Australian Photography, VIC, Australia, from Nov 22, 2024, to Feb 16, 2025. An

independent evaluation of *500 Strong* by Kim Goodwin showed that the exhibition changed attitudes towards older women by showing powerful and positive images that those who attended had not previously seen.

Representation is empowering and *500 Strong* complements *The Lancet's* menopause Series by showing that menopause does not lead to decay and decline and that many older women love who they are. Such empowerment needs to be part of the health response to menopause. While almost all the participants in *500 Strong* had experienced menopause, this did not define them. It was a part of the journey that brought them to the studio because older women should be celebrated.

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For *500 Strong* see <https://www.fleshafterfifty.com/strong.html>

For *Flesh after Fifty* see <https://www.fleshafterfifty.com/>

For the *Flesh after Fifty* video essay see <https://www.fleshafterfifty.com/event-videos.html>

For the *Flesh after Fifty* podcast see <https://www.fleshafterfifty.com/podcasts.html>

PH is the artist of *500 Strong*.
MH is a lead author of *The Lancet's* Series on the menopause and the principal investigator for the *Flesh after Fifty* project, which included *500 Strong*. JS is the Lead Curator of *Flesh after Fifty* that was funded by Creative Victoria, philanthropy, and private donors.



Photographer Ponch Hawkes stands in front of 33 linear metres of joyful, playful images of older women at the *500 Strong* exhibition



© Ponch Hawkes 2021

"I'm continuing my challenge of growing old disgracefully—not conforming to society's ideal of older women."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



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"I feel it's important for the general public to know that many women of all ages have had mastectomies, and not all women have reconstructions, we are all beautiful."

Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



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"I hate the invisibility of older women that society demands, I'm grateful for my body."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



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"Listen to women. Embracing the changes in my body is about embracing who I am."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



© Ponch Hawkes 2021

"I'm celebrating this age! It is filled with strength and vitality and I wanted to celebrate with others."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



© Ponch Hawkes 2021

"Believe in embracing the body you have, whatever shape and size."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



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"Getting naked is a present to myself and a sign of new beginnings as I embrace menopause and becoming older."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



© Ponch Hawkes 2021

"Let's celebrate bodies that have survived and thrived. We must challenge the 'value' society places on our looks."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.



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"I want to thank my body for caring for me in this lifetime, even though it is old now."
Comments from 500 Strong participant. Photograph by Ponch Hawkes.