

UNDAUNTED BY SPEKTRA

A Thesis

by

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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## ABSTRACT

Allison Mott's MFA thesis exhibition will be a pop-up shop showcasing combat equipment and fashion accessories that serve in the aid of "Magical Girls." Magic has long stood as an element of agency for women in art and literature; an agency that was capitalized upon by Japan during the Miracle Years of the 1960s via the evolving media channels targeted at 11-30 year old females. Takshi Murakami's *Superflat Manifesto* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* serve as the theoretical foundation for this body of work.

Understanding McCloud and Murakami's framework allows the paper to shift its focus to art as a consumable, specifically Murakami's partnership with couture fashion brands, such as Louis Vuitton, setting precedence for the Superflat style in high end ephemera. This aesthetic experience, follows the precedent set in postmodern work by Andy Warhol and Keith Haring's "Pop Shop."

Finally the paper will touch new ground regarding the role of women in art and society, and the effects of empowering the individual in 4<sup>th</sup> wave feminism. This will include an assessment of the sociological events that lead the artist to this body of work, including the positive effects of single sex education on girls, the Riot Girl Movement of the early 90's, the Girl Power movement of the late 90's, and how the balance of intensities for these schools of thought are represented in the work in an effort to battle injustice and fuel greatness.

## DEDICATION

*“I ain't gotta get a plaque, I ain't gotta get awards  
I just walk up out the door all the girls will applaud.  
All the girls will commend as long as they understand  
That I'm fighting for the girls that never thought they could win.  
Cause before they could begin you told them it was the end,  
But I am here to reverse the curse that they live in.  
Got two bones to pick I'm a only choose one,  
You might get addressed on the second album  
Which means you can breathe until I motherfucking say so.  
To all my bad bitches I can see your halo.”*

I'm The Best — Nicki Minaj

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Champagne and hot dogs, babies.

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## Introduction

The most terrifying thing a woman can be is more powerful than a man. With the continued dissolution of Puritanical values in America came small victories for women in the last 323 years. Victories such as the ability to own property in their name by 1839, married women having control over their own earnings by 1877, and marital rape declared illegal as recently as 1993.

From Greek sculptures of powerful goddesses to Dorothy's ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*, magic has long stood as an element of agency for women in art and literature. Slighted in reality, the realm of magic fantasy empowers girls and women to achieve what systematic oppression has denied them: power, autonomy, and opportunity. For the girls and women who have dreamed of making a difference — to only be silenced by opposers or labeled as “bossy” — finding strength, power and validation in a system that does not socially reward their success and rather demonizes them, all that magic demands is that she believes in herself.

To that end, *Undaunted by SPEKTRA*, at its least effective, starts a conversation among women. At its nearest reach, this fashionable line of accessories and combat equipment will make at least one person who feels powerless in a scenario that not only controls their life but the way they react to it, arm themselves; to equip oneself not for success, not for glory, but for freedom. True, personal, honest-to-God freedom. I believe that the meaning of life is to be your most authentic self. It is my intention as an artist and designer to acknowledge the powerful female spirit, and to do so stylishly.

## Women & Magic

### Agency of Women in Magic

Magical power and dominance for girls and women is rarely attributed to raw power, hand combat or weaponry. Often abstract concepts such as friendship, love, compassion, color, light and forgiveness are the most powerful devices of the magical girl arsenal. The *He-Man and the Masters of*

*the Universe* franchise is a telling example of this dichotomy. When Prince Adam transforms into “He-Man, The Most Powerful Man in the Universe,” he does so by raising his magic sword and declaring, “BY THE POWER OF GRAYSKULL!” Once transformed, he yells, “I HAVE THE POWER!” His twin sister, Adora, transforms by hoisting an identical sword, but her declaration is notably more docile. She exclaims, “FOR THE HONOR OF GRAYSKULL!” Once her transformation is complete, she cries, “I AM SHE-RA!” There difference between the roles of these twin siblings is discernable. The inherent military worth of power versus honor is obvious. This paper will examine the inequality of how power is attained between the genders. He is by and she is for. He is granted, and she must be earned. This is a subtle and purposeful difference as these roles, men of power and honorable women, are well-established social norms.

Often celebrated for beauty, congeniality and grace, the female spirit is sold infuriatingly short. Anger, for one, is a powerful emotion that is considered a “dark art” in the magical girl realm but is furiously used by entertainment directed at males of all ages as a justified emotion and even more often as an appropriate magical practice. Socially acceptable female aggression is almost exclusively limited to the protection of their offspring, or family in popular media. For example, at the battle of Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Molly Weasley is her most powerful when her daughter Ginny’s life is endangered before her very eyes, exclaiming “Not my daughter, you bitch!” before she disarms Bellatrix Lestrange. This aggression on Mrs. Weasley’s part is not only accepted but also celebrated in popular culture. This is a phenomenon will be referred to as “frying pan justice.”

Some of the greatest misrepresentations of women in history can be attributed to the long-standing employment of the male gaze as the method by which representational art of women was created. Women have endured their image as art for men, by men, about women, for centuries. Established in antiquity, perpetuated by the Renaissance and approved by misogynistic

psychoanalysts, the conventional ideas of women and femininity have sustained very negative social implications, specifically oppression and trivialization. Slowly but surely, however, the re-imagination of women as benefactors and artists during the Enlightenment, the desire for autonomy acknowledged by suffrage, the Women's liberation movement of the 1960s and the assertive, unapologetic waves of feminism that followed responded not only to the sociopolitical landscape of the world but to the artistic one as well. Women are in the midst of taking back their image, capturing themselves not as they want to be seen by men, but as they want to be seen, and it is happening one teenage girl at a time with every *selfie* she takes.

Historically, women made careers of being Muses by participating in and running salon gatherings, being active in the Republic of Letters, funding artists and writers they enjoyed and serving as tastemakers for the general public regarding arts and literature. Due to centuries of gender affirmation established by art, literature, and law, by the time the soft sciences approached the relationship between sex, gender and psychosexual development, there was an already well-established systematic misogyny in the perception of sexual difference that served to bolster the radical and inexplicably accepted theories of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). His were hardly new ideas; Aristotle asserted similar perceptions of women and their biological inferiority to men by virtue of their natural "place," determined by their role in reproduction, and that "we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity,"<sup>1</sup> incomplete and lacking authority. Freud's theories are essentially the mortar in the brick wall of modern, unconscious patriarchal society. It is interesting how much time, pencil and paint men had spent trying to define women, whether it art, poetry, or even psychoanalysis, but they had yet in human history, allowed woman to define herself.

### **Rise of Kawaii Culture**

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<sup>1</sup> Sabrina Lovibond. "Feminism in Ancient Philosophy: The Feminist Stake in Greek Rationalism." In *Feminism in Philosophy*, edited by Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

In the 1980s, popular manga focused toward the female audience portrayed the feminine ideal as sweet and endearing, but also possessing a strong will and a never-give-up attitude. This coincided with the rise of cute idols, and resulted in young, female consumers desiring to be considered adorable and to own adorable things. This pop culture movement became known as “kawaii.” Kawaii has become synonymous with adjectives such as: suitable, addictive, beautiful, lovable, quirky and gross, funny, ugly but endearing, and cool.<sup>2</sup> The term has been broadened further to include anything that softens the heart or creates the feeling of love.<sup>3</sup>

Accompanied by the rise of popularity in letter-writing, manga, anime, and characters similar to Hello Kitty (Figure 1), product designers have created an entire culture around the concept of kawaii. Aesthetically, kawaii can be identified by the use of pastel colors, compositional roundness, the size of the eyes relative to the overall body, a large head, and a short distance from the nose to forehead.

Artist Shojono Tomo creates her work utilizing kawaii tropes because she considers them to be fun while also being subversive.

I think kawaii became prolific as a culture because Japanese guys like things that are weaker than them - which makes them feel superior – and girls pander to this. American girls have rifles and protect their families, whereas Japanese girls start screaming, “Help me!” when they see a cockroach. They don’t really fight. The samurai spirit of the Japanese man has become a cockroach killer.

Using this kawaii style to create magical accessories and weapons for women, the *Undaunted by SPEKTRA* line hides its feminist agenda in plain sight. The oppressors will never see the revolution coming.

### **Magical Girls and 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Feminism**

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<sup>2</sup> Manami Okazaki & Geoff Johnson. *Kawaii! Japan’s Culture of Cute*. (London, Prestel, 2013), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

There is a reason modern advertisers target teenage girls so aggressively. They are often organized and passionate about what they believe in and support their passions wholeheartedly. The swelling crowd at any New Kids on the Block concert in 1990 was a very clear indication that there is nothing “passive” about their demographic. When thirty-five-year-old Anita Hill (b.1956) accused U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment in 1991 she was mocked and slandered by mainstream media. Merely a year after Newsweek proclaimed the death of feminism<sup>18</sup>, young women in the Washington D.C. area who were closely associated with the underground punk-rock scene identified and were angry about the prevalent misrepresentation of women in mass media and desired an outlet for their frustration with feminist issues and politics. Unlike their second wave predecessors who opted for demonstrations and protests, Riot Grrrls employed the distribution of homemade zines, websites and crudely produced propaganda posters.

The “art of Riot Grrrls often focused upon recycled and re-contextualized imagery taken directly from mass culture – often from commercial sources marketed toward young girls – resulting in a visual culture in which Guerrilla Girls posters, girl-band flyers, MTV hip-hop divas and Calvin Klein ads lived in peaceful coexistence.” They were pro-girl not anti-boy and they were fiercely supportive of their message, their work and each other. The message spread through the punk-rock underground and riot grrl chapters were being founded around the country and in England.

Tragically, the Riot Grrrl movement was short lived as it fell victim to the same mass media machine it rallied against. Due to misrepresentation in the news and the assemblage of manufactured girl groups such as the Spice Girls (Figure 2), the dilution of the Riot Grrrl message to a simplified “feel-good feminism, with all the struggle and critique removed,” created the kinder, more approachable but less effective “girl power” movement the late 1990s. However manufactured, “girl power” was not a total loss because it kept feminism on the radar, and through the late 1990s and early 2000s it would serve as the prevailing theme of songs from wildly successful female pop stars.

This accessible version of feminism celebrated the individual identities of the group members and allowed the girls who idolized them to project themselves on to an archetype: The Sporty one, the smart one, the pretty one, the bad one and the innocent one. These same archetypes are echoed again and again in magical girl anime and manga like Sailor Moon, Pretty Cure, Shugo Chara! (Figure 3), and Tokyo Mew Mew.

In the swell of third wave feminism, the once cohesive structure is spreading out and picking up additional material along the way. An entire global generation over 80 million strong, millennials were raised on the Internet and communicate constantly through electronic media.<sup>22</sup> With this unprecedented access and exposure to many subcultures, “millennials are more accepting of differences.”<sup>23</sup> Within the millennial culture exists the 2014 Riot Grrl feminist expression and Beyoncé’s 2014 MTV Video Music Awards feminist declaration. This acceptance from peers and comfort in personal beliefs would naturally develop self-confidence in this generation.

As the changing social and political climate of 2017 suggests, the female body is a battleground. Rape culture continues to be normalized among politicians, and the population has watched repeatedly as the future of young men who want “twenty minutes of action”<sup>4</sup> are repeatedly valued higher than justice for their female assault victims. Emma Sulkowicz (b. 1992) was a visual arts student at Columbia University. In 2012, a male student allegedly raped her in her dorm room. In protest of the university’s handling of the case, Sulkowicz carried a dorm mattress on campus throughout her senior thesis (Figure 4). Her alleged rapist accuses her of bullying him with this endurance performance piece. In response, her university blatantly attempted to censor her art and her trauma. Opting to protect their donors, their image, and the male student’s reputation, the university issued an email prior to Sulkowicz’ graduation stating:

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Judge Aaron Persky from Dan Turner, father of Brock Turner, rapist.

Graduates should not bring into the ceremonial area large objects which could interfere with the proceedings or create discomfort to others in close, crowded spaces shared by thousands of people.... On ideas in public issues with the legitimate interest in ensuring the graduation ceremonies proceed in a way that fulfills their intended purpose, mindful of the security and comfort of all participants.<sup>5</sup>

This comes off as laughable request when you consider that the university has required Sulkowicz to forfeit her security and comfort every day that her attacker remained on campus. This treatment is commonplace. In contemporary America, women are second-class citizens.

### **Exhibition**

The democratizing role of retail in the case of SPEKTRA serves the same purpose as Keith Haring's Pop Shop. As long as there are monetarily based class distinctions there will be individuals who perpetuate the difference between high art and low art. This is one of many preservation tactics that the elite use to systematically promote the work and messages that are important to *them*. This allows the elite to dictate what sells in the Blue Chip gallery art world. When you take that control away from the elite and bring the art to the public something genuinely magical happens: the viewers become customers, even without buying anything. The very notion that these items and concepts have universal availability to anyone who possesses the innate magic required to see them for what they are, gives the general public the opportunity to be in on the joke, the high art secret.<sup>6</sup>

In a gallery, this collection of merchandise would be subject to a very different kind of scrutiny. The viewer would be conscious that these items were made with the intention to be displayed as artwork. By virtue of being an art piece, theory, meaning, and contemporary art historiographical context are imposed on the work. A white pedestal with a tag can elevate a crushed water bottle and crumpled napkins to the realm of art. The retail environment, however, turns the

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<sup>5</sup> Teo Armus, *Sulkowicz may not be allowed to bring mattress to CC Class Day*, **Columbia Spectator**, May 9, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> CRAFT + MONEY = ART, Louis Katz 2016

piece into a consumable. The viewer perceives the piece in terms of how it can be beneficial to them. The viewer becomes the customer, and the customer wants to be treated well. The retail environment is also more suited to high-end items, as fashion forward, luxury customers prefer a face-to-face interaction.<sup>7</sup>

## **PopShop**

Keith Haring established his PopShop in 1985 featuring authentic apparel, prints, accessories, and toys in an actual factory store. The goal of the PopShop was not to generate revenue; it was about accessibility to the imagery and the spread of creative energy.<sup>8</sup> While some critics accused Haring of “selling-out” what he really did was make the absurdly inflated art market, the brokers and the critics obsolete by approaching his audience directly. He dissolved the barriers between education, wealth and art appreciation. On Warhol, Haring writes:

“I honestly think he was the most important artist since Picasso, whether people like it or not, and a lot of them don’t. The museum and auction worlds didn’t know how to deal with him. The ‘value’ of his work was not equivalent to the ‘market value’ of his works. Conceptually, he was certainly much more important than Johns or Lichtenstein, but his prices never equaled theirs because he didn’t play ‘the game’ by the rules.”<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to the precedents set by Andy Warhol, Haring understood the rules and could navigate the debate of high art versus low art. He could maintain both his gallery work and his retail work.

## **SPEKTRA Brand Identity**

The overarching brand, SPEKTRA, originates in a dimension where feminism already exists so it truly knows the nature of girls and women because the original demographic did not exist in a male dominated society. The brand was born in a dimension where the unlimited potential of the

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<sup>7</sup> Luxury Institute, 2011

<sup>8</sup> *Drawing the Line: A Portrait of Keith Haring*, DVD, (2004 New York: Kultur Video, 2004.), Interview footage

<sup>9</sup> *Keith Haring Journals*, 155



human spirit is acknowledged for both sexes. The name SPEKTRA is derived from the diamond planet, through which all light in the universe passes.<sup>10</sup>

The color palate of the SPEKTRA logo (Figure 5) is inspired by the inclusiveness of the 2016 Pantone colors, Rose Quartz and Serenity.

In many parts of the world we are experiencing a gender blur as it relates to fashion, which has in turn impacted color trends throughout other areas of design. This more unilateral approach to color is coinciding with societal movements towards gender equality and fluidity, the consumers increased comfort with using color as a form of expression, a generation that has less concern about being typecast or judged and an open exchange of digital information that has opened our eyes to different approaches to color usage.<sup>11</sup>

Through color, the brand implies that it is for anyone who identifies as female or identifies with female empowerment. It acknowledges the spectrum of gender and welcomes anyone who believes in the validity and equality of all people. Additionally, a rainbow of pastels, giving a soft look to even the strongest radical sentiment, supports this color scheme.

The type family Volkswagen Serial was chosen for its roundness and readability, coinciding beautifully with kawaii aesthetics. The “A” in the logo is adapted from the logo for *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (Figure 6) as a nod to those familiar with the magical girl genre. It also has an inherent “bubble letter” style, the popularity of which any sixth grade classroom can attest to. The typeface comes in a variety of weights, but the two most frequently used for SPEKTRA’s branding are the extra heavy black and light versions. For web, Volkswagen was substituted with Valeria Round as it was available through Google Type and presented best through Squarespace. Allura was chosen as a complimentary sub header for its legible, but decidedly feminine handwriting characteristics. This inclusion is also of sentimental importance, as Princess Allura of Alteia from *Voltron: Defender of the Universe* is my favorite princess.

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<sup>10</sup> As seen in *Rainbow Brite and the Star-Stealer*, Warner Bros, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Pantone Color of the Year, 2016. Pantone website.

The point of purchase signage (Figure 7) uses ethereal, galactic backgrounds, bold text in soft colors conveying serious messages in sweet ways. By asserting brand statements such as, “It is the duty of those who can to do for those who cannot,” and “if the future rests in your hands, grab a magic wand,” the signage serves as a call to action disguised as something much more adorable. This is in keeping with kawaii aesthetics and tropes in the magical girl genre. Her call to adventure always comes in the form of a cute animal, a gorgeous handwritten letter, or a beautiful new accessory.

The website for SPEKTRA (Figure 8) will be the audience’s first introduction to the brand satisfying the modern consumer need to review a collection in its entirety. The website legitimizes the brand to a younger demographic accustomed to digital commerce fulfillment.

### **Undaunted by SPEKTRA**

Contemporary society allows for individual paths to feminism. The *Undaunted* collection embraces this individuality. Therefore, its initial launch asserts three archetypes in an effort to be more inclusive and allow for individual expression. I attended Louise S. McGehee School in New Orleans, Louisiana from pre-Kindergarten through senior year. The driving motivation of this small<sup>12</sup>, private, all-girls school, in a converted plantation home<sup>13</sup> in the heart of the historic Garden District is described succinctly in the school motto: “noblesse oblige.” McGehee imparted upon us that by virtue of the education and opportunity we received, it is our moral and noble obligation as those who can to wholeheartedly assist those who cannot.

In the spring of 2015, I had a studio visit with artist JooYoung Choi (b. 1982). While speaking with her about these motivations and living life by this standard of noble obligation, Choi’s eyes softened and she said, “that sounds like a lot of responsibility for one girl.” I agreed, and so

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<sup>12</sup>In 2003, my graduating class of 31 was the largest class in school history. Since Hurricane Katrina, enrollment has nearly doubled and so has the school’s footprint, acquiring three historic mansions in the same city block as the school. In 2012, the school celebrated its centennial.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it was learning about the horrors of slavery on a property where evidence of the injustice still lingered that made us more sympathetic. In every uncarpeted classroom (which were originally bedrooms) in the Bradish Johnson House there is a buzzer on the floor next to the fireplace. The basement of this same building was our locker room. If someone in the classroom was playing with the fireplace button we could hear the buzzing in walls of the locker room. The basement had been the living quarters for the main house help.

Nobless and Oblige were split, each one half of the same coin manifesting in dramatically different visuals.

The Nobless collection (Figure 9) is overwhelmingly sweet. Killing with kindness and relentless positivity, Nobless fits comfortably into the “seemingly shallow airhead, but serious when she needs to be”<sup>14</sup> role, often seen among main characters in the magical girl genre. Lightening bolts, claws and unicorn horn spikes are softened by a candy coated pastel color palette and deliciously assembled cream embellishments. Nobless is so over-the-top adorable and visually disarming that while observing The Claw, viewers often remarked that “[they] forgot the blades were even there.” Her complementary mascot is a jackalope with a terrible attitude named Parfait (Figure 10). Like the Nobless collection, his appearance is deceiving as he is a cherubic bunny with rainbow crystal antlers and is the most aggressive out of all the familiars.

If Nobless is the sugar, then Oblige is the spice. Dark, sophisticated and seething, Oblige (Figure 11) adopts a regal peacock color palette, and more natural, crystalline sparkle than her sisters. Literally dripping with crystals Oblige juxtaposes what look like slow growth and deterioration with immediate results. Obligation is the follow-through; Nobless is the judge, Verum is the jury, Oblige is the executioner. Her collection cuts to the heart of an issue quickly, but not always comfortably. Of all magical girls, the ones who identify with Oblige have some of the most empathetic hearts in the universe<sup>15</sup>. Her mascot is a dark purple cat with a peacock feather tail and Buddha-like composure. Chiffon (Figure 12) is the epitome of grace under pressure and often anticipates events before they occur thanks to his foresight. However, Chiffon can be petty at times and act spitefully.

The Verum collection (Figure 13) uses aquatic themes to imply a connection with nature. The materials are indicative of deep sea life, but the saturated color palette and the confounding

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<sup>14</sup> Usagi Tsukino from Sailor Moon; Momoko Kanda from Wonder Momo; Ichigo Momomiya from Tokyo Mew Mew

<sup>15</sup> Rei Hino from Sailor Moon; Asuka Langley Soryu from the Evangelion series; Ryouko Ookami from Okami-san and Her Seven Companions

growth patterns allow the viewer to believe that these “natural” elements likely originate from someplace besides Earth. Repeated elements of bubbles, corals, and tentacle-like sprawls unify the Verum collection. Latin for “truth,” the focus of Verum’s power is honesty and healing. Verum’s mascot<sup>16</sup> is a squishy octopus with bumblebee wings that flutter faster than the human eye can perceive. Her name is Éclair (Figure 14) and she utilizes her Bubble Charm in battle to protect and heal both magical girls and innocent bystanders. Verum is for the quiet but passionate.

### **Conclusion**

Witches, harpies, old maids, and suffragettes all endured smear campaigns just as feminists still do in 2017. Those who seek to maintain the status quo will continue to undermine the suffering of the other. The purpose of SPEKTRA’s Undaunted collection is to equip and embolden those who subscribe to a better future. To be born great, to have greatness thrust upon you, or to rise to the occasion are brutal assignments and therefore, few take up the mantle. This is not because we lack qualified, passionate, innately good people in this world, but because political and societal oppression of the disenfranchised requires remarkable circumstances for success. The Undaunted collection is intended to lend its strength to the disenfranchised; bolstering their confidence and endurance for the battles that lie ahead. The delicious, luxurious and hyper-feminine qualities of the brand subvert the notion that feminists are all man-hating masculine women who are impossible to love. Disguised by kawaii aesthetics, a very aggressive feminist message was presented to the people of Corpus Christi and was not subject to baseless Meninist critique. I’m very interested in pushing this relationship further to find the event horizon between acceptably kawaii and unapologetically feminist.

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<sup>16</sup> “...these manga monsters are humorous characters who, nonetheless, are prepared to fight to the death to protect their friends.” Hart, p101

## FIGURES



Figure 1



Figure 2





Figure 3



Figure 4





small, round and cute

Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8





Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12





Figure 13



Figure 14

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