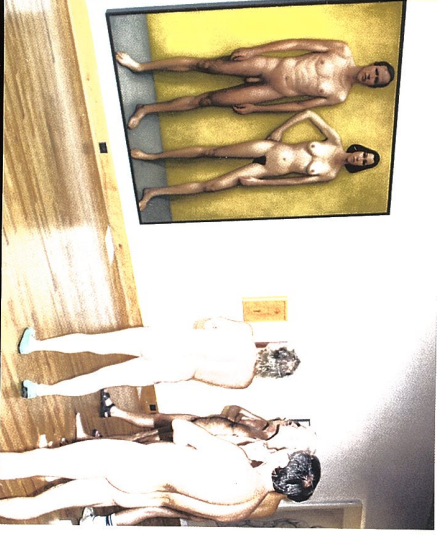
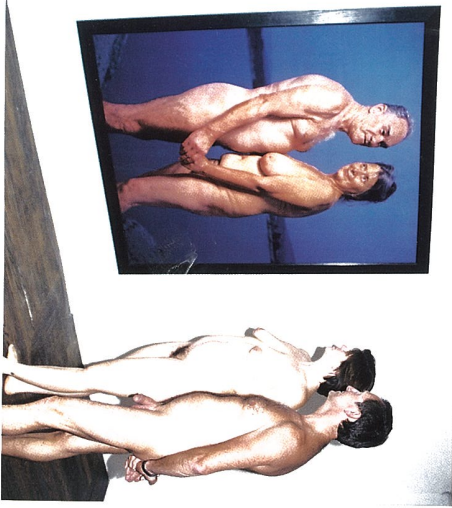
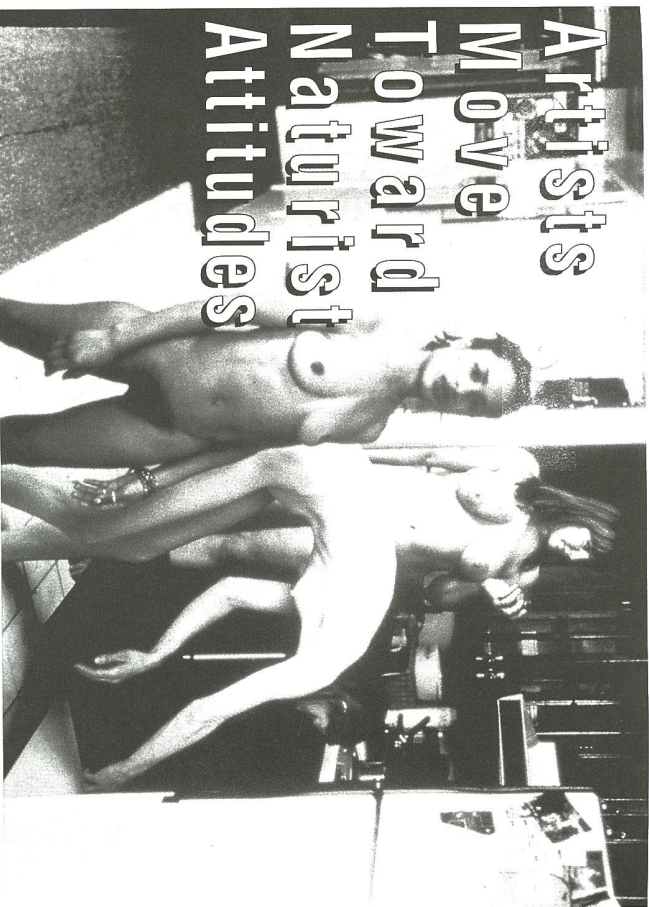


THE NUDE IN CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE ALDRICH



Artists Move Toward Naturist Attitudes



—Courtesy Aldrich Museum

TINA BARNEY, *Nude #1045*, 1986.

The Nude In Contemporary Art

The Aldrich Museum,
Ridgefield, CT
June 6 - Sept. 12, 1999

Mark Storey

THE 1990s HAVE BEEN AN EXCITING and nerve-wracking decade for Naturists. Amidst the attacks on traditionally clothing-optional beaches, rays of encouraging light steadily brighten our Naturist future. Magazine and television ads demonstrate a slow but growing acceptance of non-sexual public nudity. *N* magazine's "The N Word" has charted this progression toward body acceptance.

There appears to be increasing readiness in the arts to address nudity in

terms beyond mere figure study, erotica, or social politics. Clearly illustrating this shift in attitude was a summer-long exhibition at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

On view from June 6 through September 12, 1999, *The Nude in Contemporary Art* featured nudes from emerging and established artists. Most works were produced in the 1990s, and provide diverse interpretations of the human body. Fortunately, the purpose of the exhibition, curated by Harry Philbrick, Richard Klein, and Jessica Hough, went well beyond a simple overview.

N spoke with various museum staffers to discover their perceptions. A consistent, unprompted description was that the exhibition acknowledges that nu-

dy can be a normal part of everyday life. Instead of idealizing or eroticizing the human form, these works present people as ordinary humans.

Curator Philbrick wrote, "The exhibition confronts, from many points of view, aging, disease, birth, cultural norms, and the celebration of beauty." A cross-section of people—fat, slim, happy,

NOTES TO THE COLOR PAGE

NUDE PEOPLE AND NUDE ART inside at the Aldrich Museum. Left column, top: Sculpture by James Croak, *Man and Woman*, 1988. Middle: Painting by Andres Serrano, *Budapest (The Lake)*, 1984. Bottom: William Beckman, *Yellow Painting (Man and Woman)*, 1991-96. (Photos by Mark Orpen.)

Right column: Paul Cadmus, *Shame!* 1991 (cf. *Study for Shame!* elsewhere in this article). Provided to *N* by DC Moore Gallery, New York.

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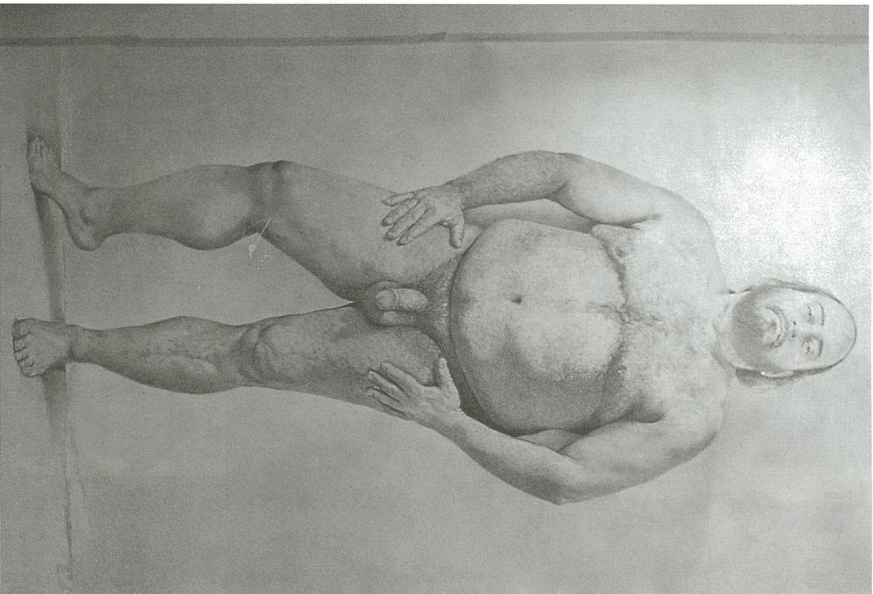
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SHERRY CAMHY, *Richard, The Golem*, 1999.

bored, old, young, white, black, male, female—are given space to say, "Look at me; I'm like you, and I can be confident with my body, here and now. Is there really any reason for you to feel uncomfortable about it?"

One museum guard noted that visitors had responded well to the show and regularly expressed appreciation that the human body was represented as normal and not just an art object. Another guard felt the exhibition showed people that

they can be nude anywhere, and that they can regard the naked human body—even their own—as perfectly acceptable in a variety of situations.

The catalog published to accompany *The Nude in Contemporary Art* has a distinctly Naturist tone. Philbrick describes a monochromatic pencil sketch of a heavy-set, bearded man standing with hands on hips starting down at the viewer. "Look at Sherry Camhy's life-sized drawing," Richard, *The Golem*, Philbrick writes,

—Courtesy Aldrich Museum

"There is nothing particularly erotic or politically charged about the piece: it is the straightforward nature of [Camhy's] depictions which give her work its strength. The model's confident, almost jaunty, pose indicates *he* is feeling no discomfort about his nudity, and nor, perhaps, should we" (p. 27).

Philbrick stresses the normalcy of our bodies, and thus of human nudity. "Our bodies famously reveal our animal selves, and we tend to think of this aspect of our nature in sexual terms," he writes. "Yet our animal self is also manifested in the absolute ordinariness of our bodies, of their functional nature, and of the inevitable fall of time on our physical selves" (pp. 27-28).

Art historian David McCarthy provides the main article for the exhibition catalog (the catalog has the same title as the exhibition itself). He begins with an overview of Western art's depiction of the nude, briefly explaining its various functions in different periods of art history. He pays special attention to the struggle of modern artists like Courbet and Manet to understand the nude in non-mythological and non-idealized terms.

McCarthy's discussion of recent nudes emphasizes the multiple approaches artists have taken in their use of the human body. Artists have shown us, McCarthy says, that "the nude can carry almost any meaning and content that artists decide to ascribe to it" (p. 43).

McCarthy seems to speak for the ideals of a Naturist aesthetic. Addressing the engaging representation of the ordinariness—even the banality—of nudity, McCarthy likens the artists in the exhibition to activists seeking what Naturists might deem a revolution of body acceptance.

"Uniting feminists and realists alike, with the two camps often overlapping, was a keen awareness of how the human body was shaped through mass media. Both groups were opposed to the staged eroticism and fanciful idealism of pornography. For feminists the pornography was too often a means of objectifying and subordinating women, forcing their sexualities to coincide with those of straight men. For realists, the art-dressed bodies of Playmate's had little to do with the rich variety of actual human bodies.

"Advertising too perpetuates imposingly ideal stereotypes, particularly in its presentation of women. The long, slender bodies of many models, whether 30 years ago or today, fit a set of propor-



JOHN CURRIN, *Three Friends*, 1998.

tions that few actual women can claim naturally. When the nude in contemporary art rejects such ideals, we can see it as a form of resistance and a confirmation of individual variety" (p. 85).

Whitney Rejects Finley & Nudes; Aldrich Provides Alternate Venue

The famous Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan originally had planned to present *The Nude in Contemporary Art* under the title "The Great American Nude." It was to have included an installation by performance artist Karen Finley, consisting of an ongoing life-drawing class where the public could sketch the nude models and tack their finished work on the walls for others to view.

But the Whitney canceled the exhibition, ostensibly to "cut costs so it could

—Courtesy Aldrich Museum

devote more resources to its forthcoming Project of America" (Mel Gussow, "Bumped From the Whitney, Nudity Finds a Showcase," *New York Times*, August 13, 1998, B1). Many suspected the museum really dropped the show because the U.S. Supreme Court had just a week earlier ruled against Finley and three other performance artists in a long-running court case, *Finley et al. v. National Endowment for the Arts*, which allowed Congress to require the NEA to take into account the "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public."

Harry Philbrick heard of the Whitney's decision and made arrangements to hold the exhibition at the Aldrich. Finley's installation included. Initial response from Ridgefield residents and press was mixed, due, Philbrick says, to an all-too-common uneasiness about the nudity.

"When the human body is the subject

Highlights Of The Exhibition

Space in a review such as this does not allow for even brief discussion of all the art works exhibited that would be of interest to Naturists. Selection must largely be arbitrary.

The normalcy of nudity in everyday life was ably depicted by Steven Digiovanni's painting *Cain Toss*. Here we see a naked man flipping a coin. He stands before a television in his living room, his bored-looking, clothed wife behind him slouched across her easy chair, as if the pair were trying to decide what show to watch. The painting depicts household nudity as a normal, mundane, part of daily life.

Tina Barney's color photographs of nude men and women engaged in eating or casual conversation in a Manhattan apartment also underscore the normalcy of casual nudity in domestic settings. Some subjects ignore the viewer; others seem to confront us, seem to ask, "What are you staring at? Haven't you ever seen people walk through an apartment before?" As viewers, we wonder whether we need to alert them to their nakedness, or whether we should rethink our own fixation on it.

Other artists spoof the common over-emphasis on erotically charged body parts and norms of beauty. Joe Cavalario's *Small Nude Man* and *Small Nude Woman*, each a gouache on paper, play the title of the works off certain enlarged and exaggerated organs. The woman's breasts and man's penis are impossibly huge. The illustrations are humorous, even cute, and the viewer may well be struck by the thought that it's rather silly to focus that much attention on just those parts of the body. Cavalario, having made his point, would smile.

In the painting *Three Friends*, John Currin mimics Lucas Cranach's 16th century notion of female beauty. The women's necks are ridiculously elongated, their stomachs are bulbous and protruding, and the fingers arch in anatomical anarchy. The exaggeration away from physical normalcy indirectly challenges the viewer to acknowledge the *artificial* normalcy of most human bodies.

Most N readers would immediately recognize scenes from Spencer Tunick's eight-minute video *Demogorgon*. Excerpted from the *Reaction Zone Series*, *Demogorgon* consists of video footage of people taking their clothes off and placing themselves in position for still photographs for Tunick's *Naked Stills Your* (see N 18, 1, pp. 88-92). Dozens of clothes-

free men and women race freely through the streets of New York and elsewhere to form a fluid mass of flesh juxtaposed against the impersonal concrete of urban America. Many Naturists participated in this project, and clearly enjoyed the opportunity both to sport naked in public and to be part of a creative art piece.

One work that arguably most represents Naturist concerns was, ironically, placed in a small, out-of-the-way alcove seen only as you wind your way up a staircase. The pencil, ink, and crayon drawing by Paul Cadmus, *Study for Shame!*, depicts three nudes—a man, woman, and young son—embracing as an angry, drunken mob below shouts at them, shakes their fists, and sets them ablaze in an *auto-de-fé*.

The naked family, meanwhile, appears healthy and comfortable with nudity. The man and woman smile confidently, though the boy seems somewhat afraid; perhaps he's alarmed at the unjust treatment he and his parents are receiving, or perhaps his expression reflects a youthful inexperience with irrationality and hate.

The crowd is obviously irate, but it is not clear if the anger is directed at the nudity itself, or at the family's refusal to feel shame at being naked together.

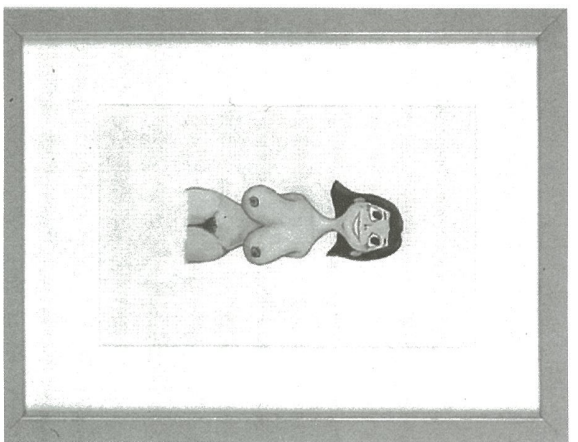


—Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, NY
PAUL CADMUS, *Study for Shame!* 1991-92 (*Shame!* is reproduced on the color page, facing the start of this article).



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JOE CAVALLARO, *Small Nude Woman* and *Small Nude Man*, 1994.

One indignant woman shields her daughter's eyes from the family's nudity as she spurs the crowd on to fuel the fire. On her back is a heart and the word *ME* (as in, "Love Me"). This woman is completely absorbed in her own desires and values, and wants the shame-free family to accommodate her every neurotic whim.

Meanwhile a man waves a beer bottle in drunkenness. His is not a considered or rational response. His opposition to nudity is purely emotional and baseless.

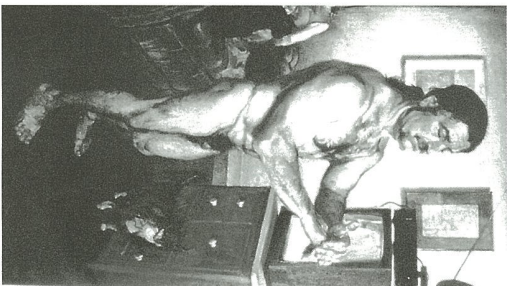
One sticky green figure with a skull-like head, a priest, breaths fire and smoke, and appears to be leading the obscene cacophony of intolerance. Though he is purportedly there to save the souls of the family, he seethes with vile loathing for the freedom he has never enjoyed.

The piece shown at the Aldrich is a rough but powerful sketch used to prepare for a painting Cadmus produced later (see the color page facing this article). The themes of body acceptance, calm recognition of differences, and comfort with nudity contrast poignantly with those of anger, intolerance, and hatred of body-freedom. The piece would strike

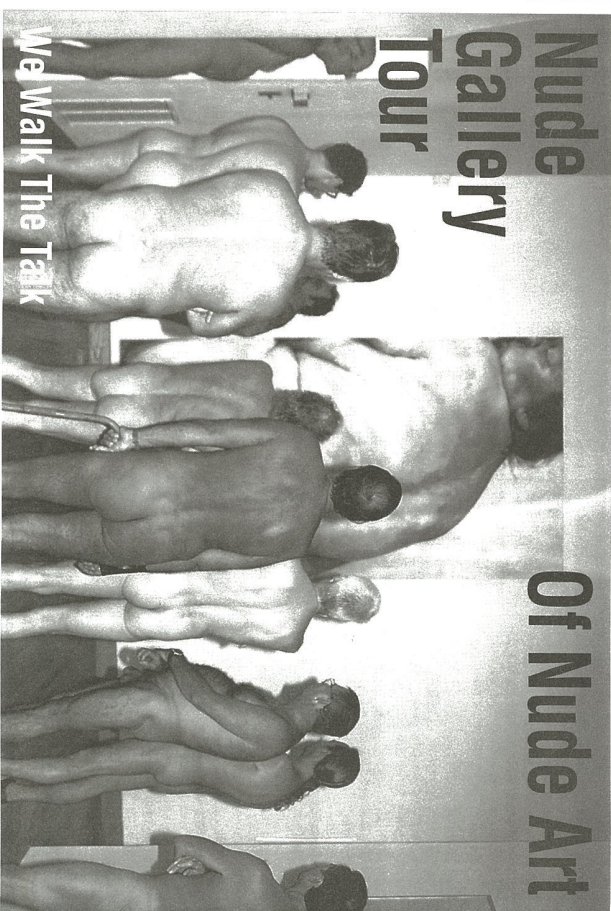
multiple chords with any Naturist viewer.

Harry Philbrick, in an interview with N, said that Cadmus is in his 90s and regularly receives the magazine published by the American Association for Retired Persons. In one issue, the magazine featured a reproduction of a Renaissance nude art work. In the following issue, Cadmus was astounded to find letters to the editor complaining about the "pornography" in the previous issue. Some AARP members were so distraught at seeing a nude art work that they canceled their memberships. *Study for Shame!* and the painting that followed are Cadmus's response to this extreme body-phobia.

The Aldrich Museum served its community well in presenting this purposefully body-friendly exhibition of nudes. The Aldrich is located at 258 Main St., Ridgefield, CT 06877, and can be reached at (203) 438-4519 or via their Web site at www.aldrichart.org. The exhibition will have concluded by the time this N goes to press, but a copy of the illustrated, 119-page exhibition catalog can be purchased through the museum for \$19.95 plus \$3 shipping.



—Courtesy Aldrich Museum
STEVEN DIGIOVANNI, *Cain Toss*, 1998.



NAKED NATURISTS EXAMINE NAKED ART. The Aldrich Museum of Ridgefield, Conn., opened its doors to a group of East Coast art enthusiasts and Naturists, who came to see the museum's *Nude In Contemporary Art* exhibit and ponder their relationship to the nudes on view. The Naturist Society and Tri-State Metro Naturists arranged the museum tour. Solair and Sun Ridge Naturists clubs were enthusiastic supporters. Attendees came from New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut.

NUDE SCULPTURE AND ART have been displayed since ancient Greek times in civic centers where civilizations define their values. Yet somehow, when male heroism, maternal nurturing, and other expressions of our collective human experience are translated from these works of art into our shared community values, the nudity itself has always seemed to fall by the wayside.

When The Naturist Society heard that the Aldrich Museum was going to provide for the New York area a summary of the nude in art at the end of the millennium, we decided that this time we would walk along on that gallery talk—naked.

From the start of TNS, Hugh Kilmer established an Artists' and Models' special

interest group, with the idea that artists should be enjoying the nude opportunity and ideal as fully as the artists' models. Hugh Kilmer embodied this basic and powerful concept in numerous writings and drawings, for example in *CWS 1.3* (pp. 19-21); *CWS 7.2* (pp. 96, 104-109); *N 9.4* (p. 23, 35); *N 10.1* (pp. 40-41, 104); *N 14.4* (pp. 93-95).

The Aldrich show, however, offered the first occasion known to us where a public museum was relatively eager to perpetuate the concept of artist, model and viewer equality of dress.

N photographer Mark Orpen was among the Naturists who participated. He provided the following photos and comments about the event.

ALDRICH MUSEUM representatives said *The Nude In Contemporary Art* was one of the most successful exhibits ever presented at their small space in Ridgefield, Connecticut. On Saturday, September 11, 1999, a small group of about 17 Naturists had a rare opportunity to view that exhibit of nude sculptures, photographs, sketches and paintings all the while as nude as the subjects of the artworks we were there to see.

Tri-State Metro Naturists, at the urging of The Naturist Society, had arranged for this special guided nude tour. The tour was led by an art model, John Anderson, who had himself posed nude for one of the works on display.

I was to have the special task of photographing this event for N. As I arrived at the museum I wondered, Despite their apparent willingness to allow us nude access, would the Aldrich staff really be that accepting of our nudity?

I pulled into the parking lot and observed that the museum was located next to a church, and that the center portion of the museum was all glass, three stories of glass. I learned that the exhibit was on the second and third floors, and wondered how people would ever up while using the stairs in this glass enclosed section.

I entered and asked the staff in what areas of the museum nudity would be permitted. To my surprise, they responded that we would be permitted to be nude anywhere, even in the glass-enclosed portion. They had decided in their staff meeting that nudity would not be restricted inside the museum. And that's how it was for our group.

During normal gallery hours, in addition to the works on display a space had been set aside where people could have the opportunity to actually sketch a nude model. Unfortunately, we wouldn't have that experience.

I am a 3-D photography enthusiast, and I would have to say the holographic images were my favorites, nevertheless I was very impressed with all the works on display.

Being able to examine the artists' viewpoints about nudity while in the nude ourselves brought a greater depth of understanding to the experience. Thanks to the Aldrich Museum for this excellent opportunity."

