

a

TimeOut
New York

July 8-15, 1999

ART

Reviews

Body politics

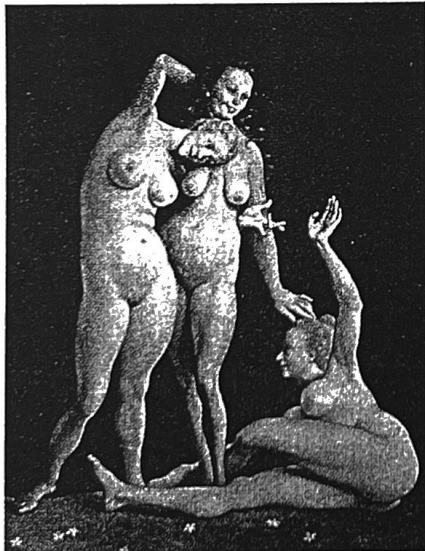
The Aldrich takes it all off to explore the continuing controversy around the nude

By Bill Arning

Life-drawing classes have always been weird. They are the reason a lot of folks either get involved with art or run away from it. Think about it: A person gets naked while a dozen other fully dressed people stare at that person and rub charcoal on paper. Meanwhile, another person (also clothed) walks around, talking about light and contour and other things meant to make you forget that you're staring at a stranger's pubic hair.

days to avoid controversy, canceled the show. However, the Aldrich, which is pushing to become the essential day-trip museum, saw an opportunity. It picked up *Go Figure* and built this show around it. It was a smart move, since Finley's piece (for which she conducted only the first class; the remainder are being taught by other instructors) reveals the central contradiction of the nude today.

Figurative art—of which the nude is but a subgenre—is something of a paradox: a conservative practice that still has the power to upset conservatives, especially if the depiction of genitals is involved. Cutting-edge art schools don't even bother with life-drawing classes anymore, since these days, learning to draw is considered secondary to learning theory. Still, watching a thin but handsome man take off his robe and pose, as I did on my visit, can be disconcerting. No doubt, some of the locals will become upset, even if most of what's on view is calculatedly unsexy.

John Currin, *Three Friends*, 1998.

It was, in fact, a work of art about life-drawing class that inspired the Aldrich Museum's current offering, "The Nude in Contemporary Art." Artist-provocateur and author Karen Finley, whose knack for exposing hypocrisy always gets her into trouble, was originally scheduled to present her installation-cum-performance *Go Figure* at the Whitney Museum. Its premise was simple: Finley would hold a life-drawing class at the museum, and all would be welcome to come, whether to draw or to ogle. Unsurprisingly, the Whitney, which is doing everything these

The real purpose of the show is to question whether the nude at century's end is avant- or derriergarde. Curator Harry Philbrick has hung hip painters John Currin, Jenny Saville and Lisa Yuskavage next to such conventional realists as Brett Bigbee and Michael Leonard, who show at 57th Street's Forum gallery. Currin, Saville and Yuskavage, who make paintings that are fleshy and seductive but also quirky and psychologically imbricated, are indeed the more interesting artists here, but exactly how they differ from their more traditional fellow travelers is worth exploring.

Jenny Saville is a British painter who creates huge paintings of corpulent women. She's been widely hyped, partly because London collector Charles Saatchi buys nearly every one of her paintings before they're dry. Consequently, little of her work has been seen in New York, except in reproduction. The nine-foot-high expanse of lumpen flesh here—in which everything but the model's clenched fist and troglodyte face is turned away from the viewer—is as startling as it is grotesque, even if it is a bit plodding compared with the work of Saville's obvious spiritual ancestor, Lucien Freud (who, unfortunately, is represented in this show only by prints).

Currin, as usual, knocks out every other painter here with his technical derring-do in the marvelous *Three Friends*. A trio of naked women interlock in stylized flirtations, and Currin's unabashed voyeuristic enjoyment of this scene gives it a libidinal kick. Similarly, Peter Krashes's virtuostic David Park-like male nudes—pictured as if through the ghostly haze of a gay bathhouse—generate considerable heat.

Of the traditionalists' work, only Sherry Camhy's *Richard the Golem*, a near-life-size pencil drawing of a chunky, hairy guy, was truly memorable. Others, like Michael Leonard's hunky *Male and Female Bathers*, just don't stick in the mind. Better are the nasty cartoon images by Joe Cavallaro and the tribute to women's body hair by Dutch artist Kinke Kooi.

Spencer Tunick's flesh-filled video *Dermafluxus* typifies the exhibition's strengths and weaknesses. He's been in the news recently for getting arrested while trying to stage and photograph another of his signature nude-ins in New York. His activities have always struck me as anachronistic, like Woodstock-era lovefests. But then Giuliani decides to enforce some silly, archaic laws, and—boom!—Tunick's work suddenly becomes avant-garde.

This incident nicely demonstrates why the nude will always be as edgy as it is mainstream: It will always have the power to turn some people on and piss others off. And the Aldrich show is a good accounting of how it's doing in 1999.

"The Nude in Contemporary Art" is on view at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, through September 12 (see Museums).