

a

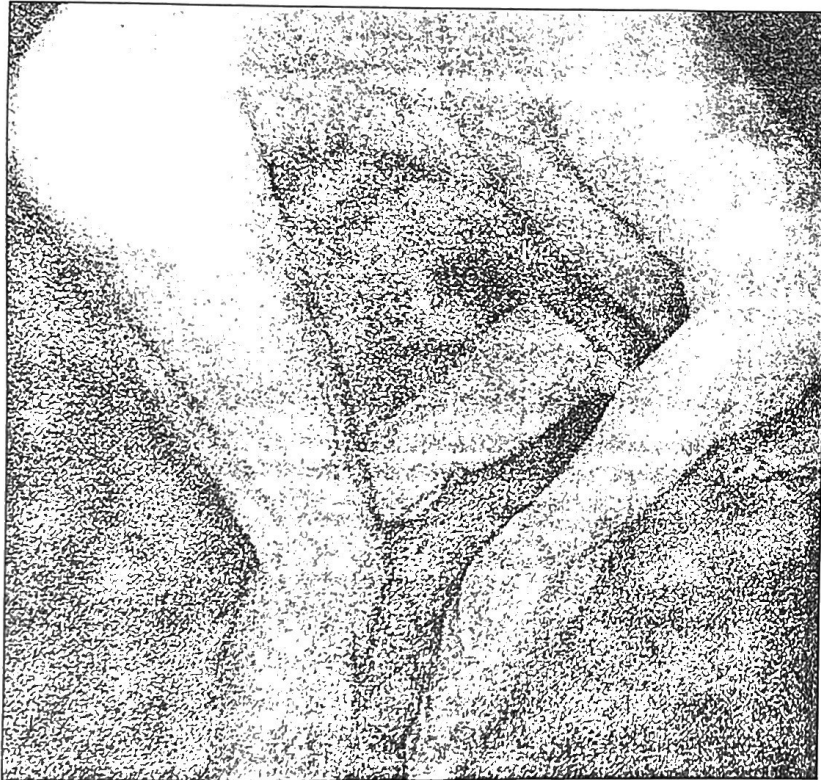
THE FAIRFIELD COUNTY TIMES

MONTHLY

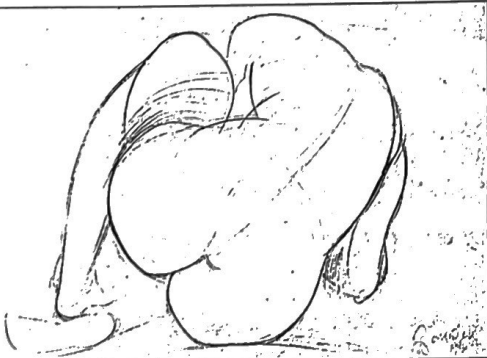
UNCENSORED

A Section of The Litchfield County Times
July 1999

JULY 1999



IN RIDGEFIELD, THE NUDE FROM CLASSIC TO RISQUÉ



Written by DOUGLAS P. CLEMENT

The Nude in Contemporary Art, the intense show running through Sept. 12 at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, is, in part, about politics, controversy and society's struggle to find acceptable points of reference to something we all have in common, an underlying nakedness. It is about the nude in its classical beauty, and modern ugliness, and at the same time it offers commentary on the state of contemporary art. But finally, at its core, the show is about humanity in its inscrutable and transcendent profundity.

The element of controversy has two facets. It was left to the Aldrich to accept the challenge of surveying the contemporary nude when, last August, the Whitney Museum of American Art canceled a planned show to have been called "The Great American Nude." That decision came three days after the performance artist Karen Finley and three others lost a case in the U.S. Supreme Court. Justices voted 8-1 to uphold a decency test for Federal arts grants. Ms. Finley faulted the Whitney for folding and for, in her view, effectively practicing a form of censorship.

Ironically, the drawings in the Aldrich show by Ms. Finley have a quiet, almost conservative charm and feel like a cross between Aubrey Beardsley and Degas, in his lithographs of women at their bath.

Other work is far more provocative. Harriet Leibowitz, described by museum staff as a Jewish grandmother from New York, has a pair of photographs in the exhibit, "Larry I" and "Larry II." The first is a chiaroscuro of Larry, who has one of those well-muscled bodies, in a pseudo-classical pose. Nothing untoward is revealed. In the other photo, Ms. Leibowitz has left in what was air-brushed out of the first: Larry's erection.

The remainder of the artwork in the show lies somewhere between Ms. Finley's restrained drawings—are they a sly commentary on her reputation?—and Ms. Leibowitz's frank look at the facts of life.

Jock Sturges, known for his nude photographs of young girls, has had his studio raided by the F.B.I. Tina Barney's photographs of men and women in domestic settings depict the often mundane qualities of the nude. In digitally altered photographs, Jacqueline Hayden adds body hair, wrinkles and cellulite to ancient statuary. With much humor, John O'Reilly creates photo-collages in which he places himself, naked of course, in art historical settings.

The painters in the show exhibit an equally broad range of work. John Currin's "Three Friends" depicts three muses with flowing locks and curious smiles. It looks like a painting you've seen before, but, in reality, contains no references to art history and features anatomy that's completely off kilter. Steven DiGiovanni's "Coin Toss" places a naked man in a domestic setting and suggests a mysterious ambivalence. In "Big Blonde Squatting," Lisa Yuskavage continues her series that takes an overtly political approach to the female nude as an object of desire. And then there's Jenny Saville's large-format oil, showing the back of a monumental woman whose face is turned to the left and squished by the something at the edge of the picture frame. It will stay with you long after you've left.

"The exhibition confronts, from many points of view, aging, disease, birth, cultural norms, and the celebration of beauty," reads a release from the Aldrich. "The exhibition also reminds us of the enormous challenge any artist faces in attempting to depict the human form."

For some, the challenge will be in going to the museum and looking at those depictions. But it is venture that can only enlighten.

The Aldrich is open from noon until 8 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and until 8 p.m. on Fridays. Admission is \$5 for adults; \$2 for senior citizens and students. The number is 438-4519. ♦

Facing page, above, "Male Bather," 1985 by Michael Leonard. Below, from left, "Figure Study," 1996, by Phillip Grausman and "Series 5" (two figures), 1994, by Robert Stivers.

In digitally altered photographs, Jacqueline Hayden adds body hair, wrinkles and cellulite to ancient statuary.