



The Nude in Contemporary Art

Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 258 Main St., Ridgefield, 438-4519. Through Sept. 12.

If I'm wearing no clothes as I write this, am I nude? Or am I naked? Is there a difference? While these questions may be a mere matter of semantics—or perverse curiosity—as regards my journalistic practice, the difference between “the nude” and “the naked” is of weightier significance in the tradition of Western art. It is a difference that is explored, parodied, celebrated and subverted in *The Nude in Contemporary Art*, an exhibit at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield.

As conceptualized by Sir Kenneth Clark in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, the nude in Western tradition has represented an idealization of the human body. Rooted in classical Greek aesthetics, this is the human form depicted in heroic terms, graced with perfect proportions and symmetry. But as an idealization, the nude—both male and female—has been dressed up in an array of mythological, allegorical and cultural finery. In the figure of cherubs the nude could represent innocence; in the figure of Eve, temptation. And even if sexual themes are not overt, they are never absent entirely. The nude portrays what is usually hidden. Revealing the private—and the privates—is charged with erotic significance.

Furthermore, conventions of depicting the nude developed within the structure of male supremacy. In *Ways of Seeing*, cultural critic John Berger noted that, “In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women.” Harry Philbrick, Aldrich director and curator of the show, says that one of the contexts in which the exhibited works need to be seen is “the media presentation of the nude, which in our culture is primarily the idealized female form whether that be totally nude or not.”

“In terms of media and advertising, we’re bombarded with images of the human body and it’s usually models—both male and female—who have bodies that are more perfect than mine, at least. It’s kind of unreal. Obviously, they’re real people but they’re not the norm,” says Philbrick.

Realism, however, is the norm in the Aldrich show. Paired with an immersion in art-historical references, it defines this provocative exhibit. Typically postmodern, it is not only about looking at the body—it’s about looking at *how* we look at the body. Across a range of media—painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, holography, video and installation—and roughly balanced between portrayals of men

New Nudes Is Good Nudes

By Hank Hoffman

and women, the works redefine the conventions, bridging the gap between the nude—the ideal—and the naked—the real.

These redefinitions are most striking in the oil paintings, the medium most associated with the post-medieval tradition of the nude. Lisa Bartolozzi’s “Wisdom” is an exceptionally beautiful painting which, in defiance of the tradition, portrays a gloriously pregnant woman who kneels, her body full, a network of veins subtly coloring her breasts, belly and thighs. Anne Harris, in “Third Portrait with Max,” also depicts herself pregnant, glowing and distended with child. Avoiding conventions of heroism and gender, Steven DiGiovanni’s “Coin Toss” foregrounds a hairy naked man, dark hair tied back in a ponytail, who balances a coin on the back of his right hand. In the background, a clothed woman, nestled in an easy chair with a cat, watches TV.

These are not, for the most part, “ideal” bodies. Vast expanses of well-fed flesh fill canvases, illustration paper, photographic images. Eteri Chkadua’s “Janna” is an unsentimental portrait of a large woman with wide garishly painted lips, stringy brown hair, a couple of stray hairs decorating her nipples and red polish flaking off her fingernails. But her expression as she confronts the viewer is, if not defiant, then assured, comfortable in her large sack of skin. Similarly, Sherry Camhy’s lifesize virtuoso pencil drawing, “Richard, the Golem,” offers a frontal view of an overweight, bearded man whose posture and demeanor convey a straightforward message: “This is who—and what—I am and that’s fine by me.”

The body has been a battleground in the ‘90s culture wars, exemplified by the flap over Robert Mapplethorpe exhibits and the bitter political battle over NEA funding. In fact, this show had its genesis in the Whitney Museum’s cancellation of an installation, “Go Figure,” by Karen Finley, one of the NEA Four. Finley accepted a Philbrick invitation to bring “Go Figure,” which consists of a life drawing class with model and instructor, to the Aldrich. Museumgoers are invited to sit in, draw and, if they wish, have their drawings hung as part of the installation.

But even though the exhibit features Finley’s work, as well as that of two other artists who have run afoul of the cultural commissars—Andres Serrano and Jock Sturges—it is not a “shocking” show. With all the naked bodies in the galleries, the most disturbing images are powerful not because of their undercurrents of sex, but because of their intimations of mortality. Manabu Yamanaka’s two large black & white photographs show old, *old* Japanese women. In “Gyahte #5,” a woman, her skin wrinkled and dried like parchment, lies in blank space with her mouth open, looking almost dead.

That’s reality.



The naked truth: Andres Serrano’s “Budapest (The Lake).”