The Aldrich Exhibit Exposes Attitudes About The Nude In Art

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By Shannon Hicks

RIDGFIELD — Harry Philbrick has it right. What, indeed, is it about the human body that makes us so uncomfortable?

Philbrick is the director of the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art and was the chief curator of the museum’s 1999 major summer exhibition, “The Nude in Contemporary Art.” The show presents works by 45 artists, representing three continents, and will remain on view until September 11. Aldrich assistant director Richard Klein and assistant curator Jessica Hough were the exhibition’s additional curators.

For his essay in the exhibition catalogue, Philbrick wrote, among other good points, “… despite the cascading ascendance of various new media… old-fashioned art still packs a potent punch. People are afraid that a still picture, hanging on the wall of a museum, might be a threat.”

Elsewhere in his essay, he went on to say, “Why are we so uncomfortable in our own skin, or at least in depictions of our own skin?… Whatever it might have symbolized at any given time, the nude has new fallen into a strange limbo, not banished outright, but not easily accepted as a legitimate icon for artistic use.”

“The Nude in Contemporary Art” packs a punch only in that it has filled the entire museum with artworks — in nearly every art form imaginable — depicting exactly what the title indicates. Visitors to the museum are in for no surprises when they visit a venue presenting a title like “The Nude in Contemporary Art”; yet there was resistance last year when a major museum like the Whitney Museum of American Art decided to create a similarly-themed show.

The Aldrich show is a strong, eye-opening, enjoyable look at the human body at its best and worst. Works offer viewers a look at the body at every age level, male and female, realistic and exaggerated. It is a celebration of the human form, and a challenge for visitors to look at something that is a part of us in our own unique configuration.

It is a very exciting show. “The Nude in Contemporary Art” offers a look at what every man and woman comes into the world with: his or her own body, unclothed.

“…”There is no subject that has the same kind of longevity as the nude,” said the painter William Beckman, who has a large painting in the show. Mr. Beckman gave a lecture at the Aldrich during the opening week of the exhibition’s run. In June, Artists have been depicting nudes in art, using every possible medium, starting out for ever over 20,000 years.

“…”Everyone can relate to the nude figures,” Mr. Beckman said. “We’re talking nearly 20,000 years of reinterpretation here.”

In curating the show, the Aldrich staff, in staying with its mission and name, chose works of emerging and influential contemporary artists. While the subject matter is all familiar, the artists have a wide range of backgrounds, training, career levels and experiences, said co-curator Jessica Hough.

“…”Some of these artists are known, and others are not. My doing the show,” Ms. Hough said. “…”The nude can actually be a very difficult form, but it is found in most art at one point or another, she continued.”

Mr. Beckman’s idea of reinterpretation not only by different generations but also in different forms. A range of works range from contemporary prints, graphite on paper and all on canvas to etchings, videos, and even sculptures from dirt, yes, dirt — see James Crook’s “Man of Woman.”

Mr. Beckman congratulated the Aldrich last month for “doing something even the Met wouldn’t do. The Met doesn’t deal with frontal male nudity.”

The Met apparently will not deal with it, nor will the Whitney. In July 1998, the New York City museum scrapped its plans for a similar show. It was preparing, to be called “The Great American Nude,” which was to have opened last December.

…”The current Aldrich show is similar in its approach to presenting the human as a nude, but in the same, show that would have been on view at the Whitney. The show in Ridgefield was curated by the Aldrich staff. It was not simply put together, using plans from Whitney materials.”

…”The images are not always pretty, nor even easy to look at. Most of the models in the works in ‘The Nude in Contemporary Art’ are described as ‘everyday’ people, with the normal bumps and bulges that come with not being a supermodel. The idea is that they will be looking, in some cases, at people who could be themselves looking back at them from a mirror may terrify some viewers. Fudly, may frightening some people, but really it is just a look at Man at his most honest.”

…”Man’s Creation of Music is a good starting point. The woman presented in the image is the ‘average American’. From there, works run the gamut in presenting young and old, healthy and heavy body types.”

…”This summer’s ‘Nude Flight’ offers a look into one apartment building, where three nude models are either walking, reaching for something or just looking at the camera. Peter Krasner’s ‘United Series #4’ and ‘Ungit Series #1’, both oils on linen, while not detailed, also kind as people with very confident bodies. Conversely, Sherry Chtchoukova’s ‘Richard, the Cello’, a pencil on paper, presents its viewer with a look at a heavy and proud — almost dictatorial — man. “…”Different by James Saville is not only of a very large woman, but of the work itself a much larger-than-life 12 inches high by 8 inches wide.”

…”One of the most difficult images for museum visitors to view could very well be Manabu Yamanaka’s ‘Gymnast’. Not many people like to confront death, or even think about what growing old does to the human body. Mr. Yamanaka’s black and white photograph (1996, 68 by 78 inches) asks viewers to look at a very old woman lying on her side, literally shrivelled all.

…”In stark contrast is the youthful energy seen in most of the works in the show, like the works by Yamanka, says Ms Hough, “that they can touch a viewer’s everyday moments, or just years, away from the artist’s wall.”

…”What’s interesting is that it shows us, in one of the very few times in our lives, exactly what happens to our bodies as we grow old. Most people don’t want to think about this, and we certainly don’t know about it because when you get older, you tend to keep everything covered all the time.”
In addition to the artists mentioned above, the exhibition also includes work by Laura Aguilar, Lisa Bartels, Brett Biggs, Paul Cardew, David Carrión, Harriet Caudillo-Silver, Joe Cavaliere, Dietrick Chakes, Chuck Close, John Copley, Renee Cus, John Currie, Steven DiGiovanni, Joanne Dunne, Lesley Freed, Philip Grassman, Chris Volin, Ana Martin, Jacqueline Haydon, Kimiko Keo, Daniel Laid, Jason Lawrence, Harriet Lebowitz, Michael Leonard, Melanie Marchant, Denise Varda, John O’Malley, Hannah Bogeberg, Karen Sanders, Jenny Saville, Andrew Seeman, Robert Stobierski, Artsite Strab, Jock Magill, Robert Napier, Spencer Tunick, Masahiro Yanaka and Lisa Yuskavage.

Bringing The Node to Ridgefield

"The Node in Contemporary Art" was born out of a series of conversations between Harry Philbrick and the performance artist Karen Finley. Ms. Finley's name may be familiar to those who are in or watch the art world fairly closely. Ms. Finley has made history during the past ten years when she received, but then had revoked, a grant from the NEA. Ms. Finley used for reinstatement and received a ruling in her favor in 1992.

In a stunning turn of events, however, the NEA then appealed that ruling and the 9th Court of Appeals overturned the reinstatement by the lower court. Thus, with Congress having already voted in the early Nineties to diminish federal grants according to "general standards of decency," the Supreme Court usually relies on a sec-

An installation by Karen Finley called "Go Figure" was be included in the show that was being planned at the Whitney, and was then canceled. In fact, according to Mr. Philbrick the Whitney event had given from a simple display of "Go Figure" into what was to be a much larger exhibition. The Whitney show was canceled a few days after the monumental Supreme Court decision was announced.

Mr. Philbrick contacted Ms. Finley shortly after last year's Supreme Court decision and the two had a telephone call over the telephone. She asked to consider mounting her installation at the art center. The museum's gallery became more open to the idea, and the two arranged for a preview of the installation to be held.

"The Node in Contemporary Art" was in the planning stages at that point; Mr. Philbrick had not yet even received approval from the museum's exhibition committee. But shortly after the idea was approved, the curatorial process began and the show quickly fell into place.

Ms. Finley's "Go Figure" is an on-site installation which has turned one gallery of the museum into a life drawing class. Every day the museum is open during the run of the show, a live model will be available for students and visitors to draw. The models are under the age of 18 must have a signed parental waiver.

The idea is intriguing — it takes the node as an art form and sets it in a gallery. It is both a statement and a dialogue about the role of art and possibly controversial. Live node people in a museum setting is presented.

What is absurd to curators is the idea that every artist would be in so many galleries every artist's work can be seen at one time or another. There is no other way to see a political in the works. It is once it is taken out of the classroom setting and installed in a museum.

There is a panel on the title of Ms. Finley's installation. "The same thing that everyone else has been talking about is America teaches life drawing," Mr. Philbrick points out in his catalogue essay, "It is controversial if it is done in a contemporary art museum. Go figure."

"Go Figure" was first presented in 1997 in an exhibition called "Common Sense," at the museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles. While curators at the Aldrich were waiting to see what, if any, ramifications Ms. Finley's installation might have, locally, museum curators in California — especially, museum curators in San Francisco and the Whitney — were very interested. The Whitney installation was quite popular two years ago.

"When Ms. Finley's installation actually is one of its most popular attractions of that show," Sylvia Höfler, the Museum of Contemporary Art's director of marketing and public relations, recalled this week as the move from Los Angeles. "We didn't really have any negative response."

"I think because of the way it was installed — there was a naked woman standing there, confronting you — people weren't upset with the installation. Instead people were given the option of participating (in a separate gallery space) if they wanted to," Ms. Höfler continued. "It was never a problem."

The Aldrich show has Ms. Finley's "Go Figure," in one of its third floor gallery spaces.

Visitors have the option of entering the classroom area, which is being constantly monitored by a teacher, or moving on to look at the remainder of the exhibition. An explanation of what is going on inside the classroom is clearly presented on the outer wall of the classroom/gallery space.

Karen Finley was in Ridgefield to conduct a preliminary live drawing class on June 5. All subsequent life drawing classes have been conducted with Silvianos Guild Art Center of New Canaan, Westport Art Center of Danbury, and Ridgefield Guild of Artists.

Newspaper pads and charcoal will be available for everyone, through the run of the show, and participants are invited to keep their drawings and use them in a collection of remnant drawings being held in the "Go Figure" gallery space.

"One of the most appealing things about that installation was that the work was from student models," Ms. Höfler added. "There was a spectrum of shapes, colors, men and women. There was a real quality presented."

The Aldrich Museum has carried that same theme into its own show this summer.

In a recent project, Kenneth Clark developed an entire chapter in his book "The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form" to discuss the difference between "naked" and "nude." He defined the latter as a body with no artifice. The Aldrich in conjunction with the Clark exhibition, Ms. Höfler suggested both is to be deprived of context, implying embarrassment. Nude, however, has an uncomfortable quality and implies a balanced, prosperous, confident body.

The summer exhibition at the Aldrich does not try to hide anything.

Even from its title, visitors to 250 Main Street should have an indication of what they are in for when they enter the front door of the museum. "The Node in Contemporary Art" does not try to hide anything either in its name or in its presentation.

"There was some concern when this show was first announced," Jessica Rough said. "But today, you see the nude everywhere. This really is the perennial art subject."

Related Programs

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art has planned a few programs in conjunction with the major exhibition "The Node in Contemporary Art." Per reservations or additional information, call the museum at 486-6189. The Aldrich is at 250 Main Street/Paico St in Ridgefield.

"Master Life Drawing Classes will be presented most Sunday afternoons during the run of "The Node in Contemporary Art." Classes will meet from 4 to 7 pm, and each class will be taught by a different artist represented within the museum.

Cost is $60. Materials will vary and are not included in class cost (contact the museum for details). Reservations are required. Each class will be conducted within Karen Finley's "Go Figure" installation.

Selected Instructors are as follows: July 20, Steven DiGiovanni; August 1, Brett Biggs; August 8, Lisa Bartolozzi; and August 29, instructor to be announced.

Note: The Master Life Drawing Classes on Sundays are not part of the regular installation of Karen Finley's "Go Figure." The open invitation for museum visitors to draw a live nude model began at the hours of 1-3 pm daily during the run of the show is included with museum admission. Newspaper pads and charcoal are provided for non-Master Class Drawing times by the museum, free of charge.

Contemporary Context Lecture: Karen Finley. Karen Finley, on Sunday, September 11, the performance artist Karen Finley will return to the Aldrich Museum to discuss her experiences as a female artist exploring the traditionally male subject of the nude. Topics to be addressed will include the problematic "gaze" and its political ramifications.

The lecture will run 4 to 6 pm. Cost is $10 per person, and advance reservations are requested.