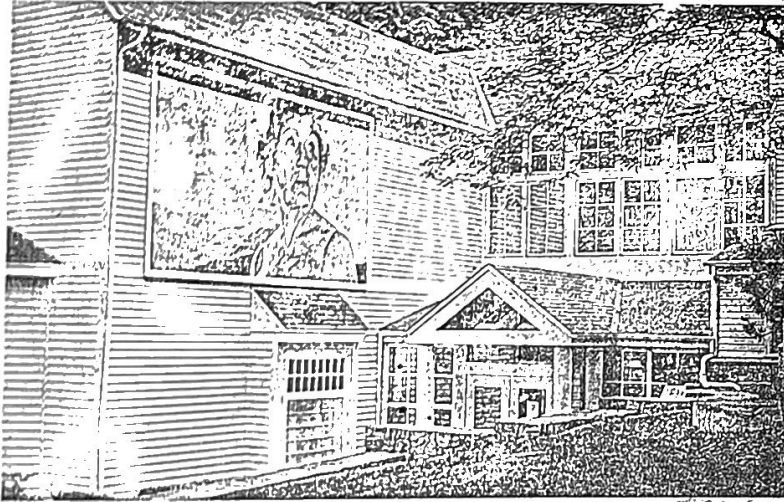


Aldrich Exhibit Exposes Attitudes About The Nude In Art



Censorship in Ridgefield? Certainly not! While the billboard-size, detailed version of Melanie Manchot's "With Mountains I" on the exterior of the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield may not show the entire view of the photograph Ms. Manchot took of her mother standing in front of the Alps in Switzerland, the artist's full C-print is presented inside the museum. The museum is offering "The Nude in Contemporary Art" as its major summer exhibition. Curators based the show on an idea that was discarded last summer by The Whitney Museum of American Art. —Bee Photo, Hicks

BY SHANNON HICKS
RIDGEFIELD — Harry Philbrick has it right: What, indeed, is it about the human body that makes so many people uncomfortable?
Mr. 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 12. Aldrich assistant director Richard Klein and assistant curator Jessica Hough were the exhibition's additional curators.

For his essay in the exhibition catalogue, Mr. Philbrick wrote, among other good points, "...despite the cascading ascendancy 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 now fallen into a strange limbo, not banned 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 just 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 visitors 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 every one of us has 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 weeks of the exhibition's run, in June. Artists have been depicting nudes in art, using every possible material, he pointed out, for over 26,000 years.

"Everyone can relate to the nude figure," Mr. Beckman said. "We're talking nearly 30,000 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 similar, the artists have a wide range of backgrounds, training, career levels and experience, said co-curator Jessica Hough.

"Some of these artists are known, and others are not known, for doing nudes," Ms. Hough said. "The nude can actually be a very difficult form, but it is found in most art training at one point or another," she continued.

Mr. Beckman's idea of reinterpretation not only by different generations but also in different forms rings true when visitors walk through the show and encounter works that range from chromogenic prints, graphite on paper and oil on canvas to etchings, videos and even sculptures from dirt. Yes, dirt — see James Croak's "Man and Woman."

Mr. Beckman congratulated the Aldrich last month for "doing something even the Met wouldn't do. The Met does not 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 is not 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 so-called "everyday" people, with the normal bumps and bulges that come with not being a supermodel. The idea that they will be looking, in some cases, at people who could be themselves looking back at them from a mirror may frighten some viewers. Nudity may frighten some people, but really it is just a look at Man at his most honest.

Meg Cranston's C-print is a good starting point. The woman presented in the image is the so-called "Average American." From there, works run the gamut in presenting young and old, healthy and heavy body types.

Tina Barney's "Nude #1045" offers a look into one apartment kitchen, where three nude models are either walking, reaching for something or just looking at the camera. Peter Krash's "Untitled Series #3" and "Untitled Series #1," both oils on linen, while not detailed, also hint at people with very confident bodies.

Conversely, Sherry Camhy's life-size "Richard, the Golem," a pencil on paper, presents its viewer with a look at a heavyset but proud — almost defiant — man. "Untitled" by Jenny Saville is not only of a very large woman, but the work itself is a much-larger-than-life 112 inches high by 66 inches wide.

One of the most difficult images for museum visitors to view could very well be Manabu Yamanaka's "Gyahtei #5." 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 (1995, 68 by 31 1/2 inches) asks viewers to look at a very old woman lying on her side, literally wrinkles and all.

In stark contrast to the youthful energy seen in most of the works in the show, the two works by Yamanaka, says Ms. Hough, "show women probably moments, or just years, away from their ultimate destiny."

"What's interesting is that it shows us, in one of the very few times any of us will see this in our lives, exactly what happens to our bodies when 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 Bartolozzi, Brett Bigbee, Paul Cadmus, David Carbone, Harriet Casdin-Silver, Joe Cavallaro, Eteri Chkadua, Chuck Close, John Coplans, Renee Cox, John Currin, Steven DiGiovanni, Jeanne Dunning, Lucian Freud, Philip Grausman, Chris Habb, Ane Harris, Jacqueline Hayden, Kinke Kool, Daniel Ladd, Jacob Lawrence, Harriet Lebowitz, Michael Léonard, Melanie Manchot, Denise Marika, John



O'Reilly, Hanneline Røgeberg, Karin Sander, Jenny Saville, Andres Serrano, Robert Silvers, Annelies Strba, Jock Sturges, Robert Taplin, Spencer Tunick, Manabu Yamanaoka and Lisa Yuskavage.

Bringing The Nude To Ridgefield

"The Nude 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 sued 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 over-



turned the reinstatement by the lower court. Then, with Congress having already voted in the early Nineties to "limit federal art grants according to general standards of decency," the Supreme Court easily rolled over a second appeal from Ms Finley in 1998, saying the Federal government had the right to "withhold federal grants from work it disqualifies for being overtly controversial."

An installation by Karen Finley called "Go Figure" was to 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 grown from a simple display of "Go Figure" into what was to have been a much larger exhibition. The Whitney show was canceled just 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 subsequent Whitney cancellation, asking her to consider mounting her installation at the Aldrich. (The museum already owns a copy of Ms Finley's sculpture, "Black Sheep," a large rock with a slate front inscribed with a poem by the artist, in its sculpture garden.)

"The Nude in Contemporary Art" was only in its planning stages at that point; Mr Philbrick had not yet even received approval from the museum's exhibition committee. But shortly after that 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 (museum visitors under the age of 18 must have a signed parental waiver).

The idea is intriguing — it takes the nude as art from a piece of work hanging on a wall or presented as a statue and brings nudity as art to life — and possibly controversial. Live nude people in a museum setting?

What is absurd to curators is the idea that something so traditional in nearly every artist's training at one time or another can be considered a political hotwire once it is taken out of the classroom setting and placed in a museum.

There is a pun on the title of Ms Finley's installation. "The same thing that every traditional art class in America teaches, life drawing," Mr Philbrick points out in his catalogue essay, "is controversial if it is done in a contemporary art museum. *Go figure*."

"Go Figure" was first presented in 1997 in an exhibition called "Uncommon Sense," at the Museum of Contemporary 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 said the installation was quite popular two years ago.

Karen Finley's installation was actually one of the most popular attractions of that show," Sylvia Hohri, the Museum of Contemporary Art's director of marketing and public relations, recalled this week on the phone from Los Angeles. "We didn't really have any negative response."

"I think because of the way it is installed — there wasn't 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 Hohri 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 life drawing class on June 5. All subsequent life drawing classes have been coordinated with Silvermine Guild Arts Center of New Canaan, Wooster Community Art Center of Danbury, and Ridgefield Guild of Artists.

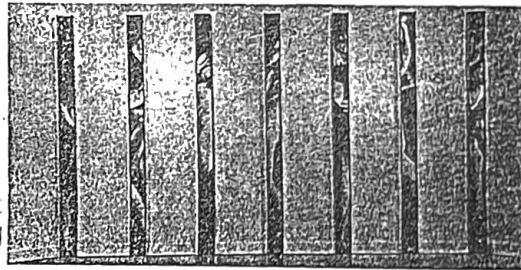
Newsprint pads and charcoal will be available for museum visitors through the run of the show, and participants are invited to keep their creations or add them to a collection of resultant drawings being hung in the "Go Figure" gallery space.

"One of the most appealing things about that installation was that there were all types of models," Ms Hohri added. "There were all different shapes, colors, men and women... there was a real variety presented." The Aldrich Museum has carried that same theme into its own show this summer.

In 1965, Kenneth Clark devoted an entire chapter in his book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* to discussing the difference between "naked" and "nude." According to a brochure published by the Aldrich in conjunction with the current exhibition, Mr Clark suggested naked "is to be deprived of clothes, implying embarrassment. *Nude*, however, has no uncomfortable overtones 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 258 Main Street should have an indication of what they are in for when they enter the front doors of the museum. "The Nude in Contemporary Art" does not try to hide anything either in its name nor presentation.

"There was some concern when this show was first announced," Jessica Hough 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 Nude in Contemporary Art." For reservations or additional information, call the museum at 438-4519. The Aldrich is at 258 Main Street/Route 35 in Ridgefield.

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

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.

Scheduled instructors are as follows: July 25, Steven DiGiovanni; August 8, Brett Bigbee; August 15, 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 between the hours of 1-3 pm daily during the run of the show is included with museum admission. Newsprint pads and charcoal are provided for non-Master Class Drawing times by the museum, free of charge.)

Contemporary Context Lecture: Karen Finley. On Sunday, September 12, 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 proverbial "gaze" and its political ramifications.

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