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Nothing Like the Real Thing

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The practice of drawing from life models is growing in popularity
by Gail Gregg

Even in our image-drenched era, when Photoshop, 3-D computer modeling, and virtual reality have changed the way we look at the world, the centuries-old activity of observing the human body and translating it to paint, paper, or plaster continues to flourish.

In private studios, community centers, clubs, classrooms, and even the local pub, artists around the world still gather to work from live models. As cultural critic Wendy Steiner says in her newly published *The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art*, "At a time when virtually everything is virtual, art is attempting—earnestly, bemusedly, wryly—to return us to the real."

The Internet is in part responsible for the vitality of this traditional activity, which originated in the 16th-century art academies of Rome. The Internet has enabled artists to find each other, to organize groups, and to hire models with the click of a mouse. You can take life-drawing "classes" on YouTube; download live-model, 360-degree-rotation photographs; or participate in such online communities as TheGreatNude.tv or Barebrush.com—where potential members are admonished that the "nude is an unclothed or partially clothed human being. No denuded trees, stark buildings, leafless flowers, please."

For many artists engaged in working from life, though, the "return to the real" has been a lifelong struggle. For decades, many art colleges and university art programs have offered only introductory life-drawing courses, often taught by abstract artists who have never studied anatomy themselves. As New York painter Margaret Bowland says of her experience in the 1970s, "You literally couldn't paint the figure. I wanted to learn how to draw a hand, and my painting teacher asked us to make a drawing of the fourth dimension." At Yale during that same era, sculptor Judy Fox remembers that "figuration was pretty much derided."

This training void has led countless figurative artists to seek out remedial instruction at such institutions as the Art Students League of Denver, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, or the New York Academy of Art, where academic dean Peter Drake reports a record enrollment of 120 graduate students, even during the recession. "We're turning people away," he says.



Philip Pearlstein, *Model with Mickey Mouse on Unicycle and Wicker Chair*, 2009.

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Will Cotton is one such artist. After completing his undergraduate training at Cooper Union, he studied life drawing at the New York Academy, in 1987 and '88, and now teaches there as a senior critic. Though his high-camp compositions are all about fantasy, he wants his subjects to feel as “alive and believable” as possible. “I have no ability to work from my imagination,” Cotton says. “Whatever I’m painting has to be in the studio. What that means to me is models posing, props, and maquettes.”

Many artists compare working from a model to meditation, another activity that requires intense observation and focus. Some are fascinated by the intricacy of the human body, others by the way light and shadow can make it almost abstract or by the technical challenge of training the hand to render what the eye sees.

For Philip Pearlstein, who has been painting realistic nude “still lifes” since making an abrupt switch from abstraction in the late 1950s, working from life can be a “Zen-like experience.” He says, “I learned early on that you can’t rely on knowledge of anatomy. One of the things that’s exciting is that you have to make decisions. Every time the model breathes or moves, things change.”

Elizabeth King, a sculptor who teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, agrees. “You discover the body again each time you depict it—its strangeness is made new to you all over again.” Working from the model, she says, “involves a huge amount of eye-hand judgment, spatial judgment, judgment about form.”

And Steve Mumford, who travels with his watercolors to Afghanistan and Iraq to record the wars, finds life drawing an antidote to the urgency of working as a combat artist. “I always wish we could have one pose for the whole session, to really look,” Mumford says of the drawing group he attends. “The closer in you get, the more there is to look at.”

Central to this activity, of course, are the models themselves, many of whom begin posing to pay the rent between acting or dancing gigs. But for those who are satisfied with the fees (\$18 to \$30 an hour), are comfortable disrobing in front of strangers, and can learn the art of the gesture pose (a kind of slow-speed dance movement) or the trick of holding an uncomfortable twist or turn for 20 minutes at a time, sitting for artists promises singular rewards. These models speak of the gratification of appearing in a work of art, the friendships that sometimes result from modeling sessions, the satisfaction of watching students learn anatomy, and a sense of freedom and self-invention that can come with the job.

Claudia Hajian considers modeling as a full-time occupation. Much in demand at the New York Academy, the Art Students League of New York, and Spring Studio, Hajian is a former geography teacher who left teaching five years ago and began posing while she sorted out her future. Quickly, though, she decided that modeling was her true calling—a calling she celebrates on her blog, *Museworthy*. “I feel much more appreciated and valued as an artist’s model than I did at any other job,” Hajian says.

In Denver, model Kirsten Dean says she began modeling because she “just loves being in the presence of artists.” Christophe Nayel is able to book between 20 and 30 hours of work each week because of his “theatrical” poses. “I love to entertain,” he says. And Morgan and Alan Williams, a married pair who often pose together, say they enjoy the creative challenge of inventing interesting interlocking poses. “When we’re on the modeling stand together, there’s a chemistry that comes through,” says Alan.

Personal chemistry with the artist turns out to be critical to the success of a model—and to the work that emerges from a session. Many artists, such as Inka Essenhigh, say they prefer models who bring their own personalities—an “air of drama”—to a pose, rather than those who are more passive. Painter Natalie Frank seeks models who “have a kind of beauty that’s a little off, a complicated kind of beauty.” Pearlstein looks for those who are flexible enough to hold difficult poses day after day. And painter Daniel Maidman prefers models with “expressive faces and expressive bodies—which is not the same thing as beauty.”

While many artists locate models on websites such as OneModelPlace, Dallas Live Models, or MuseCube, others scout for prospects in their neighborhoods, their social circles, their own homes, or even their own mirrors. Bowland typically recruits subjects from her Brooklyn community, such as the little girls who appear (clothed) in whiteface in *Portrait of Kenyetta and Brianna* (2008), which won the 2009 People’s Choice Award at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery. “I never work with professional models,” she says. “For me, my models are like a movie troupe. The ideas are very much generated by the people I work with.”

Photographer Gary Schneider used friends and colleagues, rather than professional models, for his “naked portraits,” which were the subject of a show earlier this year at the Reykjavik Art Museum. He asked them to lie on the floor in a darkened room and set his camera, which hovered on a tripod, to a three-hour exposure. He then “drew” on the subjects with a flashlight at close range, exposing parts of their bodies one section at a time until, cumulatively, the whole figure was captured.

The process was particularly challenging for Schneider’s models, who had their bodies examined in minute detail for several hours. “Not unlike a considerate dentist, he talked occasionally, telling me which part of the body he was about to focus on and asking me, for example, to let my leg or foot lie in a certain way,” remembers Trevor Fairbrother, an independent curator in Boston.

In most life-drawing classrooms, the nudity of the model becomes commonplace. “There’s always, fairly quickly, a huge banality to nudity,” says sculptor Robert Taplin.

Outside the classroom or studio, though, views on nudity can be startlingly different. “It amazes me how many people are still hung up about nudity,” Hajian says. “I’ve had men not want to go out with me because of my work.” In Denver, anatomy teacher Joanne Burney asks her models to pose in leotards for the first few classes at the Art Students League, until new students feel comfortable looking at the body. “Not everyone can separate the art from other subjects, such as sexuality or religious beliefs or cultural norms,” Burney says.

Nearly every figurative artist reports difficulty selling and showing work that focuses on the nude. And they note that working from models is sometimes prohibitively expensive. “It’s almost impossible to sell a nude,” laments painter Sigmund Abeles, for whom the nude has been a career-long subject. Painter and Royal Academy member David Remfry agrees. “I’ve drawn thousands of nudes,” he says, “but have sold very few.” And Fox has had a museum show canceled because trustees worried about exposing children to her sculptures of nudes.

“You do lose a certain percentage of the client base, particularly with younger collectors who have young children,” concedes Cheryl Fishko, co-director of Forum Gallery, which represents many artists whose work focuses on the nude.

Yet “Changing Poses: The Artist’s Model,” on view at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art through May, reminds us, artists, from Dürer to Sargent to Picasso to Warhol, have been fascinated with the human form for centuries, and that fascination persists.

“People are still being born,” Bowland says about the pursuit of working from life. “People are still beautiful. People still matter.”

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