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Why the Nude? Panel Discussion Gives Varied Answers

By Ilene Skeen

New York, NY. The Art Students League's October show entitled "Why the Nude? Contemporary Approaches" (October 5-31) was accompanied by an exploratory panel discussion (October 26th) featuring eight of the artists in the show. Pam Koob, the League's curator, acting as moderator, had explained at the show's opening reception on October 5th that both the show and the discussion stemmed from the idea of examining the relevance of the nude in today's largely non-objective art world, since so much of the education at the ASL is devoted to figurative art.

Interest was so high in the free event that it was necessary to issue tickets, which were gone within 2 ½ hours of their release on the Monday before the talk. Fortunately, the event was taped and it will be available for viewing.

The panel discussion took place in the gallery among the nudes themselves, traveling walls and sculpture pieces moved aside to make room for about 80 chairs. Ira Goldberg, the League's Executive Director, introduced the evening by stating that the nude becomes a "grand metaphor through which artists can express the human condition." The primary objective of the show and the discussion was to present the relevance of the nude to artists of the 21st century.

The artists present at the panel discussion had a variety of work in the show: drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, video. Although all were of nudes, there was a tremendous range of sensibility, expression, form, and intent.

The audience was given a handout which included a statement from each artist. The following section presents the artist's statement (in italics) and describes the work that each had in the show, with some comments:

Sherry Camhy

The subject of this image is not "the nude."

The subject of this work is a human being.

Her body is nude. Her soul is naked.

The image is timeless.

Camhy's work is a large dark drawing (black pigment on gray) of a front-facing, half-length seated woman entitled, *Xanthippe, Socrates' Wife*. There is an aspect of stolid suffering in the bleakness of this piece. During the discussion, Camhy

mentioned that although she and the model did not seem to 'like' each other, she thought that they ended at least respecting one another.

Francis "Dick" Cunningham

The underlying reason for the nude in art stems from the fact that we all have bodies, male and female, and we are all persons with emotional, intellectual and spiritual, as well as physical, properties. We are at once individuals and members of corporate society - the human race. Unless there is passionate conviction of the importance of this very fact of our being, with attendant emotions of wonder, amazement and awe, there can be no nude in art.

Why the nude now, today? Why the urgency? If we in America can't get it together and work with the rest of the world, which includes those different from us, our inhumanity will doom us...What we need is not "man," "woman," "black," "white," "Muslim," "Jew," "Christian," "Pagan," "Russian," "Ethiopian," etc. -we need the human being, our shared humanity, and it is this and this alone that will carry us past the parochial differences of class, creed, race and nation. This is why the nude.

Cunningham's art work is a life-size full frontal portrait of a standing female nude, realistic without being super-realistic or sentimental. This restrained painting is in marked contrast to Cunningham's passionate and often excited speech during the panel discussion.

Barney Hodes

We like to think we have something to say. The nude makes us have to say something - which is a different story.

The nude is as close as it gets. All the aesthetic distance in the world can't separate you from yourself. Male or female, young or old, when your clothes come off, what you see is what you got. It's not just the model who has nothing left to hide. Work from the nude and sooner or later you're left with nothing standing between yourself and the hunger of your senses.

Hodes' work is a large, rust colored, expressionistic sculpture of a female torso, from shoulders to crotch, entitled *The Gates*. The date on this piece is 2004, and I assume (rightly or wrongly) that the exuberant structure of this work and its larger than life size is Hodes' answer to Christo's construction in NY's Central Park of the same title.

Denise Marika

In Hangin' the body is projected at the top edge of a wall, the head and arms cut off, legs dangling, swinging child-like, back and forth. Cut off below the collarbone, the details of the torso take on their own persona and humor. I am using the emotional landscape of the body to explore the intersection of person and place and to give expression to the vulnerability and compassion that mark our day-to-day lives. The gestures I perform and project in my video installations explore relationships and ritualized behavior primal in nature, historically and psychologically rooted yet intimately familiar to the viewer. The video projection Hangin' intersects with the structures of the wall, the body gesturing commenting and reacting to its host and evoking as sense of shared memory and innocence.

Marika's work is well described in her statement. It is the only video piece in the show.

Philip Pearlstein

I see the naked human figure as a fantastic object that has endless possible permutations of forms as it moves. I do my best to disregard the psychological, sexual & racial baggage that society has heaped on the naked human form, just as I disregard the narrative implications that arise in the viewer's mind, as I believe the artist has no way of controlling them. I use the human form as the primary architectonic motivation of my painting compositions.

Pearlstein's work is of two models: a human model and a model airplane, both painted in a 'realistic' but unsentimental manner. At one point in the discussion, Pearlstein remarked, "I have saved the figure from the expressionists and the pornographers."

Sharon Sprung

I have always been intrigued by the quiet stability of the solitary unclothed body, where form is disclosed and the essence of the individual made available to the naked eye. In a very real sense, being a woman artist painting another woman nude, is a self-portrait. It is being simultaneously exposed—as a woman, as well as an artist - my mood and the model's joined in conversation. The human body is architectural, the hill and vale of flesh hung dynamically upon a framework of bone and sinew. I seek to explore and define this both concrete and abstract, decorative form: plains of color, light and shade, making paint into flesh in all its luminous sensuality.

Sprung's painting is a seated female back view from buttocks up with arms overhead, entitled "R, Undressing." The painting, which in reproduction can be mistaken for a photograph was the cover art for the New York Gallery Guide October 2006 issue. It was also the show piece in the ASL website and the image was printed on the 'tickets' which were distributed for the lecture.

Anita Steckel

When we learn the alphabet as children, we then learn how to form words with those letters. I see the Nude as the alphabet in the visual arts. That alphabet is the very foundation of our knowledge and skill from which we form the visual language we use to express ourselves with the nude, or later on, without.

The Nude is also an art icon unto itself, traveling as it does throughout the entire history of art and dealing as it does with nature - human nature!

Steckel's piece shows a full frontal line of six naked women arm-in-arm or holding hands at a beach splashing out of the water at the shore line. The abdomen and pubic region of each of these ladies is hidden behind a picture of the smiling face of the US president, giving rise to the picture's title, *Bush Follies*.

Costa Vavagiakis

The Nude is a subject devoid of rank, title and position. It is unencumbered by the artificial trappings of clothing. In painting the Nude, I seek to go as far as I can, beyond the barriers of artifice, to reveal the unadorned truth..

Vavagiaki's painting, entitled, *Miranda XI*, is a super-realistic painting of a young girl seated passively, but whose active and powerful stare at the viewer invites psychological and physical challenges and questions. I noticed during the opening that a large group of men could not take their eyes off her and that women tended to look quickly and turn away.

The discussion was not a debate, however, and with everyone 'on the same side' (pro art of the nude), there were few fireworks. There were some interesting points, and censorship was key. All the artists seemed to agree that our society has problems with anatomy.

Anita Steckel pointed out that children are carefully taught that parts of their bodies are shameful and taboo.

Pam Koob relayed that a magazine was going to do an article on the League's nude show, but withdrew because a major advertiser would be displeased. The magazine went unnamed but the advertiser in question was Walmart. Sherry Camhy pointed out that much magazine advertising, and in fact magazine advertising generally involves sex, sex, and sex in subtle and not so subtle ways. The difference, she proposed, between selling sex and the art of the nude was that magazine advertising is sex without body parts - "no breasts with nipples, no hair, no male 'things'," as she phrased it.

Nearly every artist had a story of a censorship experience: Costa Vavagiakis' work could not be shown by his photographer on the internet next to images of a church - the church objected. Dick Cunningham and Barney Hodes had founded the New Brooklyn School and had applied for a NYSCA grant (New York State Council on the Arts). They were turned down flat and found out that the grantors had felt that the school was a danger and that the proper response was to "stop it before it got started." Several artists told of passing up opportunities which were offered with self-censorship strings attached: no frontal male nudes, no overt sexuality, etc. One told of a dealer who looked at her work and remarked, "Oh, these are normal people." Philip Pearlstein recounted the story of the uproar over the moving of Frank Stella's massive sculpture downtown at Federal Plaza. There were protests on both sides and tremendous press coverage. At the very same time, a show of nudes was staged in the 2 Penn Plaza lobby by a new, young curator. The show was up for one day and then immediately taken down. The curator was fired - no press coverage, no protests whatsoever.

Although the following statement came early in the evening, it summarizes the proceedings and the general direction of the art of the nude. Dick Cunningham stated, citing architect Mies van der Rohe, that we are living in an age when the individual is losing significance. The art of the nude is a protest, to give the individual his due. We are living in an age which turns people into numbers and we must keep up the fight to turn people back into people.