

A moist pressure hit the back of his neck. It was the humidity, Martin said to himself. He inhaled the night air, thankful that it washed away the sewer smell of the restroom. The girls stood over the swirly-eyed Alice. Jaleesa held her putter and Martin's in her hands. Carmen leaned on her putter with her eyes half-closed

"What took you guys so long?" she asked.

"Guy stuff," Martin said.

## On Nudity

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There are certain risks of being on locker room duty. I came to realize this when I joined the janitorial staff the year I began reading for my Master's degree in English at a liberal arts college in Michigan. You will be bombarded with naked strangers washing themselves in groups as one would expect on a nudist compound. This is common, normal fare and perhaps, unlike me, you are not the sort to feel embarrassed when folks whip off their bathing suits and spread eagle under a shower head as though because they are in a locker room, they need no privacy.

One minute, I was scrubbing the tiled walls and the next, seeing jiggling body parts. I would, of course, respectfully avert my eyes and keep them fixed on the grimy tile so as not to see anything even in my peripheral vision. I thought of how strange it was that their behavior in one instance was quite inconsequential, yet in another context would be controversial.

It made me think about how taboo nude beaches still are. I thought about how the "desnudas" – women who considered themselves artists and street performers – are legally allowed to walk around Time Square with nothing but body paint on their breasts while in other part of the country, going topless meant an indecent exposure charge. I thought of how showing three inches of flesh above the knee is devastating to the conservative worshipper.

For years, modesty and privacy were drummed into my psyche as hallmarks of decency and godliness. I remember once in Jamaica, a church sister, outfitted in an elaborate black hat and covered from her neck to her ankles, berated my lack of head covering and my above-the-knee church dress as ungodly.

"You will be kept out of the Kingdom of God," she prophesied, pointing at my offending knees.

I shook my head and turned away. She was in the fanatical minority of that congregation, I knew. Still, here was the beginning of doubt forming.

Why are we so afraid of our bodies? I wondered.

And what about nudity in art?

From as early as age seven, I enjoyed sketching everything I saw. As I grew and continued this hobby, I instinctively knew that good Christian girls were not supposed to draw naked people. That was the work of smutty minded boys in my class who drew penises, vaginas, and breasts on bathroom stalls and desks. I had no inclination to draw naked people either since I was convinced by twelve, I would be a fashion designer if not an architect someday. In my teens and early twenties, I found I still felt that way, that painting people without their clothes was distasteful, even ones that did not glare out unabashed from the canvas at the viewer like Edward Manet's *Olympia* or Titan's *Venus of Urbino*, which is said to have inspired Manet's piece.

I don't remember exactly when this mindset began to change. Perhaps it was after I started roaming galleries in Liguanea back home and viewed figurative works by heavy weights like Barrington Watson and Albert Huie. The more I studied Art on my own, the more I found myself seeking out naked pictures of men

and women in various poses purely to recreate them in graphite pencil drawings in my sketchbooks; yet, if anyone were to happen upon me staring intently at my computer, I would have been hard pressed to convince him or her that my careful examination of these nude people was purely academic.

I was content to do this instead of the alternative, which would have meant asking people to actually undress so I could capture their likeness from life. In fact, when I began painting in 2005, the subject matter was usually still life paintings of flowers, fruits, and also the occasional landscape, but rarely people. When I did portray people, they were always fully clothed and cut off abruptly at the clavicle even after I began working with a Jamaican oil painter who did not share my reservations about painting nude women.

Being largely self-taught, my training in the beginning was unfocused, but I soon realized that not learning the art of figure drawing was limiting my range of artistic knowledge. My fear of not being adept at gauging dimensions and proportions of the human form outweighed my qualms about drawing areolas, genitals, and pubic hair. I tried to make it just an exercise like sketching Easter lilies or Bombay mangoes had been. Still, it did occur to me how much my drawing nudes conflicted with my sense of religious conservatism at the time.

Five years after I started painting professionally, while in graduate school (studying English by the way, not Visual Art), I asked my mother to mail one of my watercolor landscape paintings from Jamaica. I was walking toward the apartment on campus that summer day, when I stopped in the middle of the road with the

recognition: My mother would have to rifle through my portfolio; she would see all my shameful drawings of naked people. I was in my late twenties then, yet I was still gripped with the horror that my God-fearing mother would be offended by my experimentation in figure drawing. Perhaps I had misjudged her, or perhaps she was half asleep when she checked my portfolio because she never mentioned one thing about it.

Then, I began to think about how possible it was for me to exhibit paintings of the unclothed human form without it offending people I cared about. I thought, well, Michelangelo painted people as though clothes were never invented. So what if I did too? Art connoisseurs, art historians, art critics all laud his *David*. In Michelangelo's work, nearly all of his subjects, from saint to goddess, flashed a lot of skin. The Sistine Chapel has a ceiling full of naked people, I reasoned, intricate art that has transcended time, that gives a religious and social commentary of the mindsets of his time, and in many instances helped to shape the Western depiction of God, as in the white-haired Eurocentric God in *Creation of Man* (which offers Afro-Caribbean post-colonial people like me a clue about why every other house has a white Jesus painting, but that's a whole other essay. I digress.) Why should anyone really care about my nude drawings? Was this perceived opposition just a prison of my own making?

There have been quite a few discussions about the very thin line artists trod between art and pornography. I think it has a lot to do with the posing, the aesthetics of the composition, and the intention of the work. For others, there is no difference. For instance, Henri Matisse's 1925-26 painting, *Odalisque with a Tambourine*, like many

depictions of odalisques or concubines or chamber maids in the decades before his, is to some just a naked woman sprawling herself on a padded couch. Some do see the play of light and shadow in the composition and the appealing color palette and position of the subject. Still others, even today, may insist this woman is nothing more than a sex object and her artist, a pervert.

On the flip side, some high fashion models in nude photo shoots seem to straddle that line of fashion artistry and pornography. Some will argue that it serves no noble purpose for a fashion model to be in the nude to show a purse or a scarf or a pair of earrings. The creative director may counter that it is more about emphasizing one product, using her naked body as the artful backdrop that draws the attention. Then, the skeptic will ask: Why does she have to be a six-foot tall, thin as a rake, flawless supermodel in the nude to fulfill that? Isn't it also possible that they are doing it to appeal to the carnal nature of men and women? How many of you will buy the purse primarily because the supermodel is naked? That is debatable. Yet, how many of you will look?

Art has always been a very subjective expression and is truly in the "eye of the beholder," to borrow that hackneyed expression just one more time. Someone may one day take a screen grab from a porn movie and frame it, dubbing it art. Perhaps those movie posters and photographs are largely considered art by some. Personally, I feel that is blurring the boundaries of fine art, but I also cannot say this photograph does not speak to the individual in the same way it may have when performance artist, Yoko Ono, as part of an art installation, had random people cut away her clothing

piece by piece until she was naked. Art has always been in evolution and the art-viewing public given to outrage or ridicule when something new suddenly appears on the scene. Art has always been complicated by the viewer. There are rules. There have always been rules, and those rules have time and again been bent or broken.

As it relates to figurative art, it begs the questions: Is acceptable art paintings that follow the tradition of the old masters who upheld the theological beliefs of a particular organized religion? Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* deals entirely with a young Hasidic Jewish boy from New York with a remarkable gift and penchant for painting things his faith considered "From the Other Side" or the *goy's* (or Gentile) world, things like nude women and crucifixions. And while this story is fictional, it shows the tensions within an artist from a strict religious background – the pull from the external secular world of art and his respect of the faith of his fathers. Yes. There is no commandment that says: "Thou shalt not shew forth the nakedness of man in any art form," but then again there is no commandment for the wearing of hats in church or not showing thighs and knees for some reason, yet it gets a lot of church people in a tizzy.

I get it. Eve then Adam recognized their nakedness when they ate the forbidden fruit (which in art, like Lucas Cranach the Younger's 1549 painting, *Adam and Eve*, is invariably depicted as an apple), and so mankind has a number of complexes regarding nakedness. There is the censoring of female nipples despite the uncensored male nipples in media. There is the sexualizing of breasts to the point that women who breastfeed must banish themselves to smelly restrooms and cloister their babies under cloth coverings just to give them nourishment

without condemnation.

Admittedly, I am largely drawn to flora and bodies of water in my work and may never become focused on figurative art, but, over time, I determined for myself that the body, the only thing we entered this world with and the only thing in which we leave it, is a masterpiece that should be artistically rendered as often as it is scientifically analyzed. Every representation of it offers a new opportunity to bask in its complex beauty. Perhaps in my own spiritual journey, I have freed myself of the restrictions imposed by religious ideologies of purity and modesty. I have determined that if I am going to paint the naked body, there will be neither leaf nor bramble nor shrub expertly placed to hide any part of the anatomy out of fear. If I am going to do it, I will use my instinct - not any church manual or imposed societal edicts - as a guide.