

Art and Society: Creating an Audience for the Nude

by Francis Cunningham – October 2018

Why the nude? That is the essential question. Why in today's society of the internet, the computer and virtual reality need one draw, paint or sculpt the nude? There is only one reason that I can see – that is because the nude is human, it is a human being like you and me, but freed from the physical constraints and the social ranking of clothing.

It is precisely this humanity, present in every individual human being, that I have spent a lifetime investigating and which lay behind co-founding with the sculptor, Barney Hodes, two art schools: The New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting & Sculpture Inc. (NBS) and, with Stuart Pivar, its successor, The New York Academy of Art (NYAA). It is my concern here to examine why this view of the nude as a particular human being has not yet taken hold, and what can and should be done about it.

The Audience

It takes two to make a work of art, a maker and a viewer. In our society we customarily assume that art is a singular and lonely occupation, the isolated artist living in a garret. But the reality is that a work of art without an audience might as well not exist. Working for posterity is a hopelessly romantic, meaningless posture that excuses both artist and viewer from their responsibilities. And so this means that you, the viewer, must connect in a meaningful way with the work of art or it does not exist for you as art.

Go to the Metropolitan Museum in New York or others in New York and elsewhere and watch: you will see hordes of people for whom the work of art, as art, does not exist. Watch X and Y, perhaps with children in tow, go up to a painting and read the label, which may include beside the name of the artist, date and subject, an edifying statement. Then they glance at the work and move on. Perhaps they have earphones and their looking is being directed by educational babble. You will watch others go up to a painting and read the label, back off, photograph it and move on. For them, the photographic record is enough. They have been there, done that.

What have they experienced? "Oh, we went to the museum and had an enjoyable time and we saw so much." As for an experience of a work of art, they might as well have stayed home.

Art today is treated as an entertainment shown under the guise of culture, education and as an advance in our current civilization. The general enlightenment of the public at large is justification for this approach. Success is measured by the numbers in attendance at any given exhibition or display. Let the turnstiles roll.

Visual art, if it is art, is not made for the sake of entertainment or for the advancement of knowledge. While it may do both, visual art is made to move the human spirit through the eye. This always has been so. Art is only meaningful if it moves you. And you have an infallible guide in determining a work of art – yourself. Look to yourself and be forewarned: there are lots of artifacts posing as art that are not art, but as long as they keep the cultural economy, aesthetic and monetary, moving, the cultural establishment and its apparatus will continue to exhibit and support them. You must listen to yourself. You are an essential part of the artist/viewer equation.

In our society, it is less the artist who is alone than it is you, the viewer. In another day and in other cultures, human societies determined what constitutes a work of art, be it religion and the gods in Egypt and Mesopotamia, humanism and the gods in Greece, Christianity in the Middle Ages on into the Renaissance, religion in the tribes of Africa and North America or the Aztecs of Mexico. When we look at European painting, sculpture and architecture of the past – our Western heritage – we may think that this is still true when in fact there is no social agreement binding laypersons and professionals, academicians, philosophers, collectors, plumbers, bricklayers, truck drivers, and artists together in a common language.

The disruptions of the 20th century, societal as well as artistic, have left an indelible mark. Turn to the culture of Italian city-states in the 16th century or even the culture of France in the 19th and you will see an interconnectedness between the general culture and the arts of a sort that is missing today. Is it too much to say that the metaphysical in our society, religious or philosophical, has been diminished or

replaced by the materialism of our culture, and that physical reality itself is being challenged by the virtual? When art or religion or any aspect of human endeavor become separated from life as it is lived on a daily basis, look for trouble.

Like it or not, you are alone today, by yourself in the presence of the work of art. Our society has stepped aside. You alone will know when you are moved, or whether you are moved, but first you will have to set aside the cultural apparatus with all its promotions and blandishments and look for yourself.

There is one way and one way only by which anyone can appreciate a work of visual art and that is to stand before it and engage it in a dialogue. As in a verbal dialogue, this means that you will listen to the work, allowing it to speak to you. You will question, it will answer. But it may be silent and it may question you. The language of painting speaks through shapes of color-value on a flat surface and the language of sculpture through forms in stone, bronze or whatever medium. The language of the visual arts is simpler and easier to understand than that of any written tongue. Give it your attention and in time you will learn this language and find that it is unendingly fascinating.

Any interchange between a work of art and the viewer is an event taking place in time. In our fast-paced society that means you will have to stop in your tracks and give it your time. As in a verbal dialogue with a particular person, you cannot engage simultaneously in conversation with ten other people. When you are looking at a work of art the dialogue is between you and it. There is no room for others to enter and interrupt. Use your own eyes, look for yourself and ask your friends to go their own way. Put aside the friendly professor and curators who

would educate you. Later, you can converse with any of them, and with profit, but while you are looking, it is between you and the work of art. We have to learn to talk, to sing and to dance, and we also have to learn to see.

Unfortunately, our society delights in making individuals feel ignorant. “Oh, I can’t draw. Oh, I don’t have any knowledge.” Or, “I don’t know enough to be able to say what I think.” Whatever the put-down, stand before the work of art as though you were infallible. Set aside your ignorance and become simply one human being talking to another. No matter how distant in the past at the time of its creation, the work of art speaks in a present voice – it moves you or it does not. If it does, continue looking and develop the dialogue. If it does not and the world suggests that what you are looking at – let’s say, Chartres Cathedral – is indeed a work of art, just be patient. Give it time; there will be another day. The work will not change but you do and furthermore, you will continue to change. A work you may know as well as your own name can seem new to you each time you view it.

If you like Impressionist painting, go there; if you like Byzantine or East Indian art, go there. Go for what moves you, and the rest will open in due course. The entire world of art lies before you if you will use your eyes. That includes non-figurative art as well as figurative. It includes pottery, weaving and the so-called minor arts, the whole bag. Rest assured that you do not need a scrap of historical knowledge about the culture, the period, the individual artist or the civilization to begin to appreciate and be moved by any given work of art and to open a dialogue with it. But first you must cast aside self-doubt, and trust your own eyes. The rest

can come later – aesthetics, history, and all that human beings have brought to bear in making or responding to works of art.

Learning to see is as much a human birthright as learning to walk, to stand properly, to fall and to breathe. While there is an awareness of this birthright in contemporary practices such as yoga, tai chi, the martial arts and dance, there is effectively nothing of the sort when it come to learning to see. In these aforementioned disciplines there are objective facts and truths in the training of the body. Little known or considered, there also are objective truths in seeing.

The basis for these truths is visual and psychophysical. It is not philosophical or theological. The plumb line physically demonstrates to us the world vertical – gravity. Gravity is an objective force present in our every action, and its effects are measured objectively in reference to the world vertical. A line runs downhill to the right – by how much? Measured by the plumb we humans will agree about the ‘how much.’ There is nothing pragmatic or variable about it. As Martha Graham said, your leg is either parallel to the floor or it is not. The same is true for the objective determination of light and dark relationships or the warm and cool relationships of color-values. Is this area lighter or darker than its neighbor? We will also agree that when a situation is six to one, half a dozen to the other, a choice must be made.

To those who question whether there is such a thing as objective truth, put them in front of an object or another person with a plumb line and a brush in their hand. They soon will discover that in addition to the truths of gravity, we see everything not isolated but in context. Our minds may isolate the figure from the background drapery that is right next to it, but our eye takes in both without

favoring one over the other. You will see the figure and the drapery in relation to each other and you may also find that there are places where the figure and background blend to create yet another shape that is new and unpredictable. This is seeing. Do you have the nerve and the courage to paint what you see? To accept what the eye objectively sees is a learned experience. It takes time. Matisse said it took him three years to build the plumb line into his eye.

Seeing, whether in making a painting or looking at a work of art or in any activity whatsoever, is a psychophysical experience involving eye and mind. What prevents one from seeing what is actually there is the mind. Any preconception that we bring to looking can alter what we see. We have to learn to suspend judgment and to be aware of our preconceptions. This requires self-discipline. Also, you should be prepared for a war between eye and mind. Do you think Caucasian skin tones are pink and white? Look at the shadow under the chin. What color is it? No one can do this for you. No one can see for you. For me, unless you consciously have fought the war between eye and mind you have not begun to see. You are at the mercy of your mind.

In a world filled with subjectivity and private opinion, such an objective experience of objective truth, I find, stands as a beacon. We have to learn to accept what we see and then to work with it. Without the plumb line built into your eye, you will not see that the only true verticals and horizontals are directly opposite your eye. Visually, the lines that you see describing the walls of the room that you are in as you read these words, are going left and right from the world vertical and up and down from the world horizontal as they move away from the area directly in

front of your eye. Your mind, however, will straighten out these lines to make the room the expected box in which you function. We need both eye and mind.

Why is learning to see important? What I am concerned with is seeing things as they are, not as I might wish them to be or as something someone else has told me. This objectivity of seeing touches on and belongs to every human activity – artistic, scientific, and practical, as we live it in our daily lives. See things as they are, and then bring in all the knowledge you need in the making of your decisions, whatever your occupation or whatever the situation.

Now I shall tie this experience of seeing back into the nude that we were developing in the NBS and the NYAA – the life-size anatomically functional nude I have been practicing all my mature life.

The Challenge of the Nude

In my experience there are forces at work on every level – political, economic and cultural – to prevent change in the cultural status quo. To inject the nude as I have done, both as a painter and as an instructor, has been to attract negativity like a magnet. Why? Because this nude, based on the particular human being, constitutes a challenge and ultimately a threat to the status quo. It requires the viewer as well as the painter to ‘see.’ It requires both of them to go past the naked into the nude and to see the body as a work of art.

Inhibiting us, more than the art world of galleries and museums or professors and curators with their blandishments, there is in our society a deeply ingrained fear of nudity. Various religions have told us that our own bodies are

sinful, fashion tells us that we are ugly and in need of improvement, and the advertisements which we are exposed to daily, sexualize the body. Behind all of this there is money.

In America today money is king. It took awhile, but in the last 50 years money has taken over everything from religion to culture to the halls of Congress. There is money behind keeping the status quo. When there are changes, somebody is going to lose. A great deal of money is spent every day attempting to pull the wool over our eyes in the name of whatever cause, righteous or mercenary. Walking hand in hand with the desire for money is fear – fear of losing money and also the prestige, power and attractiveness that accompany it. Look closely at who may benefit when art becomes separated from life as it is lived on a daily basis. Who gains by the divisions in our society, and by driving wedges, such as the one between figurative and non-figurative art?

How does one deal with the nude as a functioning human being in the society of today? As Edwin Dickinson would say when confronting difficulties or the unknown, “Love will find a way.” Love here begins with belief, and the self-confidence to woo the millionaire collectors and moguls who control our institutions, political and cultural. It is all right to hang a painting of a nude on your wall and to have a sculpture of a nude in your living room. At the same time, one must put this new nude before the general public. It is no accident that I have found that those with education in the art of the past, with very few exceptions, have been unable to see this nude. How is it that those who have not had the experience of a Classical and Renaissance past, have little or no difficulty in accepting it – the

ConEdison meter reader, the delivery people, the young woman doctor who took care of my wife? They did not have these preconceptions, based on the past. They could be moved by what they saw.

Why Did This Nude Come About

Barney Hodes and myself, along with other faculty members and students of the NBS had to break away from existing institutions with their rules, regulations and attitudes of mind, in order to create the means to make a new nude, an anatomically functional nude, a nude that could sing of the present and of actual, living human beings, a nude to replace the patterns of the classical and neo-classical nudes of the past, as we had experienced them in our own art school practice, both as students and later as instructors. We had to be free of these institutions to do our work, to deal with what was before us, with what we saw.

Venus and Apollo in all of their various idealized guises had no meaning for us. With the subject matter no longer relevant, their idealized body forms lost meaning. Without a meaningful goal, the practice of drawing, painting and sculpting a nude as we experienced it, only amounted to the acquisition of tools and skills. This was the academic approach. Without direction or purpose and with no place to go, it had become stillborn.

No wonder there was Fauvism, Cubism and a revolution. These movements swept away a no longer meaningful classicism. Hodes and I, together with our students and faculty had to found the NBS in order to explore, question and build, both in answer to this non-figurative revolution and in answer to a moribund

classicism. We could not accept academic answers or subjective, expressive or expressionistic substitutes for what we saw with our own eyes. We could not accept the image of a nude in which there was not a concern with the subject's inner life.

Behind all of this, for me, stands Edwin Dickinson and learning to see, learning to see what is out there with your own eyes. In Dickinson's class I learned to use my eyes by setting aside expectation, judgments, and every manner of preconception that sought to color my looking. What I saw was the magnificent, breathtaking beauty uniquely belonging to the moment, and I learned the tools with which to deal with what I saw in drawing and in oil paint. Eventually I would marry this visual way of seeing with the conceptual tools of form-theory and anatomy that I learned from Robert Beverly Hale. I would come to make an anatomically functional nude, one that could take positions other than the one in which it is depicted, and which appears as present in your space. It is a nude that is derived directly from the body, mind and spirit of the particular model from which one is working.

In teaching this nude on a life-size scale I first had to train students in the Dickinson way of seeing. The model, taken from sight, is paramount. In addition to a training in seeing, the students also needed a knowledge of anatomy and geometric form concepts. Hodes, on the other hand, could start his beginning sculpture students directly with the life-size nude. That is a significant difference between painting on a flat surface and sculpting in the round. In our approach at the New Brooklyn School each medium benefitted from the other.

Are there other ways to approach a life-size nude? Certainly, but for the painters and sculptors in the NBS, our way was based on training the eye. We proceeded from there, those who were willing and able. We encouraged painters to sculpt and sculptors to paint, and all to draw.

The nude we had in mind tore down old barriers and beliefs – religious beliefs in the body as sin, philosophical beliefs that the body is separate and apart from the mind. We were after a new nude that we sensed on the horizon, a nude that would express and belong to our society, for nothing like this had existed before in the idealized and programmatic art of Europe, including its American transplants – parts of it, yes, but not the whole of it.

What place does this nude have in our society? One might better ask what place does humanity have in our society. Art today can be squares and triangles, plastic boxes, strands of rope and digital images. It can depict human beings that glory in their expressive abnormalities. Art can roll around in the mire or it may sing hallelujahs to the glory of God. It also can look at human beings – you and me. It can be based on seeing what is there without judgment, comment or distortion. This is seeing with compassion but without sentimentality. In this view, it is seeing without words or concepts such as 'beautiful' or 'ugly' to govern how we should respond. There is no 'thin' or 'fat,' 'expressive' or 'inexpressive' – there simply *is*.

This is a nude that is uncommercial, a nude that does not reflect the world of advertising and commerce or the taste of the day, the fashion put forward by museums and auction houses. Institutions cannot categorize this nude succinctly and therefore have overlooked it. It must be seen by the individual – by you. I have

suggested how you, the viewer, might view all of the world's art, and how to establish a dialogue. Take a page from a painter, look at the shapes of color on a flat surface, be moved by the geometry, the designs within the design and the beauty of the notes of color before you overly concern yourself with thoughts about what you are looking at. Allow your eyes to see the movement in the patterns you are looking at, the rhythms, and the three-dimensional forms. Experience the sensation of space and depth in which these forms exist. Be awake to the surprise of the unlooked for and the unexpected.

If you finally realize that what you are looking at is a human being, what then? If you have been absorbed in the harmonies and beauties of what you have been looking at, will you not carry this out into your daily life and into how you see people, among whom you are one? In our day, without religion or anything else to provide us subjects which we share in common with the artist and all our fellow men and women, we have this to unite us – ourselves. We are worthwhile and in fact, amazing. That is why the nude matters today, in our society.