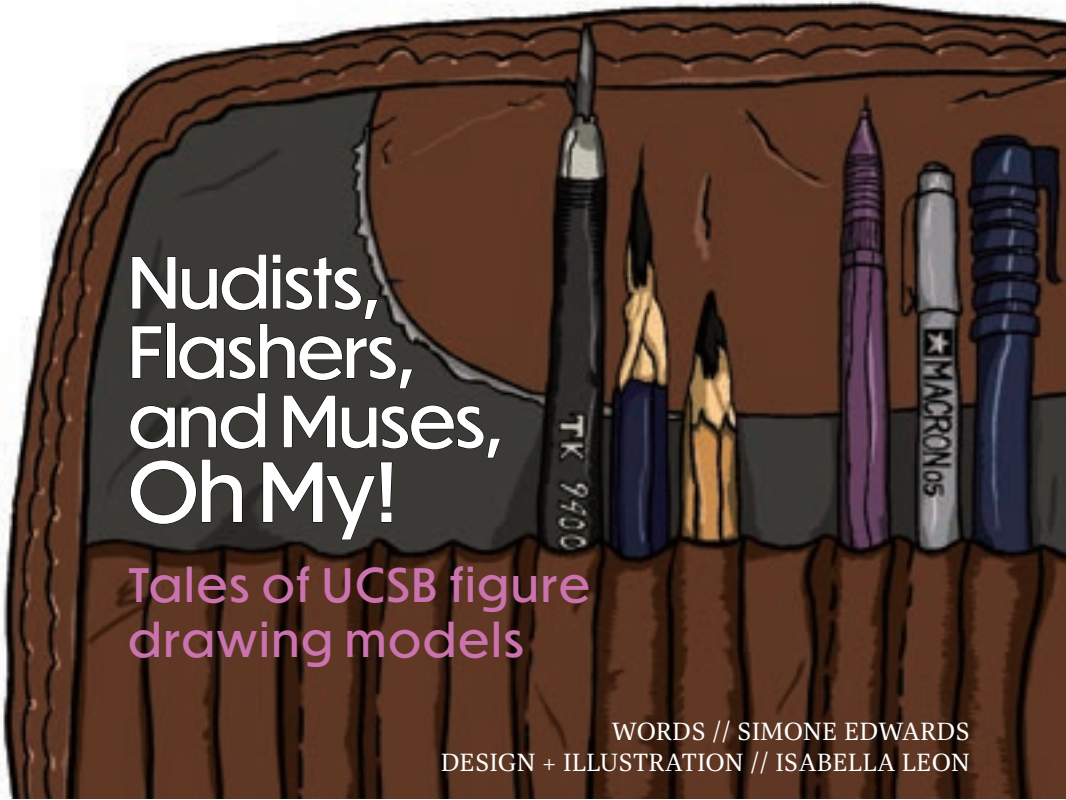




Nudists, Flashers, and Muses, Oh My!

Tales of UCSB figure drawing models

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PERCHED ON FLAT FEET, knees against boobs, hands curved in a claw form, a naked student is posed, imitating a cat for an audience of peers in a charcoal-riddled classroom. It's possible everyone in the room is high on paint fumes, but even without the turpentine, a strange ritual is taking place: A student—in the buff—offers her form to the all-knowing world of the canvas. She is a shining symbol to be worshipped.

This is the strange, naked religion of artists. They call it figure drawing, and it works like this: Every Monday evening at 6 p.m., students assemble in classroom 136 of the College of Creative Studies (CCS). Fourth-year CCS Art major and figure drawing proctor Sammy Wilkinson helps screw the backs of easels and hand pencils

to the unprepared among the group. She also passes around her phone, letting artists add to her "Figure Draw 26" playlist full of Ella Fitzgerald, Mac Miller, and Childish Gambino. The paid model of the week steps out of the room to change into a fluffy white robe, wanders back in, and somewhat awkwardly approaches the central white cushion, haloed by their impending nudity. Then, they bravely undress, and the charcoal-scratching commences. For three hours (with breaks!), they pose, while artists represent their bodies in 2D. The same ritual takes place on Wednesdays from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. for the Life Drawing CCS Art class, Thursdays at 6:30 p.m. with Figure Drawing Club, and downtown at Yoga Soup on Tuesdays at 8 p.m. These nudes are everywhere!



It's a bizarre concept until it's not. "It felt extremely normal after the first five minutes," graduated Art major and former nude model Dan LaGrange said. "It just felt like a fun challenge, like when you do a really long hike and you're like, 'Oh my God, I did it.'" But for the first five minutes, she felt...well, something else. "I felt like a flasher, I felt like a crazy perv-flasher for like a fraction of a second. And then I just let it drop," LaGrange said. In an instant, the robe was a puddle on the floor, and she became a muse for the night.

Artistic inspiration is sometimes considered a call from God, and it can come from anything: a perfectly crispy croissant, the sound of a raccoon crawling over a backyard fence, and, of course, the sacred shape of an arm, divot of a belly button, or curve of boob and butt. Many artists call upon muses to stand in as God, posing to offer constant inspiration.

Eric Beltz, a continuing lecturer in the Department of Art at UCSB, criticized the narrative surrounding muses, saying that the traditional story of a male artist and a female model assumes a sexual tension in the form of creative inspiration. "You can look, you can touch with your pencil, but you can't touch with your body," he said, noting the predatory nature that figure drawing has historically made space for. "There's the artist making up for that gap of desire," Beltz said. The artist gains access to a stripped-down, intimate look at a person, and then they construct a male

narrative of the female body. Art is not immune to gender hierarchies, and instead often amplifies these power dynamics. But in CCS 136, the space is held together by mutual respect. "It does feel like the air is charged or quiet with this collective," former nude model and fifth-year Honors Art and Sociology major Tomiko Osawa said. Instead of an uncomfortable sexual charge, this particular CCS figure drawing space is alive with community and each artist's passion for their craft. Many UCSB

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models have described feeling particularly powerful up on the modeling pedestal, overcoming fears and getting in touch with their physical form in a new, unconventional way. "I'd say everyone should nude model at least once in their life. It's a level of comfort and vulnerability with your own body," first-year Political Science major and nude model Ismael Rodriguez said.

To be nude is to be vulnerable, and to be



vulnerable is to be afraid. “Your underbelly is out, you’re vulnerable primally,” Osawa said. Exposure is biologically terrifying; it goes against our evolutionary protective instincts. “That’s just an adjustment for your body physiologically. And then that will wear off when you decide that it’s a safe space to be up there,” she said. Our ancestral fear of being bare-bodied can be forgotten, stashed in a pile in the corner with the model’s neglected clothes, and with these fears, other social conventions can be relinquished, even if only temporarily.

“We’ve been taught so long, I think especially as women, to cover these parts of ourselves up,” Osawa said. Nudity so often communicates sex, beauty, and gender, so being given the space to uncover without—or against—these connotations rejects not just clothing, but other damaging expectations. Rodriguez considers his nude modeling a taking back of his own body. “Neutral nudity is really powerful because it really does reclaim nudity as your own,” he said. It turns out, all it takes to get rid of our rigid social conventions (Telling us to wear clothes? Please!), biological fears, and cultural hypersexualization is to show up to class naked.

The classroom, lit by old, incandescent bulbs, heats up fast. Especially for a nude. They bake under hot spotlights. “You are the star of the show. If you’re standing, you’re literally standing on a pedestal,” Rodriguez said. Under the warm lights, the models are captured in stylized detail exactly as they are: sweating or shivering, goosebumped or smooth. “I feel like it’s a cool way to capture yourself in a moment of time,” LaGrange said. While photographs can help us remember exactly what we looked like at a given time, nude drawings show us new interpretations of our bodies, revealing parts of ourselves we rarely get to see. What better way to immortalize your college self than through a series of different artists’ perspectives of both the true and the beautiful lines of your naked body? Rodriguez put it this way: “Every rendition is an alternate universe of you, captured in the present.”

When comfortable enough, models can bring props, show off hidden tattoos, and strike bizarre poses as ways of radical self-expression. LaGrange crouched and bared

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her claws like a cat. Wilkinson once drew a man who posed with resistance bands, working out while being painted, and another model she drew held a headstand for an entire two-minute gesture. Osawa backbended for her first pose, and allegedly, Fraternity pledges’ hazing has included undressing for the honor (or, perhaps humiliation) of nude modeling, being captured forever in their birthday suit. In many ways, figure drawing opens the door

to a new, intimate form of self-expression that can reveal more than an avant-garde outfit or dyed blond streak of hair. We are born naked, we die naked, we love some select few in our lives naked—we do a lot of the important stuff nude, why?

There is a level of self-awareness and intimate communication that we can only express when we strip down, take off our mask and costume, and bring to the table only our form, our sweat, and our chosen pose: au naturel. **W**

