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## The naked truth about nude art modeling

"Have you ever been intrigued by what it's like to be a nude art model?" the email from my school asked

**ROBIN EILEEN BERNSTEIN**

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Over the years I've scrutinized, squinted at and visually dissected every inch of easily more than 100 naked humans. That's because my passion is figure drawing, so I rack up a lot of hours staring at unclothed adults. Yet these men and women — old and young, all shapes, sizes and ethnicities — whose bodies are exposed from every angle, whose nude images grace my walls, remain unknown to me. I rarely know their names.

Who are these people who bare all to a room full of strangers? How does it feel to pose under unforgiving lights as students mentally measure the distance from your clavicle to pubis? I often wonder what it takes to do a job most know little about yet is essential to rendering the human figure in art.

My first model was not nude and not even human. As a kid I relentlessly drew Astro Boy, my favorite TV cartoon character, which made me an anime fangirl decades before Pokémon. By the time I took my first life drawing class at 17, I was hooked and, in the decades that followed, I took classes at various schools when time allowed. It's one of the few activities in which I truly feel like I'm "in the zone."

There's a routine: A model poses on a platform surrounded by students at easels or in chairs. It usually starts with a series of dynamic gestures, one-minute poses so named because the goal is to capture the movement. There might be several five-, 10- and 20-minute poses in a typical three-hour session. After every 20 minutes, there's a break when the model dons a robe. If a pose continues beyond that, it's marked on the platform with tape so the model can resume the same position.

I've asked myself if I'd ever have the guts to pose nude for a class. Twice I'd done it clothed — once while pregnant — when the model was a no-show and volunteers were needed. And in my early twenties, a photographer friend who shot artsy black-and-white nudes of my roommate offered to do the same for me. I was game, but that was in the privacy of my home. In college I drew myself nude, again in private; it was homework, as I recall.

Would I disrobe now, for a class? Depending on my mood and wine intake, the answer ranges from "sure, why not?" to "not a snowball's chance in hell!" So when I got an email from the Art Students League of New York where I now study, with the subject line "Curious about modeling for art? Learn all about it this Thursday," I opened it.

"Have you ever been intrigued by what it's like to be a nude art model?"

Why, yes! Yes, I have.

"Modeling for fine art is challenging and personally rewarding work that requires professionalism, confidence, creativity, and a willingness to be vulnerable in a studio setting."

Was I professional? Of course!

Confident? Yes.

Creative? Sure!

Willing to be vulnerable? Uh, can I get back to you on that?

I clicked reply and typed, "Will attend." I had this crazy idea that I'd model once and write about it. When I told four writer friends over dinner about my plan, their unanimous response was "great idea!" Which of course made me think, if this is such a great idea, how come none of you are doing it?

When I told my boyfriend, his reply was somewhat less enthusiastic. "You're really gonna do that?" he asked, wide-eyed.

This is not what you want to hear from the man who sees you naked, and I suggested as much.

"No, you look great!" he clarified, and of course he'd never dream of stopping me from doing what I want. What he couldn't fathom was why anyone would want to do it in the first place, especially at our age. I should note that we're both within spitting distance of 60.

I knew I could be a good model. For the most part, I like my body, although I could do without the post-menopausal pounds that cling stubbornly to my hips and belly. It's a healthy and fit body that plays drums, does yoga and used to take dance. Naked after a shower, I'd strike poses in front of the mirror that I knew students would like to draw because they were poses I'd like to draw. In class I'd watch the models and think, "I can do that!"

And what better place to model than the League, with its all-star cast of famous artists who have studied or taught there since 1875, when it was founded? But when the model coordinator emailed me several openings for a model, I promptly panicked. It would not be for the same class I was taking as a student, but I was unnerved that people from my class also might be in the one I modeled for. I wanted an ironclad guarantee that I'd know nobody there and would never see any of them again, ever, for the rest of my life. This clearly does not qualify as "a willingness to be vulnerable in a studio setting."

I turned to five models, most of whom had modeled for my class, who were happy to tell me about their job. One was Ivan, a 26-year-old financial software developer with a gentle smile and six-pack abs, who moved to New York nine years ago from his native Dominican Republic. It turned out we share an alma mater: Binghamton University, where I took my first life drawing class more than four decades ago. His jitters before his first nude modeling gig in the Fine Arts building, where I'd spent so much time as a student, sounded familiar. "I didn't want any of my friends to be in the class," he said.

And for good reason, like the time I walked into my life drawing class in the Fine Arts Building and did a double-take, because standing nude on the platform was my neighbor — a guy I'd recently gone on a first-and-definitely-last date with and who 10 minutes earlier had given me a ride to campus. I'm guessing by the look on his face that he was praying for a trap door to fall through.

Brianna, a 29-year-old actor and dancer from the Midwest who requested a pseudonym to protect her privacy, said that she, too, wavered at first. Her roommate was a nude art model and Brianna found it fascinating. But when that roommate offered to help find her modeling work, cold feet trumped burning curiosity. "I was like, whoa! Now I was faced with the reality of, can I do this?"

Ever since Adam and Eve were booted from their naked paradise, presumably in search of fig leaves, humans have had a fraught relationship with public nudity. Cultural norms vary, by generation or geography, from puritanical to ambivalent to let-it-all-hang-out. Trends come and go, the streakers of the 1970s making way for the naked yoga devotees of today. In this post-#MeToo era, people even debate if certain artwork should be banished from museums. In January, "Hylas and the Nymphs" [was removed from the Manchester Art Gallery](#) in England to challenge its depiction of female nudity, prompting an outcry to have it returned.

I've personally seen [these mores shift](#). Once upon a time, nude sunbathing was common on certain stretches of New York's [Fire Island](#) National Seashore. Years ago, my then-husband and I and our kids, then 9 and 7, walked from Robert Moses State Park to Kismet — a two-mile stretch — and realized halfway that we'd need to walk through a clothing-optional beach. We did, of course, and my kids somehow still managed to grow up to be healthy well-adjusted young adults. Regrettably, conservative voices prevailed; five years ago authorities there began enforcing laws banning nude sunbathing.

I wondered if anyone I knew would model nude, so I asked my Facebook friends: an admittedly biased sample of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers who, like me, spend far too much time online in migraine-inducing political debates or blithely posting pics of the sunset. Of the 38 who bothered to respond, nearly half the men and two-thirds of the women wrote variations of "no, never, nope, not a chance, not my gig," and lest I misunderstand, one typed in all caps: NEVER NO WAY NO HOW.

Another said, "Stand naked in front of people and have them interpret the way my body looks? That's a hard pass." Others said they "couldn't sit still long enough" or were "too insecure" or lacked self-confidence or cited "religious reasons (public nudity is a huge no-no)" or lamented that they were too old, although one pragmatic soul said she'd do it "if it was a matter of life or death."

Of the rest said who said they would (just over 20 percent) or hedged their bets with "maybe," there was one who, like me, would do it only if nobody knew her personally. "It would depend on the reputation of the art school," said another. And one said she'd pose "waist up only" while another who long ago had modeled nude warned against that: "Naked is naked. Clothed is clothed. Partially clothed is seductive." A friend with cerebral palsy said she did it as an undergrad to help her grow more comfortable in her body (and for the money).

And because no Facebook thread is complete without a comedian: LOL to the considerate guy who would remain draped because he's from "the first-do-no-harm school of modeling." And to the one who'd do it if [Botero](#) was instructing.

If my survey determined that most of my friends would rather poke themselves in the eye with a sharp stick than pose nude, it didn't reveal what they might not understand about the job. Emily, 32 (she, too, requested a pseudonym for privacy), who started modeling as an undergrad in California for extra cash, feels the biggest misconception is that people think there's a sexual element when in fact "it's so not sexual at all." Similarly, MacKenzie, a tall athletic 25-year-old from Connecticut who's been modeling in New York since last fall, thinks most folks see nudity as intimate, "something that most people don't want to share with anyone except their partner."

The right word can avoid the wrong connotation. "If I'm in the shower and I'm washing my hair, I'm naked," said long-time model Alan. But he said that on the model stand, "I'm nude." A self-described rebel with a short grey beard, Alan, 65, started modeling in 1985 as a single dad in Georgia disillusioned with his business career and trying to redefine his life. On a whim, driving by the Lamar Dodd School of Art, he pulled into the parking lot and applied for work as a nude model. He's since turned it into a successful full-time job, modeling at several schools in New York, sometimes with his wife. He plans to retire this year.

Several of these models mentioned fear of judgment — putting your every perceived physical imperfection on display — as a reason nude modeling is such a scary prospect. Yet I can attest that when I'm drawing the unclothed human figure, the only thing I'm judging is how good my drawing is. It's not remotely erotic. You're not thinking about their nudity. In fact, you're not thinking about them much at all. "You're basically reducing them to geometry," said Emily.

She's right. We're taught to view the body as a mass of overlapping shapes: cubes, spheres, cylinders, pyramids and cones. We analyze angles and tilt. We find the centerline and identify front, top and side planes. We consider where light hits tangent to an arm or breast because that's where shadow begins. There's so much talk about the musculoskeletal system that I sometimes feel like I'm in anatomy class.

While we students grapple with the abstract challenge of rendering bodies on paper, these all-too-human models face the very real task of holding a pose. Contrapposto, for example, where weight rests more on one leg like Michelangelo's David, is very difficult to maintain. "You can really screw yourself," said MacKenzie. "You don't necessarily always know what's going to hurt your body."

Brianna learned this early on. Modeling the very first time, she “was absolutely a wreck with nerves” but within five minutes of her first pose, all she could think about was her foot, which had fallen dead asleep. “That was the last time I ever worried about being naked.”

To demonstrate how hard it is to hold a pose for 20 minutes, Alan suggests I pretend to squeeze a ball in my hand for five minutes because that stiffness and pain is “what your entire body is going to experience.” If he feels a muscle cramp coming on, he’s learned to calm his body by going into what he calls “Zen master” mode, slowing himself down to roughly five breaths per minute.

But arguably more difficult is the discipline to be alone with your thoughts. “I wish my mind would go blank so badly,” said MacKenzie, who during poses will ponder her love life or her career or writes songs in her head for her band. The biggest surprise for Ivan was that it’s more mental than physical. “In one 20-minute pose you can go through your whole ‘to do’ list, your five-year goal plans, your 10-year goal plans,” he said, laughing. He learned that meditation and staying present in the moment keep him from zoning out. “My job is not to hold the pose; it’s to be the pose,” he said. If he thinks too much, he tends to nod off.

I wondered, too, if the gender of the artist mattered, like it did for the woman who wrote, in reply to my Facebook survey: “Too many negative experiences with men who pretend to have artistic souls. No desire to be objectified by any of them, even for the sake of their art. If it were all females in the class, I would consider.” In fact, [a recent New York Magazine story asked](#), in the wake of #MeToo, if it’s “still an artistically justifiable pursuit for a man to paint a naked woman.” But with all this uproar about the male gaze, why was nobody asking the opinions of those being gazed upon? After all, it’s their naked image being turned into art.

What these models told me, in essence, is that an artist’s gender takes a back seat to the vibe a person gives off. Ultimately, says MacKenzie, it’s not about male or female but about “being professional, treating me with respect, making me feel comfortable.”

While Emily will ask why most artwork in a gallery might be by men, she is rabidly anti-censorship and would never tell anyone they can’t make the art they want to make. As for whether the male gaze is relevant to her job, she is indifferent. “It doesn’t really affect my desire to model in any way.”

Brianna, too, has never had a problem with men painting her. “They’re looking at me through artist’s eyes, and if I ever felt like they were looking at me sexually, I don’t think I would be comfortable doing it,” she said, adding that some of the most beautiful paintings of her have been done by men. “What a shame that would be if they weren’t allowed to create that.”

For them it’s less about an unwanted gaze than an unwanted touch. “If someone is getting too close to the modeling stand you almost can feel it,” said Alan, describing the time a student grabbed his arm from behind to shift it and how he swung around and laid into the guy: “Do you know how close you came to me just knocking you off your feet? Don’t you ever, ever touch a model again!” He is blunt: “I’m not a prop.”

As Emily explains, your bubble of personal comfort expands when you’re wearing less. She was more upset by a woman who physically moved her hand during a pose “like I’m a poseable store mannequin” than the guy who annoyingly flirted but did not touch her during a break. Touching a model is never OK and fortunately, she says, most students are hyperaware of this. I know I am; I’ll always give models wide berth during a pose. Those boundaries extend to cell phones, which at the League are prohibited during poses. And doors to the studio remain shut; if you’re not a student or instructor, you don’t belong there.

And let’s not forget that male models have their own biological vulnerability. One question Ivan hears a lot is if he ever gets an erection during a pose. “The answer is yes,” he admitted, although he tries his best to stop it. Then again, Alan said that in 32 years it’s never happened to him during a pose. Over the years, I’ve seen a partial erection in class only a couple of times. I always feel bad for the guy; I don’t know what they’re thinking but it usually fades fast. Besides, as Ivan points out, it’s not something most students are looking at. “Artists tend to leave the fingers and the toes for last, and most tend to leave the penis for last, too,” he said. Or as Alan put it, “I am portrayed in probably several thousand [of] pieces of art as a eunuch.”

But if I were to assume that the model is exposed and that I, the art student, remain hidden, Emily turned that on its head. “People tend to ask if I feel exposed up there, but I feel like it’s really the artists that are being exposed,” she said, because each reveals a different interpretation of her. “I get to see inside their heads.” Like the time she was in a crappy mood and a student portrayed her expression as sweet and vulnerable.

What's more, Emily's heritage is, as she describes it, "a blend of Asian and African and Western European and every immigrant group." With indeterminate multi-racial features, she's like a Rorschach test for art students. "You have this idea in your head of how people see you," she said. "And a lot of the time it's not what you think." She told me how sometimes black students might emphasize her lips or nose, and a Japanese student once gave her a painting he did of her. "It still looks like me," she said. "But the Japanese version of me."

Ivan, too, says that artists give a part of themselves to their work. "The drawing is the model, but at the same time, the drawing is the artist," he said.

But what I really want to know is how they summon that elusive capacity to be so, well, nakedly vulnerable. Perhaps it's because for these models the rewards of posing nude are many. When I asked MacKenzie if disrobing for a class is like the fear of jumping into an ice-cold swimming pool, she was mystified. "It's more like jumping into the air, like being able to fly or something, you're just very free," she said with obvious delight. Compared to her old bartending job, which she hated, modeling doesn't drain her and allows time for her artistic endeavors.

Emily, too, would come home emotionally exhausted from her former job in sales. But after modeling, she feels creatively inspired. "It doesn't suck the energy away from the other things I want to do," she said. For Ivan, it's a way to stay connected to drawing, a talent he displayed as a child but never pursued. For Alan, it's a performing art; he's a muse who controls the energy of the room with poses that provide a narrative. It's this aspect of modeling that I find most compelling.

What attracted Brianna to modeling is precisely how exposed it is, which is the very thing that terrifies me. She told me that she's [in recovery for eating disorders](#) and body dysmorphia, which is when you focus non-stop on what you think are your physical flaws. By any standard, Brianna is beautiful, but she said there were times before modeling when she could barely look at herself naked in the mirror. "As someone with broken eyes, I needed to see myself through eyes of someone else," she said.

Posing nude helped. "You're looking at what someone finds beautiful in you," she said, like when students tell her how fun it is to paint her skin. "I would never in my life think my ghostly white skin is a plus!" She now can look in a mirror and see things she likes about her body. "That was not ever something I thought was possible," she said. "This whole job is such a victory for me."

The way these models talked about the perks of their job made me wonder why nude modeling wasn't a therapeutic requirement for anyone who's ever felt self-conscious, self-critical or just plain uninspired. Still, I couldn't shake my queasiness about doing it.

Again I flashed back to college, this time to a clothing-optional beach where my friends and I spent a day together in the altogether, frolicking in our own naked Garden of Eden. But when I unexpectedly ran into a grad student I'd been flirting with — who was wearing shorts — suddenly I was trapped in a real-life version of that nightmare where you go to school and realize you have no clothes on. My first instinct was to grab the nearest towel. But I knew that would only expose my embarrassment, so I didn't. And I suspect he felt exposed for being too uptight to strip down, which brought me back to Emily's observations about who is really exposed: model or artist.

Will I draw the line at posing nude? I'll never say never, but thus far I've stayed on the artist side of the easel. I keep bumping up against that last requirement: a willingness to be vulnerable in front of others. No matter how I parse it, I can't seem to get past it. I admit this with some relief. As a writer, I expose enough of myself on the page; some things I just don't want to share.

But I'm grateful to those who can and do share their bodies — Alan, Brianna, Emily, Ivan and MacKenzie, and the dozens of anonymous people, past and future, whose willingness to be vulnerable means that I can keep drawing lines on paper, in pursuit of turning the human body in art.

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