

STUDY: NUDE

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Under the glare of bright lights and the gaze of twelve pairs of eyes, I was cold and naked. I sat on the dusty, cushioned platform of an art studio in Johns Hopkins' student activity center, my legs slowly going numb, and I tried to remember what I was doing here.

You're here, Carolyn, because you're poor and you're vain.

When I arrived in 1994 for graduate school at Johns Hopkins where I knew no one and needed a job, I called art teachers about modeling, my favorite college job. When a professor asked if I did nude modeling, I gulped and said no. In that case, he told me, he had only two spots for me that semester. At ten dollars an hour — about thirty dollars a session — I was going to need a few more gigs.

As my money dwindled, my interest in disrobing increased, and I wondered why I was so uptight. I loved telling people I did art modeling. I let them marvel at my lack of inhibition, and I loved watching them dance around the question they all wanted to ask — do you take your clothes off? But I felt like a fraud. If I were a real Bohemian, I would be so comfortable with my body I wouldn't care about showing it.

Yet there was a voice that told me I shouldn't crave being stared at naked by an appreciative audience, nor need the safer pleasure of provoking people to imagine me posing nude. Perhaps this was the voice of my puritanical grandmother, who was so intentionally oblivious to vanity that she wore her hair in forties-style rolls well into the sixties and who believed so strongly that clothes were only for covering the body that she dressed my mother in second-hand clothes throughout her childhood. Thrift stores had not yet become vintage stores, but my mother, ever ahead of her time, transformed the embarrassment into beatnik chic by wearing only black, completing the look by draping her straight hair behind one ear and drawing dark eyeliner around her deep-set green eyes. What my grandmother had intended as a way to divert eyes, my mother

turned into a way to attract them. She was a natural model. I wasn't sure I was.

I'd started modeling in college after I saw a sign on the bulletin board outside the dance studio: "Wanted: Dancer, for art modeling. \$10/hour." When I found out I didn't have to take off my clothes, just had to improvise movement for students to sketch, I was sold.

I would arrive in the cluttered basement studio, the young professor would put on Miles Davis, Billie Holliday, and I'd play while the teacher exhorted the students. "You should move like she does," she would call. "I want to see the music in your hands." I loved that job.

It wasn't the same at Hopkins. The portrait modeling sessions went well, but sitting stiff and still was boring and exhausting compared to the movement modeling I'd done before. During a break, I wandered around the room peering at the renditions of my face. I didn't recognize myself much more than I had in the schematic movement sketches — this was only an introductory drawing class. They hardly compared to the dozens of portraits of my mother I'd grown up seeing, taken by the photographers, professional and otherwise, who naturally gravitated to someone as photogenic as she. She seemed to take being looked at appreciatively for granted. I never did.

My mother never modelled professionally, yet she was photographed for magazines like *Esquire* and *Life*. The *Life* photograph never ran. She was gleeful that the photo the magazine took for a spot on, as she put it, women of the Ivy League who were actually good looking, proved unusable because, she said, she hadn't washed her hair in a week.

The *Esquire* photo did appear, perhaps because my mother was cooperative this time. The article was about "people living in sin," she said sarcastically, a portrait of the shocking new phenomenon of college couples living together out of wedlock. Moreover, she told me, it was a fraud. The Berkeley couple in the story was married, and my mother, portrayed as shackled up with a Harvard guy, was living in Radcliffe's dorms, she said. "Do you think Radcliffe would have let any woman get away with that, in 1967? Ha! A Radcliffe girl wasn't even supposed to walk across Harvard Square in pants unless she had a three-quarter length coat on."

In those days, every Radcliffe dorm had a house mother whose job it was to see that every resident was in her room at night, and no woman was allowed in Harvard's main undergraduate library. My mother's first experience at college was getting thrown bodily out of Lamont Library when, ignorant of the rules, she tried to go to a class there. She cooperated with the *Esquire* article as a protest against all those rules.

Her feminist motives may have been of the highest order, but I wasn't so sure about *Esquire's*. It didn't seem an accident that it was my mother's photo that fronted the article. My voluptuous mother was so striking that twenty-five years after she graduated, a man in her class remembered her to me as the most beautiful woman at Radcliffe. And in 1967, how could an article about living in

sin fail to titillate? From my 1997 vantage, I had to laugh when I later read that the Berkeley couple “went to a nude party once, but found it a bore,” but I figured that to 1967 readers, unmarried cohabitation and orgies went hand in hand.

I think these conflations made my mother a little queasy. It took some squeezing for me to get the precise date of the article out of her so that I could someday find a copy; she was not crazy about my reading it. Yet when she finally gave in, she got a kick out of telling me about the photo shoot, about the clothes an expensive boutique provided for her to wear. When I asked her if the prurient slant of the article bothered her, she changed the subject.

As I listened to her, I realized that my motives for modeling were much more personal than hers. They have as much to do with my relationship to my mother as with larger cultural issues. Like my mother’s motives, they are political — for a woman to be comfortable with her own body is a feminist struggle these days — yet they are somehow smaller. College women once fought to get into the library; now we fight against the waif look — the starvation aesthetic perfected by Kate Moss. My mother struggled against Harvard; I struggle against the myth that a woman’s value lies in the degree to which she approximates some beauty ideal invented by Condé Nast. My mother hoped to provoke basic change in Harvard’s treatment of women, whereas I knew that my modeling wouldn’t change anything except my immediate financial crisis, and perhaps my own comfort with my body. That makes me a little sad. On the other hand, there are certain things I can afford to be more honest about than my mother could. I see, for instance, that politics and vanity can sometimes get intertwined. When it comes to taking off my clothes, I can’t tell where one leaves off and the other begins. Was I modeling to reaffirm the beauty of the average female body, or my own?

The next semester, I got another offer to do nude modeling. This time, I said yes.

The appointed day arrived, and I began realizing there were all sorts of things I needed to know. Do I just take my clothes off in front of the class? Do I change out of my clothes in the bathroom? But it’s upstairs in the middle of the student activities center. Do I bring a robe? I’ll feel like an idiot wandering around Merryman Hall in a housecoat. And will I look uptight if I bring a robe to cover up with between sittings? If I do change in front of the class, they’ll see my underwear. What underwear would be unobtrusive, neither sexy nor frumpy? It was all much too difficult.

Strangely, these were the things to worry about. It is the transition between normal person and Nude that is embarrassing. It’s more humiliating to be caught in your underwear than naked. At best, you look like the Maidenform woman in her skivvies and briefcase; more likely you look like Aunt Ethel who forgot to lock the bathroom door. Either way you’re a joke. No Botticelli Venus or Manet Olympia wears underwear, though maybe Van Gogh’s potato eaters do.

I decided to arrive clothed and wing it. The professor and I chatted. As

students began taking their places by the easels, he said, "Shall we begin?" I swallowed and began peeling off clothes, while he continued talking. There was no awkwardness as I became naked; he showed no more awareness of my preparations than if I had been setting up an easel. His matter-of-factness eased me.

I stepped onto the platform and settled on to the foam padding. As the clock ticked, I found a spot on the wall just behind the heads of the students, not wanting to catch anyone's eye. I remembered my dance training and tried not to let my eyes glaze. First I pondered the tacked-up print of a Cezanne still life, then, carefully keeping my head still, I turned my eyes to the cracking paint on the wall. When my focus dulled, I shifted my eyes again, and so on, back and forth. The remembrance that I was really naked up here punctuated the time, and it passed quickly, in a haze of strangeness.

When the sitting was over, I gratefully got dressed. I discovered that putting clothes back on is the ridiculous part. It is possible to strip clothes off smoothly, underwear and outerwear off in one go. But in getting them back on there's no way around an underwear phase. Shedding clothes has a certain abandon. Putting them on, you can't help but look as if you're trying to recover your dignity. Without bothering to look at the results of my labor, I scuttled away.

I was glad to have won my Bohemian stripes, but didn't much feel like repeating the experience. So I planned to go back to portrait modeling.

Yet the next time I entered the art studio, there was no chair on the model's dais. I needed a chair if I were to be expected to keep my face and shoulders still for half an hour at a time while they painted my portrait. No chair meant only one thing. As I weaved around paint-spattered easels, piles of drapery, and buckets full of turpentine stained a gray murk, I began sweating under my clothes. This time, novelty would not see me through.

The professor spotted me, and I hid behind smiles and small talk, watching the students setting up, with what I hoped was a casual air.

"Whenever you're ready," he said.

"We doing portrait or figure?" I asked offhandedly, hoping I wouldn't have to take off my clothes.

"Figure."

There was nothing to do but begin stripping jewelry, hurriedly unlacing shoes. Shirt and pants had to come next. As soon as the clothes were off, I was freezing. (Eighty is the ideal temperature if you're naked.) I walked across the cold, charcoal-dusted linoleum, and hoisted my limbs up onto the foam-cushioned platform, stumbling a little.

"Let's start with some quick, dynamic poses," the professor directed.

Searching for support of my shaking hands, I reached an arm to the wall, twisting my torso and other arm in opposition. Soon my arm began tingling, the fingers chilling with rigormortis against the wall. Two minutes were an eternity.

"Change," he called.

Finally. I dropped into a crouch, stifling a giggle as I realized I had picked a Mapplethorpe pose.

“Change.”

I straightened my legs, dropping arms down to toes. The stretch along my hamstrings felt good. As I began to relax, tight hip flexors released and the stretch deepened.

“Change.”

I criss-crossed my legs and twisted my back, which made a satisfying series of pops. “Great pose. Look at the sweep of the back muscles, and the counterpull of her arm against that line,” the professor said, his arms carving my form in the air.

“Okay. Now a long pose. Can you do half an hour, Carolyn?” I nodded and settled onto a stool. Time passed slowly. Pencils whispered against paper. A chair scraped on linoleum as a student shifted in his seat. I tried not to shift.

A large drop of cold sweat oozed down my arm and dribbled onto the platform. Oh god, I hope they don’t notice it, I thought, suddenly remembering that I was stark naked, being stared at by a roomful of very much dressed Johns Hopkins students. The painting might be called “Nude on Green Stool,” but the title wouldn’t mention that the stool had a splitting Naugahide cover that cut into my thighs. My left arm had gone numb ten minutes ago, and needles of pain shot up from one foot. Suddenly, the teacher was kneeling by my naked thighs with a role of masking tape in his hands. He ripped off pieces of tape with his teeth and slapped them next to each foot and elbow. I tried not to flinch as he stuck tape on the Naugahide next to my bare thigh, but he was as casually proficient as a detective outlining a body in chalk, and there was no contact with my skin.

When he finally called break, I had to pick up my left arm with the other arm. Stepping gingerly off the platform, I stumbled on my numb legs and caught myself with a small flop.

I hadn’t brought a robe, so I wrapped myself in my shirt and slunk behind a desk. I peered out at the easels. In what form had I been immortalized?

I hadn’t been. My face was nowhere. One drawing showed a thigh and back, another arms and breast. But most of the room was filled with feet. Exquisitely rendered tendons, stretched metatarsals, scrunched sesamoids. A few of the sketches captured my long toes and bunions. Perhaps these future doctors were more interested in anatomy than in art. Then again, feet are a challenge to draw.

Then it occurred to me to wonder if the students were as embarrassed by my nakedness as I was. Maybe it was easier to look at my feet than at any other body parts. These future doctors were afraid to look higher than my shins — the thought made me smile.

“Let’s get started again,” the teacher called, and I hurriedly fumbled with my shirt buttons and trundled to the platform. I matched my body to the tape marks, trying to hit the same position as before. I thought I had, but new strains and tingles announced I hadn’t quite.

“Is this right?” I asked the students. They narrowed their eyes. A kid with a shaved head gestured with his pencil. “Your hand. The right one. No, the other right one.” Laughter. He demonstrated with his own arm against his thigh, curling his fingers and jutting his elbow. “Yeah.” The room settled into silence.

Now that I knew they weren't painting my face, I felt free to blink, move my head, watch the students. They were squinting, tilting their heads, peering through viewfinders. I suddenly realized they weren't looking at me. They were looking past me, at my sternum, clavicle, triceps, at the angular negative space between elbow and torso. I began relaxing, letting my public face slide away into the torpid blankness of privacy. I began sketching an essay in my head.

The gaze is a potent thing, and we all crave it. There's nothing wrong with that. Don't I dance because I liked to be looked at? Don't I model because I like to be looked at? But there is a difference. It's possible to watch someone move, but it's harder to reduce to a sexual object someone who is moving. The moment someone moves, she rises at least from the level of vegetable to animal, and the more intelligent and willful her movement the harder it is to forget that she is a person. Plus, if you're watched all the time, you don't get a chance to watch. Someone who has been watched watches others differently, just as I see dance differently because I dance. This essay I would write would deconstr —

“Okay, that's it. Thanks, Carolyn. Your check'll be in the mail.” The professor's voice brought me back to the studio. I had to remind myself to put clothes on, make sure that buttons lined up, belt was buckled. No one bothered to watch me get through the underwear phase. As I tucked in my shirt and tugged socks over ankles, the students disassembled their easels and washed their hands. We left the studio, they to spray their sketches with fixative, I to fix mine into the computer.

I ran into the professor a few days later as we both emerged from the cool depths of the library, where I had been doing some photocopying. The bare cement of the patio glared in the first hot sun of summer. We exchanged a few pleasantries about the weather, and he told me he was heading to Swarthmore, my alma mater, to look at its new arts center. As we began to part ways at the bottom of the library steps, he looked over his sunglasses and said with curiosity, “Do you work out? Your body looks in terrific shape.”

I stopped a smile before it had the chance to surface, but I couldn't control the blush that rose in my cheeks. I mumbled something about taking dance classes, told him to have a great summer, and hurried off. Did I blush because he had brought his knowledge of my naked body out of the studio where I thought it was safely contained, or was it shame that somewhere down deep I had wanted to hear someone say this? I didn't know, but I felt like draping myself in flour sacks.

When I got home, I unfolded the copy I'd made in the library. It was a page from *Esquire's* September 1967 issue. My blush returned as I looked at the still tableau that took up the page. In the background, a man loomed black

against strong backlight, the light, the camera and his gaze all greedily focused on my mother. She sat on a couch, with her bare legs nestled under her, her breasts curving under a tight sweater, her eyes looking up at the camera intensely. She made you want to look a long time. I knew now why she didn't always wash her hair.