

The Bare Presence

The Great American Nude by William H. Gerdts

(Praeger; \$25)

Nudity remains visually compelling, no matter how few clothes people are currently wearing in everyday life, and no matter how lax or rigid are the customs governing their removal. Evidence of this is the abiding appeal of nude art both high and low in all Western countries, even in these days of revolutionary images and techniques. Americans in particular have always had tense relations with nakedness. Dealing with it in real life, they have exhibited the same habit of ideology with which they have approached the subjects of religion and food; and in art, certain self-conscious aspirations also apparent in some American fiction and poetry. The lack of a home among comfortable traditions, which may be embraced or flouted with equal confidence, has made the American nude a restless icon, prone to awkwardness and lack of meaning as well as manners.

In art the iconography of nudity is its most important feature, although certainly never its most appealing. Because Western eyes have always loved to rest on it, whether secretly or openly, the nude image has always justified itself even at its most irrelevant. Nevertheless the question of what the nude figure accomplishes, or means to say in its artistic context, is always underlying and enriching the visual pleasure (or intensifying the shock) of its bare presence. In *The Great American Nude* William H. Gerdts describes the peculiarly American ways of giving artistic authority to the nude figure, from modes of modest candor through confident if ambiguous prudery to kitsch, by way of aggressive realism.

European traditions have always nudged the elbows of American artists. In the 18th century Americans might study European paintings in their published engraved versions, but some also crossed the Atlantic for direct instruction (as American artists did for two centuries thereafter) when native opportunities seemed to lack scope. The nude model was an unavailable commodity in colonial America except in pictorial form. Early neo-classic artists, modishly devoted to the purity of the

antique nude, had to go to Rome to look at Apollo and Venus in the Vatican, or to England to draw either from the casts or from the living model at the Royal Academy. Relations between England and America, though politically violent, were artistically extremely peaceable, even incestuous, in the days of Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley.

Gerdts' book is most interesting when it deals with shifting American styles in nude subject matter. Because of chronic national prudery, the nude had to sidle into American art rather obliquely, often against the kind of public protest that is combined with private delight. American problems encountered by nude subjects in art seem to have their parallel in the history of American movies, where for a long time naked facts as well as naked people were not permitted to appear in alleged representations of common truth. Nude subjects had to be both genitally discreet and ostentatiously classical or biblical for some time, while they were nonetheless often quite erotic in flavor, until after the European mid-19th-century convulsions in representative art had produced their effects in America.

Realism, following Courbet and Leibl, and impressionism were combined with a general acceptance of the academic necessity for producing nude images without excuse. Gerdts shows how late 19th-century nudes, newly unidealized and realistic in rendering, nevertheless required neutral outdoor settings—pools, glades or fields—with some possible but subdued classical reference in the title ("Arcadia") or the stage-props (panpipes and drapery); whereas by the first quarter of this century self-contained nude subjects could be shown in intimate indoor settings without risking the kind of censure incurred even in France 50 years earlier by Manet's *Olympia*, and which caused bedroom nudes in America to be mostly relegated to saloons.

Despite the American reluctance to take to nakedness easily, one or two of our best artists have manifested their gifts most characteristically and brilliantly through the nude. In the 1880s

Thomas Eakins got into trouble by protesting too much about the importance of the nude model for art students; but for his own work it proved a perfect vessel in which to distill his delicate, ironic and even somewhat sinister realism. Gerdts gives ample attention to Eakins' remarkable talent for rendering the nude with a combination of lucid erotic melancholy with almost pedestrian physical details. A later visionary artist of the realistic nude whom he appears to slight, however, is Edward Hopper. It seems wrong to dismiss the unique awkward beauty of Hopper's nudes without observing the psychological power it gives their solitary images. Both these artists are distinctively American, using the nude in ways that specifically depart from European academic, "realistic" or modern traditions. One classic contemporary American painter of the nude entirely ignored by Gerdts is William Bailey of the Yale Art School. Bailey's nudes, like those of Ingres, are refined abstractions, in sharp contrast both to the evocative naturalism of Hopper and Eakins and to the harsh commercial eroticism of Pearlstein and Wesselman, whom Gerdts believes to represent the main trend in present American nude art.

Curiously enough, while confining himself to this genre, Gerdts does not appear to have an esthetic interest in the representation of nudity itself. He makes no attempt to trace the development of styles in the rendering of bodies, with respect to exact proportions, posture and gesture, nor does he try to isolate the specific elements that generate erotic flavor, fashionable appeal, art-historical allusion or pathos. It seems impossible, moreover, that a whole book on nude art should fail to deal directly with the subject of pubic hair in all the various ways it has been used, finessed or ignored in representing the human body. It was, after all, for a long time the unacknowledged badge of overt erotic intent, an absolute barrier between acceptable idealized nakedness, however seductive, and the somehow intolerably real truth.

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