**The Nude in the 20 and 21 Century**

**S/2**

**Curated by Jane Neal**

The body politics surrounding The Nude in the 20/21 Century have provoked some of the most hotly contested debates in history. The human body, and most especially the naked human body, has fascinated artists for millennia, ostensibly because, no matter what the era, our relationship with the corporeal is a necessary constant, and our love affair with the body, intrinsic to our survival.

For artists, The Nude can provide an almost endless supply of inspiration. Since the 20 Century, it has become a site for experimentation for many artists, a means to explore the themes of sexuality, biological feminism, gender politics, and the ageing body in a world increasingly driven by the currency of the visual image, and intolerant to forms that are considered to traverse the societal 'norms' of how 'we' should look. The human body is always in flux, evolving as we grow, develop and age. It can function as a ground upon which to project desires, and, because of the nature of flesh and all that the skin covers over, it provides a huge challenge to painters, sculptors and photographers alike, in order to reveal the tension between what can appear to be an almost hermetically sealed, hard vessel and the organic mass of muscle, bones, sinews, organs, veins and blood, contained within.

In the 21 Century, the nude body has become even more in focus in popular culture, with television programmes abounding such as: 'How to Look Good Naked', 'Embarrassing Bodies' and an increased focus on how the naked body is presented for display. The waxing of various bodily parts is now an expected procedure for a large swathe of sexually active people, in much the same way that in the second half of the 20 Century it became 'de riguer', for women to shave their armpits. The 'rise of the razor' was linked to an explosion in the development of advertising in the early 20th Century, and so the marketing of the body began.

With the increased intersection of the fine art and fashion worlds visible throughout the Western media, the body beautiful is on display wherever one looks, held up as a vision for mere mortals to aspire to. A new icon for our age, robbed of religious significance, romantic or intellectual context, The Nude is now all about the celebration of bodily perfection; the closer to a designed mannequin, the better. Paradoxically we know that Western society is struggling with obesity, that large percentages of Europe, America and Australasia's populations are not just slightly over weight, but dangerously so. For the first time in history, the rich are thinner than the poor, and eating disorders - primarily among young middle class girls, but also across the social spectrum and gender divide - are on the rise as the division between 'the thin, rich, beautiful people', and everyone else, becomes increasingly pronounced, and the pressure to be among the rarified band, almost unbearable. According to the renowned psychotherapist, Susie Orbach: 'The sense that biology need no longer be destiny is gaining ground and so it follows that where there is a (perceived) body problem, a body solution can be found. A belief in both the perfect body and the notion that we should relish or at least accede to improving our own body has not, however, solved the problem. On the contrary, it has exaggerated the problem and contributed to what we observe today - a progressively unstable body, a body which to an alarming degree is becoming a site of serious suffering and disorder.'

The sexualisation of the body, and particularly the focus on certain areas, such as the female breasts, has resulted in society divorcing the body from natural, biological functions, such as breast feeding. The 2014 Film: 'Free the Nipple', followed a group of young women who took to the streets of New York City topless, to protest against the archaic censorship laws in the United States, where in 35 states it is effectively illegal for a woman to be topless, breastfeeding included. The film explores the contradictions in our media-dominated western society, where acts of violence and killing are glorified, while images of a woman’s body are censored. The question at the core of the film is: what is more obscene: Violence or a Nipple? Now a global campaign, it endeavours to stand against female oppression and censorship, both in the United States and around the globe.

It is important to recognise that even today, the body is still being politicised and used as a means of social control. Sexual violence in warfare continues to be employed as a method of threatening and controlling women, and in some cases, men. The legislation of pornography in the UK in late 2014 has also proved controversial. An act of state censorship, it has been described as retrograde and sexist, and according to legal consultant, Myles Jackman (the only solicitor in the country professing to specialise in sexual liberties and obscenity law), writing in The Independent in December 2014: 'It's not just the depiction of certain sex acts which is under attack — our freedom is too.'

The body, and especially the nude, can be both a target and a weapon. No wonder then that artists are fascinated with the labile phenomenon that is The Nude, and that the 20 and 21 centuries have produced such a wealth of art around it. But if The Nude is very much in focus, there is one section of society that remains hidden. Is it possible that if Simone de Beauvoir was writing today, she may have configured the iconography of men, and particularly the heterosexual male nude, as: 'The Forgotten Sex’? The heterosexual male nude is increasingly invisible as an image. Who, in the feminist-dominated arena of gender politics today, is taking an assertive stand for maleness? The gay community has understandably worked hard to raise attention for their own position, but their efforts stand in sharp contrast to the silence surrounding the young heterosexual male community. Considering society's preoccupation with sex and sexual images, in part driven by the proliferation of sexual imagery on the internet, is it not strange how there is such a one-sided focus on the female body? According to the eminent neuro psychiatrist, Dr. Anthony Fry, the questions that need to be asked are: 'What’s so terrifying or corrupting about the penis?' And, 'Why are images of it almost entirely absent from our media?'

The artists featured in S/2's 'The Nude in the 20th and 21 Century', all consider The Nude as subject. A number of them have either confronted, or continue to challenge modern society (and the art world's) cloaking of the male nude. Today, The Nude most commonly brings to mind a female body, arguably the legacy of a male dominated 19 Century where the female body became the absolute object and focus of male desire and the male gaze. The objectification of women, by men, in art was challenged in the 20th century by artists such as Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke, and Cindy Sherman, but still the mythical equation of male artist/female subject, persists in the general consciousness.

S/2's The Nude of the 20/21 Century will be comprised of works by several of the most important figures of recent art history and some of the most interesting, promising and controversial contemporary artists.

**The exhibition will divide into sections:**

**The Celebrated Nude**

**The Fear of the Nude**

**The Reclaiming of the Male Nude**

**The Iconography of the Nude**

**The exhibition will include works by:**

**Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Louise Bourgeois, Cecily Brown, John Currin, Martin Eder, Lucian Freud, Robert Fry, Anthony Gormley, David Hockney, Gustav Klimt, Robert Mapplethorpe, Henry Matisse, Justin Mortimer, Pablo Picasso, Cindy Sherman, Egon Schiele, Attila Szucs, Alexander Tinei, Caroline Walker, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Hugo Wilson, Johnny Yeo**