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Naked Reflection

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A mirror is a reflective surface that we, as humans, are often drawn to out of curiosity. Ben Witmer, a local artist, transformed a simple mirror into something more—a work of art.

"Mirrors hold a special irony—that is—we look into mirrors to understand how others will perceive us, but what we see is how we see ourselves being perceived by others," Ben Witmer says.

Witmer graduated from Iowa State in 2011 with a bachelor’s degree in integrated studio arts. While attending, he studied abroad in Rome, where he found inspiration in the abundance of classical, realist art depicted in Italian museums.

A piece of Witmer’s work—a life-sized nude portrait of himself that he made for a class project as a junior—was even displayed in the Memorial Union for a bit. He admits to receiving complaints and finding that objects were often used to obscure his image when more conservative groups met in the Gallery room where it was displayed.

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For his latest work—which he began as a student at Iowa State—Witmer traveled around the country, looking in museums male. The fourth is a painting of a male torso—Witmer's—and a female torso facing one another on a horizontal mirror.

According to Witmer, the mirrors serve as a way to better involve the viewer within the artwork.

"It's a really killer concept—being forcibly put into a nude painting," Daniel Forrester, owner of Inkblot Studio, says. "I think they're brilliant. They're actually one of the most amazing things I've seen someone Ben's age do."

Paint isn't usually compatible with a mirror's sleek surface, so Witmer painted on five or six thin layers of acrylic gesso, a surface primer, delicately to make a clear silhouette before painting the intricate image with oil paints. It took great effort and time—approximately 30 to 40 hours—to attain the amount of detail needed to achieve a look of realism. This is a relatively small amount of time to spend on a painting.

Tyler Rigg, a friend of Witmer's, saw him work on the paintings. "He has a very distinctive style—nothing really conventional about his techniques," Rigg says.
Witmer paints with thin layers and blends them subtly, rather than using big globs of paint. “I don’t like there to be too much evidence of my brush strokes in the work.”

One of his goals was to address how viewers at museums and galleries are uncomfortable with nude paintings. He inferred that viewers feared being judged by others who might see them looking at the artwork.

“I have come to terms with the fact that I cannot truly influence an individual’s opinion with my artwork. That being said, I still believe fully that I have the means to inspire people to look further into themselves, and question what they believe to be true,” Witmer says.

Witmer worked off a nude photo of each of his subjects. He had them stand in a relaxed, anatomical position with their palms facing forward. Witmer chose the pose to prevent the subjects from creating a sexual or provocative interpretation to viewers.

There are a total of seven figures so far. The first of which was his younger sister, Hannah. “Nudity doesn’t necessarily need to be sexual,” Witmer says. “It’s just a human body.”

Hannah agreed to be his model. “I guess I liked the idea of being a part of his work in general,” she says.

One day, Hannah went to Witmer’s place, stripped down and held the anatomical pose so Witmer could take a picture. Witmer had a camera set up with a plain wall prepared as the backdrop. “I’ve never done anything like it before,” Hannah says. “I was comfortable because he’s my brother...to other people, it’s more shocking.”

Hannah was able to see the finished product at the grand opening of Inkblot Studio. “He’s so talented—he made me look so beautiful,” she says. “It was strange to look at myself like that. There were all these people around and I didn’t know what they were thinking.”

While looking over his work at Inkblot Studio, Witmer says, “You can tell the order I painted them in...They’re getting better.” The latest piece being the one of Sarah Critz.

“It was a bit cold,” Critz says with a small laugh, referring to when the photo was taken of her.

Critz and Rigg both modeled for Witmer’s paintings. “I don’t know if I am a model. I’m just a friend of Ben’s,” Rigg says. “Ben makes you feel really comfortable and he’s a person who says yes in life. He makes the people around him do the same.”

According to “Sexuality Now: Embracing Diversity,” a textbook by Janell L. Carroll, “many of the earliest cave drawings and animal bone sculptures have been representations of the human form, usually scantily dressed or naked (p.494).”

In fact, many of the most praised artists—Édouard Manet, Pablo Picasso and Edgar Degas—have painted the human form.
Jonathan English, a student in the class, says, "He painted nude people just to do it, to be honest," says Jonathan English, a student in the class. "He’s using his talents to help those uncomfortable with those types of pictures and possibly their own image of themselves. In my opinion, that’s a great gift to give somebody.”

Witmer had never spoken to such a large group before. He described his work and the inspiration behind it.

"I thought the mirrors being used as a canvas was a very interesting concept," says Megan Beckman, another student in the class. "What would be a better way to know how you feel about something than actually seeing your reaction?"

Witmer provided Popillion and her class with images of the four paintings currently on display at Inkblot Studio.

"Personally, I don’t think I could be a model for his paintings, just because I don’t know if I’d be confident enough to look at myself or for other people to be able to just stare at my body."

The work is provocative; viewers have the chance to put themselves in another’s shoes, whether or not that is a comfortable place.

"All I want to do with my art is to produce a question in the viewer’s mind," Witmer says. "Make it a catchy song that you can never get out of your head, singing ‘Is that really what I think?’"