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Naked and Displayed

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“You don’t mind posing?” Cléo asks.
Dorotheé quips back, “No, why?”
“I’d be so exposed, afraid they’d find a fault.”
“Nonsense! My body makes me happy, not proud. They’re looking at more than just me. A shape, an idea. It’s as if I wasn’t there, like I was asleep.”

This dialogue, lifted from the 60s French film Cléo from 5 to 7, muses on nude modeling and exerts a predictable tilt towards the artsy-fartsy opinion of things that one would expect from a French movie. But fast forward more than 50 years later and a big skip across the Atlantic, and we solicited similar, lax responses as Dorotheé’s from four Iowa State students—a few who pose and a few who draw.

The program on campus is BPMI Co-op. BPMI is an acronym for Biological Pre-Medical Illustration, which is a major offered through Iowa State that combines elements of the sciences and the arts to prepare students for a career in biological illustration. The mission of the BPMI Co-op is to assist students in the BPMI program to improve their figure drawing and to create sketches to include in their portfolios that will come in handy while applying for graduate programs. The program is not limited to these students, but open to any artist interested in sketching human figures or to learn new or better drawing techniques.

Assata Caldwell, a senior who is studying pre-BPMI and co-chair of the program, says that during the time of the session “the artist and the model tend to go off into their separate worlds. We have music playing to fill the silence and hopefully it also keeps the model occupied so they don’t think too much about being naked. A big part of it is just trying to keep everything relaxed.”

This mood has successfully been transmitted to the models, at least according to model Emily Cisneros, a student model and sophomore in Pre-Medical illustration who attended the BPMI workshop for a over a year as an artist. She says that although staying relatively still for two hours is extremely challenging, the vulnerability of being nude was not a source of worry. It really wasn’t that big of a deal to her.

“The difference between naked and nude has become very clear to me over the past five or so years. A common misconception is that nudity is always sexual. But really, it has nothing to do with that,” Cisneros insists. “The biggest obstacle I had to overcome was boredom,” she continues. “Every part of your body must be still, including your head. Staring at the same thing for two hours is not exactly enjoyable.”

Savanna Falter, a freshman model in Pre-Industrial Design, recounted the two-hour session.

She usually arrives around 5:45 p.m., goes into a small closet attached to the main room to change out of her street clothes and into her own robe and flip-flops and along with that attire, she brings a towel, a snack and a water bottle. Once she changes into her robe, she goes out into the space where students will be setting up their easels. She describes the room as quite filthy with charcoal, dust and no windows but is warm because of the spotlights—what one would expect for an art studio.

She places her towel on the chair or bed, and her water and snack on a nearby chair. The poses are discussed, then with the robe still intact, she samples the poses.

Then when the clock strikes precisely 6 p.m., she simply removes her robe and flip-flops, and assumes position. The first twenty seconds of positioning can be awkward, but once focus on holding the pose is reached, she forgets about her bare body. Not missing an opportunity, she then quotes Rose from Titanic, “Draw me like one of your French girls, lack.”

While posing, the artist and the model are not supposed to make eye contact, but a friendly conversation tends to ebb and flow between everyone. The model is allowed to sprinkle small breaks throughout the session in case of sore joints, and a 10 minute break comes at 7 p.m. Then, after the break is completed, poses and pencils resume their work until 8. At that point, just as simply as she disrobes, she slips her robe and flip-flops back on.

She derives most of her satisfaction viewing the portraits of herself afterward. “Most of the time I don’t think they look like me—they usually look much better, and it gives me a self-confidence boost. To me, having confidence is not only a sensation within one’s self, it is something that people reassure you of as well even if they aren’t purposefully doing so.”
This space, the studio that is, is an incredibly intimate environment, with the relationship between the model and the artist varying from an understood absence of conversation to a bantering back and forth while the two hours tick by. Oddly and perhaps magically, the intimacy of the moment is trapped within that room, unable to mingle about with the outside world. It

Caldwell became good friends with one of the models she sketched multiple times. In the studio, they rattled tales of fraternity life and old cartoons. As coincidence would have it, she saw the model at a party. They stared at each other at a distance for what seemed to her five minutes, then as a pal would, she said something to break the ice. Her choice of words? “Ha, I’ve seen you naked.” She admits it was a bizarre thing to say and seems to understand why the two did not talk for the rest of the night.

It is a certain kind of special to be nude in front of someone and to be one of those someones. What’s the impression that remains after the portrait, though? After all, we are just a bunch of shapes.