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*Note: This is the second lecture in a series of five as part of the "Path of Liberation" lecture series. More information below event description....

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Being There

Anatomy of a Picture

Exploring Taboos in Art

Words and Photography by Matt Dibble



Your eye went directly to the plastic wineglass didn't it? Yes, it's an art opening. The exhibition: Full Frontal: A Male View of the Male Figure, at Esteban Sabar Gallery in September. An exhibition that questions why "The specific image of a naked man remains taboo in our society."

Taboo? It's been nearly 25 years since a man, three stories high and clad only in white briefs, first loomed over Times Square, stopping pedestrians in their tracks on behalf of Calvin Klein. And it has been 18 years since a Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective featuring homoerotic photographs nearly brought down the National Endowment for the Arts. Here in the Bay Area, where clothing-optional beaches and Abercrombie & Fitch ads are as much a part of the landscape as Coit Tower, is the nude male really taboo anymore?

The Back Story

OAKLAND — *Police are trying to find out who used red spray paint to deface a wall-sized public mural about the oppression of the Ohlone Indians. Oakland muralist Rocky Baird completed the 25-by-10-foot mural on the side of Gaylord's Caffe Espresso at 41st Street and Piedmont Avenue in February. Since then, he has heard from a few people upset that the mural features a naked American Indian man.*

—Kristin Bender, Oakland Tribune, April 25, 2006

We would not be gazing at a man gazing at his platform shoes right now, were it not for another naked man across town. The central figure of the mural is an unclothed Ohlone man, surrounded by Spanish missionaries offering him jeans and a red shirt. Before Baird could complete his mural, someone else stepped in to finish the job begun by the Franciscans: red spray paint obscured the man's genitals. After several repair jobs—and more vandalism—Baird finally left the mural as is.

The Curator

Full Frontal's curator, Carl Wolf, was living near the Ohlone mural when the incidents



began. "I thought, why the sharp reaction? In the 21st century we're not ready for this?" Wolf asks. After a public protest, it became clear that a small group of Native Americans felt the nudity was demeaning. "In the context, you see these missionaries trying to clothe the native person. So the nudity illustrated the point of the mural," says Wolf, who recognized taboo at work. "It's still a nude figure. So nudity is savagery? What's up with that?"

The Jingtowntown Connection

Months later, while visiting the Jingtowntown area during Open Studios, Wolf was reminded of the Ohlone man. There in Fernando Reyes' studio, among masterful charcoal drawings of landscapes and female nudes, hung masterful charcoal drawings of male nudes. Peacefully coexisting—as nature intended. Wolf began to envision a show of male nudes by male artists. Reyes sent Wolf to the nearby studio of Russ Osterweil.

The Photographer

Though Russ Osterweil has made hundreds of images of male nudes, none were hung for Open Studios. Instead, when Wolf arrived, they had to search his computer. One image they found, *Wayne Stretching*, is included in the exhibition. "You see the sensitivity in this guy," says Wolf. "You look at it more like you look at an image of a female nude, much more organic."

"I thought about this image for two years wondering if it would ever be publicly shown," says Osterweil.

Wolf knew he had the genesis of a show, and the fact that he had never curated an art exhibition before was not going to stop him. "I'm a personal trainer!" he says. "I work with bodies, which doesn't really tie into this, but it's an interesting coincidence."

The Photograph

The show inspired Osterweil to create a new body of work. "I knew I didn't want to use models," says Osterweil, whose subjects are acquaintances or men like the one above, whom he found online; some identify as gay, some as straight. "The feeling that I got from all of them is to first gulp at the idea and then to decide not to empower that timidity but to empower liberation."

The Boxes

There is the bed, an empty shelf and some taped-up boxes. "I don't find out too much about who they are, because I want to find that out while I'm doing the shoot," explains Osterweil, standing at the opening with his model, Kenshi, who is seeing the photograph for the first time. "The boxes are real. Kenshi had just moved here from Utah. He grew up in a Mormon environment."

"San Francisco is the first place where I was really able to just be myself," says Kenshi. "It [the photograph] pushes the envelope for me. I love the idea of not being stuck in a box. I think the way women are able to express their selves through fashion is very liberating, and I think men are very restricted. If I want to wear platform boots, I'm gonna wear platform boots."

Adds Osterweil: "We don't look at men, and we certainly don't look into men. I think the taboo is against being seen as vulnerable, being available for scrutiny."

The exhibition, which also included the work of Kamal Al Mansour, Terry Furry, Ross Kennedy and Marty Mccorkle, ran Sept. 7–Oct. 15.

E-mail Matt Dibble at beingthere@oaklandmagazine.com.

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