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Naked and unafraid

How contemporary artists are reclaiming the nude

A striking portrait by the Zimbabwe-born, London-based artist Kudzanai-Violet Hwami takes the traditional representation of the female nude and tosses it aside in spectacular style. Against a zesty tangerine backdrop, a young Black woman stands tall, chest forward, shoulders back, hips open as she rests one foot on a step that's out of view. There's a confidence to the pose, which is strong and fixed, as rooted as the thick stem of the leafy green pot plant behind her. Her lips are locked, her eyes glued to the horizon. A pair of hands – those of the title, *Dance of Many Hands* (2017) – emerges from one side of the canvas and edges toward her, fingers grasping for flesh. And yet, she stands firm, in control of her own image.

Art history is filled with nakedness. To be specific, it's filled with naked women depicted by men. Often there's a mythological or allegorical explanation; occasionally it's more about holding up a mirror to contemporary society. Either way, the women tend to be reclining, laid out for male viewing pleasure. The presence of a drawn-back curtain adds an extra dash of voyeurism. Props hint at a before and after. Think Titian's ravishing *Venus of Urbino* (1538); Diego Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* (1647-1651), a sumptuous study in pink and cream; or Édouard Manet's brusquely naked women in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*, both painted in 1863.

Hwami isn't the first to twist the traditional view of a sexually available female subject. Suzanne Valadon subverted the male gaze with her reading and smoking (and fully clothed) modern woman in *The Blue Room* (1923). The Guerrilla Girls' most recognizable work – *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* (1989), a reproduction of Jean-August-Dominique Ingres's *La grande odalisque* (1814), her face hidden by a gorilla mask – was sparked by a survey of the New York institution, which found that less than five per cent of the artists in the modern galleries were women, while eighty-five per cent of the nudes in those galleries were female.

Sometimes subverting things means saturating them, and embracing the idea of the body as object was

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another key gesture in the New York art scene in the 1980s. Fusing American suburbia and Queer fetish subculture, the prolific photographer Jimmy DeSana, who died in 1990 at the age of 40 from AIDS related illness, created playfully kinky images of men and women (the gender isn't important), along with everyday household items including storage boxes and coat hangers. With their lurid lighting and unlikely combinations – two lots of pale legs poking out of a gym bag, a strategically positioned high-heeled shoe within an otherwise sheer pair of tights – DeSana created surprising assemblages of people, animals, and objects reminiscent of the Surrealist exquisite corpse.



The young Swiss artist Jeremy breaks down bodies, too – or rather, he explores how far bodies can be broken down before they're no longer considered human. While the majority of nudes on display in galleries and museums are female, the male body, too, has for centuries been a site on which artists have explored ideas of desire, tragedy, beauty. Drawing on references from Ovid to the Italian Baroque and German Expressionism, Jeremy moves beyond the masculine and instead captures stretched and swollen figures in shifting states of metamorphosis. His works are populated by, among others, an amorphous mother figure with a hint of breasts and a belly; a hybrid hunchback with a nubby spine topped with flickering flames; a mass of curly hair; warped and jumbled limbs. Part figurative, part abstract, the artist's pink-tinged paintings and vessels capture shapeshifters that defy categorization up close, and in turn promote a more gender-fluid and all-inclusive way of being. But it's not easy. There's a sense of struggle in *The Impact (Running Through a Field of Arrows)* (2023), which captures a ruddy body spliced and sliced, and *Vessel B* (2023), an elegant, elongated vase fringed with throbbing veins.

Sanam Khatibi inserts nude figures into hostile environments too. Inspired by the mystifying and hypnotic works of Hieronymus Bosch, the Belgian artist, whose practice encompasses painting, tapestry, and sculpture, presents stark, unfussy figures engaging in violent and sexual acts in fantastical settings. A far cry from the passive female subjects painted in opulent interiors by Titian et al, Khatibi's pale-skinned people are let loose into the wild, where they slaughter and skin rabbits, urinate, and wander about with hearts and snakes in

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their hands. Among the exotic flora and fauna are crocodiles, dogs and deer, a nod to the characters' primal instincts, and small and delicate still lifes of porcelain and skulls that allude to pagan offerings and sacrifices. Stripped bare, the figures symbolize a state of being that's free and feral.

Besides such unsettling representations of nakedness, Hwami's powerful nude portraits seem hopeful and bright. But tied up with them are thorny questions about the depiction of Black bodies throughout history. Think again of Manet's *Olympia*, except this time turn your attention away from Victorine Meurent, the artist's favorite model, reclining in the foreground, and towards Laure, the maidservant handing her a bunch of flowers wrapped in paper. With paintings such as *Virtue Sermon* (2021), showing three embracing naked men, and *Expiation* (2021), a bold portrait of a woman lifting up her blue-striped top to reveal her bare breasts, Hwami puts the Black body front and center.

Using collage as a starting point, Hwami creates compositions from digitally edited and layered family photographs and online archival and pornographic images. The use of collage, she has said, reminds her how fragile the human condition is when you strip back the basic parts of the self: gender, sexuality, race. Also, clothing. Free from social signifiers, the body has room to breathe, and Hwami – like her fellow artists – is able to explore how it's presented and perceived, broadening the narrative.