

"For lexicographers construed..."

Exhibit explores the nude in photography

The Nude in Modern Photography
Ring House Gallery
To February 12

Review by Angela Wheelock

The nude has been one of the classic subjects for artists in all mediums, and photography - the newest "art" - is no exception. The exhibit, "The Nude in Modern Photography", which opened Sunday at the Ring House Gallery was put together by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and is aimed at educating the viewer about the role of the nude in 20th century photography, or as the catalog informs us, to "illustrate the myriad ways in which photographers have responded to the nude, whether male or female."

At this level the exhibit succeeds in bringing together 45 eclectic examples of nudes by a wide range of photographers including such acknowledged masters as Edward Weston and Bill Brandt, as well as lesser known artists such as Marsha Burns and George Platt Lynes. California artists are most completely represented, as is to be expected of an exhibit that originates in San Francisco.

The arrangement seemed haphazard at times but often succeeded quite well, forcing the viewer to think and react to the nude in new ways. I enjoyed the two pieces the organizers chose to begin the exhibit with: Kevin Wrigley's small intimate portrait of a woman posed in a Victoria-style room wearing only stockings, and Eikoh Hosoe's tiny abstract nude, "Untitled (#50)". Both works were much smaller in scale than many of the other pieces in the show, thus encouraging the viewer at the beginning to pause and consider the subject matter which was going to be presented. Hosoe's work was particularly compelling, suggesting texture and flesh without any reference to specific parts of human anatomy; it revealed the beauty and wonder of the human form more subtly than a more concrete photograph might have.

Beginning the exhibit with these two somewhat unconventional photographs set the tone for a number of surprises and unusual treatments throughout. Of course there were the requisite number of classic female nudes, including Man Ray's masterful portrait of Suzy Solidor, and Manuel Alvarez Bravo's sensual and brooding study of a young girl. But there were a number of unexpected treatments such as Leslie Krims' "Paul Diamond in the Engine Compartment of His Volvo." Here we see a young bearded man wearing nothing but socks and tennis shoes sitting on the engine of a well-worn Volvo. But there is nothing ludicrous about the pose, the connection of man and machine somehow seems right. (Krim's is perhaps best known for his series of nude portraits of his mother making chicken soup, called appropriately enough, "Chicken Soup".)

Which brings us to the underlying "point" (as I understood it) of the exhibit, which was to turn many of the sexual stereotypes associated with nudes on their heads, and to blur the boundaries between how we perceive the male and female forms. Nowhere was this more evident than in the way the organizers chose to end the exhibit. The two final photographs epitomize androgyny at its finest.

The first, "The Beautiful Man" is a portrait of what the viewer initially takes to be a lovely young woman. "Her" face is at the center of the composition, and one

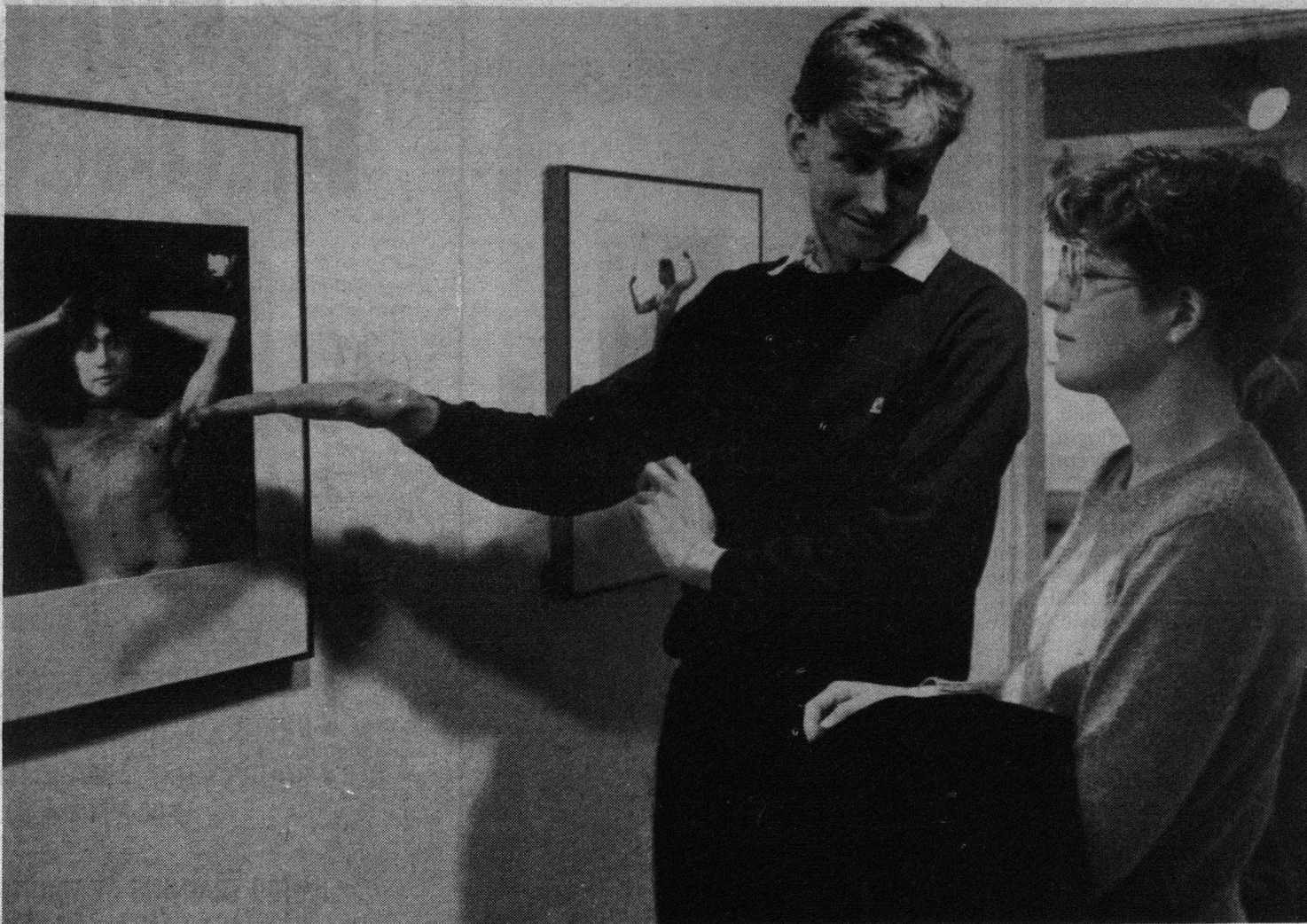


photo Bill Inglee

Couple enjoying Ring House Gallery exhibit.

instinctively looks there first and thinks, "What a pleasant girl," or something to that effect, only to be faced with the disconcerting fact that "she" has a hairy chest and no breasts. The shock value is very clever, as one looks at the lovely face and then the chest, the photography communicating a double message some may find exciting, others disturbing.

The final photograph, Roger

Mapplethorpe's "Lisa Lyons", shows the world famous woman weightlifter. She is shown in a typical Atlas pose, in a rocky - dare I say heroic? - landscape. But is she a Greek god or a goddess? Here muscles don't necessarily preclude femininity.

This is not to suggest that the exhibit hits the viewer over the head with all of this. It is at the same time a pleasant introduction

to modern photography, and a challenge to our commonly held notions about nudes (and men and women); all of this with some surprises and marvelous photographs with

enough variety to suit most tastes. An hour at the exhibit some snowy afternoon would not be time ill-spent, surrounded by the luxuriousness of all that bare flesh in the middle of an Edmonton winter.

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