

Life Drawing Class

By Susan Ferguson



It's a foggy Tuesday morning, and one by one, students of various ages shuffle into the spacious studio, lugging large drawing boards. Paint-splattered easels stand in a large circle, facing a cushioned platform. We each select one and hoist our pads onto its track. With the concentration of an orchestra fine-tuning its instruments, we busily adjust our easels' height and tilt. We unpack bundles of charcoal and stash the cloths and erasers we will need once the drawing begins. Quiet chatter fills the room, mixing with hushed anticipation.

I straddle a stool facing my easel, set at precisely the right height for my eye to glide from paper to platform. Other students stand waiting at their easels, feet wide apart.

In the far corner of the studio I notice a woman without any drawing supplies, sitting alone. Moments later there's a quick blur of motion beside me; I look up to see the same woman, suddenly naked, standing on the platform before us. A rumpled robe lies at her feet.

The instructor, also appearing from nowhere, now paces beside the model and booms out, "OK class, Alika is our model today. We'll start with ten sixty-second warm-up poses. Remember, keep it loose and flowing!"

It is Alika's first time modeling for our class. For her opening pose she finds an exuberant stance: forward motion caught in mid-stride. Her chest is thrust forward, head tilted back. All eyes around the room take in her delicate form, so different from the more rotund shapes we usually draw.

Having propelled herself onto the platform, Alika now takes her first daring steps onto the tightrope. But suddenly, eyes floundering, she is in danger of losing her equipoise. From behind our easels we meet her gaze and steady her back into position.

We are a circle of twenty strangers who offer protection, a safe cocoon that guards her delicate secret. Partitions at the entrance of the studio shield her from any stares of onlookers and help sustain our intense focus.

When we pause for a break, a small, gray-haired woman at the easel on my right, turns and asks, "How can she do that? I'd never find the courage."

I think back to my own heart-pounding attempts at self-disclosure. In design school my projects always culminated in an oral presentation to a panel of architects. These exams had prompted me to hone my drawing skills: I found it easier to point to detailed renderings than to deliver a shaky verbal explanation of my designs. All semester I had been feverishly excited creating my project, but when it came time to present it publicly, my enthusiasm gave way to self-doubt. During each torturous unveiling of my creativity I always felt the sting of the same subversive thought: How dare I assume my ideas are good enough?

I look now at this young woman and marvel at her courage to stand tall and expose her nakedness. In talking with various models after class, I have learned that none of them are exhibitionists. But they all do possess a calm self assurance, never doubting the inherent beauty of their bodies.

When they disrobe before us, our models reveal a well-kept secret—the indescribable beauty of the human form. They give us an unedited version of themselves, with flaws and imperfections in full view. They present the whole package, with no apologies or disclaimers. “This is who I am, take a look. I am a worthy subject for your drawing.” They teach us a profound self acceptance, as disarming as it is genuine.

Our teacher slowly circles the room, pausing to watch as we scramble to capture the figure in each fleeting pose. Every sixty seconds he calls out, “And...change!” for the next stance.

Alika flows gracefully from one position to the next in a freeze-frame dance of her own creation. Each posture affords us a different angle, a new and challenging placement of arms around legs, an overlay of lines and foreshortening of proportions.

We have learned that the key to drawing a lifelike figure is first to take in the broad sweep of the entire form. We then translate that impression—for instance, the long curve of the back rippling out through the legs—into a quick, spontaneous line on the page. The trick is to stop thinking, stop trying to control the outcome, and simply trust the hand to work in unison with the eyes.

At first, it is utterly exhausting work. It’s frustrating to see my hand scratch out an awkward and clumsy shape in total betrayal of my vision. I am groaning out loud when the instructor appears over my shoulder.

“That’s right, over here. But notice how the chin drops below the shoulder line. And look at this lovely curve along the arms.” He takes my charcoal and adds a sweeping line that magically captures the swanlike lilt of Alika’s pose. My drawing is redeemed, along with my sense of the possible.

Every once in a while I unexpectedly enter a flow, and my hand faithfully recreates the contours I see. During these moments time loosens its taut edge and all tension is

dissolved. My hand guides the charcoal knowingly along the paper, easily giving the answer that was there all along. I stand aside and let the miracle unfold, careful not to question what I can't possibly explain.

When the final pose is over, we pack our supplies. My neighbor says to me, "Too bad we don't have any older models, my age."

I think back to all the models I've drawn in classes over the years. Men and women of different builds and colors. Pregnant mothers with bulging bellies; stout and stocky men; voluptuous women with ample hips and thighs; even slender and bone-thin models. But none with loose skin and sagging musculature.

"I guess we just weren't taught to be so comfortable with our bodies in my generation," she sighs.

But as my friend and I leave the studio, we both agree that now, when we step out of the shower at home and meet our reflections in the mirror, we see ourselves in a kinder light. We can forgive the breasts that have succumbed to gravity, the dimpled thighs and soft folds of belly.

We are learning to accept the unedited version of ourselves, to find beauty in lines that are bold and free and true. What we see in the mirror is living art, a unique form exquisitely drawn and continually revised by the hand of a master Artist.

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