

Naked Truths"

**A conversation with Patricia Stewart
by Esther Mürer**

Patricia Stewart, a member of Central Philadelphia MM, teaches contemporary art history at the University of the Arts. In 1995 Pat was guest curator of "Naked Truths," a show of nudes by local artists at the Philadelphia Art Alliance. The following is taken from an interview written for the Central Philadelphia MM Newsletter.

Pat originally wanted to do a retrospective show of the work of the painter Edith Neff. "Being a Friend has helped me to understand why I value Edith's work," says Pat. "Each figure has its own reality. Many artists would change the figure to bring it closer to ideal proportions. Edith doesn't; her figures stay fat, thin, or shortwaisted. These are real people."

Edith Neff, feeling that the time was not right for a retrospective, suggested that Pat instead put together a show of nudes. Pat set about visiting studios and talking to local artists. She wanted works representing an emotional range—sad, confrontational, funny, joyous. She wanted a range of media—painting, drawing, sculpture, stained glass, photography, video. She sought a diversity of styles, but excluded artists who were primarily concerned with issues of form, technique, or material; she "wanted the people to be people rather than collections of forms and colors and angles."

Above all she sought, and found, images of "people doing or experiencing something." Three mud-covered Graces rising out of a lake. A person with AIDS, covered with sores, looking up to heaven. A predatory Venus. A sleeping child. A Crucifixion with a female Jesus.

Only after she put the show together did she realize that it was politically diverse as well. Some artists have an agenda—feminists, gay activists, African Americans; some produce works which are interior, poetic, otherworldly. This realization made her uncomfortable at first, but it came to her in meeting for worship that it is wrong to impose a false unity. "The fact that all the artists insist on the individuality of the figure puts them all on the same side, that of lifting up particular reality."

Writing an essay for the show's catalogue was a challenge. Pat doesn't feel she could have written it before becoming a Friend; previously she wouldn't have been able to understand or articulate some of the values which she feels the show conveys.

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"I wish I could understand the American anxiety about nudes," says Pat. "They are mostly relegated to porn shops. I suppose it has to do with the distinction between public and private spaces and with who controls what goes on in both. Nudes bother people most when they blur boundaries—between public and private, between power and vulnerability.

"European artists have tended to use nudes to make universal statements; without clothes, the figure transcends class and time. But the collective nature of Quakerism, and the emphasis on concrete experience, has reinforced my understanding of how much the particular matters—of the importance of upholding concrete, individual truth—not in the spirit of 'anything goes,' but as a gift to the community. There are a lot of false universals around," says Pat.

Why nudes? Clothes serve as a *persona*, a mask. Perhaps the nude figure transcends self in the narrow sense and, discarding irrelevancies, presents an incarnation of the Self we were meant to be.

We'll let the nude have the last word. Writing in the August 1994 *Friends Journal* about her experience as an artist's model, Roberta Nobleman lists as the essential requirements for the job: The ability to sit still; humility, truth, and hope. She says

This is *not* the centerfold of *Playboy* magazine. Every roll of fat, every wrinkle, every wart, every blemish—that's what the artist draws.... It is my true self sitting there, just as I am without one plea. If Jesus or Mary walked into an art class, I think they would take up a brush and start painting.

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