

Desexualizing Sexy

Finding the desexualized space between naked and nude

When Lauren Karpinski pivoted to painting nudes, she was a little taken back when her Google searches for “nude female” pulled up some really in-your-face images of flappy vaginas and perky boobs. Then she narrowed down her search with, “nude female for art drawing” and got a little more of what she was looking for: line drawings, abstracts, and Greek marble sculptures.

“I had to specify because I started feeling weird, like why was I seeing this? It was interesting thoughts about, ‘Wait, is this OK? How are people going to see this? Are they gonna see it as sexual?’” Karpinski says.

Pinterest apparently did. Karpinski had just finished her “clearly abstract” painting of a female figure. It had pink nipples with pink paint drips running down the canvas. A small pink dot covered where the pubic area was. Like any modern artist, she posted a photo of her art on Pinterest, but soon enough, it was flagged and taken down; her account, frozen.

“I thought art was allowed?” Karpinski says. “But no. The message I got back was like, ‘If there’s anything with nipples or genitalia or fluids, we won’t post it.’”

AMERICA SEES SEXY

America loves to sexualize everything. It used to be that when you sat down to watch porn, you’d choose categories like sex, boobs, and butts. Now there are specific interest videos for body parts like feet, hair, elbows, and ears. There’s probably a sexual fetish for about every part of the body. Fetishizations exist for both sexes, but female bodies are more objectified into sexual pleasures than male. Unsurprisingly, this objectification is rooted in the male gaze.

John Berger, late novelist and cultural thinker, broke down the male gaze in his well-known book and BBC docuseries *Ways of Seeing*. “Men look at women,” he wrote. “Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”

We see the result of the objectification of women to attract to the male gaze in advertisements all the time. Women dripping in oil while lying on the beach next to a sunscreen brand. Women in short, sequenced dresses posing next to the newest, hottest car. Berger describes women as

being made to be “surveyed” objects, but that notion is the exact reason why hypersexualized advertisements of women continue to exist.

And why it's expanded. Just look at Instagram. Although the social platform doesn't let images stay public for too long, if you search #hotwoman on Instagram, you're told 132K posts use the hashtag. But when you try to view these images, a gray bar at the top reads, “Recent posts for #hotwoman are hidden because some posts may not follow Instagram's Community Guidelines.” According to the guidelines, that removed content could be photos, videos, or art of anything from nipples to breastfeeding to buttocks to nudity.

On one hand, we've got the porn industry letting mass female sexualization roam free of charge. Then, there are platforms that celebrate creativity, such as Instagram and Pinterest, who think things like nip slips are too sexual to keep public. But there's a movement to change that. People are working to find a healthy middle ground to desexualize human bodies, to draw the line between naked and nude.

In 2012, the #FreeTheNipple movement fought against the heightened criminalization and censorship of women's bodies and breasts. The *New York Times* reported that about 12,000 women get arrested each year for breastfeeding in public in the United States. And on top of that, another 30,000 get arrested for indecency under state law. The movement wasn't trying to promote seeing naked people everywhere. It wanted to desexualize female bodies.

In 2019, a federal court motioned to finally legalize publically going topless in six US states: Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wyoming. Now, almost 10 years since the first #FreeTheNipple march, a majority of the US women are free to be seen topless, but individual cities can have their own ordinances making the act illegal.

Yet, even with those legal advances, most still don't understand the cultural difference between showing skin while naked and showing skin while nude. Berger identifies this difference in *Ways of Seeing*: “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and not recognized for oneself.”

So if this is our working difference between naked and nude, then to be naked is to be without clothes. Shower, naked. Going to bed—if it's your thing—naked. To be nude is to be without clothes but viewed as a form of art, like models posing for a nude painter. Nudity is the objectification of the body.

The #FreeTheNipple movement represented the act of being naked. Women fought to be seen in their barest, most natural selves—and do it free of judgment. They wanted to show their bodies, not face sexism or be told to “cover up.”

And that's way different than something like, say, stripping. Based on our new definition, strippers aren't people who “get naked for money.” Strippers use their bodies, they use sex, they use attraction to lure men in for financial gain. Their bodies aren't anatomical. They're dressed

up, manipulated, turned into an object. And that object: It's used to attract the male gaze and earn some cold, hard cash. Because of this, stripping is an act of nudity, not being naked.

If we can actively work to remember these definitions of naked and nude, then we can begin to know how and when to look at bodies as forms instead of vessels of sexual pleasure.

Idsonil Alvarez is a 20-year-old nude model and social media creative. Looking at her Instagram can make you feel either dirty or empowered. It's like you're a Peeping Tom looking through a keyhole asking yourself, "Am I supposed to be seeing this?" Her body confidence empowers her to post nude photos overlooking glass balconies, topless pics lying on king-sized beds, and side views of her doing naked yoga during golden hour. Nothing is ever revealed, but it's always implied. It's all intentional.

She was 14 when she got her first camera, an iPad, and started taking pictures of her body. She remembers thinking, "Damn, I look fucking good. I wanna show people."

"It was beautiful. It was my bare body," Alvarez says. "But now when I post naked or nude photos on my Instagram I get shit all the time, but like why? It's just my body. I don't know why people can't just see that your body is art, and that's it."

The more people see nudity as an art form, not just getting naked or selling your body for money, the more accepting society will be to seeing naked and nude in the real world. This acceptance may, even, encourage some to experiment, dress up, or manipulate their own bodies into a nude form.

THE RETURN TO MODESTY

Sometimes meeting in the middle is too much to ask. Naked is naked. Nude is naked. No clothes on is naked. It's all the same. And if everyone could just keep their clothes on, no one has to worry about being uncomfortable, right? Reluctance to recognize where female hypersexualization exists and the difference between naked and nude doesn't stem from stubbornness—it's social, it's cultural, it's religious.

Pure Fashion is a Christain-centered program that promotes modest fashion for young women. Their mission is to engrain in women the notion that they don't need to show skin to be fashionable. They can look pretty without looking provocative. In an interview with NPR, Brenda Sharman, national representative for Pure Fashion, says they want girls to "present themselves in the way that doesn't expose their body parts to get attention, and that they understand that what they wear does send a message, and that they want to be aware of that message." A woman of faith, Sharman is one of many proponents of female modesty.

Carli Nelson, too, is a woman of faith, although she questions modesty and its ties to religion. On her Instagram account, @carliann____, she's naked on beaches and topless in her van

parked seaside. In one post, she's clothless, arms folded over her legs, hunched into a ball. Her nipples, swooped, grazing the tops of her thighs. She added a slight blur to them in hopes the post wouldn't get removed again. Her caption is a callout to modesty, asking what happened to the middle ground where bodies are beautiful, embraced, and shown but neither hidden away nor shared for pure sexual display.

Nelson writes, "Why can't you love your breasts because they are yours and your moms fed you and grew you and believe in Jesus? Why can't you love your vulva, the place your mom pushed you into the world and praise God?... If modesty is truly where you feel comfortable, that's the place you should be. I just hope that it is the place you landed after knowing you don't need permission to post a photo of you loving your body without a shirt on or to lay by the water naked and soak up the sun even when other people are around."

AROUSR

Arousr works at finding the desexualized space between naked and nude. It's an adult sexting and video chat service that focuses less on sending sexy.

"75% of the venue comes solely from texting, meaning no video, no content being sold. It's based on intellectualism," Tiffini Truth, Arousr's social media and marketing manager says. "It's not like this heavy push of sexuality like ass and tits. It's the complete opposite where you're not even having to show your face or your body."

Before Arousr, Truth worked as a model—nude, clothed, runway, fetish, entertainment. America's tendency to sexualize any form of nakedness labeled her as a sex worker. "I personally hate that terminology," Truth says. "I've never considered myself as a sex worker because I've never had sex or engaged in sexual acts on camera. I celebrated my body as a woman, and it was one of the most beautiful times of my life."

Truth enjoyed her modeling career but found it was time to switch things up. She started working for Arousr as a chat host. "I signed up because it did not involve me having to get nude and lewd on camera to a live audience in order to make an income," Truth says. "It was an easy way to make a new revenue stream by getting paid for my words."

Truth is a writer and has always loved to flex her skills. With Arousr, she felt that she could use her creative writing to chat and connect with members rather than sending scanty pics.

The company equally values the boundaries of the female chat hosts and the male members. Users can share nude content, but it's changing the way female sexualization is seen. The app proves that whether it's in life or online, females can be sexy topless, natural, and posed. But they can also be sexy with their words, voices, humor, and charm.

NAKED AND BEAUTIFUL

Pinterest wasn't the place for Karpinski's work, but her curiosity to paint the female body didn't stop. It was the curves, the anatomy, the feeling of painting something that was viewed from behind a closed door. Studying the body made her feel things she wasn't sure she was supposed to feel; It was an uncomfortable headspace—but she liked it. It was attractive. So she kept at it.

At one point, she even asked herself if she was the one doing the sexualizing, painting nude women in the first place.

"But it doesn't have to be sexual if I don't want to. I can literally see it as shapes and forms," Karpinski says. "Or what if I am painting a pose that's more sexual, what's wrong with that? Nothing. It doesn't have to be sexualized, it can just be naked and beautiful."

SIDEBAR Q&A WITH IDSONIL ALVAREZ

K: What are your thoughts on the censorship of the nipple?

I: I think it should be free. I hate bras. I hate shirts. Guys have nipples and so do we. Just because we look better than them without a shirt on doesn't mean we can't. They hate when a woman isn't naked purely for his arousal.

K: On your Instagram, all of your nude photos have emoji stickers covering your nipples. If you could post without them, would you?

I: Yeah, I want to show my nipples to the world. When I do, I want it to be the most beautiful photoshoot in the world, something iconic like how Rihanna did it but better. Fucking why not? It has to be something insanely amazing. I don't know if it'll be a dance video, recorded, my senior film? Maybe I'll put nudity in it. I probably will, definitely.

K: Have you ever gotten shit for the types of photos you post?

I: I love that question. I get shit all the time. I don't go to my requests anymore. I used to get sad. Like, women deserve respect whether she's butt-ass naked or completely clothed.

K: What would you say to creators who are afraid to show some skin and embrace their natural bodies?

I: I say be patient with yourself. Be patient, love yourself, don't focus on showing skin first. Focus on what makes you happy little by little, eating seconds at meals or posting your nipples. People have insecurities in their bodies because of the trauma in their minds. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Love yourself.