

THESIS

UNTITLED NUDES

Submitted by
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Summer 1988

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY CHRISTINE ANNE MARTELL ENTITLED UNTITLED NUDES BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

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Department Head

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

UNTITLED NUDES

The strength of my figurative art comes from the fact that it would be hard to paint nudes dispassionately. In essence, every nude done by an artist is a self-portrait because it is infected with his or her own experiences and needs. The figure is psychologically where we live, and we bring whatever emotions and needs we might have to it.

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When I began painting the nude figure, I was influenced by a background in figurative sculpture where the figure becomes an island unto itself wherever it is placed. This three-dimensional idea of the figure being unattached to any specific setting was an interesting vision for me because the viewer's primal senses are immediately confronted by the nudity itself and not influenced by a specific setting which could justify the nudity. A nude figure demands our attention when we encounter it unattached to a specific world.

Painting, for the most part, creates some kind of environment for the nude, giving it a time and place. With this information, the idea of nudity has some justification. Bath scenes, mythology, and the Bible have traditionally given artists a vehicle to justify to the public a portrayal of nudity. In contrast, I like the mystery, tension, and uneasiness that the lack of narrative gives my paintings. The minimal description of the setting and the self-absorbed attitude of the figure itself untie them from a time and place. Realists search for detail, such as hairstyles or makeup, to give their work an unmistakable attachment to their particular time and place. I have left these details out. This lack of personal description gives my figures an abstract, mask-like quality which adds to the mysteriousness of them.

By its very nature, nudity evokes an erotic image. This eroticism grabs our attention immediately because it appeals to our most primal sense. Notably, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) was the first artist who dared to paint an erotic portrayal of women without the guise of mythology or some Biblical theme.¹ He was influenced by the seventeenth century drift in philosophy away from man's divine connection with God toward man as an animal.² The natural eroticism of Rubens' nude women are expressed within and without the socially acceptable themes for nudity in art. His nudes extol the joys of flesh without compromise or guilt and celebrate its ubiquitous eroticism.

My paintings display this awareness of the erotic nature of nudity; private looking moments and dream world expressions heighten this feeling in my figures. My oil paintings are arrived at without the use of a model, but I do make watercolor drawings from a model which serve as a library of ideas for these paintings. I can be less literal and more experimental with the figure when I am not looking at a model. Color also enhances the sensualness of the nude, but I do not make any formal decisions about colors, rather I use them intuitively. The strength of my figurative art comes from the fact that it would be hard to paint nudes dispassionately. In essence, every nude done by an artist is a self-portrait because it is infected with his or her own experiences and needs. The figure is psychologically where

we live, and we bring whatever emotions and needs we might have to it.

Historically, the nude has been captured for the most part with classical empathy. In other words, the nude has been edited for beauty and perfection, and the artist's ability to create this ideal has been the standard in art for centuries for most of the western world. The twentieth century has produced several figurative artists who have helped free us from this idea of classical beauty. Willem de Kooning's nudes are violent and complex. He has chosen line and color in an explosion of femaleness rather than femininity. It was important for de Kooning to leave the traces of his search, that is, the abrupt stops and tentative or explosive starts visible in his paintings. The end result being a unique blend of human energy and the "subjects' latent potency contained within the rectangular controls of the picture's edge."³

Larry Rivers' Portrait of Birdie painted in 1955 certainly was not edited for beauty. The power of the painting lies in the personal statement which Rivers made. She is not desexualized and ornamental like a Matisse nude; she is a tribute to true life with qualities of "vulnerability and fragility."⁴ Reginald Marsh preferred lower- and working-class women as models because they could not afford to disguise their femaleness with the right clothing, hairstyles, or makeup. They parade across his canvas, displaying all of their innate sexuality.⁵

I am comfortable with the fact that figurative art is erotic, and I am also aware of the emotional impact which it can express. The very idea of nudity carries with it a psychological uneasiness because it may speak metaphorically of our fears of being caught unprotected and unprepared. The poses in my paintings may be erotic, but they are not a display of pin-up sexuality. The mood is distinctly feminine and vulnerable. Paint is the only way for me to express the nude in these ways.

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2. Jensen, James H., The Nurses' Concord, Indiana Univ., 1976, p. 18.
3. Hills, Patricia and Tarbell, Roberta K., The Figurative Tradition and the Whitney Museum, New York, 1980, p. 123.
4. Hills, Patricia and Tarbell, Roberta K., The Figurative Tradition and the Whitney Museum, New York, 1980, p. 147.
5. Heller, Nancy and Williams, Julia, The Regionalists, New York, 1976, p. 119.

PLATES

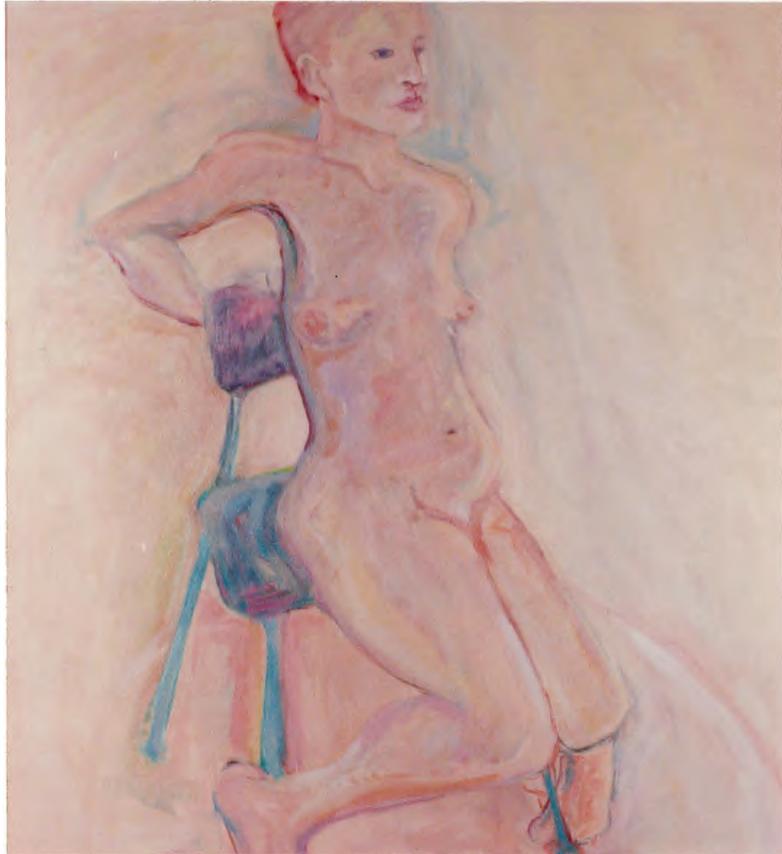


Plate 1. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 38" x 42".

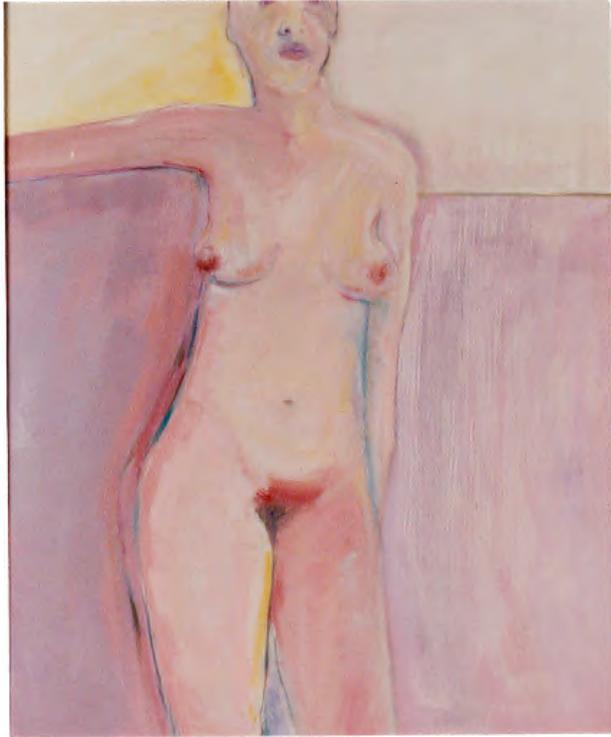


Plate 2. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 30" x 36".

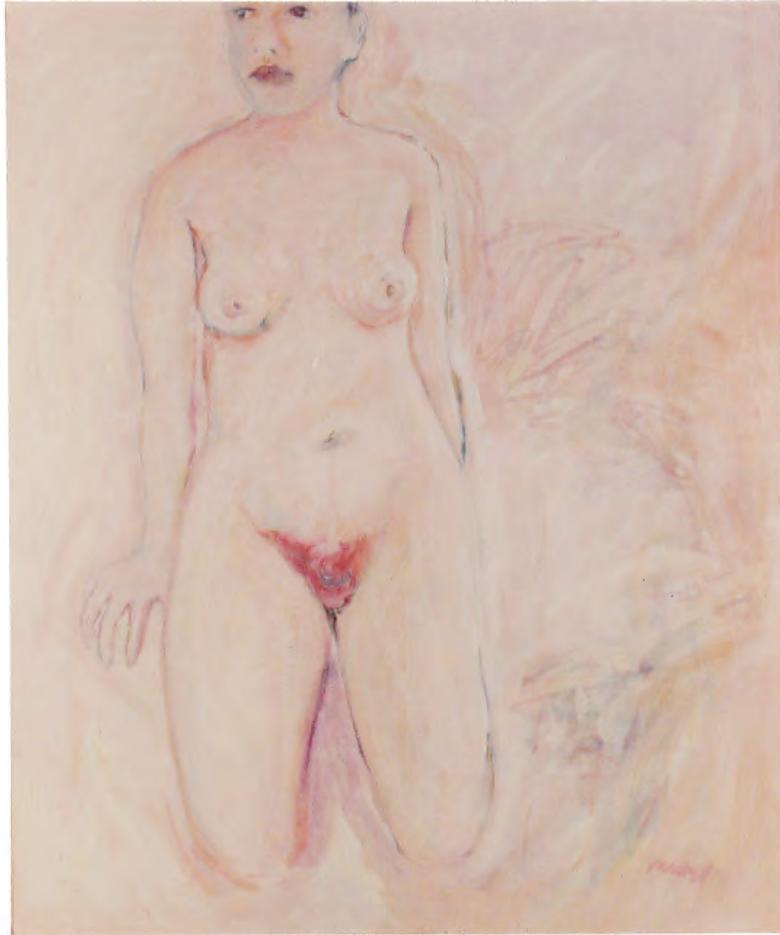


Plate 3. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 38" x 46".

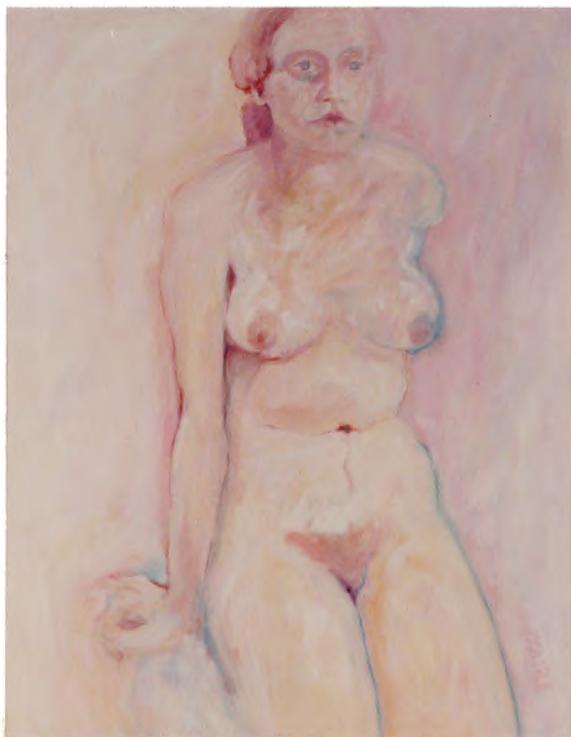


Plate 4. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 28" x 36".

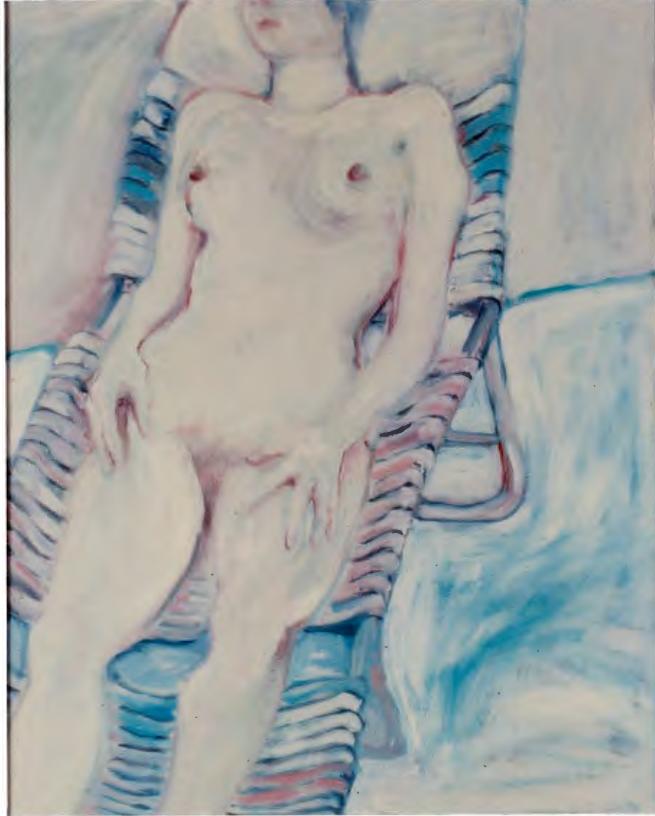


Plate 5. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 32" x 40".



Plate 6. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 30" x 36".



Plate 7. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 36" x 40".



Plate 8. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 36" x 34".



Plate 9. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 48" x 36".



Plate 10. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 40" x 42".

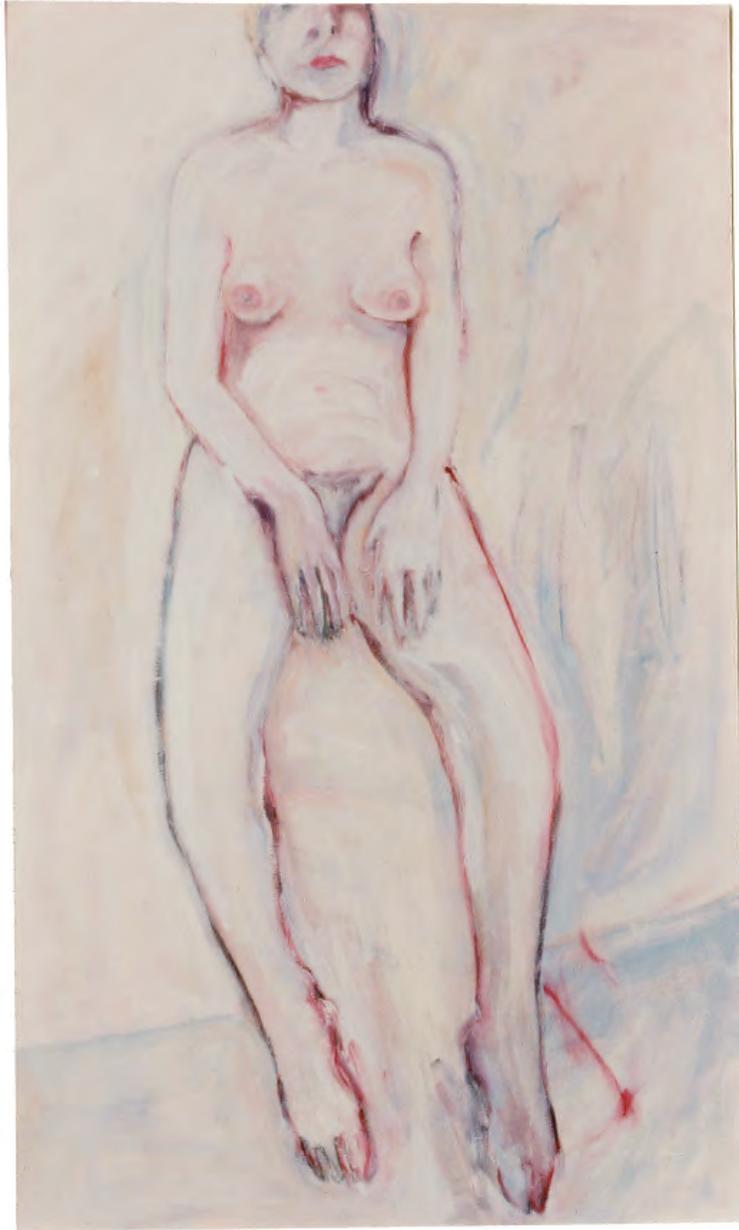


Plate 11. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 36" x 60".



Plate 12. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 34" x 40".



Plate 13. UNTITLED, oil on canvas, 38" x 46".