

THE FEMALE NUDE: A SCULPTURAL INVESTIGATION OF VARIATIONS OF MEANING AND IMAGERY IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

Bonita Kim Alice B.A.F.A.(University of the Witwatersrand)

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PROPOSAL

The Female Nude - A Sculptural Investigation of Variations of Meaning and Imagery in the Western Tradition

My work is intended as an exploration of conceptions of the female form in the imagery of selected Western cultural traditions. This will be achieved by experimenting with sculptural metaphors derived from the female figure as well as from existing images of the female nude in Western culture. The aim is to illustrate the extent to which the meaning of the female nude has been abstracted from its human origins. The work will attempt to show how attitudes to women in Western societies are reflected in representations of the nude female.

I intend to emphasise the practical, that is the sculptural, component of this study, as is required for the M.F.A. degree. The written component will extend and evaluate ideas derived from the sculptural work.

INTRODUCTION

The Origins of the Nude and The Focus on the Female

The nude is so integral to the history and development of art that it has been said to be more than just another of Art's subjects. Kenneth Clark, for instance, has suggested that 'the nude is not the subject of art, but a form of art.'¹ This applies to occidental and oriental societies, and, within these traditions, the history of the nude spans all genres and includes all styles. Although it is possible to make certain generalised statements about the nude in Western culture, these statements cannot necessarily be extended to other cultures where such issues would require more detailed consideration in relation to specific cultural and religious traditions. For practical purposes, therefore, this study will be limited to the nude in Western culture.

It is the aim of this dissertation to draw attention to certain conventions which occur in depictions of the nude female. Since most of these conventions have persisted from one historical period to another, and are common to images of various cultural genres, the area of study has not been further limited to a particular context, historical period or specific genre.

My approach is consistent with the belief that the treatment of the female subject by male artists (particularly since the mid-nineteenth century) reveals

power relationships that exist between men and women in society. That position will be supported in this dissertation. I will argue that certain depictions of the nude female reflect a particular attitude to women in Western culture. What is discernible in these images is the notion of subordination of the female (subject) by the male (artist) - a reflection of his authority in her passivity, and of his power and wealth in her beauty.

In their book entitled *Old Mistresses - Women, Art and Ideology*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have noted that, in the late eighteenth century, following a period where the nude in Art was predominantly male, the female nude became increasingly popular. Furthermore, they emphasize that not only did the female subject predominate from this point onwards, but that women in this period were prevented from attending the academies and schools where these trends developed. They write:

The images reproduce on the ideological level of art the relations of power between men and women. Woman is present as an image but with the specific connotations of body and nature, that is passive, available, possessable, powerless. Man is absent from the image but it is his speech, his view, his position of dominance which the images signify. The individual artist does not simply express himself but is rather the privileged user of the language of his culture which pre-exists him as a series of historically reinforced codes, signs and meanings which he manipulates or even transforms but can

1 Clark, K., *The Nude*, Penguin Books: London, Great Britain, 1956, p. 3.

never exist outside of.²

Because this study engages in the feminist debate on the female body, it is logical to focus on the female nude while ignoring the male. Although the female nude has conspicuously dominated most visual traditions, the history of Art, for instance, is far from devoid of male nudes. However, this dissertation is concerned with those formal conventions which occur mainly in depictions of the female nude and have few comparable equivalents in depictions of the male nude.

In *The Painted Witch*, Edwin Mullins quotes John Berger who, in attempting to show how the spectator's response to certain images is presumed to be male, proposes the following test :

Substitute, he suggested, a male figure for any female nude; then notice the violence which this transformation does to the assumptions of the spectator. If I do this with Giorgione's *Venus* (v.r.1)³, and change her into a naked man asleep clutching his genitals, I do indeed feel a shock. Perhaps if I were homosexual I would feel a thrill. But I do not. It is like suddenly seeing the Frog Prince in place of Sleeping Beauty. I want to laugh: the image looks ludicrous. Perhaps this is because I am embarrassed, or perhaps it is because the pose and mood of the Giorgione *Venus* are perceived as so

quintessentially female as to render any transformation incredible.⁴

In the context of the present discussion, I would suggest that Berger's experiment serves to illustrate how certain devices were established in response to the desire to display the female body in a particular way - the focus thus being placed on her appearance alone (or more specifically, her sexual character) rather than on the identity of the sitter or, perhaps, the figure's narrative or symbolic rôle. The reclining nude female, for instance, has been depicted by many major Western artists over the last five centuries; from Titian (1477-1576) and Francisco Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828) to Ferdinand Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). However, no directly comparable convention exists in depictions of the nude male.

The narcissism inherent in the reclining female nude is essentially passive in the sense that, traditionally, it does not suggest an autonomous self-awareness and confidence. It implies rather the imposition of the values of another on whom the qualities of the nude will reflect favourably - that is, the viewer or owner of the image (or of the woman). The male nude, however, even at its softest and most decadent (for instance, *David* (1411) (v.r.2) by Donatello (c.1386-1466) or *Mercury* (before 1574) (v.r.3) by Giovanni da Bologna (c.1524-1608)), expresses its energy and, in a sense, its independence.

2 Parker, R. and Pollock, G., *Old Mistresses - Women, Art and Ideology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, Great Britain, 1981, p. 116.

3 v.r. - visual reference. See pages 22-44.

4 Mullins, E., *The Painted Witch - Female Body/Male Art*, Secker and Warburg: London, Great Britain, 1985, p.89.

This dichotomy apparently developed in relation to specific cultural and religious practices. To the Ancient Greeks, for instance, the male nude was no less important than the female nude as the incarnation of physical or spiritual ideals. In fact, as Kenneth Clark has observed in *The Nude*:

...the nakedness of Apollo was a part of his divinity...

However,

there were evidently ancient traditions of ritual and taboo that Aphrodite must be swathed in draperies.⁵

(It was with these divinities that the physical ideals of male and female were identified.) Consequently, according to Clark, no nude Greek female figures date from the 6th century BC. and very few from the 5th.

In *Classic Myth and Legend*, Moncrieff asserts that:

At first Aphrodite [also called Venus] appears well-dressed as becomes a matron; but soon her form made an excuse for sculptors and artists to display their mastery of the nude...⁶

Clark has identified a male figure from the Acropolis, known as the *Ephebe of Kritios* (c.480BC) (v.r.4), as the

earliest surviving male nude in whose rendering there is the sense of heightened sensuality. Clark writes: Here for the first time we feel the passionate pleasure in the human body which is familiar to all readers of Greek literature...⁷

Unlike his rigid and geometricised predecessors, this figure is softly rounded, even vaguely plump, with a curled halo of hair and a gentle contraposto. However, there is also an air of physical strength which ensures that figure retains a sense of authority.⁸

5 Clark, K., *The Nude*, Penguin Books : London, Great Britain, 1956, p. 65.

6 Moncrieff, A.R.H., *Classic Myth and Legend*, The Gresham Publishing Company Limited: London, Great Britain, [1913?], p. 38.

7 Clark, K., *The Nude*, Penguin Books: London, Great Britain, 1956, p. 29.

8 The ideal personified in the male nude of Ancient Greece - the pursuit of physical perfection - relates to the cult-like preoccupation with athletics. The male nude of this period is, therefore, essentially athletic. This cannot, however, be said of his female counterpart.

Subverting the Tradition

The traditional dichotomy that was established between depictions of men and women has been deliberately subverted on numerous occasions by contemporary artists. In the images of photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989), for instance, both male and female nudes are rendered god-like and powerful. (v.r.5&6) His preference for well-muscled female models, such as body-builder, Lisa Lyon, enables him to portray both male and female figures as aggressively and confidently erotic. His works, as a result, function as a critique of the more traditional approach to the female nude - in his inverted erotic visual language, women do not serve merely as a means for the assertion of male sexual power. In its conscious breaking of such traditions, (and also, perhaps, in the light of the artist's declared homosexuality), Mapplethorpe's imagery calls to mind those theories that associate images of women with the expression of virility by male artists.

Carol Duncan opens her article entitled *Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Painting* thus:

In the decade before World War I, a number of European artists began painting pictures with a similar and distinctive content. In both imagery and style, these paintings forcefully assert the virile, vigorous, and uninhibited sexual appetite of the artist. The best remembered - but surely not the only - artists who felt the need to see themselves thus reflected were the Fauve artists in France and the Brücke group in Germany. Much of their art not only celebrates male

erotic experience, it promotes some wider, still unexamined notions of women and art in general. ...The concern with virility - the desire to assert it in one's art - is hardly unique to this particular decade. Much of what I am going to say here could be said of later 20th-century (sic) as well as some 19th-century (sic) art.⁹

A primary concern of this study is the apparent loss of dignity of women as reflected in attitudes towards the female nude. In the process of adapting the female nude to various roles, meaning has repeatedly been abstracted away from its human origins. I would suggest that the over-manipulation of the human figure alone may result in a loss of dignity.

In his article entitled 'Iconophobics Anonymous' (*Artforum*, Summer 1990), Thomas Sokolowski refers to photographs of AIDS victims by Nicholas Nixon and Rosalind Solomon. Sokolowski observes that images of the sick and dying run the risk of denying the humanity of the sitter by denying their sexuality. The opposite case has often been stated, that is, the risk of denying the humanity of the sitter by focussing on their sexuality alone. While in each case there is the potential for a loss of dignity, a factor common to both is the manipulation of the figure in order to express an idea. The figure is anonymous - a vehicle of expression rather than the depiction of an individual - and in this alone there lies a risk. While the use of the anonymous figure as a vehicle

⁹ Duncan, C., 'Virility and Domination in Early 20th-Century Vanguard Painting', *Artforum*, December 1973, p. 30-39.

of expression does not necessarily degrade it, it does render it more vulnerable to prurient exploitation.

Unlike the nude female, the authority of the nude male is rooted in his physical strength, and, since the nude male, like the female, generally embodies an ideal, he is rarely portrayed as being less than physically superior. Further, the male nude as visual signifier evokes a range of conditioned responses which is entirely different from those evoked by the female nude. As part of the feminist discourse in art a number of women artists have attempted to subvert the norm by portraying the male nude in a manner and setting usually reserved for the female nude. In her work entitled *Philip Golub Reclining* (1971) (v.r.7), American painter, Sylvia Sleigh (active from early 1960s), has alluded directly to *The Toilet of Venus* (or *Rokeby Venus*) (c.1650) (v.r.8) by Diego Velàzquez (1599-1660). Such inverted imagery operates on the level of irony since, as has been demonstrated by John Berger's experiment, this reversal of rôles is rendered ridiculous by centuries of conditioning. Parker and Pollock have written of this work :

It is a very different image, or is it? The female figure is upright, a strong vertical in contrast to the lounging horizontal of her male model. But the relative positions of male and female in the space of the painting are not reversed. She is further away from us while he dominates the whole of the foreground. He is not simply a body, a model for the artist to work over, he is Philip Golub whose characterful, highly personalized face stares back at us by the device of the huge mirror in which all save

Philip Golub himself, even the artist, is a reflection.¹⁰

Sleigh has recognised and, in this work, reinforced the point, that the mere reversal of rôles is not sufficient to rob the male nude of authority or dignity.

10 Parker, R. and Pollock, G., *Old Mistresses - Women, Art, and Ideology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, Great Britain, 1981, p. 124.

The Erotic Nude

The female nude, throughout its history, has been cast as a primary signifier in the language of erotic imagery. Indeed, it is with this rôle that she is often equated. It is the female nude, and not the male, which is so thoroughly bound up with visual erotic language that one often cannot perceive it as being separate. It is with this type of female nude that one most often associates loss of dignity.

Even in an erotic context, the male nude retains authority and, therefore, dignity. The female nude, on the other hand, is particularly vulnerable to abuse since it functions in this genre as that which offers gratification. Traditionally, the male, if he appears at all in such imagery, is depicted as the party receiving or claiming gratification. The female, in turn, need merely appear desirable. Passivity and availability by implication are essential signifiers in the code of erotic imagery. As part of the manipulation of the motif, the artist will therefore often accentuate passivity, usually through the choice of pose and setting. In *The Painted Witch*, Edwin Mullins writes:

[The] propensity of art to turn people into objects, and to animate objects with sensations normally associated with people, has been of crucial importance in the iconography of women as sexual beings, and therefore in establishing the archetypes that we have inherited of what a sexual woman should be. Because a picture is still, and because the same substance of paint describes everything in that picture - flesh, foliage, or fruit - all sensual encounters have

a tendency to be described in terms of objects. Sexual woman becomes quite naturally a Love Object: art creates an ideal of female passivity. It is no accident that one of the most famous and influential of all paintings of sexual woman, Giogione's *Venus*, in Dresden (v.r.1), depicts the Goddess of Love lying asleep.¹¹

Referring to the female nudes of nineteenth-century Salon art, Parker and Pollock write:

The female figures are frequently asleep, unconscious or unconcerned with mortal things, and such devices allow undisturbed and voyeuristic enjoyment of the female form. Despite variations of style, setting, allegiance or politics, the similarities between these paintings are more striking than the differences. All present woman as an object to a male viewer/possessor outside the painting, a meaning sometimes explicitly enforced by the gaze of a subordinate male onlooker in the painting itself.¹²

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- 11 Mullins, E., *The Painted Witch - Female Body/Male Art*, Secker and Warburg: London, Great Britain, 1985, p.85.
 - 12 Parker, R. and Pollock, G., *Old Mistresses - Women, Art and Ideology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, Great Britain, 1981, p.116.

Apart from these devices which amplify the erotic content of an image, the female nude, in its rôle as chief erotic vehicle, has potential for further manipulation because of Western societies' ambiguous attitudes to sex.

Although overtly erotic images have been produced in abundance, they have not traditionally been acknowledged as part of Art's history. Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures may prohibit, or disapprove of, most kinds of sexual imagery, but explicit depictions of sex acts feature in the artistic traditions of inter alia ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, the Roman Empire, India, Japan, China, Africa, Oceania, Pre-Columbian Central and South America.(v.r.9)

In the West, at least since the Middle Ages, explicit depictions of sex acts have been suppressed. Yet the nude, the most basic vehicle of visual eroticism, has not only survived censorship but has been incorporated into accepted Art traditions. However, because the 'high-art' label has also implied moral respectability (and therefore transcendence of the base instincts of human sexuality), erotic subjects in the mainstream of Western art have been handled covertly. As Thomas McEvelley has observed, in an article in *Artforum*:

...Prohibitions on sexual images hasn't meant that artists don't make them, but that they don't exhibit them; nor does it mean that people don't want to look at them, but that they hide their desire.¹³

He has noted, that as a result of the repression of sexual images, the situation has arisen where a submerged tradition of forbidden images runs in tandem with official cultural traditions. This he describes as a 'dual-image track'. He stresses, however, that the distinction between these two tracks - between legitimate and forbidden images - is in many cases an artificial distinction. This is nowhere more obvious than with regard to the nude in high-art. McEvelley writes :

The idea that the portrayal of nudity, without signs of sexual arousal or engagement, is exempt from charges of lewdness if it occurs in a high-art context stems from the Greco-Roman belief that art draws the mind toward higher things; a belief that has been extended to imply that the viewer whose mind has been elevated by the art effect is temporarily immune to lewd stimulation.¹⁴

The nude in the context of high-art is thus unlikely to encounter moral criticism as long as its sexuality is not too overt. The female nude is thus doubly manipulated - firstly, in the interests of titillation, and secondly, in the disguise or sublimation of implicit erotic content.

The most common explanation for the scandal caused by *Olympia* (v.r.10) by Edouard Manet (1832-83) at the Paris Salon of 1865 is that her sexuality was too obvious to be sublimated. Manet's nude appears to have defied the unwritten code that although a female subject should

13 McEvelley, T., 'Who Told Thee That Thou Wasn't

Naked?', *Artforum*, February 1987, U.S.A., p. 103.
14 McEvelley, T., 'Who Told Thee That Thou Wasn't Naked', *Artforum*, February 1987, U.S.A., p. 104.

be available for scrutiny, her sexuality should not be too much in evidence.

A common safe-guard against the criticism of nudes on moral grounds has been the use of allusions to mythology, particularly in the art of the late 19th-century Salons and Academies. This popularity of mythological subjects is generally attributed to the revival of interest in Classicism. However, the reference to mythology in many of these works was largely superficial. What is far more obvious is the heightened eroticism of images like *In the Tepidarium* (1881) (v.r.11) by Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912) and *Birth of Venus* (1863) (v.r.12) by Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889) - in the figures' abandoned poses and the sensuous treatment of their skin. In neither of these works is more than token reference made to the Classical subject matter. The allusion to the Classical nude merely legitimised the depiction of an idealised nude female in a setting which enhanced the beauty (and sensual appeal) of her nakedness.

Clearly, the nude cannot be wholly detached from sexuality; and to attempt to do so in order to justify its place in Art would merely be morally expedient. It may be argued that the nude, however sensuous, is never as flagrantly erotic as images which make direct reference to sexual acts. The very choice of the nude as subject matter may be taken as acknowledgement of the nude's inherent sexuality. At very least, claims of disinterest in that inherent sexuality are unconvincing. Kenneth Clark has vehemently defended this position. In response to the statement by S. Alexander, in 1933, that :

If a nude is so treated that it raises in the spectator ideas or desires appropriate to the

material subject, it is false art and bad morals.¹⁵

...Clark replied :

...no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feelings, even although it be only the faintest shadow - and if it does not do so, it is bad art and false morals.¹⁶

Thus Clark supports the view that the idea of a pure, asexual nudity (befitting the elevated status of Art) is a fabrication.

Charges of indecency against nudity in Art have generally been limited to genres other than 'high-art'.

The degree of manipulation of meaning in the female nude is wide-ranging. In scenes of war and horror, for instance, the nude female has been depicted as exposed to violent forces, as in Delacroix's sadistic and theatrical *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) (v.r.13), or as an 'heroic' populist symbol, as in *Liberty Guiding the People* (1831). (v.r.14) Marina Warner, in her investigation of the female form as allegory, writes of the figure of *Liberty* :

Above all, Liberty's exposed breast stands for freedom because thereby a primary erotic zone is liberated from eroticism...By exposing vulnerable flesh as if it were not

15 Clark, K., *The Nude*, Penguin Books: London, Great Britain, 1956, p. 6.

16 Clark, K., *The Nude*, Penguin Books: London, Great

so, and especially by uncovering the breast, softest and most womanly part of woman, the semi-clad female figure expresses strength and freedom.¹⁷

Here Warner has analysed the underlying psychology which made it possible for the symbolism of the female nude to be extended and exploited - sadistically and propagandistically.

The Nude as Ideal

Reference has been made to the range of diverse concepts which the female nude has been chosen to personify. Many such values - for example, good, evil, truth, liberty - imply idealism. Hence, within certain traditions, the female nude has been closely related to notions of an idealistic nature.

Ann Hollander, in her book *Seeing Through Clothes*, writes:

The idealizing function that is inherent in the serious nude art of a dressed society - to express longings for a primal virtue, a primal human beauty, a primal sexuality - had an inevitable by-product. This was the costume of nudity itself, which might be described as a visual extrapolation of the sense of being 'with native honour clad.' Paintings and sculptures of nudes offered the opportunity to make a style of clothing out of nudity, in a way that the natural undressed behaviour of the sartorially committed usually inhibits.¹⁸

Kenneth Clark supports this when he writes:

The body is not one of those subjects which can be made into art by direct transcription...the process which students of art call empathy...is at the opposite pole of creative activity to the state of mind which

17 Britain, 1956, p. 6.
Warner, M., Monuments and Maidens - The Allegory of the Female Form, Pan Books: London, Great Britain, 1985, p. 277.

18 Hollander, A., Seeing Through Clothes, Avon: U.S.A., 1975, p. 84.

has produced the nude...We do not wish to imitate; we wish to perfect....the naked body is no more than the point of departure for a work of art...¹⁹

In his book *Bodies of Knowledge - The Psychological Significance of the Nude*, Liam Hudson refers to the body as

that which gives us the alphabet of images in terms of which most of our imagining occurs.²⁰

There is surely no better illustration of these ideas than the fact that within particular cultures and historical periods, the nude has often acquired a pattern or formula by means of which it has been modified to the specific needs of a culture or period. Consequently, through much of art's history, it has been possible to determine the cultural and historical origins of an image by identifying and locating this formula. (Clark has noted that it is only in Mediterranean countries that images of the nude reveal a greater acceptance of nudity in its natural and imperfect state.) Clark stresses, however, that unlike most other subjects in art which, similarly, have served as points of departure, (the animal motifs of Romanesque art, for example), the nude has its own associations that are not entirely lost in the completed work.

19 Clark, K., *The Nude*, Penguin Books: London, Great Britain, 1956, p. 3.

20 Hudson, L., *Bodies of Knowledge - The Psychological Significance of the Nude*, Weidenfield and Nicholson: London, Great Britain, 1982, p. 9.

In order to accommodate the wide range of concepts with which it has been identified, the female nude has not only been appropriately allegorically presented, its form has often been intrinsically altered in order to express these various ideas. By distortion of selective aspects of anatomy, the *Venus of Willendorf* (c.25 000 - 20 000BC) (v.r.15) and *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) (v.r.16) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) have each in turn, been physically 'adapted' to reflect those concepts for which they are visual metaphors. The former is the expression of an ideal of fecundity. Her breasts and belly, those parts of her anatomy which reflect her function, have been exaggerated and the rest of the body reduced or understated. In the latter, an ideal of erotic femininity, the spine has been lengthened and the skin rendered impossibly smooth and polished, hence, augmenting the image's inherent sensuality. Neither accurately reflect a real experience of the female body; indeed, that is not their intention. It is understood, therefore, that the nude is an artificial construct that can function as metaphor.

As has been stated, the nude as a subject of art, from Prehistory to the present, has been closely linked to idealism. This is affirmed even in inversion. The works of Lucien Freud (b.1922) (v.r.17) and Philip Pearlstein (b.1924), among others, subvert the practice of idealising the nude, but in so doing, reinforce the notion of idealised physicality.

Outside the realm of Fine Art, female body types continue to reflect different values and perceptions of women. In his essay entitled 'Monroe and Sexuality', Richard Dyer reaffirms Marilyn Monroe as the popular female ideal of America in the 1950s (and perhaps of all

time).(v.r.18) He identifies as the focus of this ideal, the idea of "desirability". Further, he observes that what characterised the ideal type was, above all, "unambiguous whiteness" and hence, the whitest possible hair colour. Dyer writes :

This race element conflates with sexuality in (at least) two ways. First, the white woman is offered as the most highly prized possession of the white man, and as the envy of all other races. American Imperialist and Southern popular cultures abound in imagery playing on this theme, and it has been the major source of all dominant race images in the twentieth century. There is the notion of the universally desired "white Goddess" explicitly adumbrated in Rider Haggard's *She* and its several film versions; and there is the most obvious playing out of this theme in *King Kong*, with the jungle creature ascending the pinnacle of the Western world clutching a white woman.²¹

Also, as Dyer observes, blonde hair is frequently associated with gold or platinum, and therefore with wealth.

The 'high' and 'low' orders of culture, as represented by Fine Art and Hollywood films, are generally regarded as reflecting vastly different values and concerns. However, the differences between the two genres are not clear cut.

21 Dyer, R., 'Monroe and Sexuality', Women and Film, Todd, J. ed., Holmes and Meier: New York, U.S.A., 1988, p. 81.

The Influence of Nineteenth Century Sculpture

The sculpture of the nineteenth century has been an important influence on the works completed for this dissertation.

The revival of interest in Classicism in that period gave rise to a wealth of female nudes, initially as Classical motifs, but later, loosely adapted and integrated into various styles and movements. In his book, *Nineteenth Century Sculpture*, Maurice Rheims has interpreted this period as a response to the demands of the newly rich middle-class in Europe and America. He writes:

In reality, the true originality of nineteenth-century sculpture lies in its public 'utility' - for a public whose taste was not sophisticated but still responded to noble actions and fine sentiments.²²

[The] taste for classical art persisted throughout the century. It corresponded sufficiently with what elegant gentlemen sought as well as the man in the street: something handsome, lofty in manner, and with a good likeness.²³

He notes also that:

...the lively success enjoyed by Antique symbolism was not unrelated to the restrictions of censorship: the crowds swarming to the Salons delighted in the academic spectacle - that is to say, the nudity.²⁴

Sculptors in the nineteenth century depicted the female nude with varying degrees of expediency. Despite the variety of subjects it represents and styles in which it occurs, there is a general sense of pleasure in the sensual and idealised female nude. Trends ranged from a fair degree of seriousness to decorativeness and, finally, to kitsch.

With the emotion and drama of Romanticism the female nude became a noble and heroic figure, as in *Dying Lucretia* (1834) (v.r.19) by Damian Campeny y Estrany (1771-1855). In this work, Lucretia has collapsed gracefully in a chair, a breast exposed and a knife, the instrument of her death, at her feet. As in Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* (v.r.14), the bared breast signifies abandon and passion. However, in this image, the erotic potential of that exposed breast has been emphasized rather than underplayed.

The female nude was depicted, as a favoured medium for allegory and symbolism, in works like *Electricity* (v.r.20) by Louis-Ernest Barrias (1841-1905), a monument executed for the Paris Exposition of 1889. In this composition, the nymphs which attend the visual

22 Rheims, M., *19th Century Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson: London, Great Britain, 1977, p. 11

23 Rheims, M., *19th Century Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson: London, Great Britain, 1977, p. 16.

24 Rheims, M., *19th Century Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson: London, Great Britain, 1977, p. 15.

symbols of technical and scientific progress are not discreet and neutral nudes which assume the identity of their surroundings. They are overtly voluptuous. Ironically, the image combines educational moralising with an overt sensualism.

During the second half of the century, a lightness and lyricism emerged with Art Nouveau. The female nude, now sentimentalised as a magical and mysterious creature of nature, was again found to be the perfect motif. Small bronze statuettes, like *Flower Woman* (late 19th century) (v.r.21) by Maurice Bouval (d.1920), were extremely popular and extensively reproduced.

Later in the century more rigid styles returned to favour, stylised versions of the academicism with which Art Nouveau had broken.

Apart from the more covert exploitation of the sexual nude in nineteenth century sculpture, there are images which, despite the prudishness of the period, place the emphasis clearly on the nude's erotic qualities, as for instance, in works such as *Woman Caressing a Chimera* (1866) (v.r.22) by Sèraphin Denècheau (1831-1912).

Rheims writes:

The realist sculptors, in illustrating the social condition of women, show us more or less unwittingly the evolution of sexuality and sensualism. If the Romantics, Flaubert in particular, contributed to opening women's eyes to their own status, the moral taboos that were even more inflexible than in the

preceding century forced women to dream of their other life.²⁵

Within twentieth century sculpture, the most important influences on my own work have come from works by Gaston Lachaise (1882-1935), Aristide Maillol (1861-1944) and Reg Butler (b.1913). Clearly, these sculptors were involved with sculptural trends which began in the nineteenth century. For all three, the female nude is an important focus. Lachaise and Maillol produced almost nothing else. Maillol adhered fairly closely to a stylised neoclassical realism, introducing a restrained expressiveness in works such as *The River* (1939-43) (v.r.23). For the others, the classical or neoclassical nude provided the starting point out of which evolved very personal styles. However, the visual link to these earlier idioms is retained in much of their work. There is a sense that it is not the female anatomy that has been distorted, but the female nude. The images of Lachaise and Butler refer constantly to the female nude *in art* even when the distortion is extreme.

In a series of works by Butler from 1968-72, both nude and classical plinth appear to have broken rebelliously with the traditional mode. The plinth has become an independent compositional element upon which the nude figure 'writhes'. Defying all the rules of decorum, these figures express an erotic urgency and tension. In *Girl on Back* (1968-72) (v.r.24), the figure lies on her base, fists clenched, head thrown back and legs pushing outward. The fine modelling of anatomical detail (albeit distorted) links the work to classical models, yet the

25 Rheims, M., *19th Century Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson: London, Great Britain, 1977, p. 361.

apparent agitation suggests an expressive use of emotional form reminiscent of *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1644-1652) (v.r.25) by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). In an article about this series of sculptures in *Art and Artists*, Eddie Wolfram writes:

It appears that around 1968, in the wake of the thalidomide scandal, he [Butler] felt that it was impossible to continue to make bronze modelled figures which were 'expressively' edited and to this end effectively mutilated, physically compromised, for aesthetic reasons. He resolved to 'look again at the grass roots of the figurative tradition and see if they were still growing,' and aesthetic and formal concerns were no longer the only factors involved. He decided to begin all over again, to make human figures which were not only anatomically complete, but also with 'real' eyes and 'real' hair, conceived with an almost clinical precision. ...To explore the nakedness of these girls was to explore 'an incredibly tiny world between actuality and kitsch.'²⁶

In *Elevation* (1912-27) (v.r.26), Gaston Lachaise created an expressive ideal of female eroticism, but he also retained classical links. In a near parody of classical poise, the stance of this figure suggests an ostentatious narcissism. This in itself subverts the classical model in

which the female nude was presented as essentially modest and unselfconscious. Lachaise' model was his wife, Isabel, and his work appears to have been an expression of his passion for her. Despite the fact that his distortions were often extreme, he apparently found the female nude as the embodiment of an ideal to be the perfect medium for this purpose. The classical ideal, then, became a personal ideal.

The work of these artists, especially in their adherence to a basic classical or neoclassical sculptural language, may be seen as the starting points from which my own work has developed.

26 Wolfram, E., 'Objectified Images', *Art and Artists*, June 1974, U.S.A., p.35.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The works or artists discussed in this section have been selected on the grounds that they have attempted to provide a critique of the nude. In other words, they have acknowledged, to some extent, the nude's complex history. In some of the works that will be discussed, the critique is inherent in the treatment of the nude and does not necessarily constitute the subject of the work.

My work is more concerned with existing images of the nude than with the reworking of the female form. In the development of these works, therefore, direct reference has been made to existing models. These references will be discussed in the following chapter in relation to the individual sculptures.

Some of the earliest examples where art 'became its own subject' may be found among the works of Edouard Manet (1832-83). Manet constantly antagonised the art establishment in France with his rejection of conventional academic practice, making his dissatisfaction evident in the treatment of traditional academic subjects in a distinctly unconventional manner. In 1865 he submitted two works to the Salon - *Olympia* (1863) (v.r.10) and *Christ Scourged* (1865) (v.r.27). The latter, his second and last religious painting, depicts a clumsy and unconvincing Christ surrounded by soldiers dressed in an assortment of inappropriate clothing. As he had done previously, Manet produced, not so much a contemporary version of a traditional subject, as a parody of the subject. As in a scene from a cheap amateur theatrical production, the actors appear unwilling and unskilled, the costumes

makeshift. More than anything else, Manet succeeded in drawing attention to a subject which was so familiar that it had lost its impact, having become, in a sense, no more than a notational symbol.

In *Olympia*, similarly, he refused to idealise or sentimentalise the nude, as was common at that time. George Heard Hamilton writes :

In *Olympia* tradition and modern life collide with even greater violence, for here Manet was reworking one of the most familiar as well as one of the most conventionally idealized themes of European painting. In her nudity and recumbent pose *Olympia* proclaimed for those who knew anything at all of the past that her ancestresses were the Venetian Venuses of the High Renaissance, in particular Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. (v.r.28) Not only the pose, the interior scene, the motif of the servant, the animal on the bed (Titian's little dog changed into a black cat) but specifically the bangle on the woman's right wrist obliged the spectator to acknowledge *Olympia*'s heritage.²⁷

27 Hamilton, G.H., *Manet and his Critics*, W.W.Norton and Co.: London, Great Britain, 1969, p. 67.

But Manet scorned the decorum of *Olympia's* artistic forebears and contemporaries. Hamilton observed :

The motif of the reclining nude and attendant servant had been seen before, and even at the Salon. *Olympia's* predecessors included most notably Ingres' *Odalisque with Slave* (1839-40).(v.r.29) ... But in each example... some slight allusion to a place and time other than the present, or some conspicuous reticence had lain like a slight veil of idealization between the unclad form and the spectator. An averted gaze, a fold of drapery, or a Turkish pillow was sufficient to establish the propriety of the subject. *Olympia* ignored such advantages. She was, in 1863, incontrovertibly there.²⁸

Just as certain visual references distance the nude from the reality of the viewer, hence eluding the issue of moral transgression, so the suggestion of the subject's innocence of her own sexuality serves to purify the image. Manet's nude, however, is alert and aggressively sexual. Edwin Mullins, in *The Painted Witch* writes:

Olympia is not a fantasy Goddess, neither is she the expensive property of some absent prince submitting to our regard. She is steadily regarding us; it is not we who are doing the sexual appraisal - she is.²⁹

In a similar vein, Anne Hollander has described *Olympia* as :

...an unidealized image of a mundane courtesan, shocking in its unequivocal harshness...³⁰

Apart from generally subverting traditional practice, Manet, in his *Olympia*, restored dignity to the female nude. It is this quality in particular which links his work to the concerns of this study.

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69) and, later, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), created images of the female nude in which the nudity of the figure ennobled rather than dehumanised the sitter. In Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* (1654) (v.r.30), his *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* (1631), and Toulouse Lautrec's images of the prostitutes which he had befriended (v.r.31), there is no pretension to a physical ideal. Anne Hollander describes Rembrandt's nudes as:

[appealing]...primarily to the sense of common humanity in which the erotic element is enfolded rather than thrust out onto the surface. Their bodies have a psychological perfection, a kind of idealized distillation of individual personality.³¹

28 Hamilton, G.H., *Manet and his Critics*, W.W.Norton and Co.: London, Great Britain, 1969, p. 68.

29 Mullins, E., *The Painted Witch - Female Body/Male Art*, Secker and Warburg: London, Great Britain, 1985,

p.96.
30 Hollander, A., *Seeing Through Clothes*, Avon: U.S.A., 1975, p. 139.

31 Hollander, A., *Seeing Through Clothes*, Avon: U.S.A., 1975, p. 92.

Goya's paintings of the naked and clothed *Maja* (1796-1800) (v.r.32&33) are distinctly erotic, particularly in the faithful translation of the figure from the clothed to the unclothed. The naked *Maja* retains all the confidence which she displayed when clothed. Hollander writes:

Goya's famous naked and clothed *Majas* in the Prado are universally recognised as erotic, and not just because of the shadowy suggestion of pubic hair. One of the most telling features of the *Nude Maja's* body is that +it seems to show the effects of corseting without the corset - which, on the other hand, is very definitely present in the dressed version. The high, widely separated breasts and rigid spine of the recumbent lady are as erotic as her pubic fuzz or sexy smile.³²

In his inclusion of the majos as subject matter, Goya introduced a social element which further subverts the genre by alluding to a lower social order. In an article in the *Guardian Weekly* (May 20th 1990), Tim Hilton wrote :

A Social as well as a personal element is indicated by the paintings' titles. Majos and their companions, majas, appeared in Spain in the late 18th century as a thrilling phenomenon of national self-awareness. They are the aristocrats of the poor. Never far from unlawful activity, always anti-authoritarian if the authority is the corrupt

state, the majo and his maja have strict codes of honour and their own form of caste.

Above all, they have style, as expressed in their clothes, their dance, their walk. ...This working-class stylishness was taken up by the aristocracy. It became part of the national myth. Goya is the artist who records the birth of a patriotism that was generated from below.³³

More recently, the Pop images of Mel Ramos (b.1935) have presented the female nude at its most synthetic. His nudes are reduced to an air-brushed idealisation; a facade with no suggestion that anything exists beyond appearance. In Ramos' images, all objects, including the human body, appear to be made of the same plastic material. He irreverently manipulates the female nude, even reducing her scale and presenting her as the topping on a bowl of fruit salad (*Miss Fruit Salad* (1964) (v.r.34)). Like Tom Wesselman (b.1931), Ramos has alluded to the exploitative exposure of the female body in images which equate the status of women with that of the consumable commodity. His paintings reproduce the seductive commercial language of advertising images. Clearly, what he parodies is the female nude rather than the nude female.

Photographers Cindy Sherman (b.1954) and Robert Mapplethorpe have produced images which imitate and reassess other traditions. Mapplethorpe makes conscious reference to pornography, retaining the specific subject

32 Hollander, A., *Seeing Through Clothes*, Avon: U.S.A., 1975, p. 91.

33 Hilton, T., 'What has the Maja got to hide?', *The Guardian Weekly*, Great Britain, May 20, 1990, p. 24.

matter but passing it through the filter of a higher sensibility and thereby potentially elevating it from pornography to art. (v.r.5&6) Sherman alludes to familiar conventions in the depiction of women, in particular those which seek to portray an anonymous and generalised perception of woman. Her own body provides the subject matter for most of the works, yet her images consistently deny the intimacy of the self-portrait by the use of elaborate costumes, masks and artificial environments. The rôle or assumed character is thus made to dominate and the identity of the subject/artist all but disappears.(v.r.35)

American painter and performance artist, Karen Finley (active from 1970s), addresses the issue of the overexposure of the female body in performances with titles like *A Tit Sandwich* (1986) (v.r.36) and *The Constant State of Desire* (1986). In her article on Finley in *Artforum* entitled 'Finley's Poisoned Meatloaf', Maria Nadotti observes that the term "overexposure", with its associations with photographers' jargon, may be seen to embody a paradox. She writes :

...the world must be illuminated to be seen, but can be cancelled, annulled, through an excess of illumination, made invisible through a surfeit of visibility. ... [Finley] has engaged in a feminist debate on the female body, which is itself overexposed : everywhere visible, its appearance everywhere emphasized, to the point where its reality begins to recede.³⁴

Finley addresses these issues by presenting the female body - as with Cindy Sherman, it is her own body - in performances in an intentionally obscene and confrontational manner. Her approach involves an exaggerated exhibitionism, a deliberate overexposure of the body which thus 'de-eroticises' it. Nadotti writes :

Her brazen display of the body as the place of sexual practices both everyday and every day concealed, under considerations of privacy and of sentiment...,become[s] an invitation to voyeurism so hyperbolic that it deactivates itself in the very act of its production.³⁵

Finley presents the artificial facade of woman, her identity as signified by costume and gesture. She crudifies this artifice, aggressively confronting the viewer/audience with distorted and menacing versions

34 Nadotti, M., 'Karen Finley's Poisoned Meatloaf', *Artforum*, March 1989, U.S.A., p.113.

35 Nadotti, M., 'Karen Finley's Poisoned Meatloaf', *Artforum*, March 1989, U.S.A., p. 114.

of familiar female types. As Nadotti has observed:

[By]...shutting off the easy paths of pleasure and identification rather than incorporating them as content, Finley pushes the spectator to function more independently and to judge more freely. Becoming invisible as a body by overexposing her body, making of it an abstract signifier,... she anticipates and combats being objectified and commented upon by others.³⁶

Although Finley has distorted the familiar, rendering it maniacal and even grotesque, the power of her images lies primarily in the fact that they remain familiar. In a similar process, Jasper Johns (b.1930) aestheticised an image as omnipresent as the American flag, (in *Flag* (1954-5) (v.r.37)), rendering the original pattern of shapes and colours in a painterly manner. In so doing he made visible an image which was so familiar that it had become invisible. The original function of the image was thus undermined and another suggested. In other words, in the context of art, the American flag, however immediate one's recognition, may be seen also as an arbitrary arrangement of shapes and colours.

In my own work, the most clichéd and familiar modes of presentation of the female nude have been adopted. In addition, artifice has been exaggerated. On the one hand, then, as in Finley's work, the intention is to prevent the viewer from responding to the figures as erotic. On the other hand, it is also my intention that the

viewer is presented with the signifiers of eroticism, forced to look at what has become invisible as a result of its being constantly on display (like the display of mass-circulation 'girlie' magazines in any store).

In her article, Nadotti cites Yvonne Rainer's film *The Man who Envied Women* in which the female protagonist is never seen. Nadotti writes :

...the movie [thus] avoids implication in the process of voyeurism and fetishization, addressing instead the ambiguities of spectatorial pleasure, perhaps of pleasure itself.³⁷

My own work addresses similar problems. However, unlike Rainer, I have attempted to confront the viewer directly with all the signifiers of voyeuristic pleasure. The breasts, hips and buttocks of these figures are, in most cases, exaggerated in size and fullness, and are made even more conspicuous by pose and gesture. Also, in keeping with many traditions of the female nude, most of these figures have been made to appear passive. Traditionally, the intention was to suggest the subject's willingness to be watched. Many of my works seek to introduce the notion of the subject's discomfort at finding herself naked and on display. The viewer may thus observe the naked body but, by implication, also witness the subject's humiliation. A common observation made about pornographic photography is that part of its value lies in allowing the consumer/viewer to disregard the needs and feelings of

36 Nadotti, M., 'Karen Finley's Poisoned Meatloaf', *Artforum*, March 1989, U.S.A., p. 115.

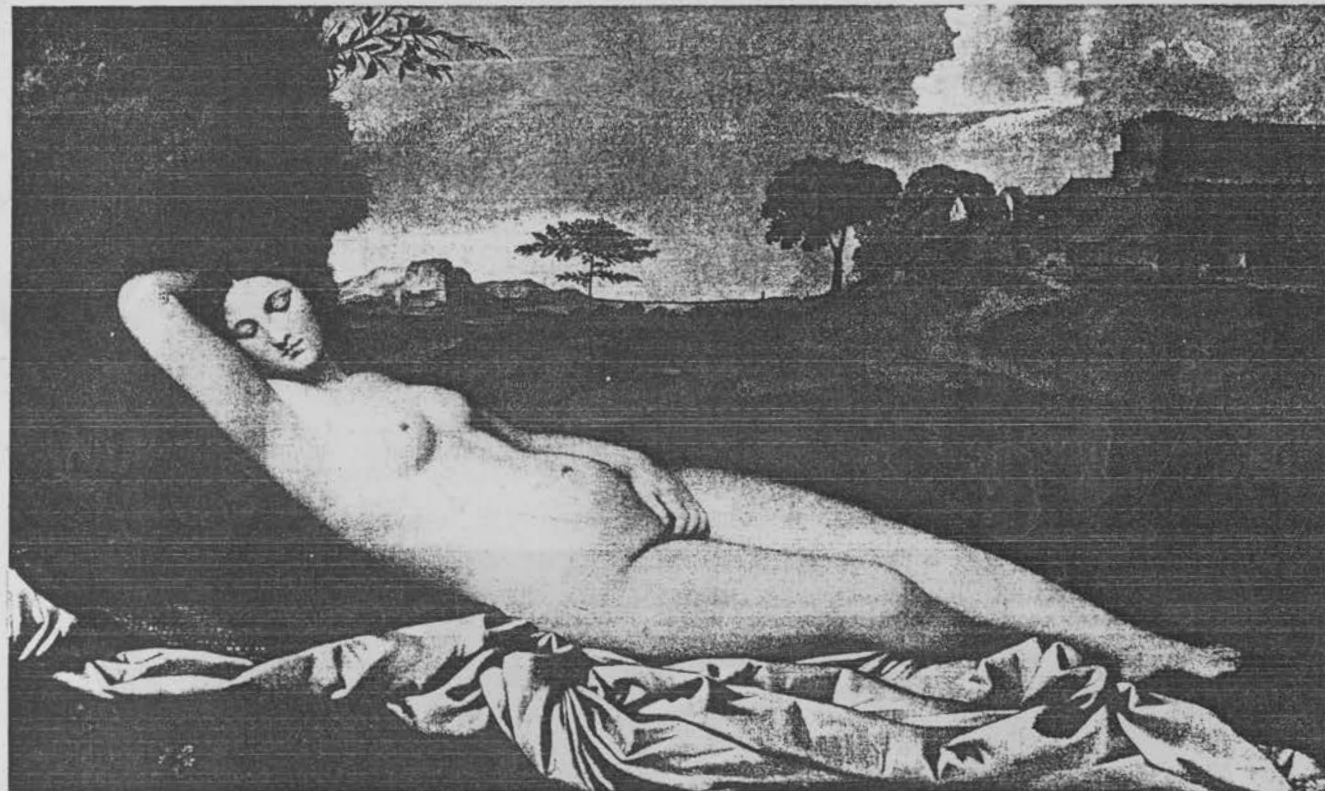
37 Nadotti, M., 'Karen Finley's Poisoned Meatloaf', *Artforum*, March 1989, U.S.A., p. 115.

the sitter. She appears to offer herself freely while making no demands. This series of images operates on the principle that, if the human and vulnerable aspect of the nude can be made evident, the dignity of women may be partly restored.

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 - v.r.4. *Ephebe of Kritios*. c.480bc.
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 - v.r.6. Mapplethorpe. *Thomas and Dovanna*. 1986.
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 - v.r.11. Alma-Tadema. *In the Tepidarium*. 1881.
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 - v.r.37. Johns. *Flag*. 1954.
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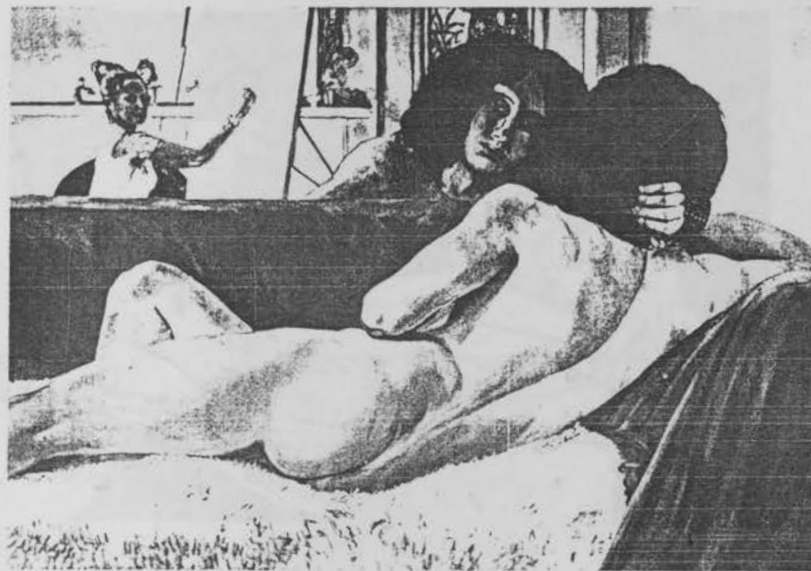


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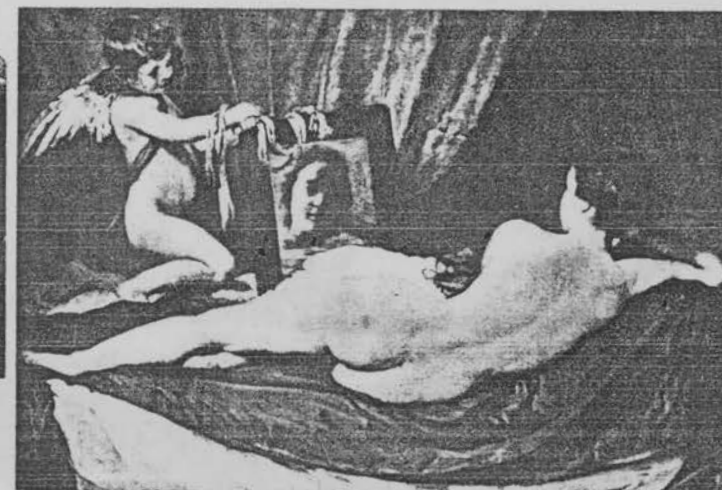


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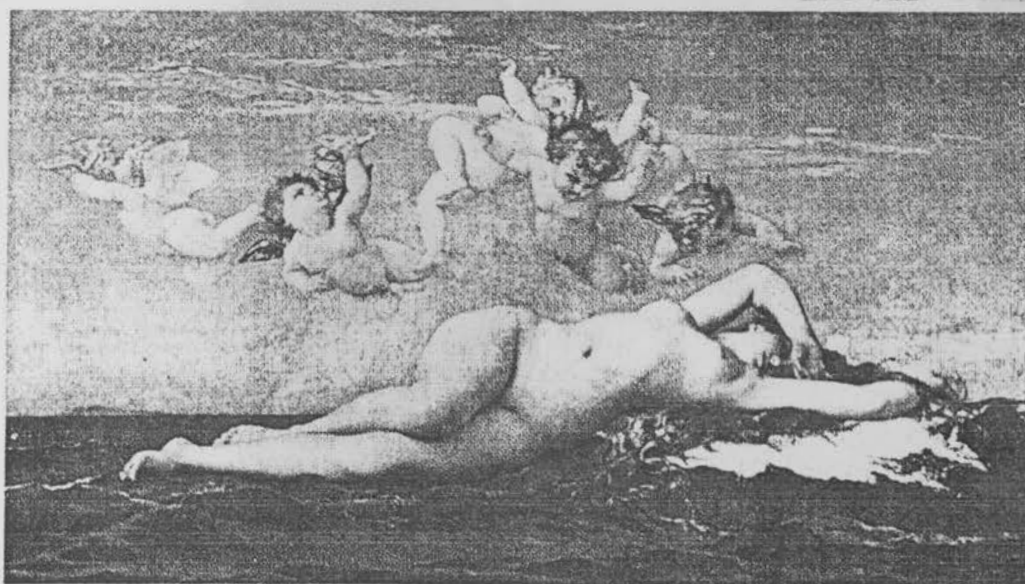
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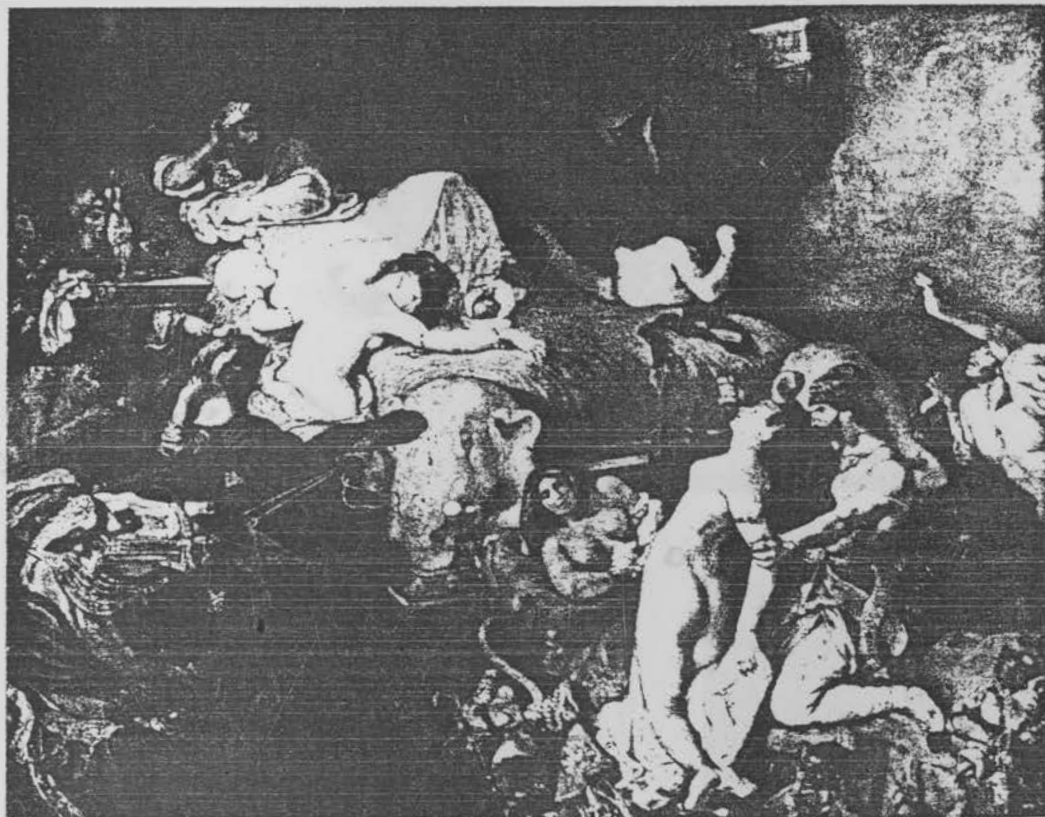
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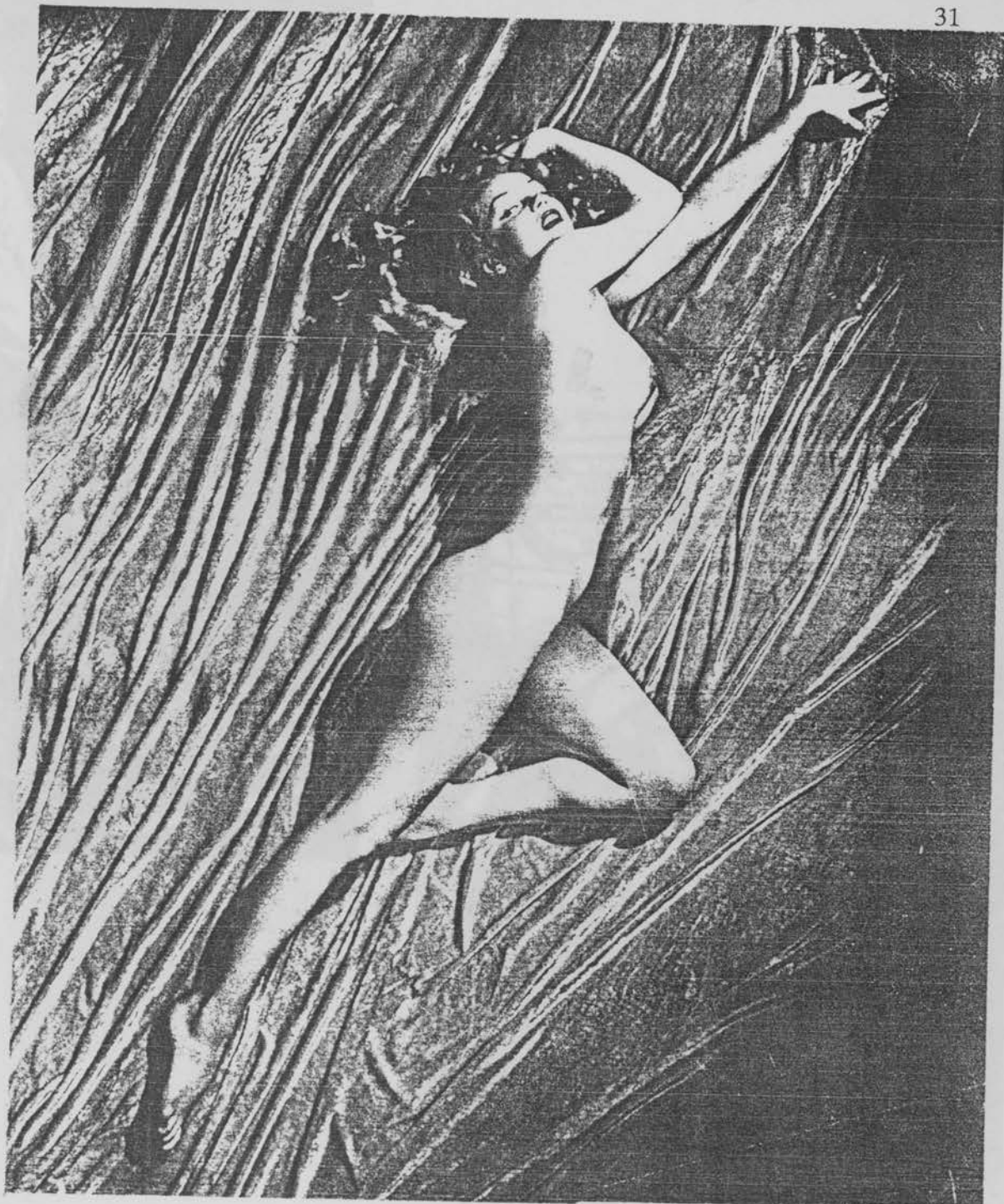
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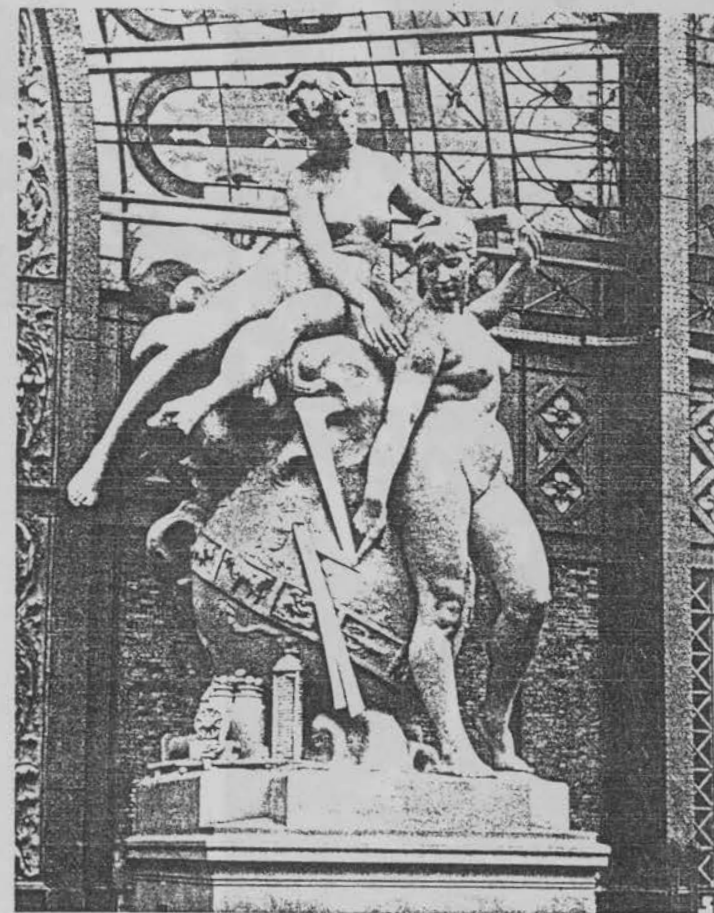


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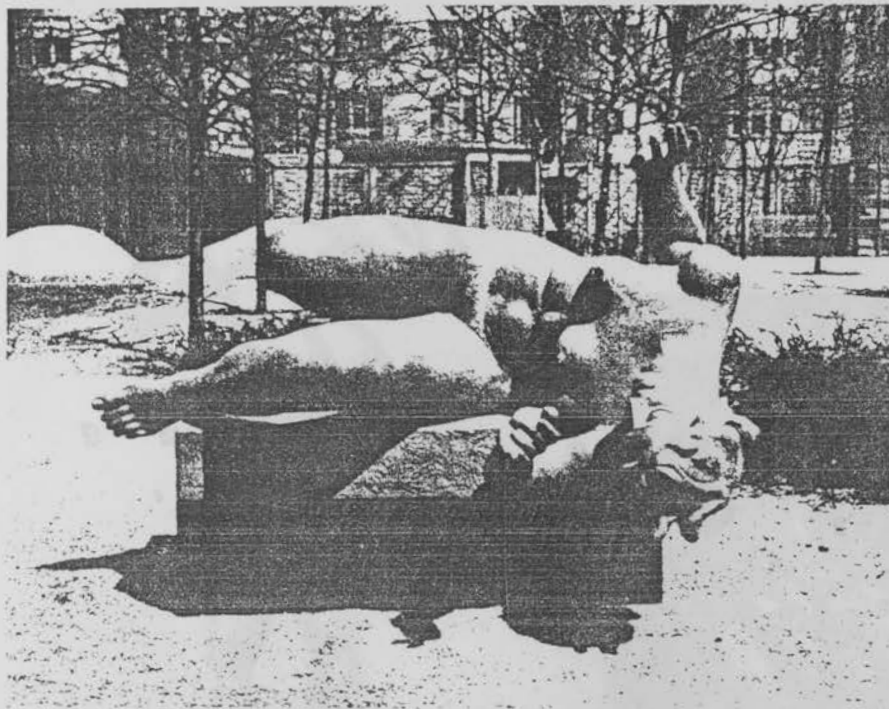
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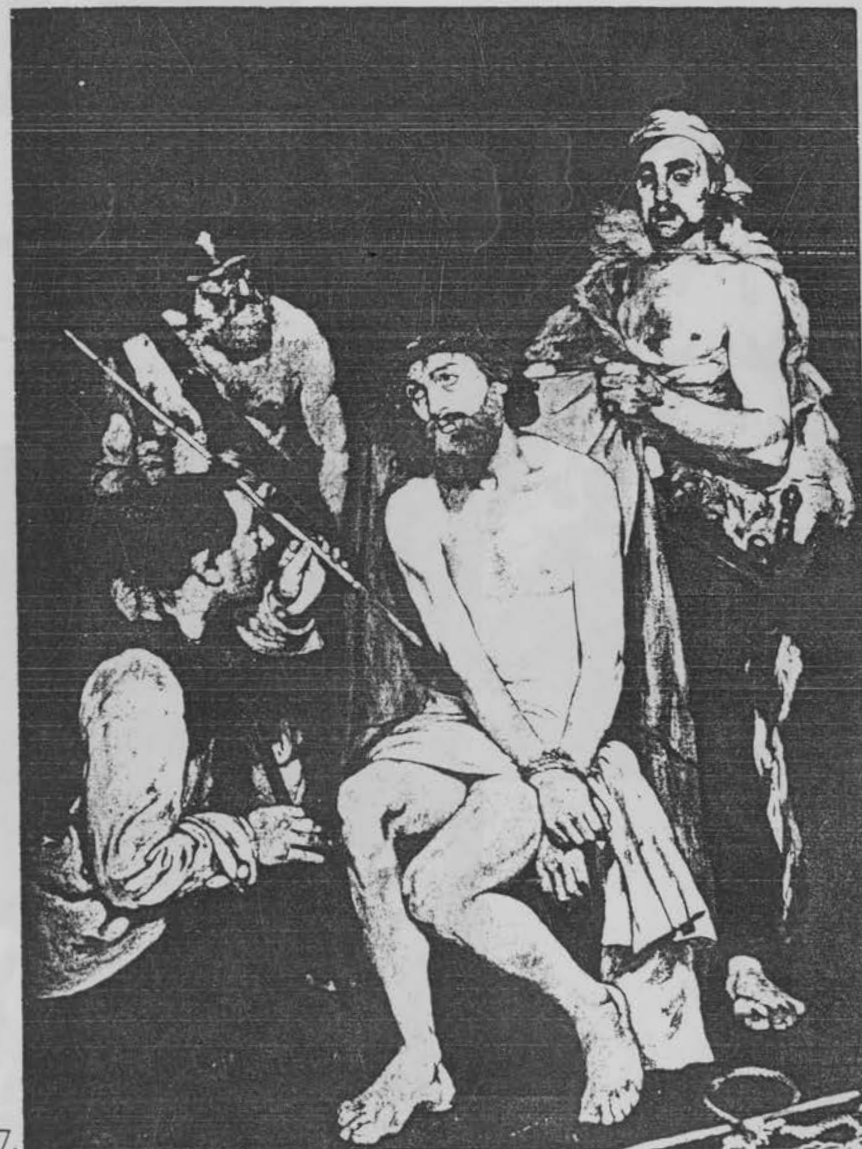
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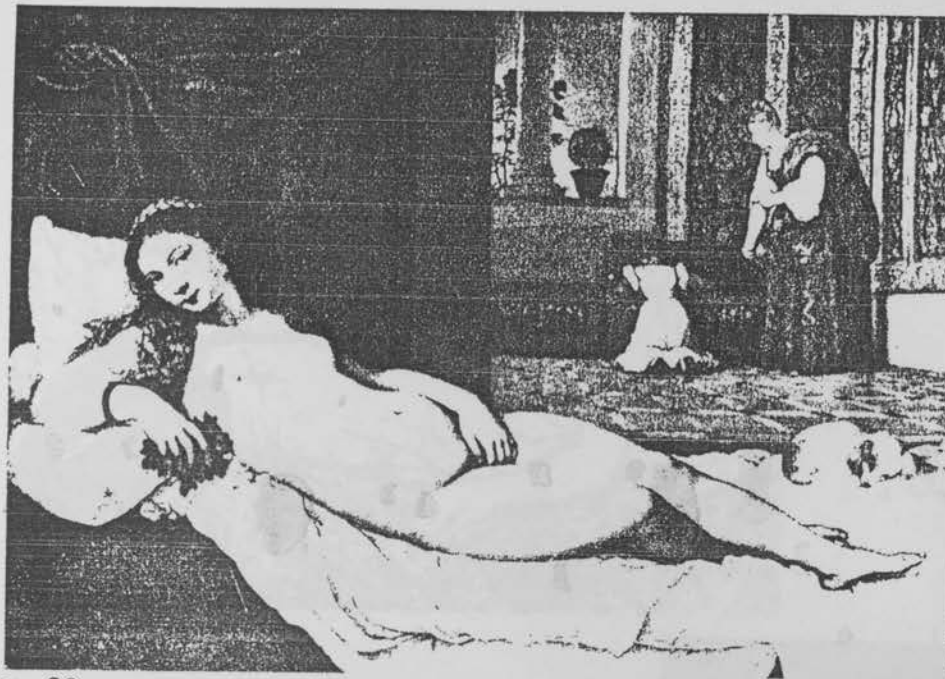
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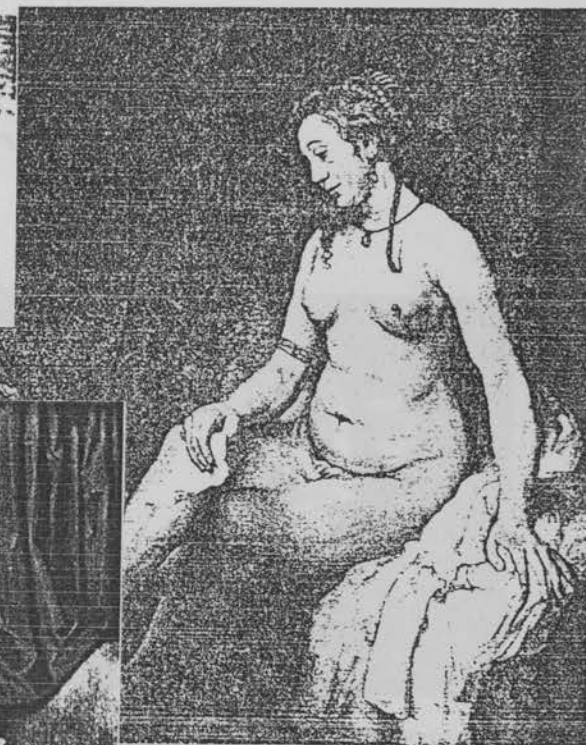
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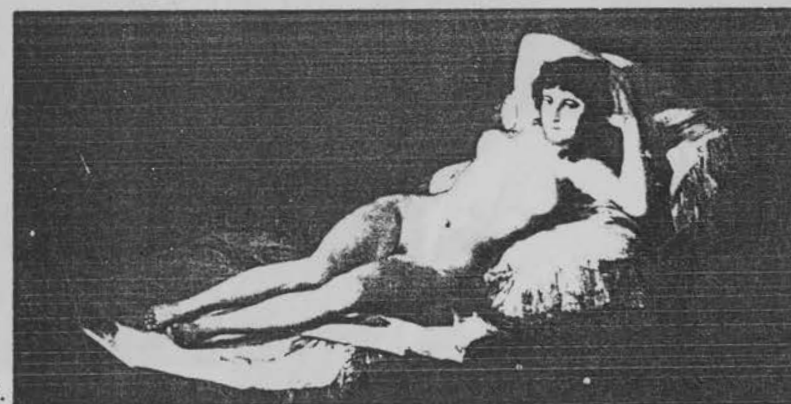
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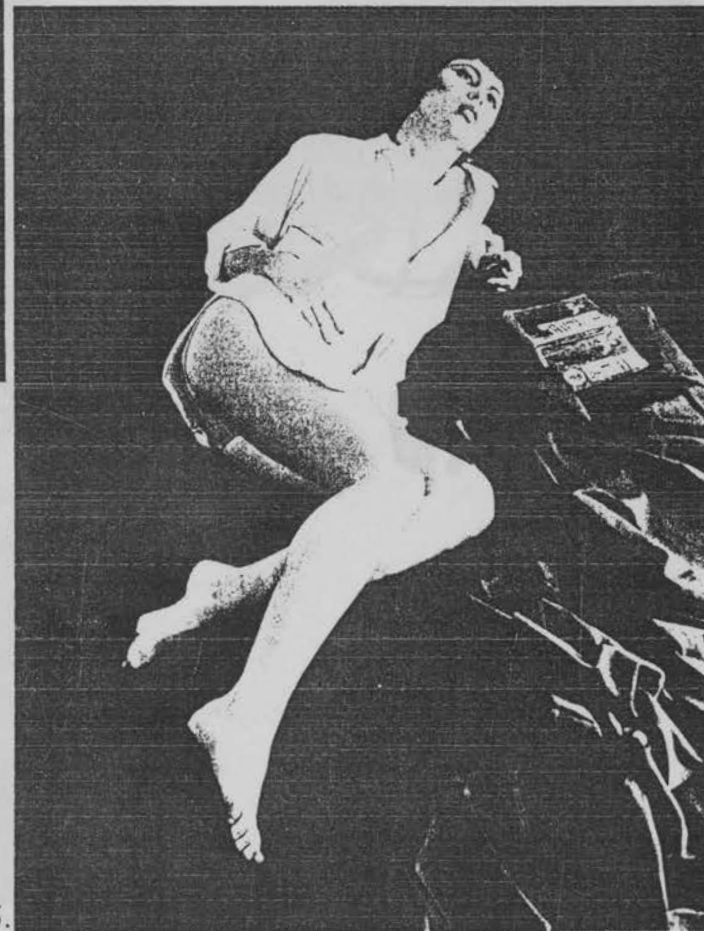
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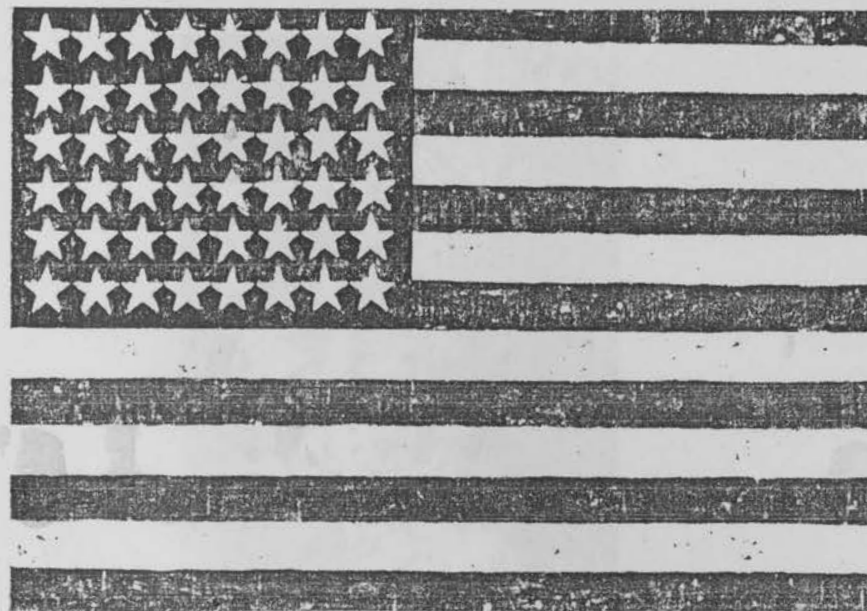
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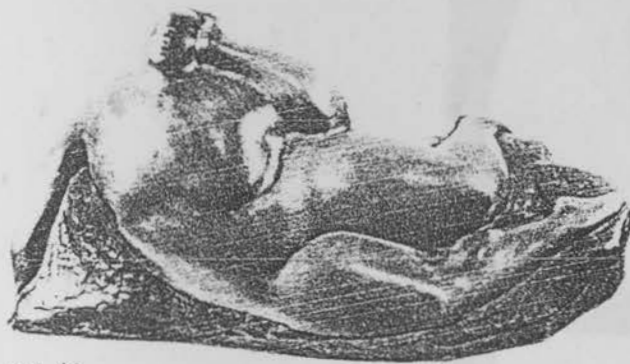
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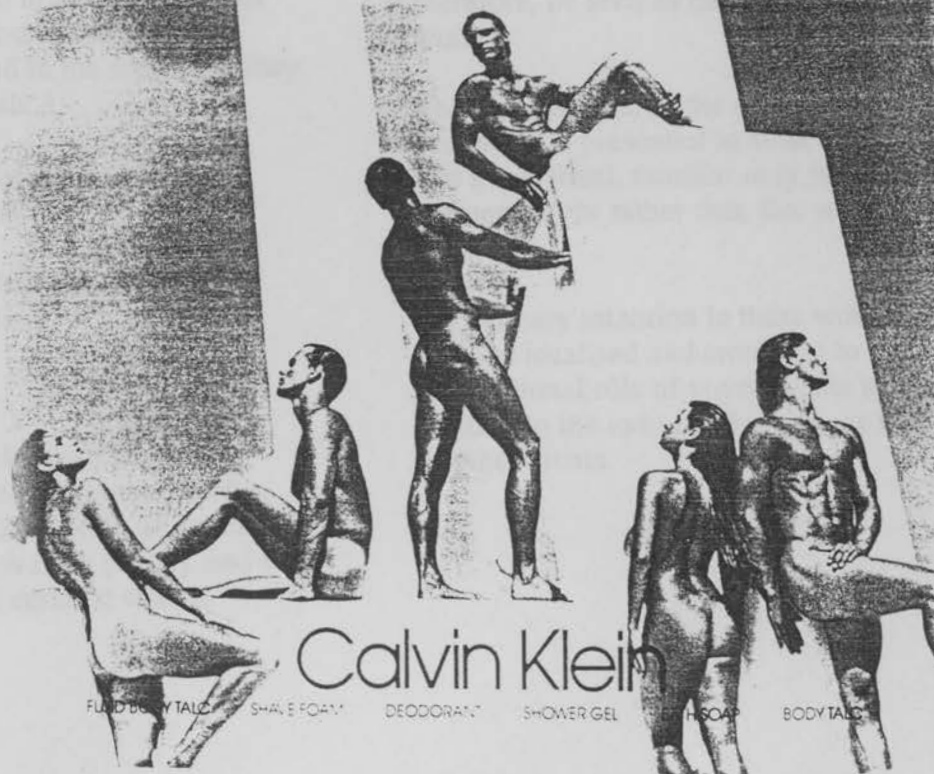
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OBSESSION

FOR MEN
FOR THE BODY



Calvin Klein

FLUID BODY TALC

SHAVE FOAM

DEODORANT

SHOWER GEL

SOAP

BODY TALC

v.r.54.

WORKING PROCESSES AND METHODS

Process

The making of sculpture prior to this dissertation involved a constant shifting from one material to another. Such experimentation gave rise to various types of form, due largely to the varying degrees of resistance offered by the different processes and materials. Consequently more than one approach to the making of sculptural metaphors in response to a single subject was investigated. The works included in the scope of this dissertation represent an extension of these earlier developments both in content and in the sense that they continued along this multiple path.

The body of sculpture may be divided into sections according to material and process :

1. Carved wooden torsos
2. Cast and polychromed ciment-fondue figures
3. Single carved reclining figure
4. Ceramic figures
5. Bronze figures

In terms of the evolution of this body of work, the development that began with the first ciment-fondue figure, that is, *Standing Female Nude* (No.1), neared its culmination in *Reclining Nude on Base* (No.5), and was finally consolidated in the small ceramic works.

In the carved torsos the evocation of the human body is immediate and tactile, the aim being to promote a relatively intimate engagement between the viewer and the work. The intention, in rendering the body as soft and unidealised, is to evoke a familiar experience of the body - of one's own or that of another who is known intimately. Those qualities which evoke this sense of intimacy have been exaggerated to the point of becoming grotesque. The images are thus simultaneously familiar and repulsive, hence presenting the viewer with the familiar which has become alien. However, this approach to the subject matter was discontinued in order to pursue the more tactile area by allusion to the idealised nude. The carved torsos may, therefore, be seen as tangential to the main body of work.

The female nude, as the sole motif in this body of sculpture, is presented in most of the works as removed and impersonal, familiar only in the sense of being a common sight rather than that which is intimately known.

My primary intention in these works is to present the nude as idealised and erotic but to deny the viewer the conventional rôle of voyeur. This is discussed further in relation to the individual works, as well as to the works of other artists.

Materials and Method

1.The Carved Works :- Planks of Jelutong were laminated and the forms were hand carved. The surfaces were rasped and sanded, then sealed, and stained with numerous transparent coats of oil paint. The surfaces were finally treated with wax polish.

2.The Ciment-Fondue works:-The forms were modelled in a fine-bodied clay around a metal armature. A plaster piece-mould was then made. Throughout the rest of the casting process, the mould was prevented from drying out. The inner surfaces of the plaster moulds were then treated with liquid soap. They were coated with a thin layer of liquid ciment-fondue (ciment-fondue 1: water 1) backed up by a thicker layer of sand and ciment-fondue mixture (ciment-fondue 1: sand 2: water 1). A reinforcing layer of fine fibre-glass matting was fixed in place with a liquid cement mixture. Finally, a simple system of metal reinforcing rods was cemented over the fibre-glass. When the ciment-fondue had cured, the pieces of the mould were joined with liquid ciment-fondue and left to cure again. The plaster mould was chipped off the cured ciment-fondue sculpture and the surface restored by removal of the seams. Numerous layers of oil paint were applied and, when dry, sealed with wax polish.

3.The Bronze Works were cast by the lost-wax method.

4.The Ceramic Works:- The work was hand-built from either a fine-bodied throwing clay or a mixture of four parts standard throwing clay to one part forty-mesh grog. When the clay was 'leather-hard', the piece was hollowed out. When completely dry, the work was fired in an electric kiln to Orton Cone 06 (900°C) over 18 hours. The fired work was sealed with a PVA sealer and layers of oil paint were applied.

NOTES ON INDIVIDUAL WORKS

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1. Standing Female Nude

960mm x 290mm x 290mm (including base)

Cast ciment-fondue, oil paint

Standing Female Nude (No 1) attempts to subvert the artificial distinction that is often made between the morality of the nude in high and low cultural genres by combining apparently incompatible elements in one image. The work presents the viewer with the signifiers of sexuality but denies them the conventional rôle of voyeur.

In this work the preciousness of the art object is parodied by alluding to traditional sculptural conventions and negated by the absence of traditional finish. The formal base is roughly modelled and both base and figure are made of ciment-fondue rather than marble or bronze. The work adopts a basic formula reminiscent of the early Classical nude and its many variations throughout the history of sculpture - that is, a single, vertical nude on a low base. The figure's youth, grace and serenity conform to the Classical model in which these qualities signified an ideal which extended beyond physical perfection alone. However, the body-type and exaggerated display of sexuality satirise this reference. They allude to a genre of nude which is concerned with little more than the physical. The roundness and fullness of the forms refer to, and parody, images of Hollywood filmstars of the 1950s, like Marilyn Monroe.

The female aesthetic, as personified by Monroe, reflected the growing preoccupation with sex in America at this time. Dyer writes :

1953 was a year in which the most directly sexual of stars was also the star of the moment, and it was also a year of extraordinarily compelling significance in the history of American sexuality. In August, the Kinsey report on women was published with the most massive press reception ever accorded a scientific treatise. In December, the first issue of Playboy appeared...Monroe was on the cover of the first edition of Playboy and inside her Golden Dreams nude calendar photo was the magazine's first centrefold.³⁸(v.r.18)

The absence of overt sexuality is frequently claimed to be that which clearly distinguishes the 'high-art' nude from all others. This claim has, however, been shown in previous discussion to be debatable. The intention of an image like *Standing Female Nude* (No.1) is to suggest that generally the nude cannot be separated from sexuality.

38 Dyer, R., 'Monroe and Sexuality', *Women and Film*, ed. Todd, J., Holmes and Meier : New York, U.S.A., 1988, p.73.



2. Standing Male Figure

1030mm x 290mm x 290mm (including base)
Cast ciment-fondue, oil paint

Within this series, this figure may appear to be contradictory, since the subject is both male and fully clothed. Nonetheless, it functions as both a companion piece and foil to the previous work, *Standing Female Nude* (No.1). Artists such as Titian, Manet, Balthus (b.1908) (v.r.38) and, South African painter, Deborah Bell (b.1957) (v.r.39), have recognised that the juxtaposition of a clothed male and a naked (or partially naked) female figure evokes suggestions of sexual tension.

The man's clothing establishes his identity as the woman's nudity establishes hers. Although the man's clothing locates him in the present, his hair and facial features are intended to suggest an anachronistic mood reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance. (The figure was modelled on *David* (1501-4) (v.r.40) by Michaelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564).) The spiralling forms allude to the decorativeness of the late Baroque. In both figures ornamentality prevails over content, de-emphasizing signifiers of sexuality. In so doing, the work aims to draw attention to the possibility of the manipulation of meaning in Art. The air of confidence in the stance of the figure is countered by his gentle face and lowered gaze; the jacket swung casually over one shoulder, has become merely decorative. The figure is thus rendered asexual.

As a partner to *Standing Female Nude* (No.1) or on its

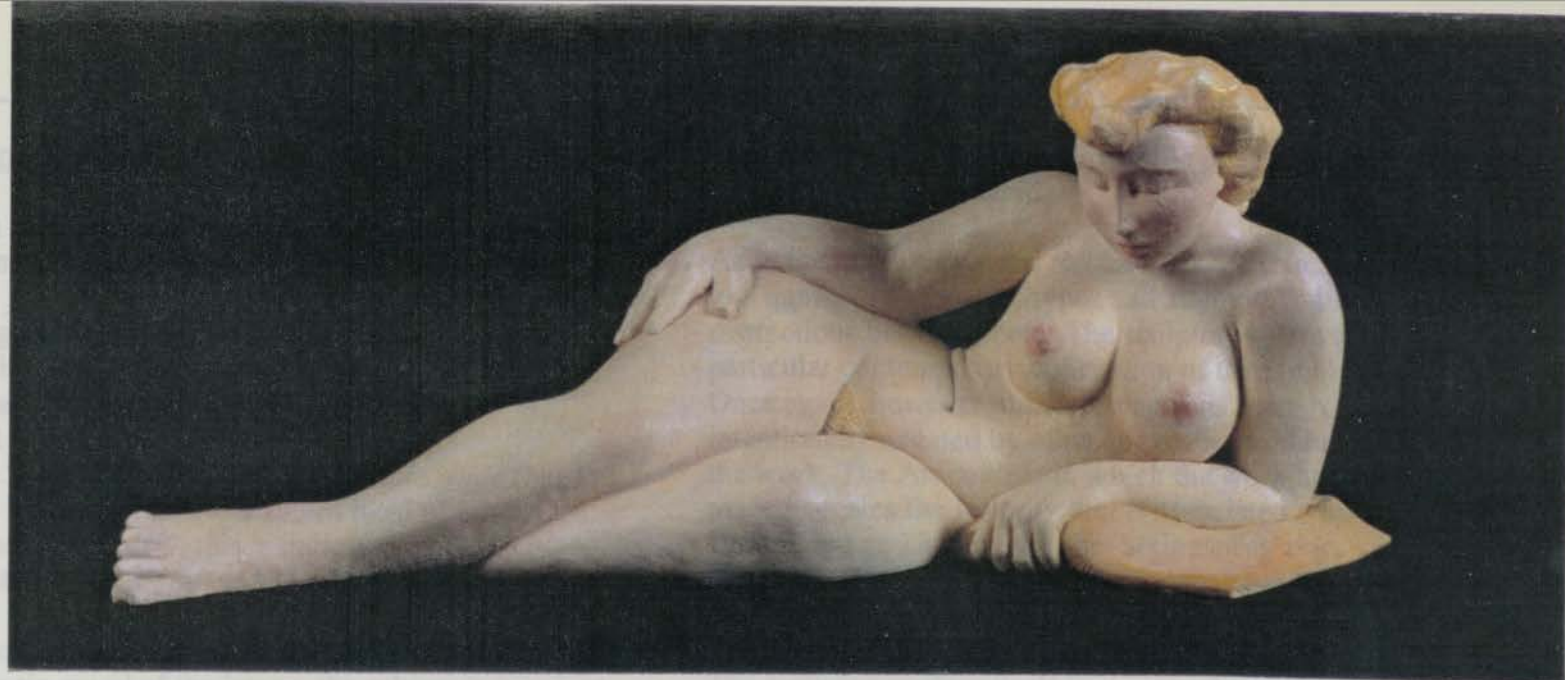
own, *Standing Male Figure* (No.2) is intended as a parody of certain formal sculptural conventions. As in the previous work, this image alludes to the genre of 'precious Art object'; and again, the reference is denied by the elimination of traditional qualities of material and finish. Furthermore, in this work, the draped male figure is intended to parody both the prevalence of female figures and the preference for nudes in these sculptural traditions.

3. Reclining

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The reclining position itself is as strongly reminiscent of the
15th-century Italian painting as it is of contemporary
photography. In both of these cases, it has



3. Reclining Nude

700mm x 370mm x 290mm
Cast ciment-fondue, oil paint

This image alludes to an essentially sexual nude - or a type that is often referred to as an 'odalisque' [Eastern female slave or concubine - OED]. The pose is borrowed from Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* (1814).(v.r.16) But, as in *Standing Female Nude* (No.1), reference has been made to a 1950's ideal of female beauty; most obviously, this is indicated by the incorporation of pale skin and blonde hair.

The figure's serene expression suggests that, despite the overtly erotic mood of the image, the subject is innocent of the sexuality of the spectacle she presents. This is a double reference. First, it is a direct reference to Marilyn Monroe, who, as Richard Dyer has written, was able, better than most, to appear at once extremely sexual and completely innocent. Although, as has previously been mentioned, America in the 1950's was characterised by a heightened awareness of sex, this mood was accompanied by a moral conservatism. Dyer observes that the predominant approach to sex in this period was that it could be justified by asserting it to be natural. Monroe's ability to communicate an overt sexuality with apparent innocence ensured her popularity. *Reclining Nude* (No.3) refers also to the rejection of manifest eroticism as, for instance, in academic 19th-century Salon painting. There, in order to avoid charges of moral impropriety, the subjects of these nudes, like Monroe, were made to appear

unaware of their own sexuality while presenting a distinctly erotic spectacle.

As in the previous works, *Reclining Nude* (No.3) alludes to a number of disparate types and attempts to blur distinctions between them. The sculpture refers to a particular contemporary conception of the female nude. Once again, however, this reference has been intentionally negated by other suggestions inherent in the work. The Art context in which the work has been placed negates the frivolity that is associated with Hollywood and its images; the 'seriousness' of its material substance, for example, is incompatible with the 'cheapness' of Hollywood images.

The reclining posture itself is as strongly reminiscent of 15th-century Italian painting as it is of contemporary 'glamour' photography. In both of these genres, it has been used to emphasise the sense of the female nude as erotic spectacle.

In *Seeing Through Clothes*, Anne Hollander has attempted to show how trends which develop in popular fashion and culture influence high art forms. She writes:

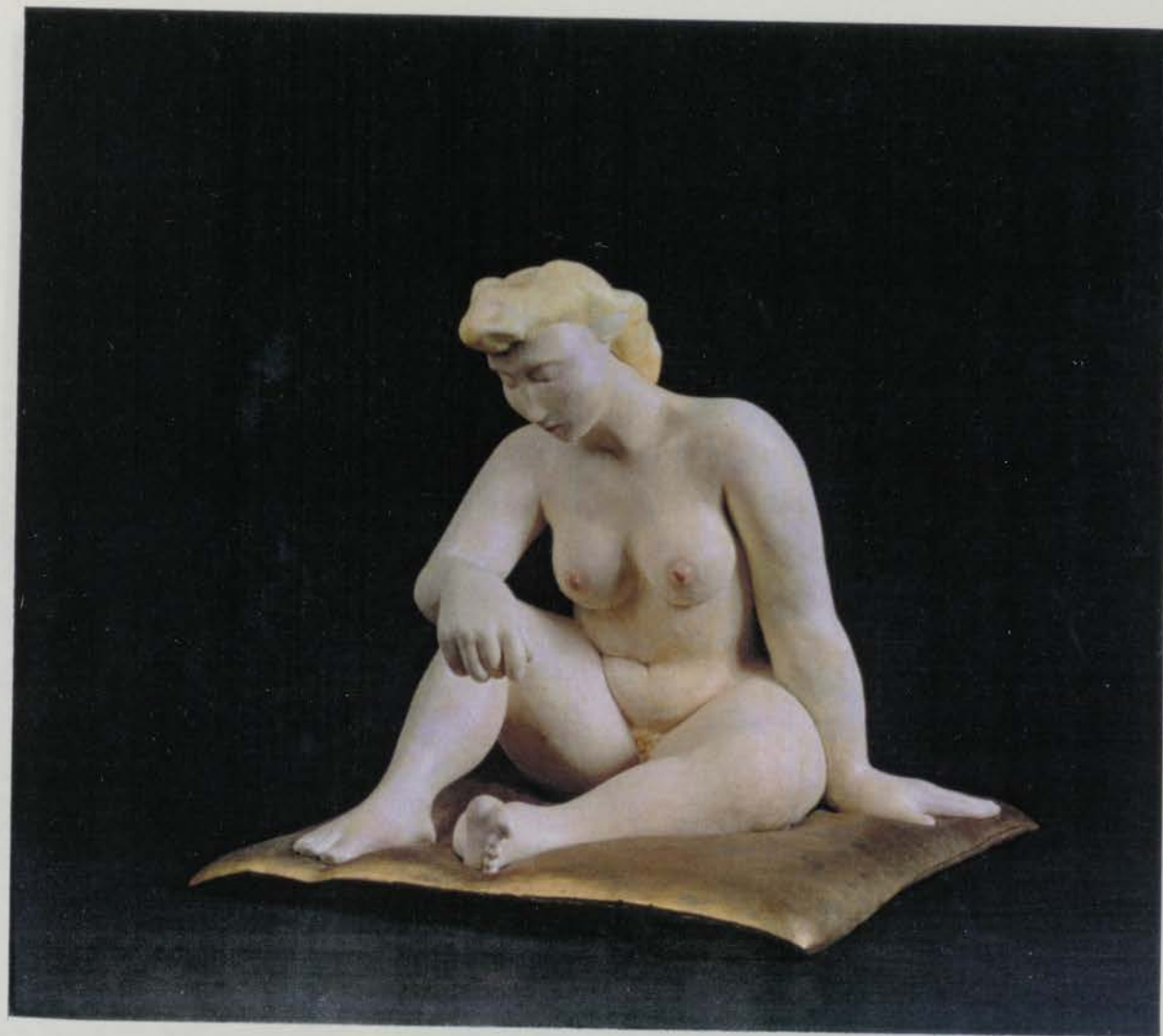
The hint of depravity, the legacy of centuries of taboo, had given an element of strong erotic importance to the existence of women's underpants rather than to their absence.... In Paris the notorious cancan was invented toward the end of the [19th] century to cater to this particular prurient interest, and a great deal of semipornographic art was produced showing enormous behinds clad in very elaborate

panties. ...The underwear-obsessed popular art of the late 1880's and 1890's,...including photography, insisted heavily on a figure with an arched back and an outthrust behind.

Corseting indeed coerced the female torso more and more into this posture as the century waned, and the new full and fancy underpants were suitably displayed by a jutting rear in many French postcards and spicy illustrations. Nude popular art followed this model for the pose of the female figure; and serious nude art, however remote in intention from dirty French postcards, nevertheless bears the unmistakable stamp of the same influence.³⁹

Reclining Nude (No.3) then, attempts to subvert the false distinction that is made between the inherent eroticism of nudes in 'high' and 'low' cultural genres.

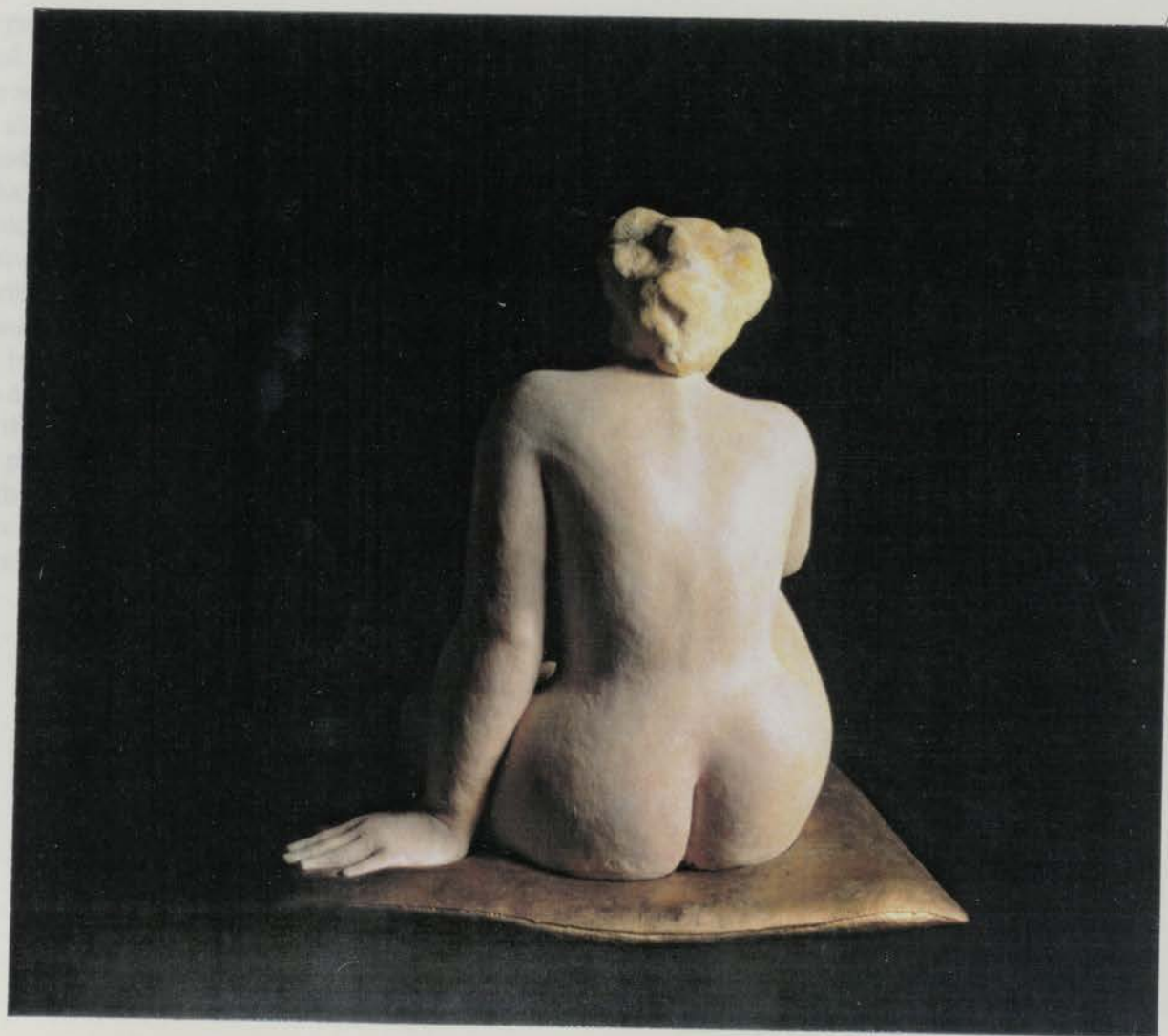
39 Hollander, A., Seeing Through Clothes, Avon: U.S.A., 1975, p. 133.



4. Seated Nude On Cushion

450mm x 470mm x 430mm
Cast cement-fiberglass, oil paint

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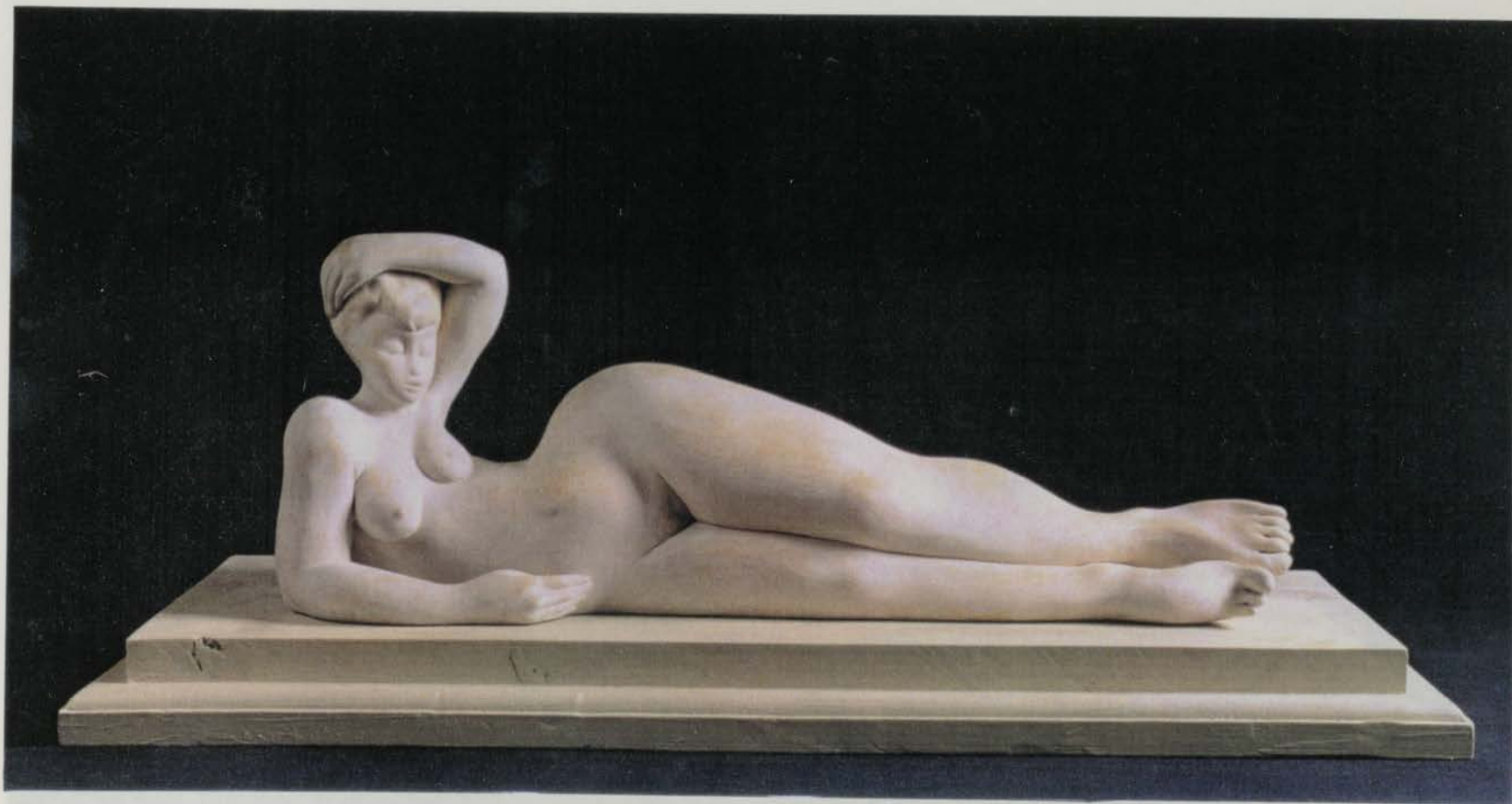


4. Seated Nude On Cushion

450mm x 470mm x 430mm

Cast ciment-fondue, oil paint

Here the subject matter of the first and third works has been reconsidered. I have changed only the pose of the figure in order to suggest that this is in fact the same subject depicted at a different moment. The figure refers to a synthetic idealisation, a prototype which does not actually exist. I have implied, therefore, that the subject of all similar depictions of women may be seen to belong to an elusive stereotype. The gold cushion refers to the practice, which was adopted, for instance, by Ingres in *La Grande Odalisque* (v.r.16), of placing the female nude in a lavish, Orientalised setting as a means of enhancing the erotic content. In *Seated Nude on a Cushion* (No.4), the subject appears to be waiting rather than posing. Her posture is relaxed and unselfconscious, and so counters the reference to the posed erotic nude. In this way I have attempted to depict a reality somewhere between that of the subject and that of the fictional image.



5. *Reclining Nude on a Base*

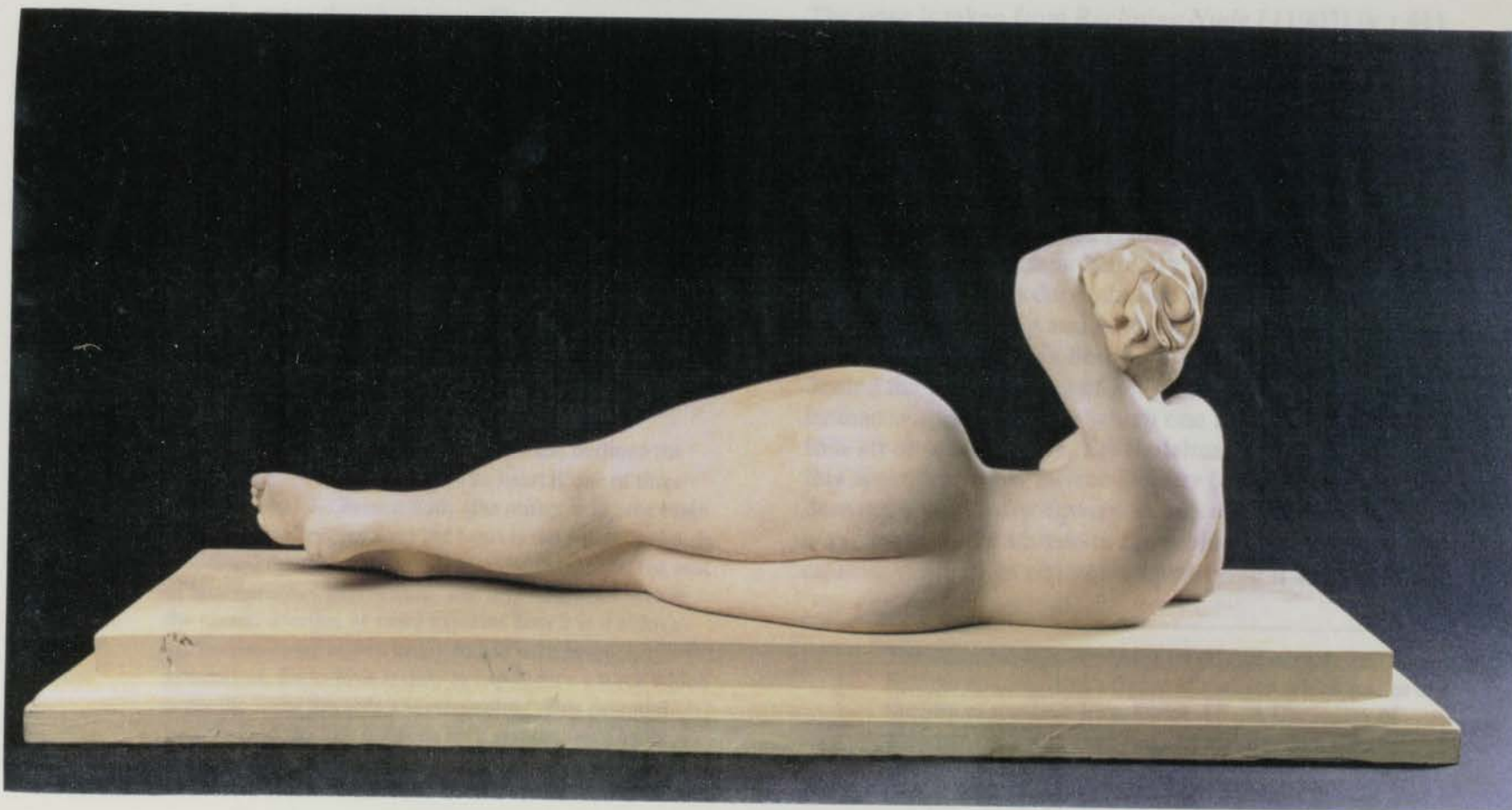
100mm x 250mm x 200mm (including base)

Carved Jelutong, oil paint

This work represents a departure from the 'archetypal' nude. While the body type of the two previous nudes conforms largely to a synthetic female, here distanced (as an expressive sculptural device) from being considered. The nude, liberated from the static, now be-

The formal presentation of the figure in *Reclining Nude on a Base* (No.5) alludes to an essentially decorative type of image. The affected pose echoes the exaggerated elegance of works that seek to amplify the erotic content of the nude, but the individual component forms themselves do not complement the pose. This nude is again a parody of eroticism rather than being actually erotic.

The nude is shown from the back, No.5, 2000, 100 x 250 x 200mm



5. Reclining Nude on a Base

106mm x 250mm x 280mm (including base)
Carved Jelutong, oil paint

This work represents a departure from the 'archetypal' nude. While the body type of the two previous nudes conforms largely to a synthetic formula, here distortion (as an expressive sculptural device) has been introduced. The nude, liberated from the erotic, may be seen to signify more than just sexuality.

Standing Female Nude (No.1) and *Reclining Nude* (No.3) allude to the type of image generally associated with a sentimentalisation and debasement of the nude. As Kenneth Clark has suggested, the nude has regressed at times from "religion to entertainment, [and] from entertainment to decoration", this being, in his view, "the fate of any motive (sic) in art which loses its meaning."^{40 41}

40 Clark, K., *The Nude*, Penguin Books: London, Great Britain, 1956, p. 87.

41 In *A Dictionary of Symbols*, J.E. Cirlot has outlined the origins of the heart as symbol. The heart is one of three focal points of the human body (the others being the brain and the sexual organs), but the heart is the central point. In traditional thought, the heart was considered to be the seat of intelligence. Cirlot writes: "The importance of love in the mystic doctrine of unity explains how it is that love-symbolism came to be closely linked with heart-symbolism, for to love is only to experience a force which urges the lover towards a given centre." This essential logic behind the link between love and the heart as its symbol has been almost completely forgotten, however.

The formal presentation of the figure in *Reclining Nude on a Base* (No.5) alludes to an essentially decorative type of image. The affected pose echoes the exaggerated elegance of works that seek to amplify the erotic content of the nude, but the individual component forms themselves do not complement the pose. This nude is again a parody of eroticism rather than being actually erotic.

The pose is taken from *Reclining Nude I* (1907) (v.r.41) by Henri Matisse, a motif he developed from its origins in *Joy of Life* (1905-6). The extravagant rhythms of these images relate to the tradition of Art Nouveau, although in Matisse's work the result is not merely, decorative but expressive.

Reclining Nude on a Base (No.5) is the first work in this series to identify sympathetically with the human figure. Despite its inherent decorativeness, the work attempts to reflect the simplicity and humility of its materials - that is, unpolished wood in both figure and base. It is thus denied the preciousness of a high-art object and invested instead with an intimacy which one might associate with folk art or wooden toys. Eli Nadelman (1882-1946) used this approach in works like *Dancer* (c.1918). (v.r.42) By denying a work of sculpture an elevated status in this way, the sculptor addresses the problem of assessing the relative value of an object by identifying it as either

The valentine-type symbol is all that remains. It has become no more than a figure of notation which relates to the idea of romantic love. Cirlot, J.E., *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, Great Britain, 1962, p. 141

`high' or `low' Art. *Reclining Nude on a Base* (No.5)
attempts to draw attention to the often dubious
discrimination made between these categories on moral
grounds.

The change in form is, to a large extent, the result of the
change from modelling forms in clay to carving them
directly in wood. The new material and process have
been allowed to dictate the nature of the forms. This has
given rise to a more personal sculptural language, one
which is more sympathetic to the female nude.

A Figure on Wood

William K. Warrick
Design

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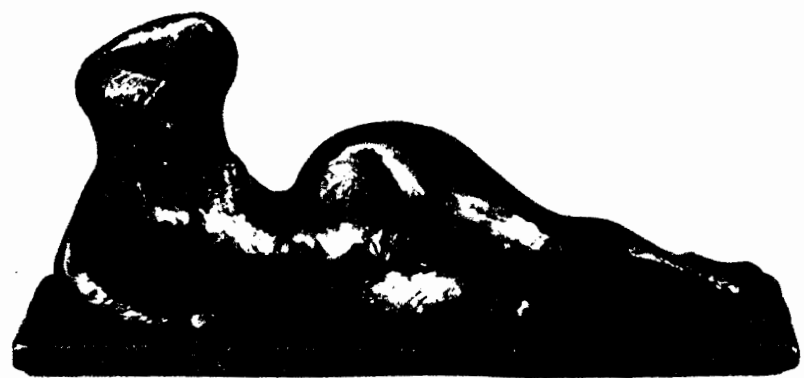


6. Figure on Wooden Base

500mm x 100mm x 100mm(including base)

Bronze

Here the female nude has been placed on a formal base and presented ceremoniously as an 'occasional trophy'. The subject, although stately, is matronly and unglamorous. Her nakedness is awkwardly offset by a formal coiffure. The image is intended as a critical alternative to those images which attempt to equate the female nude with the manifestation of a physical ideal. The figure alludes to Matisse's portraits in bronze, particularly Jeanette III, IV and V (1910-13) (v.r.43), and to his painted Portrait de Madame Matisse (1905). The image is a portrait rather than an abstraction, the intention being to emphasize the dignity of the subject. Whereas the majority of works in this study refer to and attempt to subvert the practice of idealizing the female nude, this image operates more on the level of Rembrandt's nudes in the sense that I have attempted here to restore the notion of the female nude as portrait.



7. Figure Study I - Reclining Nude

80mm x 180mm x 55mm

Bronze

This figure was modelled on the reclining naiad figure in *Les Fêtes Vénitiennes* (c.1718) (v.r.44) by Antoine Watteau (1684-1721). The naiad appears almost arbitrarily in Watteau's composition and is perhaps the artist's mocking allusion to the frivolity of the contemporary Rococo style. In that image, the erotic element which is suggested by the interaction between the elegantly clothed figures seems to have manifested itself in this single nude figure.

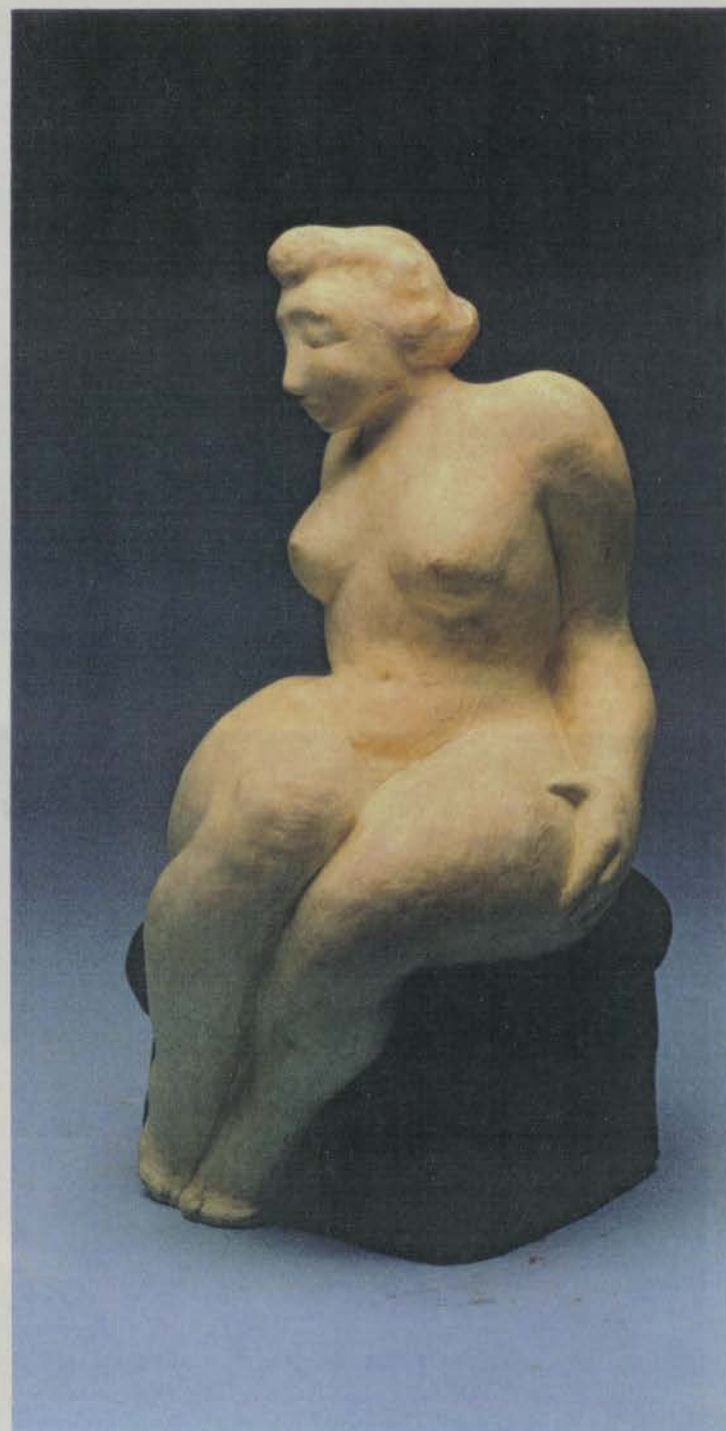
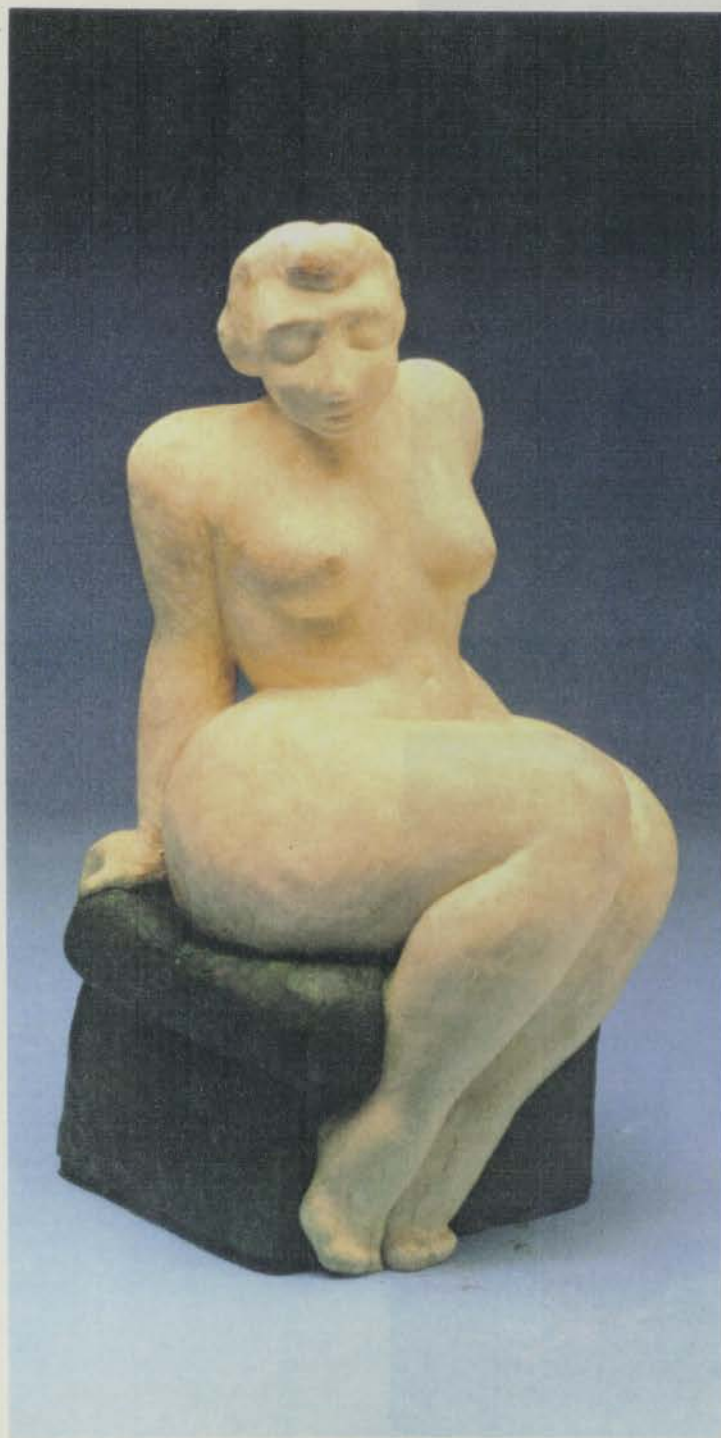
8. Figure Study II - Standing Nude

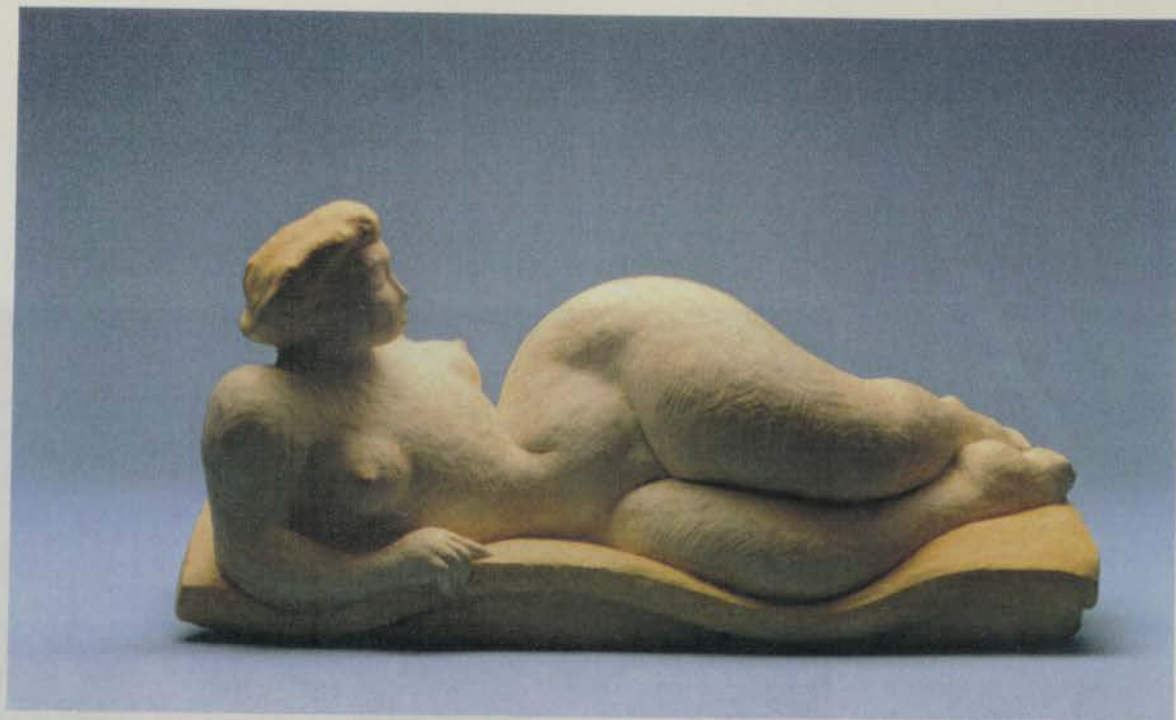
185mm x 60mm x 60mm

Bronze

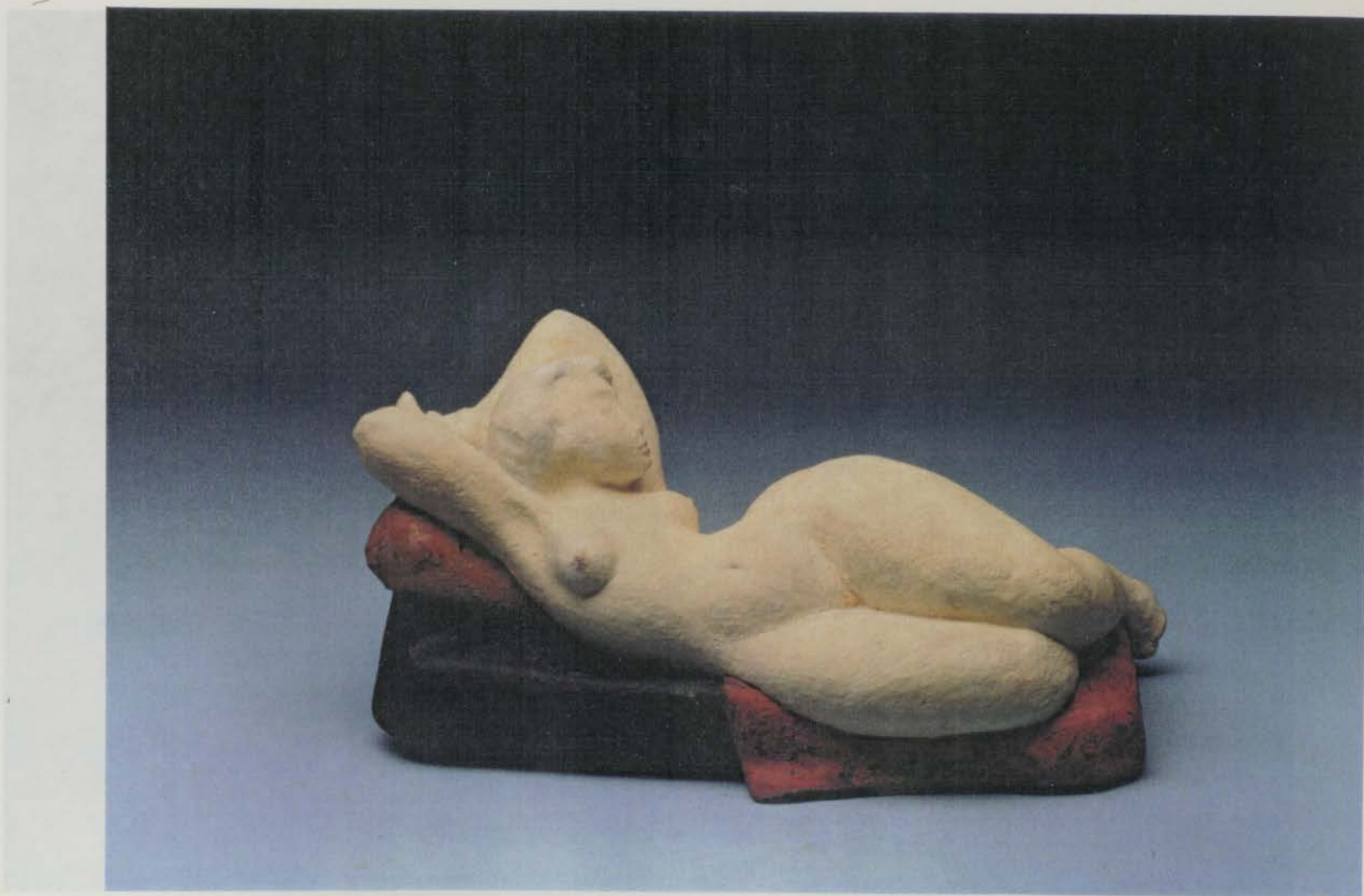
The figure is based on the nude in Dominique Ingres' *Venus Anadyomene* (numerous versions dating from 1807) (v.r.45) and *La Source* (1856). In *La Source* and *Venus Anadyomene*, Ingres used a stereotyped pose which originated in the classical nude and evolved from a covert to an overt signifier of eroticism. In his paintings, the female nude reached a high point of polite eroticism.

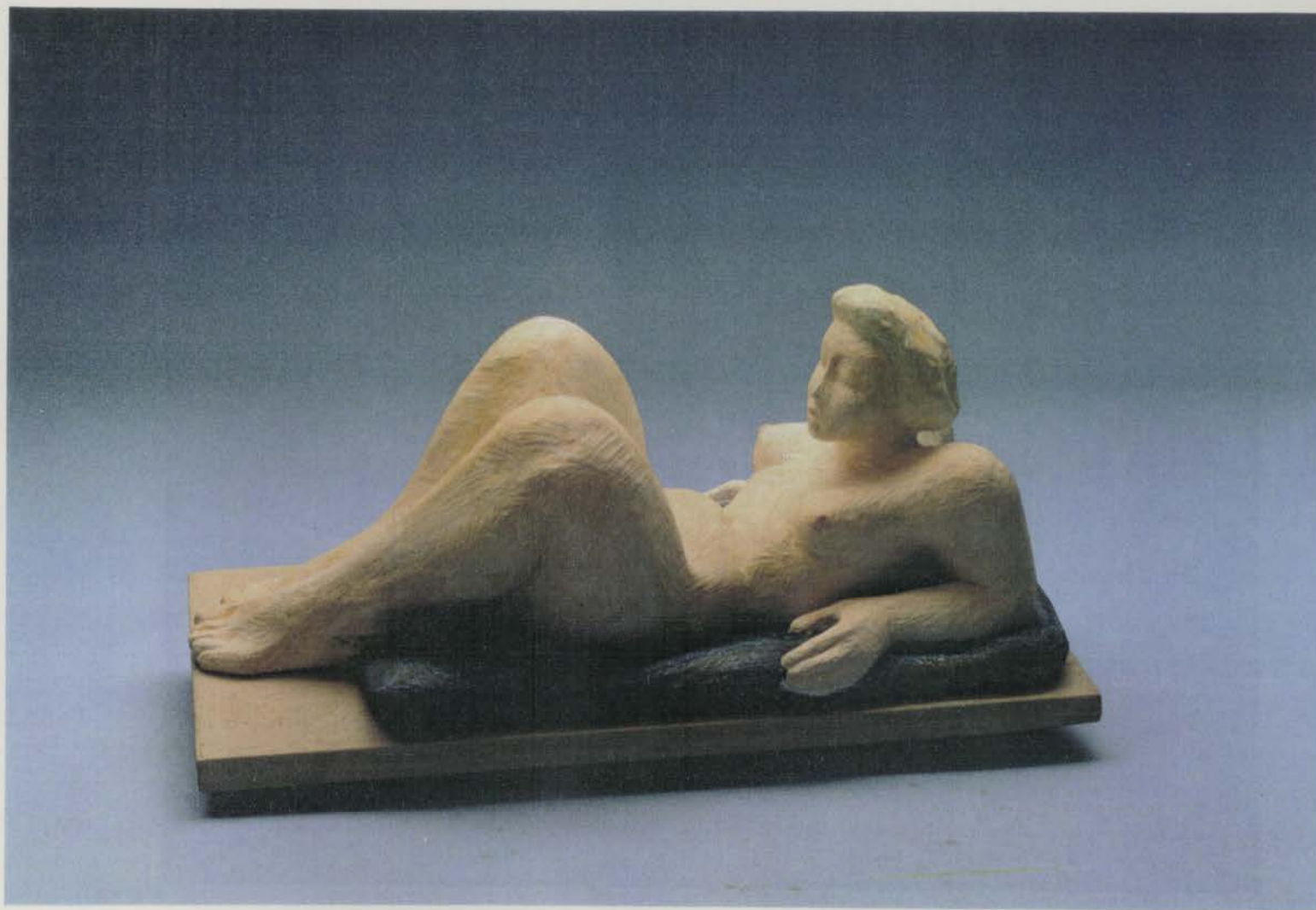


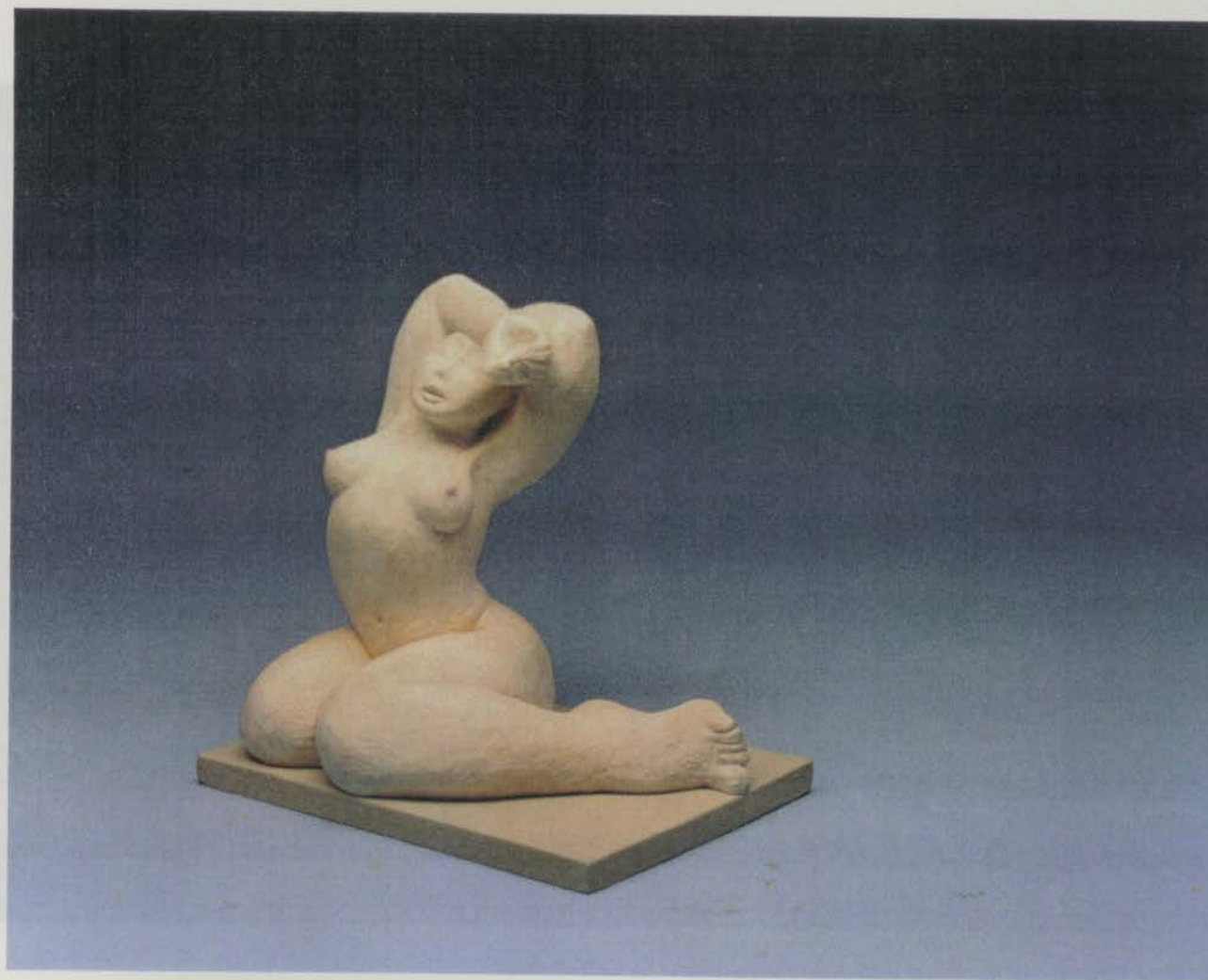


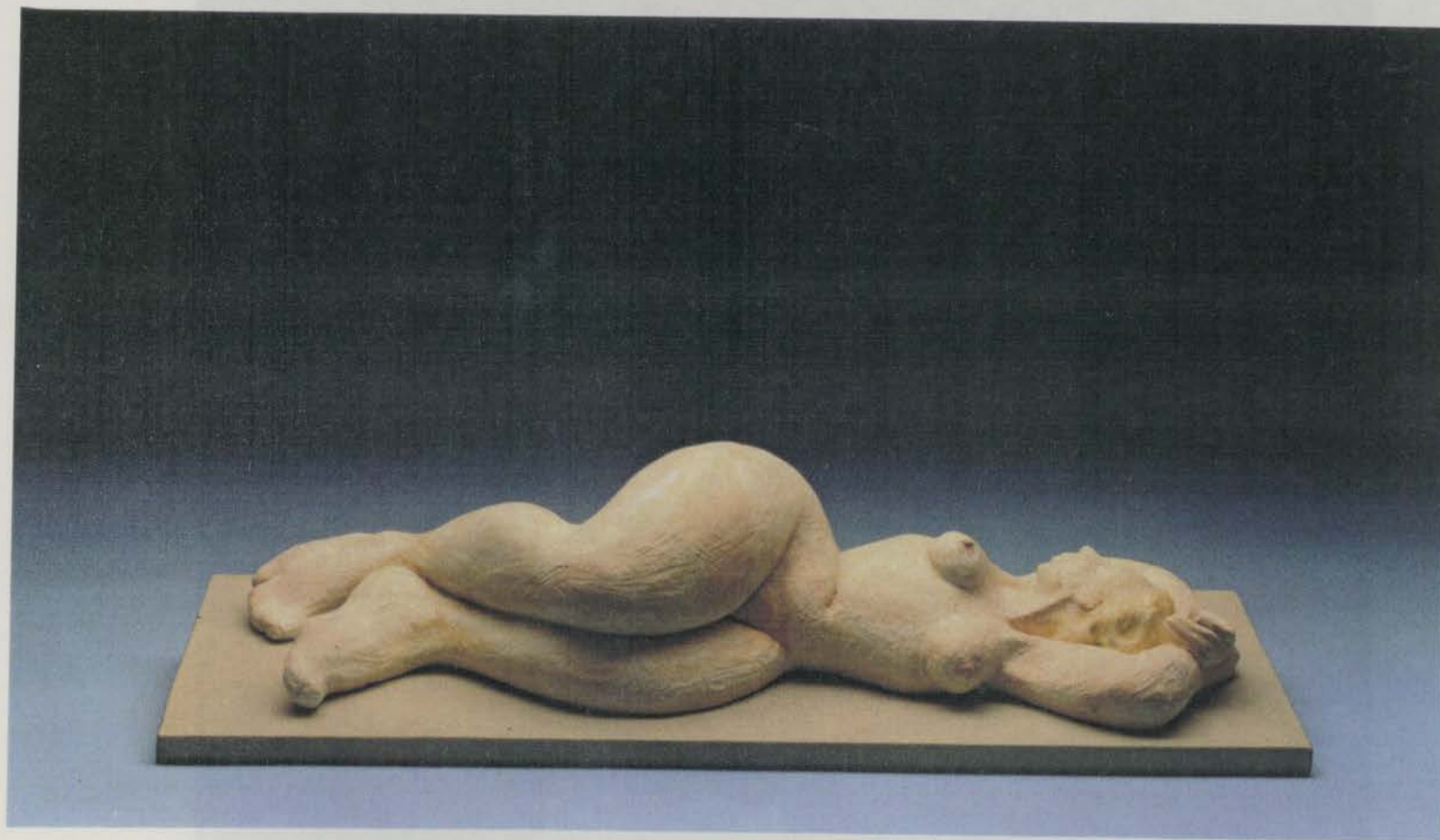


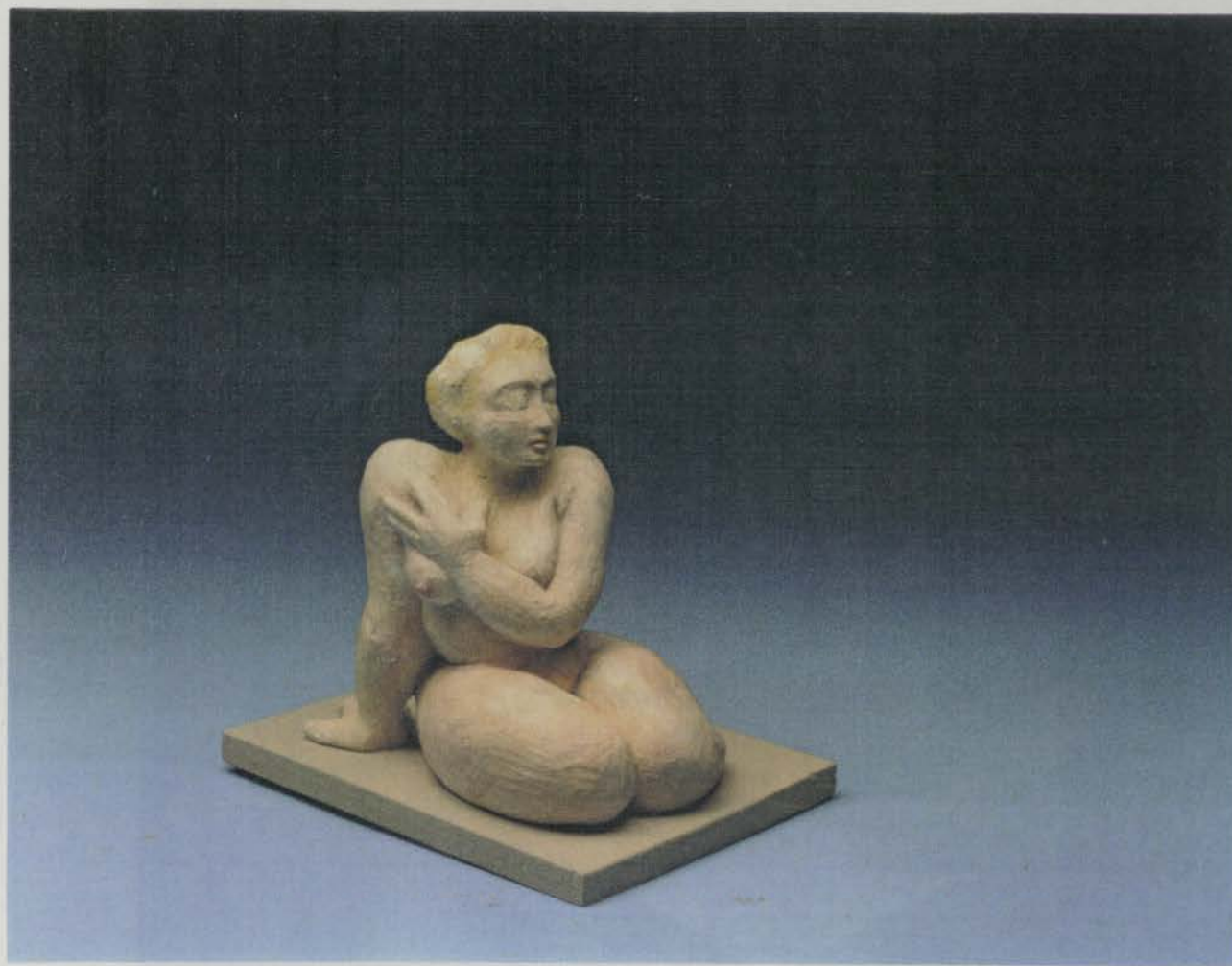


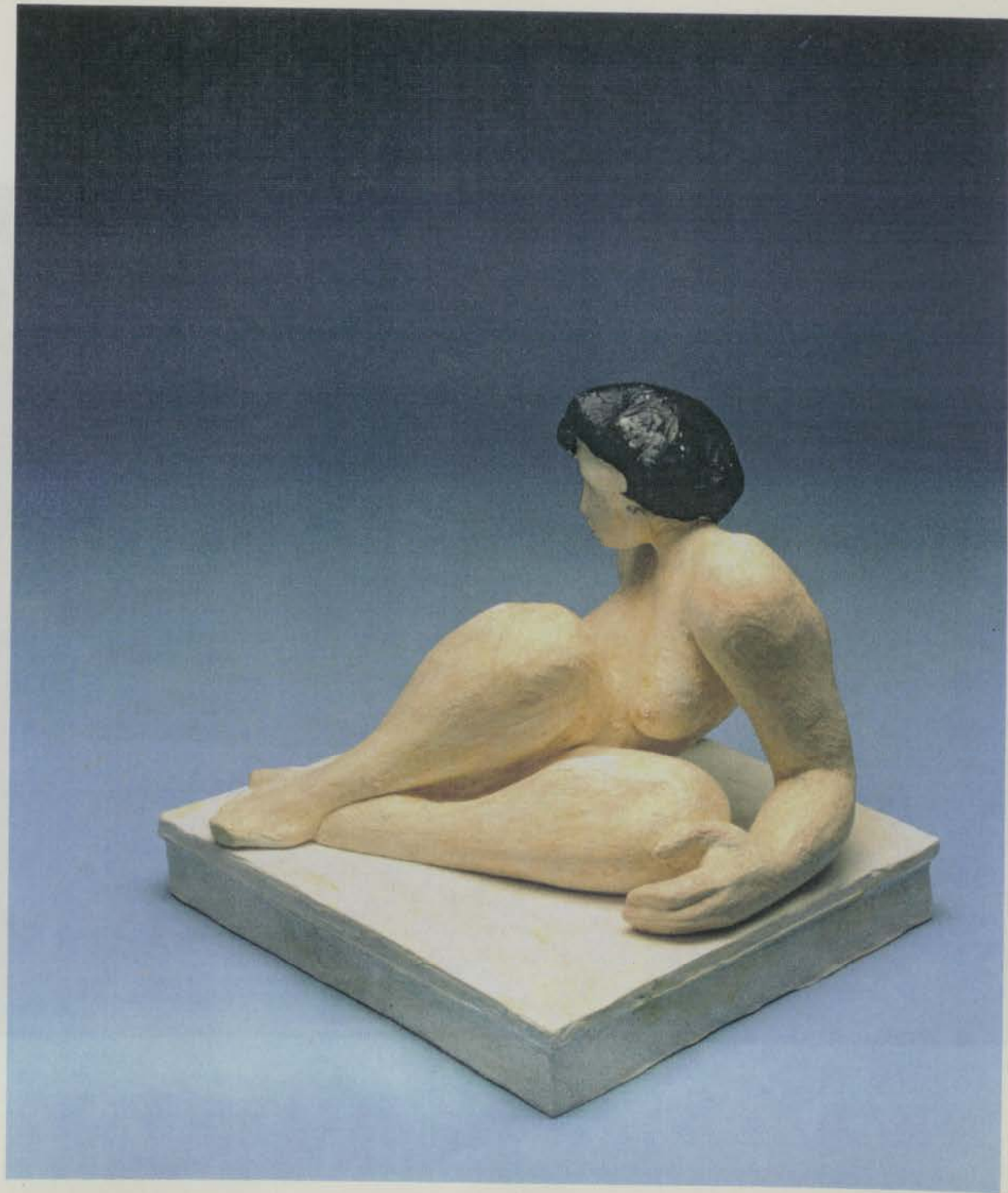




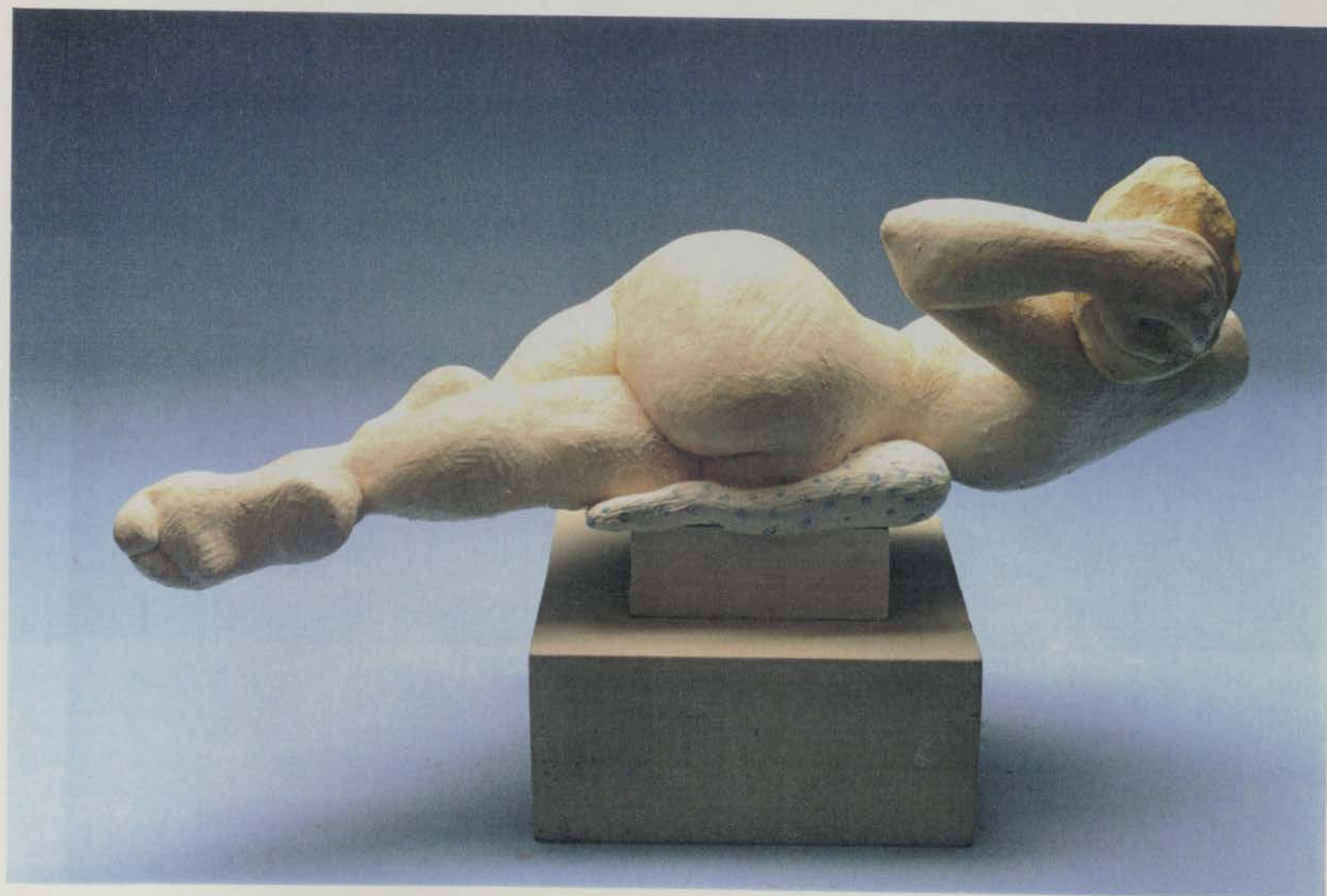










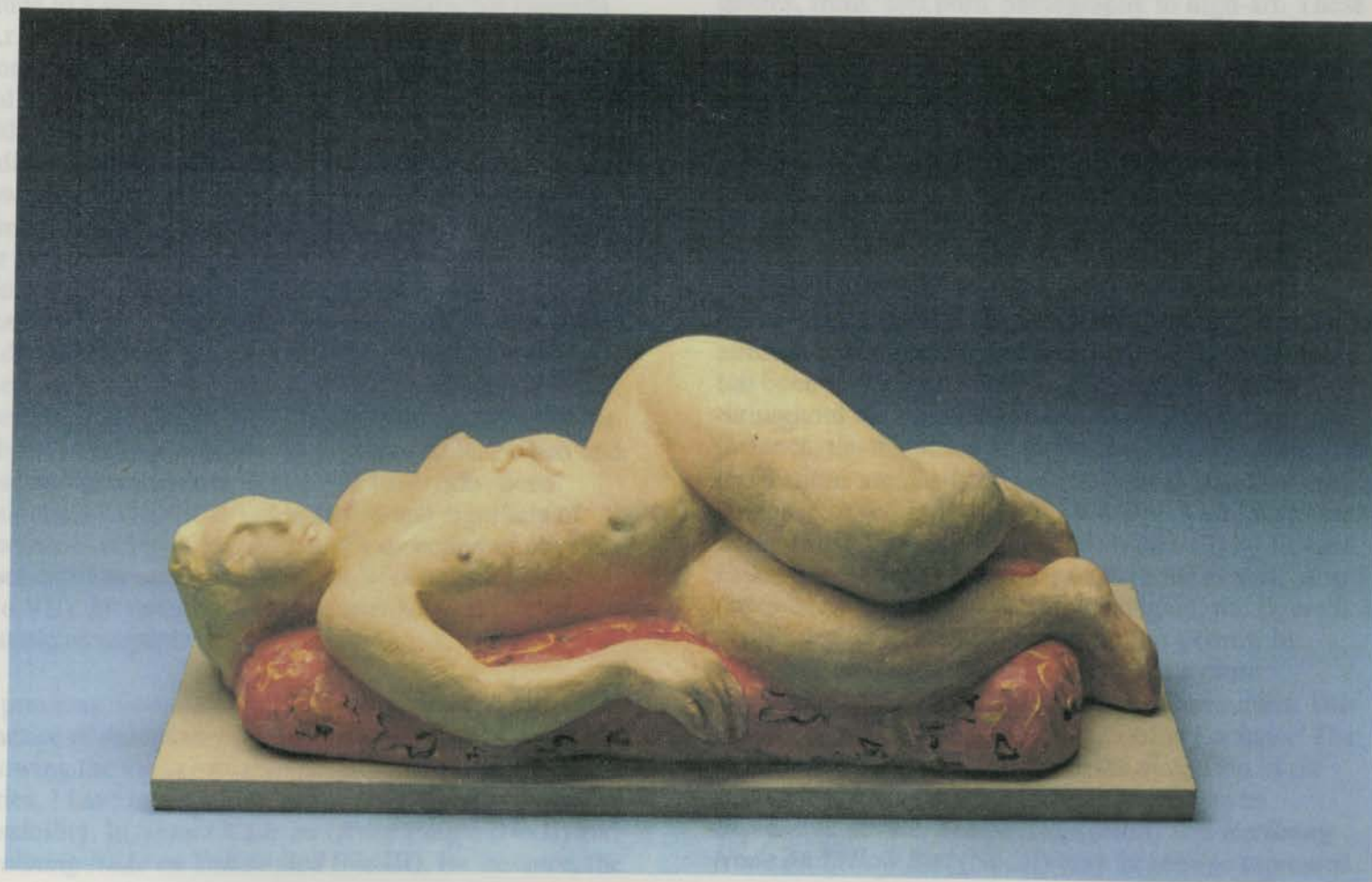


2. Ceramic Works

In these works the female nude has been presented in the form of the "small suspended object". The hands suggest a Japanese doll-like which makes various kinds of objects, even flattened. When, again, previous. The scale of the works and the movement of hand rather ally.

subject is intended to appear, if not uncomfortable, then aware of her exposure. This device is reminiscent of that used by Monet in *Jeune fille* (ex. 16).

The poses which have been used in this series of works are associated solely with the display of women. Women have been depicted in similar poses in various forms, from "old" and "young" to high art. These



9. Ceramic Works

In these works the female nude has been presented in the form of the 'small ornamental object'. The bases suggest a Japanese aesthetic which makes various kinds of objects, even functional objects, appear precious. The scale of the works and the introduction of local colour allude to a genre (Staffordshire porcelain, for example (v.r.46)) where the human figure is denied anything more than a superficial meaning and becomes innocuous and decorative. My intention here is to depict the female nude stripped of meaning. What I have implied is that, ordinarily, the female nude is no longer visually powerful. However, in these works, the meaningless symbol has been invested with other qualities. Whereas the subject of the erotic nude is usually made to appear comfortable despite being on display, it was my intention here to imply that such exposure might result in discomfort and anxiety. In other words, I have attempted to make visible that which traditionally has been sublimated; that is to say, any consideration of the subject as human and, therefore, vulnerable. To this end, pose and gesture have, in some of the works, been assigned a double role - a) as traditional signifiers of eroticism, and b) as the means of expression of physical discomfort or mental anguish. In *Swooning Nude* (No.VII), for instance, the pose may be seen as either ecstatic or anguished.

In previous discussion, reference was made to the practice of dehumanising the erotic nude as a means of allowing the viewer to gaze unselfconsciously. In this series, I have again attempted to deny the viewer that possibility. In *Seated Nude on Green Pouffe* (No.II) and *Reclining Nude on Yellow Bed* (No.III), for instance, the

subject is intended to appear, if not uncomfortable, then aware of her exposure. This device is reminiscent of that used by Manet in *Olympia*.(v.r.10)

The poses which have been used in this series of works are associated solely with the *display* of women. Women have been depicted in similar poses in various genres, from 'soft porn' photography to high-art. These poses constitute a language which relates to nothing more than erotic display. If one were to attempt to relate such stylised poses to particular activities, they would make little sense. The pose is the act and the image needs no further explanation. The viewer has often been conditioned to accept the awkward contortions of the female body, postures legitimized by familiarity.

A similar subject has been depicted in most of the following works - that is, an idealized blonde female, an allusion again to the fifties stereotype. This basic image has been stylised and distorted to varying degrees throughout the series. In *Seated Nude* (No.I), for instance, the distortion of forms is relatively minor. The proportions are idealised and the pose is standard in the language of feminine display. It refers to an image such as the *Little Mermaid* figure (1904) (v.r.47) by Edvard Eriksen (b.1876) in Copenhagen harbour as well as to the nude of 'soft porn' centrefolds. Again, the figure is a distillation of elements from dissimilar genres. In *Reclining Nude on Yellow Bed* (No.III) a more decorative and elaborate distortion has been used. This image refers to an image such as Gaston Lachaise' *The Mountain* (1924) (v.r.48) where the distortion of the female body is as much a formal exercise as an expressive device. *Seated Nude* (No.I) and *Reclining Nude on Yellow Bed* (No.III) may be seen to represent

the limits to which the motif was developed formally in this series.

In *Seated Nude on Blue Pouffe* (No.IV), the subject has been 'aged' and demurely seated to evoke the suggestion of a formal portrait. The concept of a formal nude portrait subverts to a degree both the nude and the official portrait.

In *Seated Nude on Flat Base* (No.X) I have introduced a reference to a Pop aesthetic. The female nude thus becomes the ideal Pop motif just as she has previously been shown to have been adapted to numerous other aesthetics. The figure is a reference to the images of Roy Lichtenstein (b.1923).(v.r.49) In this work and in *Suspended Nude* (No.VII), the sense of the figure has shifted towards the fantastical - a three-dimensional translation of a painted image. In relation to the rest of the series, a more complex sculptural composition has been introduced. In *Suspended Nude* (No.VII), I have made a formal compositional reference to the arrangement used by Jacques Lipchitz (1891-1973) in a work such as *Prometheus Strangling the Vulture* (1944-53).(v.r.50) *Suspended Nude* (No VII) is intended to float mysteriously - this is an allusion to Alexandre Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* (1865).(v.r.12)

The works are listed in chronological order.

The following 12 works: Ceramic, Oil Paint.

- I. Venus I (Seated Nude)
185mm x 160mm x 160mm
- II. Venus II (Seated Nude on Green Pouffe)
255mm x 105mm x 110mm
- III. Venus III (Reclining Nude on Yellow Bed)
160mm x 350mm x 150mm
- IV. Venus IV (Seated Nude on Blue Pouffe)
205mm x 130mm x 190mm
- V. Venus V (Reclining Nude on Red Floral Couch)
160mm x 295mm x 140mm
- VI. Venus VI (Reclining Nude on Blue Mattress)
120mm x 300mm x 130mm
- VII. Venus VII (Swooning Nude)
210mm x 200mm x 130mm
- VIII. Venus VIII (Horizontal Nude)
90mm x 355mm x 105mm
- IX. Venus IX (Demure Nude)
145mm x 120mm x 135mm
- X. Venus X (Seated Nude on Flat Base)
180mm x 200mm x 200mm
- XI. Venus XI (Suspended Nude)
150mm x 350mm x 200mm
- XII. Venus XII (Nude on Red Floral Bed)
120mm x 250mm x 120mm

ADDITIONAL WORKS

The following pair of works represent the parallel development of ideas that are central to this dissertation, but in a different sculptural mode from that of the main body of works. They may be seen, therefore, to be tangential rather than an extension of the main body of sculptures.

a. Large Torso



London, Open Britain, 1956, p. 101.

Some time between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s an element of expressive



London, Open Britain, 1956, p. 101.

a. Large Torso

510mm x 360 mm x 300 mm

Carved Jelutong, oil paint

This work is concerned with the formal manipulation of the female form to the point where it may no longer be recognisable. The formal abstraction of the nude has been a common practice in Twentieth century Western art, and does not necessarily subvert or negate that which is human in the nude. This can be seen in a work like Aristide Maillol's *Action in Chains* (1906) (v.r.51), where the figure is simply truncated; as well as a work like *Princess* (1916) (v.r.52) by Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) where the formal abstraction of the female figure is more advanced. There are instances, however, where the abstracted female form retains strong visual links with its human origins, the resulting image suggesting the mutilation of the human body rather than the manipulation of sculptural elements. This occurs, for example, in certain works by Gaston Lachaise.

In her discussion of Lachaise' sculpture, Janet Hobhouse has observed that, although the artist has isolated the human torso in a work like *Torso* of 1928 (v.r.53) as:

...the means to a powerful and economic statement of beauty,⁴²

he has used this device in other works to entirely different effect. Hobhouse writes :

Some time between the late 1920's and the mid-1930's an element of excessive manipulation enters Lachaise's work, hinting at obsession, coercion, and certainly not always either reverential (as he continues to claim) or benign. In his examination of what is beautiful and what grotesque..., Lachaise seems to be pushing against the edges of ideal form, seeing how far it can go without surrendering its aesthetic power or becoming simply ideosyncratic or grotesque.⁴³

These developments are evident in works like *Torso* (1933) and *Female Acrobat* (c.1935).

This testing of limits has occurred in *Large Torso* (a.), in which I attempted to raise the question of how far the female form can be abstracted before it loses all reference to its origins, such as in the fetishization of separate parts of the female anatomy in pornographic photography. The use of such a device in this context would suggest that the isolation of parts of the figure does not necessarily reduce its erotic potential; rather, it appears that it might be increased. The efficacy of the pornographic image is not dependent, however, on preserving the human vulnerability or dignity of the subject. Indeed, dehumanisation appears to be a prerequisite of such imagery.

42 Hobhouse, J., The Bride Stripped Bare - The Artist and the Nude in the Twentieth Century, Jonathan Cape: London, Great Britain, 1988, p. 191.

43 Hobhouse, J., The Bride Stripped Bare - The Artist and the Nude in the Twentieth Century, Jonathan Cape: London, Great Britain, 1988, p. 190.

b. Torso with Head No. 27

50/55 cm x 30/35 cm
Carved Jelutong

This work is a
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study...



b. Torso with Bare Midriff

560mm x 300mm x 200mm

Carved Jelutong, oil paint

This work is closely related to *Large Torso* (a.). In this piece, however, an element of cruel humour has been introduced in the allusion to a type of garment (the brief, but over-decorated bathing costume) which trivialises the female body. This mediates the grotesque and evokes a greater pathos, thus aligning the work more closely with the sculptures that form the core of this study.

CONCLUSION

To the extent that this study forms part of the feminist debate on women's bodies, I have attempted to reassess traditional ways of thinking about the depiction of women, especially since such attitudes appear to persist even when perceptions of women change.

Aspects of contemporary culture still reflect the belief in an all-pervading anonymous feminine ideal. C.G.Jung's theory of the 'archetypal' man and woman, culture-bound though it may be, provides a possible explanation for the persistence and elusiveness of such a fantasy. In 1925 he wrote:

Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of the man, an imprint or "archetype" of all the ancestral experiences of the female, a deposit, as it were, of all the impressions ever made by woman - in short, an inherited system of psychic adaptation. Even if no woman existed, it would still be possible, at any given time, to deduce from this unconscious image exactly how a woman would have to be constituted psychically. The

same is true of the woman: she too has her inborn image of man.⁴⁴

A male equivalent of this ideal female 'archetype' has become increasingly visible in commercial imagery (v.r.54) - apparently a cross-gender reference to the female tradition. In other words, instead of the practice of idealising women being reevaluated in relation to contemporary thought, the practice has simply been extended to men and the power relationship has been retained. While there has emerged a 'powerful woman' stereotype - which is perhaps an ironic cross-gender reference to the male equivalent - the traditional female stereotype still exists. One aspires to that model in order to be desirable, while one aspires to the male stereotype in order to acquire power. There remains a sense that *images of women* are somehow separate from *women themselves* and therefore do not reflect changes in social attitudes.

My approach in the sculptural work has been to attempt to subvert images of female stereotypes in order to negate their conventional functions. However, although my references are primarily drawn from the broad genre of erotica, it is not my intention to de-eroticise the female nude. It is not in the interests of women to perpetuate the idea that images of the female body are merely an erotic trigger, but this does not preclude the making of images which acknowledge and celebrate female sexuality. Therefore, while I have attempted to subvert images which are particularly insensitive in their

44 Jung, C.G., *Psychological Reflections*, Jacobi, J. ed., Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, Great Britain, 1953, p. 114.

depiction of the subject, I am also concerned with the creation of an erotic language which may include images of women, but does not insult them.

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