

OPINION

# Naked With Clothes On: How It Feels to Be a Drawing Model

BY SARAH BROWN

October 16, 2016

My (short-lived) muse moment began when the New York Academy of Art called to ask if I would be a guest model at Will Cotton's annual Drawing Party. I've known Will for years—he's one of my favorite painters, and people—and who wouldn't be the slightest bit flattered to be considered a "model," if only for one night?

I immediately said yes, before fully comprehending that it was a life-drawing party, i.e., the models would be *nude*. A helpful clue I somehow disregarded was that many of the evening's works would later be auctioned at the popular Take Home a Nude event at Sotheby's, which benefits the school.

The New York Academy of Art was established in 1982 by an artsy, intellectual group—Andy Warhol, Tom Wolfe, and others—who sought to promote and preserve figurative art. The goal was to teach traditional skills like drawing and painting, which the founders felt that contemporary artists, no matter their medium, needed, and in some cases, lacked.

Will, one of the Academy's senior critics (along with other luminaries like Eric Fischl, Jenny Saville, and Vincent Desiderio), has been holding these intimate soirees for years. They are casual affairs that in both spirit and practice harken back to the way artists used to operate a century ago in Montmartre. "There's this social aspect, which is completely absent from art-making today," said Will when we met one morning at his studio. Since artists from various disciplines participate, I imagine that in some cases, the flexing of muscles not often used—say, a sculptor or abstract painter suddenly sketching a reclining nude as if back in art school—must send off sparks in exciting, surprising ways. Yes, responded Will, "some have told me that it has fed back into their work, even if it's not figurative work."

Once I confirmed I could remain clothed—in years past, guest model Padma Lakshmi had worn a leotard; Brooke Shields had worn a nude slip. *Phew*—the rest of what I had signed up for dawned on me. I am (painfully) aware that I have a not-quite-from-this-time face that artists often find “interesting” in some way or another. And it is precisely the “interesting” parts—you know, the strong profile, the things that give you “character”—that had me worried. Would Will and his circle of contemporary art stars immediately zero in on the features, the angles, I most dislike about myself, confirming, objectively, yes, *this is how the world sees you, and it is hideous?* Because, that’s the thing: In this Insta era, as members of this selfie generation, we have become accustomed to capturing and controlling the image. If I don’t like it, I delete it. If I do like it, I filter and Photoshop away, to make it even more becoming—my perfect version of me. There would be no way to influence how this group of people interpreted me. What each artist commits to paper, Will noted, is a function of how he or she sees the world. Many versions of me. All true. I would be exposing my vulnerabilities—and hoping for the best. I would, in fact, be naked, just with clothes on.

---



James Adelman "Portrait of SB"  
Photo: Courtesy of the New York Academy of  
Art

Speaking of clothes, I flicked through some old favorites in my closet and found a long-forgotten gem tucked in the back: a classic goddess dress in heavy folds of cascading champagne-color silk that, against my very pale skin, had the sheen of candlelight. It draped dramatically in the front, dipping nearly to my navel, and had an elegant cowl detail in the back that made my neck look about as long as a giraffe's. I slipped it on, and the train, with its intricate pleating at the sides, was about a foot too long—clearly I'd never worn it, or bothered to have it hemmed. But that didn't matter. I loved the generous folds of fabric, how they fell like a silken puddle around me on the floor. If I couldn't (or wouldn't) give them nudity, at least I could give them my best approximation of a Greek statue.

The morning of the event, I called former-guest-model Waris Ahluwalia for any helpful recon or last-minute wisdom. The handsome and prolific Waris—jewelry designer, actor, model—was an old pro at being studied and admired by rooms full of strangers. “At first, you can’t help but feel a little self-conscious, posing, but then you’re reminded that’s what you’re there for,” he said encouragingly. “It’s an exchange. They’re looking at you, celebrating everything about you, the human form in all its shapes and sizes. It’s not a fashion shoot.” Indeed: Can you imagine if all art, throughout the ages, only focused on slender, tall people with perfectly symmetrical features? How boring the world would be! Waris continued: “You walk down the street and look at a tree and admire its beauty for all of its variations—a crooked branch, gnarled trunk. You glance over at a human being, and immediately you’re judging ears, nose, butt. Why is it different than a tree?”

That evening, at a sprawling Meatpacking District photo studio, the other models in attendance—pros who did not have my benefit of a scrap of clothing—and I were positioned in various stances and states of repose on a series of pedestals strewn languorously with fur throws. An intimidating conglomeration of wooden easels encircled us. Before we began our pose, I asked Kate, the pretty brunette behind me, who was an aerialist by day, how she stayed perfectly immobile for 20 or more minutes at a time. “I make to-do lists in my head, and plan my week,” she said cheerfully.

In order to remain completely still, I picked a single point on which to fix my gaze and did not waiver. For the first pose, it was a piece of masking tape stuck to the back of an easel with the number 44 scrawled on it. This was working great until an artist came in late and sat down in front of it. (Luckily, once he got going, he worked with a board on his lap, which meant he bent over enough that I could still focus on my number 44.)

I felt serene, and strangely unself-conscious, standing there beneath the spotlight. I let go, and trusted everyone to see their own version of me. At one point, I felt I could not hold the pose any longer—all five fingers on my right hand were numb from being frozen in place; my left knee, slightly twisted so my hip would be positioned just-so, throbbed; my nose itched—but if I moved, the folds of the dress might change; the position of my chin could shift, casting new shadows. There were no less than 10 people positioned around me, measuring, studying, and scribbling away intently, counting on me to just stay still. So, I did.

Walking around the room, glass of wine in hand, after the session, seeing so many renditions of myself was like looking into 10 different mirrors. Will's drawing—dreamy and soft, with elegant lines, virtuoso draftsmanship—predictably made my heart soar. Jansson Stegner, a painter known for distorted bodies with mile-long torsos and limbs—“weird figuration,” he calls his style—probably had the worst seat in the house: directly in back of me. But he created one of my favorite portraits of the evening: a delicate sketch, almost classical in nature, of the back of my head and neck that, even without showing my face, was just perfectly, unmistakably me. Jocelyn Hobbie, whose figurative paintings feature exuberant colors and joyous floral-print backgrounds that look like they came straight off the Spring runways, took a few iPhone snaps of me so she could continue the piece in her studio. What resulted several days later was a luminous oil on canvas that made me gasp: me on my very, *very* best day, like, ever. Inka Essenhigh, a painter lauded for her surreal, undulating dreamscapes, confirmed my worst suspicions about my hated profile, but her drawing reminded me of a Toulouse-Lautrec, which softened the blow.



“You’d have to be confident with your perceived flaws,” Will had said to me of facing the room from that pedestal. It’s his use of the word “perceived” that I keep coming back to: As in, not everyone would consider the things that make one most insecure flaws or deficiencies. Some might view these defining characteristics as a person’s best assets. Becoming comfortable, even proud, of what you don’t like about yourself is easier said than done, but if I take one thing from that evening, along with the honor of being in the sights of so many talented people for even one minute, it will be that.

*The New York Academy of Art’s Take Home a Nude event will be held October 24 at Sotheby’s in New York City.*