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Why drawing naked women is good for the soul.

1. Notting Hill, London. (2013)

They projected onto the big back screens enormous pictures of naked women. Fronts, backs, undercarriages; laying down, standing up, crouching, sleeping. All the drawings were mine. The crowded audience looked at this vast presentation of small drawings projected big with as much awe as I did. I had not seen this enlarging of small drawings before. The talk organizer had not told me there would be this kind of backdrop to my talk.

The man sitting in front of me smiled over his clipboard. The audience of perhaps 400 talked among themselves, seemingly overwhelmed by the powerful graphic images of female nakedness. I was overwhelmed. A quick gesture with a pencil magnified into a giant gesture over thirty foot high seemed odd. Like giant gestures on giant pieces of paper.

Silence fell and the man began his questioning.

“So. You draw. As we can see here. And as your book graphically tells us.”

“I draw. But never at this scale and size. I do some small works. You have taken some of them here and made them into something which they were never intended to be. I don’t draw at 30 foot heights.”

“We wanted to create a sense of largeness of drawing in your life. You suggest that drawing civilised you and overwhelmed your bad side. And we wanted that feeling to be captured in this talk this evening.”

I would not argue. There was some strange logic to it. I was claiming that drawing naked women took me from an obliterated, criminal life, an underclass life into something different.

“Explain the first occasion that you took up a pencil.”

“Probably when I was a child. As we all do. We draw like Picasso until we are about 11. And then we start drawing, most of us anyway, as if our creativity has been amputated. That is the weird thing about drawing and painting and all the other creative things we do.”

A few months before the talk I had been on a beach in Northern France, walking over dunes towards the sea. I came over a large dune on this deserted beach and saw an embarrassing sight. A woman was crouching down urinating and the moment I saw her she saw me. She jumped up and I

shouted, "Excuse me." I turned to walk another way. But the gorse was so thick on either side of me I could only turn and walk back to where I had come from. She shouted after me. "Missus, please." So I stopped and turned and was at a loss as to what to do. She came up to me. I felt like the biggest fool in the world. I had wandered off the accepted path from the campsite I was staying in into the gorse and the patches of sand. I was going to conquer my lack of regard for drawing water and I carried one of my bigger sketchbooks.

She came up and laughed nervously.

"Sir, we were both caught by that."

The path led directly to a tent that was pitched within the gorse and sand. It was almost hidden. A place where you could forget about the world; until of course you wanted to piss.

"I really am sorry. I am in the campsite there and I was on the way to the sea to draw some sun and sea and sand."

"Look. I am the one. I take up a private place in a public place. I am the culprit."

Her English was good.

"I will simply retrace my steps."

She would not have it.

"No, if you go by the bush there, and then go to your left, then right, for maybe 200 meters you will get your sea."

She was in her early 20's. She smiled and was dark haired and strong faced. The wind whipped her hair around. She had a broad smile and she seemed now to have regained her composure. She was beautiful.

"Thank you. If you ever want to use the smallest room I would go into the campsite. There are good facilities."

"I must remember. Thank you."

I smiled and touched my imaginary cap, as many men did in embarrassment.

"Have a good hide out."

"I was just going to make some coffee sir. I have some croissants I got from the village. Would you join me. And show me your sketchbook."

I looked at the woman and imagined myself drawing her. Her, laying quietly, and occasionally telling me what was motivating the mood or feeling or situation she was in. Little did I know that I would spend the next week drawing her almost daily in her sand tent. And out of that would come the best

collection of drawings I had committed since my young manhood; when back then I devoted the time and energy to one thing and one thing alone: drawing.

“Yes. Thank you. I was going to a café. Why not sit and talk for a few minutes.”

I sat on a small stool and she prepared the coffee. And then when we sat over the coffee she told me about her life. A student. At the Sorbonne. Studying philosophy. And then we fell to looking at my drawings. Most of the drawings were of women. Some of men, many also of trees and plants. But mainly they were the work of the female body. And she looked at them with great interest.

“You must draw me.”

How many times had I been asked to draw someone? How many times had I asked. Celestine was the most recent.

“This afternoon? I really must draw the sea. It’s necessary.”

“I study. I read. That’s all I do. You come when you are ready. But I sleep also. I may sleep while you draw.”

I went down to the beach and drew some light waves and birds, and sand. And clouds and distant boats. The clouds were particularly good out over the English Channel; Le Marche, the Sleeve as the French call it. I tried hard to bring some depths to my clouds, but I was asking the impossible of myself. Then sitting carefully on the back of an abandoned chair I drew waves again and again. And began to realise, as with drawing leaves, each little bit of the drawing has to get a personality. After a few hours I think I had learned more about water and clouds than I had all of my time as a drawer. Which stretched back over 4 decades.

I came back up the slope of thick sand, soft underfoot. As I approached the gorse and knew the tent would be over the next sand duned ridge I began to feel awkward. Our sudden rapport had been based so flimsily on her being caught out squatting. Such thin things bring people together. Yet there was out in the world, I knew, people so open to new things. And I was a new thing.

At the next ridge I could not see her about. I walked up close to the tent and she was laying there with glasses on, asleep with a book on her breasts. She looked full of what knowledge can do to someone, if used well. So at peace with the world. I pulled up one of her small stools and almost squatting down began to draw her. She stirred once or twice, and Jean Paul Sartre slipped out of her hands. But I was drawing her face and hair mostly. Drawing sleeping people is something different. People have to feel happy with you as they sleep. Once I was drawn by a girlfriend asleep and it was a very different drawing to my animated face. Now I drew Delphine, unanimated.

I drew for half an hour before she stirred, and then looked up in wonder at me drawing her. And smiled.

“You caught me.”

“Sleeping and studying; you seem to do them well.”

"I do. It is also a time of forgetting. Would you like to draw me more?"

"I am already there."

"But more? More of me?"

"Of course. I want to draw you until either you leave or I leave."

"Then we must begin."

She stood and undid her denims, exposing a delicate pair of knickers. White and with some decoration of a filigree'd kind. I tried to avoid my eyes. You normally drew naked models when they were completely undressed, arriving wrapped in a bath robe. But Celestine was unwrapping herself before, exposing tanned skin that complimented her light black hair. She pulled down her knickers with such confidence I had to ask.

"Have you been drawn many times before?"

"Never. But I have always wanted to be drawn. Every French girl wants to be drawn."

I could not agree or disagree, having drawn a few of them.

"It is because we are all romantics. We are stuck in the life of Paris when Picasso drew and Modigliani drew. All French women need to be reassured that they would be drawn by the great men."

"As a philosopher you should not say such unprovable generalisations."

"Exactly."

She said this as if she had just proved a hypothesis. I had to smile. Now as she stood with her top off and undoing the white, light filigree'd bra. Her total body, strong and tanned, with more white where she had covered up with summer bikini. Her strong breasts came bursting out and she stood now complete.

"This is good. Later shall we swim in the sea?"

"Why not?"

As she stood I sketched her quickly. I came up close to her and drew her above me and in front of me. Her neatly trimmed pubic hair was little more than a line that did not manage to cover her lips. I drew on and soon had a few strong drawings. Then Celestine sat and carried on reading.

"I will write about this. This is what happens only in a movie."

"French, or American?"

“French of course. A lost girl who wants to hide from life and study, is discovered by a wandering drawer. And they draw from then on. Their friendship blossoms because of the pencil.”

I drew. She read. I occasionally praised her concentration. She talked about philosophy and I talked about anything that came into my head. And then I told her the story, over coffee, of the various times that led to my taking up drawing. She listened intently.

“Drawing was good for your soul.”

“I am a devote ex catholic. I lost all that soul stuff.”

“A soul can be as broad as you wish it. Or as narrow as you wish it. It is all the unresolved things about your life that do not fit into your brain or your heart.”

She came back to the mobile home I had rented on the campsite and took a shower. She was tall and good bodied, with good breasts. And she got me thinking about how I was rescued by drawing. And all the other parts of me were tacked on to that central thing: drawing. And drawing naked women in particular.

“I could not tell you how many naked women I have drawn. Hundreds. Hundreds.”

“You must write about it.”

“I will.”

A few weeks afterward she wrote to me from Paris; now back at the university she wrote: “Capture those stories you told me on the beach. I think I will never rise above that short time. When the sand and the wind, and the rain and the sun inspired us to work together.”

I wrote back and said that she was a tonic. That I had gone to France to the campsite to get away from the pressures of life, just to draw. And she had made all of this possible. And that now she was enshrined in many drawings and I would send her some. And she must come to London and be drawn again.