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The Evolution of Nude to Naked:

Female body image and the impact that

figure modeling has on the female perception of self.

A brief history of the representation of the female nude in Western Art: The representation of the female nude has evolved very differently than the male nude in Western art. The male form has been associated with athletic perfection and strength, which is apparent in the idealized male sculptures of ancient Greece. The latter stems from a woman's life giving powers, and dates back to prehistoric times. Representations of the feminine form have emphasized the traits of fertility, which is ever apparent in the voluptuous Venus of Willendorf (dating back to 25,000 BCE). Images of other female fertility/love deities, such as Aphrodite, grew to be common images portrayed in Western art. The ideal nude is represented differently by each culture, and reflects the values of its people.

Nudity over-sexualized: The perception of the female nude, as a powerful image of procreation, has wilted away over time. We find ourselves in the 21st century, where the nude has become naked. There is a lack of reverence for the feminine divine, and the woman is objectified on a massive scale. Across all forms of advertisements and media, women are used as sexual symbols. It starts from a very young age; where young girls are taught that they will never be thin enough, or have enough sexual appeal. Our media perpetuates the negative self-image that many women spend a lifetime attempting to overcome. It is only natural that artwork, where the female form has been represented, be viewed through a distasteful lens. Women and men alike have been so programmed to view women as symbols of sex, that they bring the same illusion to their art experience. Tragically, the art is grouped with the values of our current society, and it becomes almost impossible to see through to the beautiful origins of the perception of the female nude: divine, life-giving, goddess.

The artist, the figure, and the audience: Artists who study the nude understand the complexity of the human form, and often regard working from a live model as one of the most important things that they do in life. Drawing, painting, or sculpting the nude comes with never ending challenges, and art that is often emotionally charged. Unfortunately, it is not common in our society to view the practice of studying the nude form, as anything but taboo. When an artist

reveals that they work with a nude model, people react with crude humor, and make the assumption that there is something perverted is taking place. This delusion may have to do with the insecurities that the person making the statement has about his/her nudity, or the attitude that nudity is directly related to sexuality. Both derive from the social values that have shaped that persons attitudes about being naked, and nothing to do with the representation of the nude in art.

Figure modeling as a remedy: Women, as they are portrayed in our media today, represent an unattainable ideal. There is an ever-increasing amount of money being spent on beauty supplies, diet remedies, and products that promise to make a woman more beautiful. The consumer culture contributes to a sense of worthlessness among women, and shapes their attitudes about their own bodies. Females in our society are being raised to have a warped perception, because nobody can totally prevent the forces of media from penetrating their home. Secondary issues, such as eating disorders, and depression are also linked to a woman's perception of self. Fortunately, nudity does not have a source of angst, and it certainly does not have to be taboo. The only understanding of the female form should not be shaped by society's sex-driven attitudes, nor does one have to be an artist, who studies the nude. I propose that all women have the experience of figure modeling, in order to be liberated from the insecure self-image that society has imposed. When a woman sees her form through the eyes of the artist, she discovers a representation of herself that connects to the feminine divine.

Intentions: I hope to create a dialogue about our current attitudes toward the female form, as it is portrayed in both our society and art. I also hope to better understand the relationship between the artist, the model, and the audience. My own perception of my body has evolved from an insecure dance student, to an artist full of respect, and finally to an experienced figure model. It was only through figure modeling that I finally felt comfortable in my own skin. I wondered if I was the only one who had experienced this revelation through figure modeling, and began to talk to other models. Many of them were artists before modeling, and expressed having similar enlightened outcomes as myself. These were often experienced models, with recollections from years earlier. Through conversation, we concluded that most non-artists view figure modeling as something they could never do, because they did not have perfect bodies and would be humiliated. It is this self-hate of our own bodies that is such a concern to me. I began asking women who have never modeled before to pose nude for me. So far I have had three women participate. I interviewed the women before they posed, and again after modeling. All three reported a sense of new freedom. One 28 year old woman wore a bikini for the first time, with confidence, after modeling. If figure modeling has the power to alter the female perception of self, it is a worthy topic to explore. My presentation will present my own body of work dealing with the female nude, explore the representation of the female nude in

Western art, and address the issues described in this proposal. The platform that “Art as Illusion” would provide to discuss this topic would be ideal. I would also be interested in running a figure drawing workshop if a model could be attained.