

Two Nudes

“In our ambivalent attitudes to the body we are heirs of the Judeo-Christian denial of the flesh, heirs as well of nineteenth-century reticence and repression... few of us are really easy with the naked body. For some people nakedness signifies liberation, joyful and un-neurotic sexuality; for others, it stands for a licentiousness which threatens traditional moral standards... we are still self-conscious about nudity, feel that it breaks some still potent taboo.”

Margaret Walters

There is an undeniable difficulty associated with the nude body in photography. The medium was invented during an era when rules of decency were rigidly enforced. Naturally, the photograph's extreme reality concerned 19th century moralists who quickly dismissed depictions of nudity as vulgar and pornographic; their righteous fervor perpetuated into institutions of high art, which, at the time, were relatively new establishments that excluded the exhibition of photography.¹ Labeled as depraved imagery, photographs of men and women stripped bare were branded as “naked”, a term not to be confused with “nude”. Sir Kenneth Clark classified the nude as a body without clothing which inspired such adjectives as “balanced, prosperous, and confident”; the naked body, on the other hand, connoted a figure that was merely without.² John Berger counters Sir Clark's viewpoint with a different assertion, stating that “to be naked is to be oneself.”³

Much has been said about Craig Doty's ability to confront and challenge viewers through his multifaceted and often unsettling constructions. He has been called “a sick little pervert” by *Artforum* as many of his photographs are known for their twisted visions.⁴ Earlier works explored the darker side of “boys being boys” and, more recently, he focused a critical eye on the female subject. In *Two Nudes*, his first exhibition since relocating to the West Coast, Doty returns his lens to the male sex; though he is revisiting a theme most familiar to him, there

¹ For those interested in the history of nudity in Western art pre-1945, here is a brief summation. Only limited subject matter was considered appropriate to portray unclothed and on display for public view. Tolerable nudes were representations of Adam and Eve, Christ crucified, classical figures from ancient Greece and Rome, exotic subjects from the imagined Orient, and examples of non-Western or primitive art.

² Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3.

³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC & Penguin, 1972), 54.

⁴ Choire Sicha meant this as an accolade.

is a decidedly different feeling with this new work. We are no longer looking at boys suspended in adolescent waywardness and noncompliance. Instead, we are offered a diptych of two young men, exposed and unadulterated, composed with an air of clinical detachment. For Doty, this new approach towards depicting the male gender is subtler, but no less provoking than prior examples. We see the essential attributes that give man his identity. There is no emphasis on his character or his behavior. Set in a nondescript (and inconsequential) room, both figures act as the variable in this somewhat awkward equation. Nothing is shocking beyond their full frontal nudity, which is not distasteful, only slightly inelegant. It is clear that Doty wants us to gaze deeply at each man, to explore the nuances of their shapes, and to compare and contrast their bodies.

The concept of “the gaze” was born out of second-wave feminist discourse in the 1970s; typically, this loaded topic suggested a male artist visually consuming a female body.⁵ The original gaze of the artist is preserved for the pleasure of his audience, which also happened to be predominately male. Particularly with nude photography, privilege was held by the artist. His private vision of the naked woman was made into a very reproducible and life-like document. According to this theory, the feminine model was rendered powerless. *Two Nudes* rearranges the aforementioned relationship of power. Here, the gaze is unusual since the artist and his subjects belong to the same gender; the models’ presentation is a product of Doty’s eye, which reads as transparent, possibly even equalizing. The traditional dynamic is skewed and a different kind of tension emanates from these studies. Theory suggests that power is shared with the observer. In contemporary audiences, both men and women are eligible to look closely at this diptych. They are a pair of images that cater to the voyeur in all of us. Doty influences our posture by providing an opportunity to gaze fully and unabashedly at something that is usually prohibited. Whether we experience embarrassment, stimulation, unease or ennui, we have been given egalitarian sight, the license to stare. Melissa Marinaro

⁵ Photographically speaking, the gaze may also refer to the literal image as seen inside the camera’s viewfinder by the author of the image.