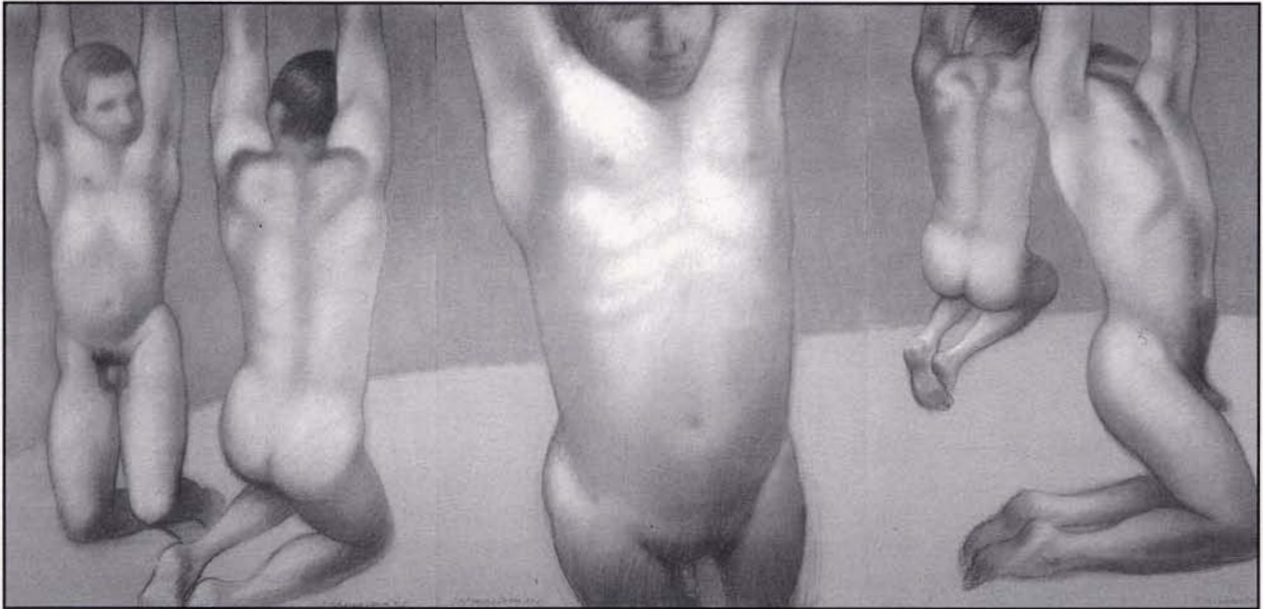


Catherine Catanzaro Koenig

C o n f r o n t a t i o n s



November 22, 1997 - January 17, 1998

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center

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Confrontations: Drawings by Catherine Catanzaro Koenig

In a new series of drawings premiering at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo-based painter Catherine Catanzaro Koenig gives us the male nude. In a departure from previous works, Koenig has focused on simple compositions of between one and five figures rendered in muted pastels on earth colored paper. Known for her thoughtful egg tempera paintings of objects such as shells, eggs, and hats in allegorical compositions, Koenig chose to pursue this series both as an extension of existing formal and metaphorical concerns, as well as reflection on the current social and political discomfort over the body and the male nude in particular. In these images, the body and its gestures becomes the central subject. In considering gestures and the way the body is represented, Koenig touches upon a wide range of figurative traditions in visual art. In these elegant works, Koenig shifts the gaze from men looking at women to women looking at men and makes subtle observations about humanity and gender.

The word "nude" calls to mind a female form more often than a male, such as Ingres' *Odalisque*, Manet's *Olympia*, and Botticelli's *Venus*. The figures are often recumbent, gazing at the viewer with expectation or invitation. A standing figure with feet apart, muscles rippling, its arm in a forward striking motion and the overall composition of the body in a diagonal is active, aggressive, and dominating. (Think of representations of Hercules, Apollo, or any number of warriors or athletes.) A reclining figure with supple curves is receptive, calm, and passive. The nude figure has different meanings and impacts within different cultures; its gestures have lineages and levels of importance.

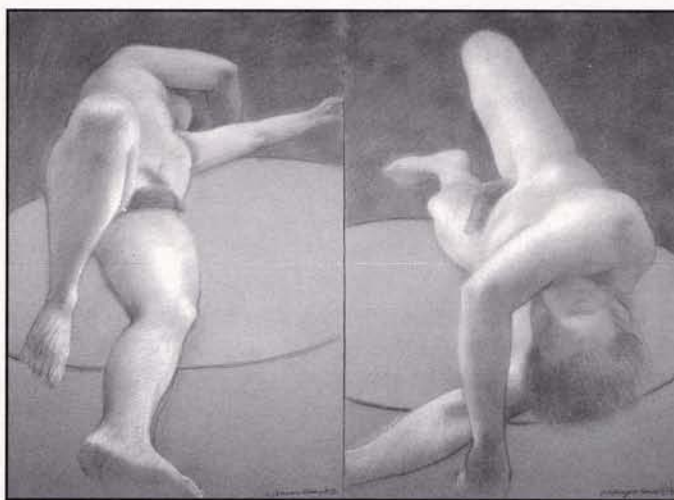
Conflicting interpretations of the nude have existed throughout history, certainly now. Greek Kouros figures represent man as godlike; the heroic nudes of the Renaissance show the triumph of the individual and Muybridge's photographs reveal the all powerful eye of technology. In Christian theology, nakedness is often a symbol of shame and guilt, and male nudity continues to incite controversy. A copy of Michelangelo's *David* on the Scajaquada sans fig leaf is acceptable. Frontal nudity on television is not. Bill Viola's *The*

Messenger at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery was OK. A nude Jesus Christ on a cross is not. It's an epic of who can look, under what circumstances, and with what controls. Koenig's drawings continue this ancient conversation. These instances (some familiar, others more hidden) and the way they have been imprinted on our brains provide a context for this particular exhibition.

Like many of Koenig's previous works in painting, these have a dry touch, with the particular airy dryness of pastel and charcoal. These are not the juicy, paint-loaded figures of an artist such as Lucien Freud, but endless marks of colored dust on paper, an ephemeral medium. To create an even further distancing, Koenig often works from slides. "Photography is a way of distancing, being more contemplative and intellectual. Which one can't do when faced with a posing model." ¹

Often Koenig works from multiple views of the same pose. *Dais #1, #2* present two views of the same pose, looking at the length of the body from the head and from the feet. The figure is almost vertical on the vertical page. It lies on a cartoon-like oval dais (a round platform), a compositional trick borrowed from Francis Bacon. It is described by a pencilled arc across the bottom of the page and mute gray background above, suggesting a horizon line. The left leg is extended, the right propped up by its foot, right arm thrown over the face, and left trailing off to be cut off at the edge of the page. Edges are rounded, gestures soft, the flesh silky and unmarred.

There is a lushness in this work that the earth tones and monotones hold at arm's length from the viewer. It's distant but unabashedly sensual. The body in repose is relaxed, expectant. It's the male body in the "female" repose of Ingres' *Odalisque*. Having the two views of the same pose reversed creates a sense of disjuncture, movement and passing time as in Muybridge. The body is presented as the turning hands of the clock positioned at 6 and 12. The limp left arms go off the page at lower left and upper right, creating a gesture between the two panels. The round platform also suggests rotation. The simultaneous verticality and horizontality of the figure create an uneasy gravity. It is a body ostensibly at rest within a carefully constructed illusion of motion.



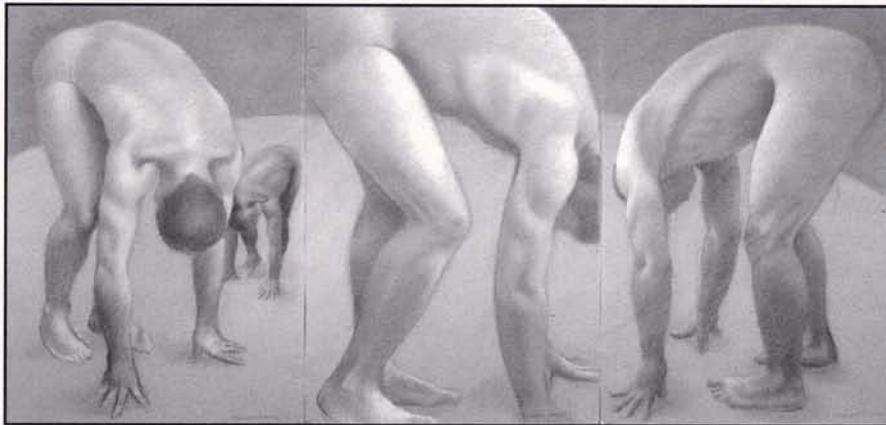
In a triptych entitled *How on Earth*, a group of four figures are bent over, head at the knees, fingertips touching the ground. The heads are no longer positioned at the pinnacle, but below the regions that generate the waste products of the body. The intestines, thighs and genitals are at the highest point. Hands to feet, these bodies could topple forward if pushed. Or they could stretch out and start running on all fours. It is the gesture of an animal, a folding of the erect human form in two. It could also be a gesture

of reverence to the earth, completing a circle with the ground. A long arc crosses the three panels, dividing foreground and background, perhaps a reference to the globe. In the left panel of the triptych there are two figures making the same gesture, one at the middleground and one much smaller in the distance. It feels like a reference to architectural space, a similar, but reversed, construction based on Piero della Francesca's

Flagellation. In the central panel, the monumental figure fills the page and describes the rectilinear shape of the page, the page in turn making an archway of the body. The entire composition has a classical and balanced arrangement.. In the right panel is the same gesture repeated yet turned to show the haunch of the thigh with a slight turn of the rear towards the viewer. Not a gesture of culture, but of animals. Such paradoxes emerge throughout these drawings.

In *Absurd Heights #3*

we have the body both succulent and horrific. A grouping of three men hang by hands and feet cut from our view; the backs, buttocks and thighs strongly doubled over, they hang like fleshy sacs. They hang as though under the leaves of an unseen tree, no ground beneath



them. Gravity is in operation but its mechanism is not evident — a familiar slight of hand by Koenig. The pose seems difficult, absurd and monkey-like. The body becomes just another object. I believe this work subtly refers to Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit" which describes the bodies of Black men hanging lynched on trees. The work has simultaneous humor — in its seemingly humorous gesture and the play on fruit/woman metaphors — and horror at violence done out of fear and hatred. Much of Koenig's work hides things under the guise of humor, familiarity, or a gentle touch or obscures meaning by an intense focus on the objectness of her subjects. In gesture and the arrangement of the body on the page, histories evolve, and the works reach beyond the figure.

Besides the many meanings of the nude and the body, the other context for this exhibition is Koenig's 56 years of professional work as an artist. Paintings with images of objects such as eggs, shells, hats, art supplies and — occasionally — nudes, have been familiar subjects for decades. All of the objects are treated as objects, and many of them refer to the body. Eggs and egg shells become ovaries, fetuses, ideal form, woman. Homburg hats become a substitute for a particular person, representations of masculinity, identities for men of a certain age. The homburg was a popular object in Dada and Surrealism, particularly in the work of Magritte, whom Koenig has paid homage to in her work.

For many years, these objects have been her language. Often the arrangements are meditations on men and women through the surrogate presence of still-life objects. The works include examinations of pictorial rules, scale, representation, illusion, and art history. In *Elegy R.M.* from 1992, three Homburg hats seem to float in space. The composition is highly rhythmic and formal, strikingly similar to the triptych *How on Earth.*

Lurking under this elegance is a jab at one of the giants of 20th century art, Robert Motherwell. Her composition of dark, turning hats parallels Motherwell's famous work, *Elegy*. Masculine hats take the place of the great bravura brushstroke. In the late 40s and 50s when Abstract Expressionism was the rage, Koenig tried to paint that way, but found it as rigid as any other artistic canon. At that time if an artist painted the figure they were called "18th-century." Koenig has worked from the figure

throughout her career. In paintings from the *Monument Series* the object is presented as monumental in a manner similar to Renaissance portraiture. In perhaps the most famous portrait, *Mona Lisa*, the figure looms large against a deep landscape and in Koenig's work, seashells, broken eggshells, and rocks take the place of honor.

In a series titled *Niche Paintings* Homburg hats hang magically in a space similar to the monastic setting of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. Koenig paid homage to Magritte in a series from the 1970s entitled *Magritte Cracks Me Up*.

The body and its gestures may be the most examined subject matter in the history of world art and culture. It seems that no aspect of the human body has been left in shadows; no bodily position, pose or gesture unrecorded. Koenig joins a long lineage of artists who place the body in its time, give human flesh its poetic and intellectual significance, and create language out of gesture. Looking at this group of drawings as a whole, they move into two groups: relaxed poses meditations on sleep and death, active poses examining man as animal. By placing drawings into groups of two or three, Koenig creates movement, narrative, and allusions to other artists and art historical movements. *Confrontations* is a significant leap in Koenig's conversation about the human form and the vocabularies of the seen world.

— Sara Kellner, Visual Arts Director

1. From a conversation with the artist, July, 1997

Artists Biography

Catherine Catanzaro Koenig

Born in Buffalo NY, 1921

Graduate of Albright Art School 1942

Taught at the Art Institute of Buffalo 1946-1956

Instructor of Art at State University of NY at Buffalo 1961-1979

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1997 Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, NY
- 1995 Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY
- 1994 Franz Bader Gallery, Washington D.C.
- 1992 Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY
- 1991 Butler Institute of American Art, Youngston, OH
- 1990 Capricorn Galleries, Bethesda, MD
- 1987 Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY
- 1985 Lillian Heidenberg Gallery, New York, NY
- 1983 Oxford Gallery, Rochester, NY
- 1981 Ball State University Gallery, Muncie, IN
- 1980 Members Gallery, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
Birmingham Museum, Birmingham, AL
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH
Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH
Everson Museum, Syracuse, NY
Herman Fine Arts Center, Marietta College
Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
Memorial Gallery of Rochester, Rochester, NY
Mercury Gallery, London, England

Collections

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo, NY
Butler Institute of American Art, Youngston, OH
Gannet Publishers, Rochester, NY
Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
Manufacturers and Traders Trust Co. Inc., Buffalo, NY
The Buffalo News, Buffalo, NY
Leslie Fay Corporation, New York, NY
Graphic Controls Corp., Buffalo, NY
Roswell Park Memorial Institute, Buffalo, NY
Hyatt Hotel, Buffalo, NY
E. F. Hutton, New York, NY
David Anderson Collection, Buffalo, NY

Exhibition Checklist

1. *Absurd Heights #4, #5, #6*, 1997, pastel on paper, triptych, each 39.5 x 27.25", total 39.5 x 81.75"
2. *Absurd Heights #3*, 1997, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
3. *Absurd Heights #2*, 1997, pastel on paper, 39.5 x 27.25"
4. *Absurd Heights #1*, 1997, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.25"
5. *Hanging Around*, 1997, pastel on paper, diptych, each 27.25 x 39.5", total 27.25 x 79"
6. *How on Earth #1, #2, #3*, 1997, pastel on paper, triptych, each 39.5 x 27.25", total 39.5 x 81.75"
7. *How on Earth #4, #5*, 1997, pastel on paper, diptych, each 27.25 x 39.5", total 39.5 x 79"
8. *Dais #1, #2*, 1996, pastel on paper, diptych, each 39.5 x 27.25", total 39.5 x 54.5"
9. *Towering*, 1997, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
10. *Cross Down*, 1997, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
11. *Cross Up*, 1997, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
12. *A Leg Up*, 1996, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
13. *Cover Up #1*, 1996, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
14. *Cover Up #2*, 1996, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
15. *Flat Out*, 1996, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
16. *Spent*, 1996, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
17. *Curl*, 1996, pastel on paper, 27.25 x 39.5"
18. *Why, Yes*, 1996, pastel on paper, 39.5 x 27.25"

Cover Image: *Absurd Heights #4, #5, #6*, 1997, pastel on paper, triptych, each 39.5 x 27.25", total 39.5 x 81.75"

Interior Right: *How on Earth #1, #2, #3*, 1997, pastel on paper, triptych, each 39.5 x 27.25", total 39.5 x 81.75"

Interior Left: *Dais #1, #2*, 1997, pastel on paper, diptych, each 39.5 x 27.25", total 39.5 x 55"

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center is supported by its members, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the County of Erie, and the City of Buffalo. This exhibition was made possible by the additional support of Barbara Price Baird, Kurt Campagna, Vincent E. Kane, Marilyn Deona Mendell, Martje More, Lee Rubin, Suzanne M. and Robert E. Schaff, and Calvin G. Rand. Hallwalls is a member of the National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO).