

FIGURE ON DIVERSITY

Figure On Diversity: Benefits of Life Drawing and Representation in Arts Education

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CONTEXT & RATIONALE

Figure models provide the foundation for the study of fine arts. Students pursuing a traditional western art education develop their skills in representing human anatomy and likeness through drawing a combination of live models and plaster sculptures of the human form.

Historically, however, figure modeling communities are comprised predominantly of white, thin or athletic, able-bodied, and cisgender individuals, and sculptural representations used in studio art education are overwhelmingly based on hyper-idealized, male Greco-Roman forms.

Together, these failings of our curriculum leave students unprepared to depict a full range of humanity in their work. But even beyond this technical failing, these limitations perpetuate the harmful idea that only a small subset of bodies is worthy of representation in the first place.

As an example of one modeling community, there are 14 models currently booked at the University of Florida this semester, Spring 2021, where I am teaching Figure Drawing. Of these models: two are visibly BIPOC, and one uses they/them pronouns and may be identified as gender-expansive. While any of these models could possess an invisible disability, none are visibly disabled, and a majority may be described as thin or athletic.

My intention in outlining these demographics is not to criticize UF's hiring practices – I know it to be true that everyone applying for this position is hired after arriving on-time for an interview by our university's models' coordinator, Jillian Marie Browning. However, it is clear that individuals of societally accepted body types are filling these positions at a higher frequency.

Barriers exist which limit figure modeling's accessibility to diverse individuals. Folks belonging to marginalized identities are less likely to feel welcome or safe in art spaces, where members tend to hold more social power. Some models will also self-select themselves from the possibility of modeling due to embedded beliefs about beauty: sizeism, colorism, and ableism all contribute to these perceptions. As one example, one workshop alum had believed her severe scoliosis meant that she was ineligible to be an art model, given that her body is "anatomically incorrect."

There are also infrastructural issues which prevent marginalized individuals from participating as figure models. Models are almost always expected to be able to mount and pose safely on a model stand – the one in my classroom is 22 inches high. And while there are increasing exceptions, many drawing groups will advertise positions for male and female models, enforcing a gender binary which precludes nonbinary, transgender, agender and intersex models.

POSITIONALITY AND EXPERIENCE

My name is Angela DeCarlis, and I am an MFA student at the University of Florida. I am white, I use they/them and she/her pronouns, and I am Queer and invisibly disabled. I am a cis-passing person in a straight-passing relationship. I benefit from thin privilege, and I grew up in a middle-class, college-educated family that supported me fully when I began pursuing studio art as my primary passion. I mention all this to acknowledge and claim my extraordinary privilege and to contextualize myself within my research, as well as to demonstrate that I have benefitted from seeing bodies like mine represented as beautiful in fine art and media.

I did the first two-and-a-half years of my undergraduate education at PAFA, studying painting and portraiture. While enrolled at PAFA, I decided to become a figure model for art classes myself. I modeled for five years, during which time I had moved to Boston. There I became a moderator for a models' advocacy Facebook group called *Figure Models of New England*.

During my time working as a model, artist, art student (now at Lesley University) and eventually a figure drawing instructor, I began to recognize the homogeneity of our community of figure models. In collaboration with my school's models coordinator (and Berklee alum), Jessica Johnson, and my friend, co-facebook-group-moderator and professional model Izebel V., whose degree is in Social Work, I designed and ran the first Figure On Diversity workshops.

THE FIGURE ON DIVERSITY WORKSHOP

The benefits of Figure Modeling and Life Drawing extend well beyond the scholastic, particularly with regards to positive body perception. Models report attitudes which demonstrate their own "corporeal empowerment," and studies demonstrate that these advantages can be reaped second-hand, through the practice of drawing from the model.

But who has access to these benefits, and who is impacted most by the limitations highlighted earlier? When art institutions fail to represent a diversity of bodies in their academic curricula, we fail students whose bodies have already suffered oppression and marginalization throughout our institutional history. Arts academies are already only accessible to students with immense social privilege (students like me) – even more-so than most higher education already is.

The original Figure On Diversity workshop was created to shift that paradigm. The reasoning was that the systemic issues impacting diversity in art education weren't values held by the majority of people hiring models, and that a training workshop catered specifically to diverse individuals would lower those barriers. The workshop is open to anyone interested in trying nude figure modeling and who identifies as underrepresented in fine art and media in any way, including people of color, and individuals who are fat, transgender, or visibly disabled.

The workshops are free to attend, and are structured as 8-hour intensives divided into three parts:

Part I: Wellbeing in Figure Modeling | Workshop leaders facilitate group discussion with special attention paid to the needs of participants as belonging to marginalized identities. Topics range from logistical (kinds of modeling work; receiving payment) to psychological (vulnerability; objectification; empowerment). The importance of self-advocacy is emphasized, and participants are encouraged to connect with the local modeling community.

Part II: Physical Practice and Needs | After engaging in movement games, participants hold timed poses while facilitators discuss physical aspects of figure modeling, including different kinds of poses, how to occupy the space of the model stand, how to avoid injury, and how to develop poses which play to participants' strengths as individuals. Disability and gender are particularly centered in discussion as participants learn to work within their ability and consider how to perform gender through physical stances.

Part III: Open Drawing Session | Artists from the community are invited to draw from workshop participants, who are given the option to try nude modeling for the first time. No participant is required to model. Participants each pose for about 20 minutes total, providing an entry into modeling which is significantly shorter than a typical 3-hour modeling gig.

While the first two workshops we ran in Boston did not offer compensation to model-participants, we have since implemented a system whereby workshop registrants may request monetary support in order to attend. We'll now reimburse participants for days taken off work, for example, or childcare for the workshop's duration.

COLLABORATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Isabella Stewart Gardner

The original workshop has served as the jumping-off point for all the work we've done since. On February 17, 2020, Figure On Diversity was hired to provide programming at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's Frank Hatch Free Day. The open-drawing event featured four clothed models who were alums of the workshop series, and was attended by 500 people over five hours. This event was held in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition *Boston's Apollo*, which brought together drawings and paintings made of the Black and Queer model Thomas E. McKeller by renowned American painter John Singer Sargent.

FOLD

On March 6th, we partnered with the organizers of an Instagram page called Fat Life Drawing, a group which hosts weekly figure drawing sessions with plus-sized models. I hired three Figure On Diversity models for the special online drawing session over Zoom, all of whom are fat, Queer, gender-expansive, and disabled. Two of the models are BIPOC. The collaboration hosted over 160 separate Zoom accounts with people from San Francisco to Berlin.

BustEd

Merriam-Webster defines the idiom “to put someone on a pedestal” as: “to think of someone as a perfect person with no faults; to admire someone greatly.” Culturally, then, we understand these works to represent ideal human beauty, so much so that the notion is embedded in our language.

We also conflate these artworks with their subjects: we understand first that the sculptures represent beauty and perfection, and then we see that the people represented belong to a single ethnicity, and possess a single body type. When we internalize these facts as inextricable from one another, we forgo the opportunity for any human body outside this narrow demographic to be culturally valued through the lens of fine art.

BustEd is an initiative toward the creation of new work for use in the classroom. In collaboration with sculptor Morgan Yacoe, new plaster busts depicting a diversity of humanity are being produced and promoted – this project has just received funding to be piloted, and the first three sculptures will be completed before 2022.

Modeling Modeling

Despite the figure model's vital role in art making and art education, few resources exist to support them. Those that have been written fail to recognize the needs (or even the possibility) of models of color, transgender models, fat models, or disabled models.

Combined with inconsistent standards, this creates an environment which, to diverse models, is at best unwelcoming and at worst unsafe or completely inaccessible.

Due for release in Fall 2021, Modeling Modeling is a three-volume series of guidebooks for figure models, instructors, and art administrators aimed to standardize and make equitable the practices of modeling, working with models, and hiring models.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Each of these projects comes at the art institution from a different direction. The workshops, along with our more public-facing events like at the Isabella Stewart Gardner or with FOLD, move bottom-up with community members who already exist just outside the institution's doors. *BustEd* appeals to administrators and instructors looking to decolonize their curricula in a top-down approach. Finally, *Modeling Modeling* offers separate handbooks to each of the three groups.

Of our workshop model-participants, all reported the experience as positive, and several have continued to pursue paying gigs as models. Also, as a result of our workshops and collaborations, we have aided artists in the production of drawings which feature a broader range of human bodies. Some of these works were produced during the open-drawing portion of our modeling workshops. Others were produced during the FOLD collaboration, or the event at the Isabella Stewart Gardner, where we had a Drawing Swap table for artists to share and trade their works. The table helped to promote the value of the artworks, and we hope that many ended up on walls in people's homes.

Drawing from the model can feel like a very vulnerable and intimate experience. Models have absolute control over how they are being seen, and they are permitting your gaze as a drawer. It's a real gift, especially from marginalized models, in a world where bodies like theirs have been literally disappeared from society, and where we're still taught today not to stare, especially not at people who are different. In a figure drawing session, we are invited to see these bodies, really observe them, as they are. And later, your artworks will invite viewing, too, multiplying the impact of seeing and being seen many, many times over.

CONCLUSION

I believe that art education's impact on our societal values is underestimated. Among the painting and drawing students in my figure drawing classes, I have graphic design and illustration majors. When they graduate they will become responsible for producing media – everything from advertisements to children's books. Don't we believe that the bodies included in their education will impact the work they'll make? After all, if there's one thing that's true of all artists, it's that we make what we know.

I also believe that everyone deserves to feel seen, represented, and empowered in their body, and that art production and education are vital tools with which we can accomplish these ideals. Regardless of whether one chooses to pursue the work of modeling, or instead gets to encounter images of bodies they can relate to portrayed as beautiful in art and media, these kinds of experiences should be made accessible – and commonplace – to everybody.

RESOURCES

Instagram

The following is a collection of online figure drawing groups run by and/or in support of diverse bodies. All of these pages host regular life drawing sessions, and many have online presences outside of Instagram.

[@2bornot2bcollective](#)

[@bayareamodelsguild](#)

[@bbfiguredrawing](#)

[@fatlifedrawing](#)

[@queerbodiesmontreal](#)

[@queerlifedrawing](#)

[@thatbarelife](#)

[@translifedraw](#)

Scholarly Articles

Stanhope, C. (2013). Beauty and the beast: Can life drawing support female students in challenging gendered media imagery? *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 32(3), 352-361.

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Texts

Cahner, A. (2009). *The Art Model's Handbook: The Naked Truth about Posing for Art Classes and Fine Artists*. Self-published, <http://artmodelbook.com/>.

Phillips, S.R. (2006). *Modeling life: Art models speak about nudity, sexuality, and the creative process*. State University of New York Press.

Rooney, K. (2008). *Live Nude Girl: My Life as an Object*. The University of Arkansas Press.

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Figure On Diversity

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