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Egon Schiele, Self Portrait, 1917

Picture: Courtesy Richard Nagy Ltd, London



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Naked ambition

Artists bare all in The Naked, a new exhibition at the Drawing Room that celebrates the human body in all its nude form



BY LOUISA BUCK

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When is a body naked and when is it a nude? What is the difference between an erotic image and a pornographic one? In his classic tome 1970s tome *Ways of Seeing* John Berger stated that “to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself,” but many feel that this definition is too woolly and open to abuse: after all, how can we tell whether someone is baring all on their own behalf or on someone else’s? Or whether an image of a body bared will later be interpreted in ways entirely at odds with its original intentions? These vexed issues are grappled with in [The Naked](#), a fascinating exhibition at the [Drawing Room](#) devoted to drawings of “the body exposed.”

And what an array of bodies they are. The Naked takes as its starting point two delicate and explicit 1912 pencil drawings by Egon Schiele – a self portrait and a drawing of his girlfriend/muse Valerie “Wally” Neuzil – as well as a rare portfolio of five prints taken from Schiele’s drawings of young girls and women reclining in various states of undress which miraculously survived an obscenity trial in 1923 that ordered their destruction. The



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Chris Ofili, *Untitled (Afronude)*, 2006

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Schiele drawings and prints then act as a reference for a stunning array of works from the 1940s to the present day that parade the unclothed human form in a range of media and incarnations.

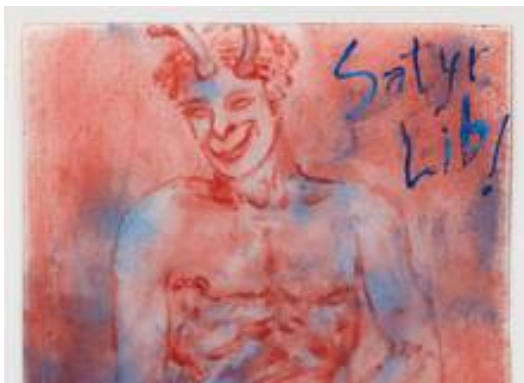
These include Andy Warhol's tender early 1950s line drawings of young men, Louise Bourgeois's chilling drypoint *Hanging Figure* and an ink/crayon female body contorted into an "Arch of Hysteria"; Joseph

Beuys's timeless goddesses and Bruce Nauman's pencil and coloured crayon study for a neon "Masturbating Man". [Fiona Banner](#) writes rather than draws from life with her directly observed account of a stripper performing in her studio written across a pair of doors; while Franz West pokes savage fun at sexualised media glamour by sticking the heads of magazine models onto a painted parade of absurdly copulating figures.

The *Nakeds* confirms that the human form is still the most effective means to express an infinity of often opposing emotions, anxieties and concerns, from Leon Gollub's cheeky come-hither satyr, to Chantal Joffe's paunchy bearded patriarch painted on cardboard or the grimacing tooth and vagina baring primeval totem from Nancy Spero, who also reaches to the other end of the

emotional spectrum with a hand painted collage depicting a pair of quietly touching lovers.

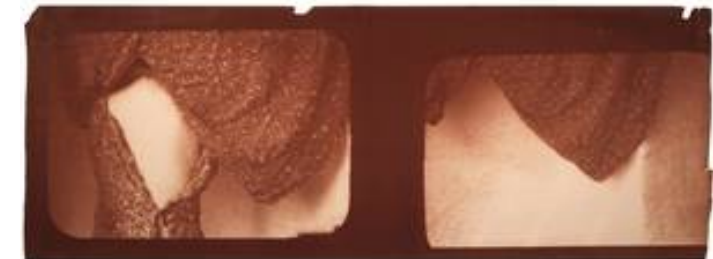
Agendas aside, what makes *The Nakeds* so unmissable is the sheer treat of seeing so many top quality works in a single show. Marlene Dumas melts the porno poses of



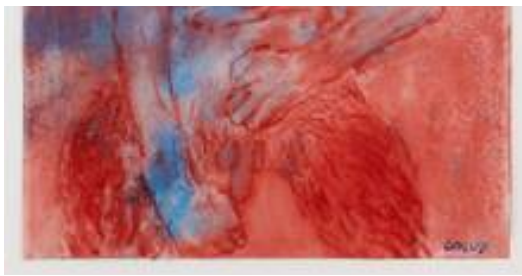
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Leon Gollub, Satyr Lib!, 2003

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her pinups into exquisite pools of ink wash; Chris O'fili's languorous watercolour "Afronudes" ooze delicious sensuousness with their voluptuous dark bodies charged with flashes of vivid turquoise and cerise. The 83-year-old Maria Lassnig captures the dignity and pathos of her own ageing body in the sparest of jagged pencil lines against

glowing washes of yellow and blue.

And it's not all big names: one of the highlights of The NAKEDS is a large pen and ink drawing covering a paper sheet in a dense tessellation of naked men, and which, along with two sketch books filled with fine angular pencil drawings of Argentinian transvestites, is the work of Stewart Helm, a 50-something London and Buenos-Aires based artist whom I'm sure we will be seeing much more of in the future.

One of the higher-profile participants in The NAKEDS is Tracey Emin, who cites Egon Schiele as a major influence and who chose the 2007 monoprint on show – in which a prone naked female is accompanied by the handwritten text "Don't tell me that you don't love me" – especially to chime with the



artist's work. Emin has long used her own naked body as source and subject matter, and the paintings and bronzes in her current show of new work at [White Cube](#) reveal that several decades of self scrutiny – as well recent workings from a life model – have resulted in her line becoming freer and more confident, more classical in its references, but without losing the intensely personal emotional charge that has always



Tracey Emin, *The Last Great Adventure is You*, White Cube Bermondsey

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been her special quality.

Emin works especially well on a small scale: down the central corridor at White Cube a new series of 23 seated and reclining female figures rendered in indigo blue gouaches on paper are particularly dramatic evidence of her departure into a more academic but

fluid mode, as are the hand-sized but powerfully present bodies that mark her latest forays into cast bronze. Her larger works tend to lose this focused intensity, the exception being a new series of embroidered calico works, some over two metres high, in which the liquid line of Emin's drawings is scaled up and mechanically – and dramatically – stitched in inky black thread. As she gains in maturity and assimilates rather than quotes from her art historical heroes and heroines; Tracey Emin challenges John Berger by showing that she can indeed move from the naked to the nude while still being utterly herself.

*The Naked*s is at *The Drawing Room* until 29 November. *Tracey Emin: The Last Great Adventure is You* is at *White Cube Bermondsey* until 16 November

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