

The Naked Truth

Understanding what is more than skin deep.

NAKED

By various artists
Wood Street Galleries // Downtown
Through Oct. 20: 412-471-6070

In Spencer Tunick's "Social Static," several hundred people lay naked in various positions on the streets of New York. Not amid the bustling midday, midtown streets — Tunick's site-specific video project is set during the city's early morning calm. Is this the image of true, personal freedom or an unsettling sea of victims? Woodstock or World War II? A comment on pornography or humanity? Appalling? Disturbing? Sensual? Beautiful?

The naked human form is probably one of the most contextual images in art, and the artists showcased in *Naked* drive that point home on many different planes of meaning. For example, Tina Barney's photos of upper class folks posed naked in their upper class surroundings force us to consider the physical manifestations of classist society. Sans the accoutrements that we identify with certain economic and social positions, Barney wonders, how do we categorize ourselves? By our humanity, she then suggests. This becomes apparent, in her work, to the viewer and also to the subject.

Taking the familiar and transforming it is a common thread here: Anton Corbijn photographs well-known celebrities (Naomi Campbell, Adam Clayton, Christy Turlington and Lars von Trier) in new and unconventional situations, naked. To what extent? Placing Von Trier in the woods pushing a wheelbarrow, not necessarily conscious of the camera, allows him to reject his fame and his position. Ironically, being naked also allows him to forget about the public consciousness and his place in it.

The assumptions we make about gender, sexuality and sex come under scrutiny in Ma Liuming's portraits of himself posed naked. In these photographs, he takes on a new moniker Fen-Ma Liuming and highlights his more feminine features with make-up and jewelry. Because of his posture and demeanor, one is not compelled to question his sex — he looks positively female but for his genitals, which Liuming partially hides with his hands. That's hardly important though: He could've covered nothing and doubts would still linger. Yet this isn't a piece about homosexuality. Rather, Liuming is addressing issues of perception, thought and boundaries. What happens when what we are taught to believe differs from what we see? This is Liuming's question.

Just as Tunick's work questions the humanity often associated with nakedness, other works in the show reinforce it. In Jaan Toonik's video "Father and Son," the artist skates naked on a frozen body of water while his ten-year-old son sings softly. Manaba Yamanaka considers the beauty of the bare human form in pictures of women at least 90 years old. Zhang Huan directs 50 naked Americans in a ceremony steeped in reference to various Eastern and Western religious influences, after which they pelt him with loaves of bread.

These images fluctuate between startling and tranquil because they draw upon what we know of the body and also what we don't know. The subjects here are quietly naked and nakedly aware; vulnerable and at times empowered and at times neither. *Naked* addresses issues of the body in society despite — and using — connotations of the body in society. And this is its strength. INPGH