

'Naked' exhibit stretches the body's image

By Mary Thomas
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The nude figure has been a subject in art since the beginning of expression. But never in quite the way that it is in "Naked: The Naked Body in Contemporary Video, Photography and Performance," which opened last night at the Wood Street Galleries.

Although realist figural work had fallen out of favor with artists in recent decades, symbolic manifestations of the body — particularly by feminists — addressed sexism and exploitation. Here actuality prevails, and the sheer numbers of naked forms, their variety and their sincerity prompt the viewer to surpass voyeurism and, through recognition and consequential identification with them, reach a universal — and perhaps spiritual — experience.

Spencer Tunick was in the news a couple of years ago when art-beleaguered New York had him arrested when he orchestrated mass nude-ins on the streets. First Amendment issues triumphed and the resultant actions are preserved in arresting large color photographs and a lively 10-minute video, "Social Static," a collaboration with Chris Habib with original music by Sonic Youth. The video catches the performance aspect, showing the participants disrobing and dashing to their positions so quickly it overrides any opportunity for gawking. The tableaux of bodies slumped on asphalt are sobering, calling to mind mass extinction or farm animals in a slaughter yard, and human vulnerability.

As powerful as these photographs are, the exhibition's videos have the most potent impact because they are able to convey the rhythm of ritual that underlies much of the work.

This element is most pronounced in Zhang Huan's entrancing, atmospherically mystical works, such as "My America," in which he offers his shamanistic body to bread-tossing naked followers, or "My Australia," an act of memory — species and personal. "To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain," a 1995 conceptual work by Zhang, has the conciseness of haiku.

Estonian Jaan Toomik's moving "Father and Son" interprets the blend of sacramental and sacrificial contained in promises made to the next generation. As his 10-year-old son hauntingly sings a medieval plainsong chant, Toomik awkwardly skates in the buff on a frozen lake, but he perseveres because he must.

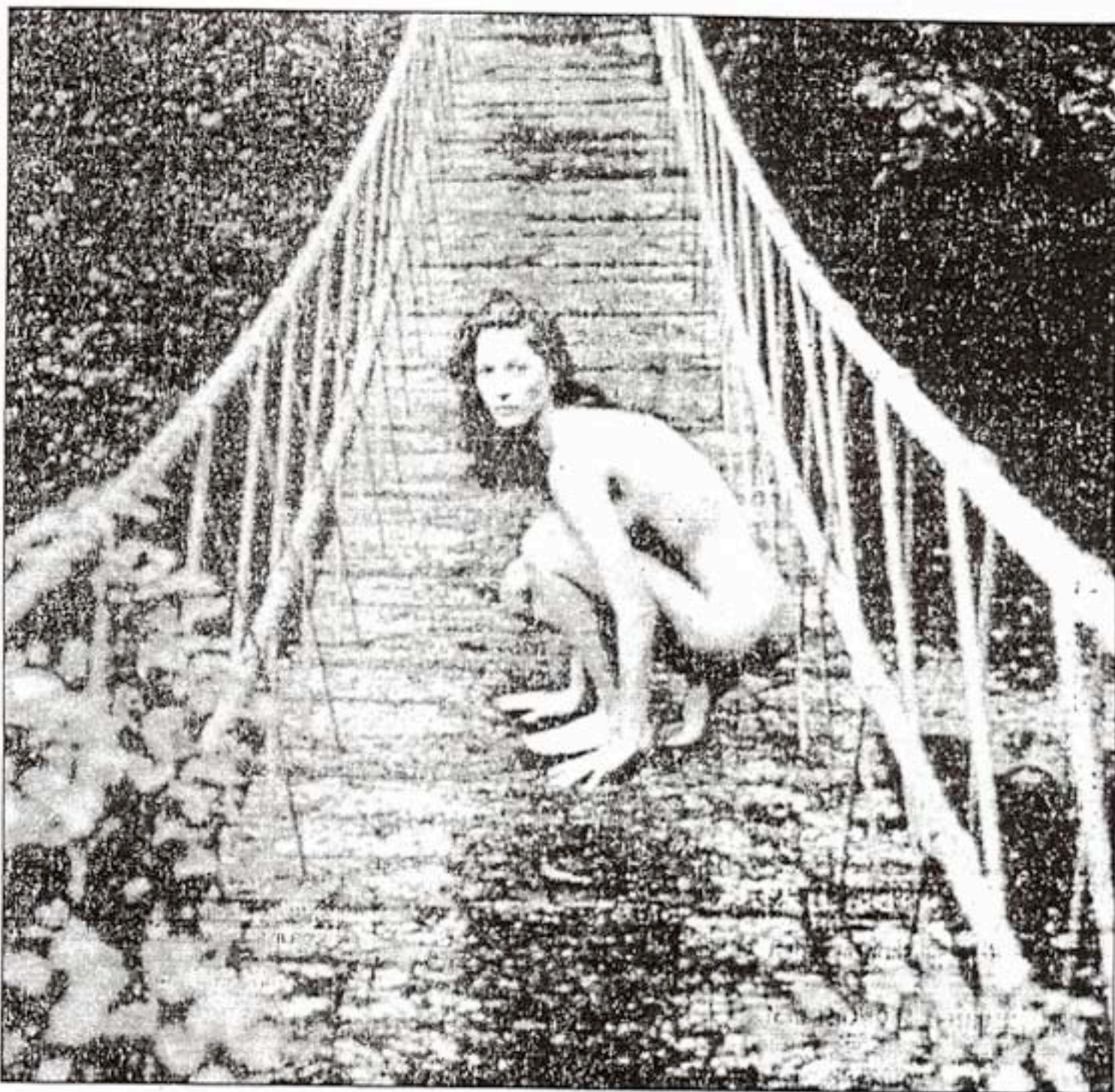
To make "Fen-Ma Liuming Walks the Great Wall," the artist — naked and wearing women's makeup — committed an act "considered illegal, immoral and punishable by death" in China. But the spirit of this contemplative, political work is freedom rather than tension.

Ma questions, among other things, the way gender is interpreted and regulated, as does Greensburg native Bruce Weber in his beefcake prints of frolicking nude men. They're twins. "What were you thinking?" seems to be Weber's question, although the intent of provocation can't be denied. After all, they are the Carlson brothers who appeared in the racy Summer 2001 Abercrombie & Fitch catalog.

On the opposite wall are Anton Corbijn's photographs of celebrities like supermodel Naomi Campbell, the most bland works in the exhibition, and sandwiched between are Manabu Yamanaka's touching, life-sized, unself-consciously frontal photographs of Japanese women in their 90s, their bodies bent, their skin transparent.

If Weber's images suggest classical idealism, Tina Barney makes art historical references when she composes her middle-class subjects, but without the most obvious trapping, the clothing that bestowed rank.

This kind of juxtaposing throughout the exhibition increases the richness of an already heady stew that pushes a lot of buttons, but it defuses them in the same presentations.



Anton Corbijn demystifies the celebrity model in this 1993 photograph of Christy Turlington that downplays the tall, leggy look of urban fashion houses and by pose and context suggests a somewhat ungainly woodland creature.

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The most captivating revelation is perhaps the most subtle: that the intrinsic commonality of the flesh that defines, supports and binds us surpasses all other considerations.

To continue the discussion, Eleanor Heartney, contributing editor to *Art in America Magazine*, will give a gallery lecture at 1 p.m. today.

And at 3 p.m. Oct. 20, a seminar, "The Body in Context," will be held, comprising performance artist Zhang Huan, and the following University of Pittsburgh faculty: Sheldon Lu, associate professor of East Asian languages and literature; Ann Sutherland Harris, professor of art history; Joseph Alter, associate professor of anthropology, and moderator Kathy Linduff, professor of history of art and architecture.

At 601 Wood St., second and third floors, through Oct. 20. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. Admission and events are free. For information, call 412-471-5606.

