

Wood Street Galleries takes 'Naked' look at contemporary art

By Kurt Shaw

FOR THE TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Since his humble beginnings of carving into cave walls, man has endeavored to depict his own human form. Naked human forms in art can be traced as far back as the "Venus of Willendorf" — a female fertility figurine from about 25,000 to 20,000 B.C.

In the exhibit "Naked," on view at Wood Street Galleries through Oct. 20, the human form is represented yet again, but this time through contemporary video, photography and performance.

In the second- and third-floor galleries, "Naked" features the work of Tina Barney, Anton Corbijn, Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Jaan Toomik, Spencer Tunick, Bruce Weber and Manabu Yamanaka.

All of the pieces in the show take the form of either photography or video and use the unclothed human body as a central motif. They reflect a current trend in contemporary art in which the body is

'Naked: The Naked Body in Contemporary Video, Photography and Performance'

- ▶ 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. Through Oct. 20.
- ▶ Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St., above the

Wood Street "T" Station, Downtown.

- ▶ Free; children younger than 18 are not permitted unless accompanied by an adult.
- ▶ (412) 471-5605.

'The Body in Context'

- ▶ An exhibit seminar featuring Zhang Huan, performance artist, and including the following panelists: moderator Dr. Kathy Linduff, professor of history of art and architecture, University of Pittsburgh; Dr. Sheldon Lu, associate professor of East Asian languages and literature, University of

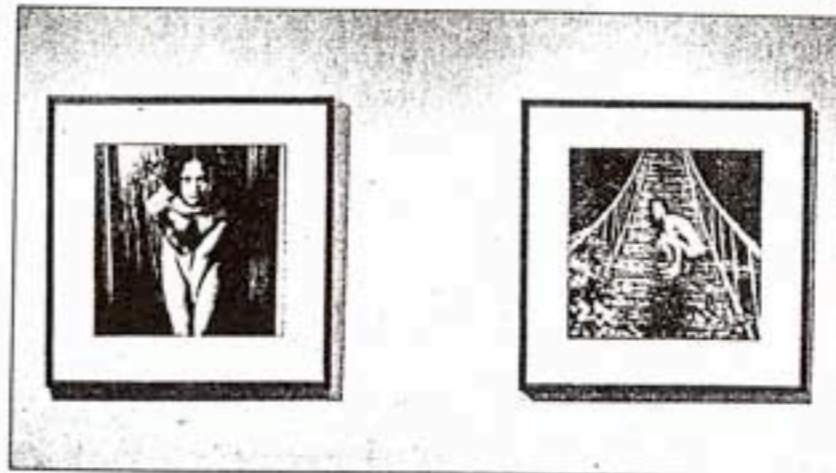
Pittsburgh; Dr. Ann Sutherland Harris, professor of art history, University of Pittsburgh; Dr. Joseph Alter, associate professor of anthropology, University of Pittsburgh.

- ▶ 3 p.m. Oct. 20.
- ▶ Free; children younger than 18 are not permitted unless accompanied by an adult.

largely stripped of all sexual connotations and used in context of other forms of expression.

"It occurred to me that there is a

lot of nakedness in contemporary art," says Murray Horne, curator for Wood Street Galleries. "Right now, a lot of artists are involved



J.C. Schisler/Tribune-Review

Photographs of Naomi Campbell (left) and Christie Turlington are included in the exhibit "Naked," on display at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.

with the naked body, and it's not so much painting and sculpture — it's more about video, photography and performance."

For Zhang Huan, the human body carries specific, and often very different cultural meanings. In videos of three performances — "My America," "My Australia"

and "Dream of the Dragon" — he examines the ritual of spiritualism and its decay in Western civilization.

In "My America," a video of a performance piece originally executed at the Seattle Asian Museum in 1999, Zhang assumes the role of shaman. In the piece, he leads 50

unclothed Americans in a choreographed ceremony intertwined with references to Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. A comment about the lack of spirituality in America, the piece culminates with Zhang being pelted with loaves of bread by the participants.

"He does a lot of historical research on the countries involved," Horne says. "His performance pieces are very controlled events, there's nothing random about his decision making at all."

Ma Liuming exercises similar control in his video piece "Walks the Great Wall." In the piece, ritualistic culture takes on significance, except from an Eastern perspective.

Unclothed, the longhaired Liuming is depicted from the back as he slowly walks the Great Wall of China with nothing more than makeup on his face, so as to appear androgynous. It is an act of defiance that is considered illegal and immoral and was once punishable by death.

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"The political consequences of him doing this are quite severe," Horne says.

"First, he's neither male or female, secondly he's naked, thirdly he's doing something which is almost sacrilegious (in regards to) walking the Great Wall of China in this state. I think it's rather heroic myself."

Another video piece, "Father and Son," is by Estonian artist Jaan Toomik. In this poignant work, Toomik awkwardly skates naked on an ice-covered sea while

Greensburg native Bruce Weber pays homage to Greek art with his images of the Carlson Twins of Minneapolis who were most recently featured in the Summer 2001 Abercrombie & Fitch Quarterly.

accompanied by audio of his 10-year-old son singing plainsong. The contrast between the young boy's voice and his father's faltering figure seems to reverse their roles.

"It's about lifecycle," says Horne, "represented through the innocence of the son and the clumsy, inability of the father."

Greensburg native Bruce Weber pays homage to Greek art with his

images of the Carlson Twins of Minneapolis who were most recently featured in the Summer 2001 Abercrombie & Fitch Quarterly. Weber's striking black-and-white photographs recall the reverence once bestowed on the naked male form by ancient civilizations.

In stark contrast to Weber's comment on society's ideal of the human form, Japanese artist Manabu Yamanaka questions the Western view of physical beauty and repulsiveness with photographs of naked 90-plus-year-old women.

Also pushing extremes with the naked human form in relationship to society is the work of Spencer Tunick. Both evocative and apocryphal, Tunick's large photographs are of elaborately staged events involving several hundred naked individuals in various prostrate positions on the streets of New York.

Accompanying the photographs is "Social Static," a video collaboration between Tunick and Chris Habib with original music by Sonic Youth. The video follows the staging of one of Tunick's

photographic events. Shot in grainy black and white, it harkens to '60s protest events and, at the same time, reveals Tunick's work to have social commentaries similar to those of that time.

"There are freedom of expression issues in the fact that these people can take over the city for a period of time and do an artistic event," Horne says. "And if it wasn't for the artistic event, then these people wouldn't be doing it. Artists have license, and I like that."