

Undress code: My naked ambition

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Can posing nude for a life class empower you? Self-conscious Lydia Slater, below, dropped her dressing gown to find out...

I'm standing on a platform covered in dustsheets, clasping hands with a distinguished-looking former barrister, and trying desperately not to catch his eye. At my feet, a large, crop-haired woman is curled in a foetal position. Behind me, a muscly young man is re-enacting the famous pose of *The Thinker*.

We are all – old and young, fat and thin, black and white, beautiful and not-so-beautiful – completely naked. The only sound in the room is the scratching of pencils and the snipping of scissors as the artists around us try to capture our poses before we move.

I am taking part in a mass life-modelling class, run by an organisation called Spirited Bodies. The concept is that by shedding our clothes, we amateur models will also shed our inhibitions and experience physical self-acceptance. The organisation was set up by two professional life models, Lucy Saunders and Esther Bunting. Lucy, age 50 and a size 22, got into life modelling after a fall from a horse left her incapable of running

her PR company. 'I thought that because I was large people would draw caricatures of me. But the pictures were beautiful. Modelling was a therapeutic choice,' she says. 'And I like taking risks.' By contrast, Esther, 35, who has a theatrical background, is thin as a whip and specialises in acrobatic poses.



The life-modelling class at full sketch

In 2010, they were approached to help set up a community project in which 20 women would try life modelling for the first time – a concept that subsequently morphed into Spirited Bodies, after they realised how empowering it had been for the women involved.

Baring all as a means of self-empowerment is not a concept I have ever been comfortable with. In communal changing rooms, you'll find me huddled in a towel. I'd never go topless – even showing my upper arms these days feels like a step too far.

But as a 42-year-old mother of two young daughters, I'm also conscious of not perpetuating the modern double standard that says women's bodies should either be perfect, or perfectly invisible. Which is why I agreed to give Spirited Bodies a go. Not that my daughters are in the slightest bit grateful. 'OMG!' shrieks the eight-year-old. 'How embarrassing! Please, please don't!'

While applauding my bravery, my friends comment that they'd never dare to bare. 'You won't know where to look, surrounded by all those willies,' prophesies one. Consequently, when I arrive at the Battersea Arts Centre in Southwest London, carrying my dressing gown, I feel a lurching stomach and wish to be anywhere but here. In the (un)dressing room, 40 men and women – all amateur models, apart from a few professionals – are chatting desultorily as they disrobe. I am indeed surrounded by willies but I don't look down. Life-modelling etiquette dictates that you keep your gaze firmly above collarbone level. What I really want to know is why on earth everyone else is here.



A life drawer sketches away



Models change position frequently

For John, a 50-something company director, life modelling is a great confidence boost. Robert is doing it to provide material for his next novel. Clifford Allison was a barrister before becoming a full-time life model and actor four years ago. He doesn't miss his legal career, even though months of modelling in one pose for an artist has given him serious shoulder pain.

The women's motivations are more complex. LaDawn Clare-Panton, 48, is small and curvy, with purple streaks in her blonde hair. She looks like a natural exhibitionist, but in fact has been suffering from depression for the past 18 months. Once a senior manager for an energy company, today she finds it hard even to leave the house. 'That gregarious person I used to be has gone,' she says. Her antidepressants have also caused her to gain weight. She used to be a size ten; now she's pushing size 20. 'I want to recapture my self-confidence,' she explains.



Machan checks out the finished drawings

'Someone drew me skinny, someone drew me with curves. All the pictures were different from the way I perceive myself' Machan Enever

Machan Enever, 27, is a lighting designer with a beautiful face and

willowy figure, but having scoliosis (a condition where the spine is twisted) has always made her embarrassed about her body. 'I'd never wear anything strapless because people might look, and I hate going into changing rooms.' Even when she was dating a sculptor, she loathed the idea of posing for him. 'Now I've decided that I can't continue to worry about it. I'm doing this to help me leave those issues behind.' All the same, she is clearly very nervous.



Jenny, at 73, is the oldest model here. 'Like a lot of women, I have bad feelings about my body,' she says. 'In the past 12 years, I've had two hip replacements and one knee replacement, and I've got large scars. And I'm short and stocky with champagne-bottle legs. I used to hate that. Now I accept it, but I'm not really comfortable with myself.' She wants to challenge the expectations of a society that demands discretion from older women. 'If you go along with people's thinking, you make yourself invisible,' she says defiantly. All the same, she doesn't want to give her real name because she says her family would be shocked if they knew what she was doing. Lilian, 53, is immaculately groomed and works in a primary school.

She has come to celebrate her body. 'My husband died of cancer five years ago,' she explains. 'I saw his body wasting away and that has made me realise that the perception of others isn't important. And a healthy, robust body is always beautiful.'

I also meet Gill Vennall, 29, currently unemployed having left her office job after falling victim to sexist bullying. She is hoping that posing in the nude will help her reclaim her own body (somewhat ironically, the following week, she is set to start work on a campaign against Page Three).

Compared with these women, my own inhibitions seem trivial, but they are very real to me. I worry about my bottom being too big, my bust too small and about my cellulite, and that when I take my clothes off, everyone will judge me. So when we are told that it's time to begin our two-hour modelling stint, I feel a cold clutch of sheer terror. In the draughty hall, some 50 artists from a group called London Drawing are waiting for us to climb on to the podium. Some have charcoal to draw with, some are armed with coloured pencils, and others have scissors with which they will be snipping out our silhouettes. There is complete silence, apart from the roaring of the giant heaters that will keep us warm.

'I feel a whoosh of adrenalin as I unfasten my dressing gown'

I follow Clifford to the far end of the podium. He shrugs off his robe and casually clambers on to the stage. I'm on the high diving board and I can't retreat. I feel a giant whoosh of adrenalin as I unfasten my dressing gown and drop it to the ground.

I quickly discover that there is, frankly, far too much else to think about than how I look. Lucy and Esther have told us to hold our poses for at least ten minutes and to take different positions around the podium to give all the artists a chance to draw us. We've been

advised to fix our eyes on a distant focal point and keep them there – it makes it easier to stay perfectly still. I feel like posing crouched in a ball with my arms protectively around my knees, but Clifford suggests we take up a position shaking hands.



Finished sketches of Lydia and her fellow models. 'In a few strokes of crayon I have become a work of art,' she says. 'It's an exhilarating thought'

The absurdity of my situation is not lost on me. I divert my energy from trying to suck my stomach in to trying not to giggle in case Clifford thinks I might have broken with etiquette and looked down.

After ten minutes, he whispers that we should pose as if we're dancing together. Luckily, it's decorous Jane Austen-style dancing not a full-blown body-contact rumba. I twirl obediently and stare in the opposite direction as he holds my hand above my head. A single verse from Handel's Messiah keeps running through my mind, so I focus on that. Now, I'm in the zone. It's only when my arm develops pins and needles and my leg starts to tremble that I realise I have to change position.

Now, Clifford suggests we sink to our knees, side by side, in an attitude of prayer. I catch the eye of an artist staring intently at me, sketching like fury. With a thrill of pride, I realise she is drawing me. So even though my knees are by now burning in agony, I stay as still as I can until she starts looking in another direction. Then I climb off the platform and walk to the other side to pose for the other artists, without giving a thought to how my bottom might look from the side.

As I peek out of the corner of my eye at all those pendulous breasts, sagging stomachs and knobbly knees, I can see that I'm actually weathering pretty well by comparison. But then I have a more interesting realisation: with life modelling, the natural order of desirability is reversed. Wrinkled, sagging skin can draw the artist's eye in a way that baby-soft smoothness cannot. And thinness is no longer the ideal. I have carefully arranged myself in an interesting, angular posture when one of the largest models – an engineer in specs – sits down next to me. I know immediately that her extravagant curves and folds of flesh will be much more appealing to draw than my size 12 physique. Meanwhile, Machan is now deliberately posing with her back to the artists to give them a chance to depict the curve of her spine that in daily life makes her so self-conscious.



‘I’m going to struggle to accept certain aspects of my body, but being drawn like this has made me feel more positive about who I am’ Machan Enever



‘One artist said she wanted to sculpt me. She said I had the perfect body for sculpture. I’d never thought of myself like that!’ Ladawn Clare-Panton

At the end of the two hours the artists give us a hearty round of applause. According to London Drawing’s co-director, artist Anne Noble-Partridge, drawing rookie life models like us can be much more thrilling than working with experienced professionals (who are

typically paid around £12.50 an hour). ‘There’s a real intensity and energy created by models experiencing their bodies in a completely new way. You see that people have to steel themselves to take their clothes off – and then you see the elation when they do. It’s hard not to be engaged in that emotional and physical exhilaration.’

Back in the dressing room, we models are all grinning with relief and astonishment at what we’ve just done. I get dressed and wander out to see if I can spot myself in any of the drawings. One picture is of me and Clifford kneeling. The artist hasn’t divided me into my component and unsatisfactory parts, which is how I see myself: she has drawn me whole, as a graceful silhouette, in a few strokes of white crayon on black paper. I have become a work of art. It’s an exhilarating thought. Some of the other models want to buy the art that depicts them, but I like the idea that a drawing of me might end up on someone else’s wall.

‘One artist came up to me and said she wanted to sculpt me. She said I had the perfect body for sculpture. I’d never thought of myself like that!’ LaDawn tells me happily a few days later. Has it helped her depression? ‘I think it has,’ she says. ‘I walked away feeling like a million bucks and that there’s nothing I can’t do.’

Seeing the drawings of her body was a surprise for Machan.

‘Someone drew me skinny, someone drew me with curves, but all the pictures were totally different from the way I perceive myself,’ she says. ‘I’m going to struggle to accept certain aspects of my body, but being drawn like this has made me feel more positive about who I am.’

Jenny found the experience ‘strangely moving. I saw the artists’ respectful reaction to my body, and I started to think that it was OK, too. I haven’t exercised for five years, but since then, I’ve been

going out for regular walks...'

So what about me? It's certainly given me something to talk about at dinner parties. But outside the confines of a studio, I don't feel any less self-conscious. And until the rest of the world learns to see with an artist's accepting eye, I'll still be hiding behind a towel in the changing room.

spiritedbodies.com. Some names have been changed