

# Aesthetic Investigations

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*Special Issue – Models and Sitters: the Art and Aesthetics of Posing*

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## Why It Matters Who Poses

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**Abstract:** I make the case for modelling as a collection of creative practices that work with various art forms as a promising area of work. I achieve this by exploring three questions. First, are models not merely a prop employed by the artist? Using phenomenological considerations informed by my work as a life model, I argue that models often work to vague briefs and are moreover employed precisely because of their unique poses. Second, how do models impact artworks? Overlooking a model's contribution can drastically alter our aesthetic understanding of an artwork. I argue that models contribute creatively and maintain 'model reasons', a formal interest in posing as body-experts. Third, what is the value of research into models and their poses? Deepening our knowledge can constitute a restorative act. Further scholarship will also need to reckon with the realities of changing technologies and working practices. It is especially important, then, to tease out and understand the existing practices of modelling and their interrelations with other artists, artistic media, and technologies.

## I. WHY IT MATTERS WHO POSES

I am interested in models broadly, across a variety of artistic media, and art making scenarios: life models who typically pose for traditional visual arts, photographic models who work in front of a camera, and fashion models who strut on catwalks. Understanding what might be unique to the phenomenon of posing across these modelling scenarios and pinpointing those qualities they share between them must underpin any philosophical framework of posing. This paper is an exploratory one, in line with discussions that took place during the symposium ‘Revaluing the Life Model in Art Practice’, held in 2022 at Kent University. I will not endeavour to create a grand argument of the kind that, for instance, states models simply are artists (nor do I believe that merely labelling modelling differently is the route to developing greater understanding). What I do wish to accomplish is to pick at some of the particularities around modelling, by means of treating what I believe are some key questions and potential objections. Broadly, I believe models have been under researched because they are considered rather like vessels for the artist’s inspiration, manipulated into a desirable pose by and for the artist, thus rendering the conception of a pose and its impact on the artwork an extension of the artist’s executive control, which does not belong to the model. I endeavour to show that the situation is more complex, and not merely delegable to executive decision-making on the artist’s part. My aim is ultimately to argue why philosophy, specifically aesthetics, presents an excellent discipline to investigate the phenomenon of posing, and, hopefully, to clarify some reasons as to why philosophical aesthetics should care to invest in this area of work.

I will do so by working through three objections that might preclude philosophical inquiry into models and their poses. I view these objections as constituting crucial areas of research, which help reveal some of the importance and richness of philosophical scholarship into posing. These three are the following:

1. Aren’t models another kind of prop that is used by the artist?
2. How do models impact artworks?
3. Why should aesthetics care for a philosophical account of posing?

Exploring these broader questions, I make the case for some of the salient aesthetic qualities in modelling, ultimately urging for it to be recognised and investigated as a collection of skilled artistic practices which are rooted in the phenomenon of the pose, each of which have the potential to contribute creatively to art making.

## II. AREN'T MODELS ANOTHER KIND OF PROP THAT IS USED BY THE ARTIST?

I must start my exploration with some phenomenological considerations of posing as a thing which exists in the world, particularly posing in the creative world. Posing is not merely descriptive of a physical configuration, it is a verb – an action each of us can undertake, and often do across a number of situations, some of us more convincingly than others. I present myself in a particular way at work, which differs from how I might present myself throughout a quiet evening with friends in the pub. These contexts, however, are not (typically) of the artistic kind. The kind of posing I am interested in is that which is involved in artistic creation. The pose is part of the artistic process, a model works together with one or more artists to achieve the ends of that creative work. Those ends may be educational, in the context of an academy life drawing session where students must learn about human anatomy and how this interacts with light, or indeed creative ends where the intention is to achieve an artwork. The resulting material artefacts may be a drawing, a photograph, a film – the posing I'm interested in occurs within the art making context of a variety of visual artistic media, both traditional and digital.

Modelling as a practice and support to art making has been around for many centuries in Western-European art, take for instance Italian Renaissance artist's workshops and their reliance on a body of models to supply their apprenticeship teachings. I will, however, think predominantly about Western art of the last 200 years, as contemporary art academies and modelling practices evolved directly from long nineteenth-century institutions and attitudes to art and its models.

In the nineteenth century, life models played a key role in the development of art students, for instance by means of posing in anatomy classes, which teach about the human body, its proportions, and the manner in which one can perceive and then visually represent its interactions with colour, light, and shadow. Nineteenth-century academy models were specifically selected for their muscular and idealised physiques. They were typically working-class men who had undertaken intensive physical labour, which kept their bodies in excellent shape for study. The academy model was indeed a male model, contrary to what one might envision. Much like it took until the end of the nineteenth century for women to take up studies in the most privileged art academy subject areas, such as history painting (and even so they could only study from a male model if this model were modestly covered), so too were female models largely refused in the academy until much later in the century, on grounds of moral concern where it was deemed inappropriate for a woman to take part on both sides of the easel when nudity was involved; whether it was to see a man naked, or indeed to be wholly in the nude herself. The vision of a woman who poses nude for the sake of art remained largely confined to the privacy of the studio and home, far removed from the public display of

academy modelling. Models have historically faced considerable challenges, the key ones related to precarious work and pay, to gender-related considerations around what is deemed morally appropriate, to classicism – particularly when one considers that it was often a working-class model who represented canonical beauty and body ideals, both of which were being studied by a middle to upper class audience.<sup>1</sup>

The educational perspective is that of the art academy or drawing group. Here students and professional artists gather to study the model. It may take place in a designated life room, or any room in which there is a separate space for the model to undress (if they are lucky!), a space for them to pose (perhaps on a stage), around which the students or artists are arranged. This model is a life model who typically poses in the nude, inviting visual access to their body for all to see. Moreover, artists used inert models – objects – to learn from and incorporate in their artworks. Ranging from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Parisian gypsum casts of antique sculpture, which academy students would study, to little wooden and jointed figurines whose limbs, torso, neck, and head can be manipulated into a desirable pose.

In my view, it is this combination of the historical reliance on objects as props, and the assumption that living models are similarly manipulated into a desirable pose for and by the artist, that may lead one to assume that the story of models is really quite simple: models are just like props used by the artist to execute their vision, arranged to achieve this much like one would manipulate the wooden figurine. However, this assumption foregoes the impact of the model on the artist, and it would be an additional mistake to understand silence as passivity – whether through absence of archival material or considering the silence and concentration inside the studio as the model poses. While the model may literally be silent while they pose and the artist draws or takes photographs, it does not entail a lack of engagement or steering on their part. The activity is the continuous posing, whether this is moving through multiple poses quite rapidly or going through great effort to maintain a singular long pose. My point is that the model is not just a tool or prop – an instrument – used by the artist: the model actively instrumentalises their body: posing is an active physical and conscious exertion.<sup>2</sup> The model is therefore at no point passive in a physical sense. Passivity, to my mind, is better considered in terms of the degree of agency the model can exert over the conception of the pose, as they harness their ability to come up with and execute a pose that is valuable to the art making to which they contribute. This is where my distinction between types of poses comes in, which I write more about in the next section.

### III. HOW DO MODELS IMPACT ARTWORKS?

So – aside from being a living, breathing, moving human – how do life and photographic models contribute differently, compared to the way inert plas-

ter casts and wooden figurines feature in art making? It is true that model bodies take on an exemplary function much like the inert objects and wooden figurines; artists can employ their bodies to ‘scaffold’ qualities of their artworks upon. What I mean by ‘scaffolding’ is how a physical body or object present in the studio may be rendered into a visual depiction, take for instance anonymous models’ bodies featuring in a grand history painting, or otherwise influencing the formal arrangement of the artwork even if they do not recognisably feature.

The route to appearing in an artwork seems to be one dictated by the artist, after all it is this person who has the executive say over what the final piece might become or feature. I think the reality of art making is more nuanced than this. I have attempted to lay bare some of this nuance by distinguishing between categories of posing to designate the different types that exist, identifying three larger types: the guided, self-improvised and collaborative poses. I won’t argue that all poses are wholly independently formed and created by the model. Guided poses are similar to a portrait sitter who may be guided by the portrait artist to take on a pose that best reflects their jovial personality. The self-improvised pose is a pose in which the model can wholly retain decisive power of their pose: they configure their body in the space as they choose. Lastly, the collaborative pose results from a mutual consideration by artist and model. I am most interested in the self-improvised and collaborative poses because of the decision-making models can insist on in these instances.<sup>3</sup>

Accounts by models, which echo my own experiences as a life and photographic model, may surprise one in that models report there is typically only a general artistic brief at the start of a session – the actual execution is left more open than one might assume.<sup>4</sup> Although this may depend on the constraints imposed by the larger institute or a given art tutor or artist, it is on the whole up to the individual model to explore and fill in the brief. What this means concretely is that a model oftentimes is not heavily directed into a particular pose. The anatomy class model will have done a bad job if, in an anatomy class that is intended to study the musculature of a woman’s back, they instead insists on taking on supine poses which hide the view. What is key is that, even within the anatomical brief of backside musculature which is more restrictive than a wholly open brief that calls for posing in any fashion, the decision-making power over the specific pose they will take on to fill the brief is reserved for the model themselves. It makes sense when you consider why someone would hire a particular model: they are selected for their unique body and ability to conceive of poses in the space. The model then becomes much less of an inert object who does not have much input into the session, but takes on degrees of collaborative input where they steer the brief and session by creating and moving into particular poses – either self-imposed on their own, or indeed in collaboration with the artist to experiment with a brief. The posing is much more experimental than what would be achieved

by a mere prop. Each iteration of the pose may lead to a surprising but compelling visual avenue that the artist was not expecting.

A prop is inert, it is a tool used by an artist on the artist's terms, and I have tried to show how this does not hold when we consider existing practices that use loose artistic briefs and employ models for their specific physiques and approaches to those briefs by means of the poses they create and are physically able to hold. What this argument is coming to then is a realisation that models are skilled. If models are selected for what they bring to the session, what we find is that we need this particular model to successfully achieve the ends of the session. Once more, this may mean educational ends, or indeed creative art making ends that result in an artwork.

The conversation, then, turns to one that relates rather to skill and creativity. The fact that briefs are often vague speaks to the creative nature of the work; while there may be a broad sense of where the art making is going, it is not entirely clear what the final piece will look like, nor precisely the road to getting there. Some models are better at posing within the parameters of particular types of briefs or art forms than others. This is why it is exceptionally important to find the right model, not merely in terms of physique, but also in terms of execution. It is important to remember that some canonical artists heavily relied on the same models throughout their oeuvre (think the likes of Elizabeth Siddall – who had her own painting practice – and Dante Rossetti, David Dawson and Lucian Freud, or Cindy Crawford and Helmut Newton). Some of these might be considered muses, but I think – in my understanding of the muse as a (typically female) vessel that the artist uses to channel his creative inspiration – this distracts from the skill and input many of these people brought while modelling and generating artistically salient ideas.

The ongoing negligence of models and their contribution to artmaking is rooted in two assumptions: models are not considered skilled, and if they are, they are certainly not considered creative workers who might supersede the artist's executive decision-making powers over the artwork. I have touched upon the dismissal of a model's contribution in another paper, exemplified in a brief consideration of any model's influence on Titian's painting practice.<sup>5</sup> Any such influence was dismissed and delegated to the privacy of the artist's studio. To my mind, this type of dismissal arises from, once again, insufficient archival material to evidence any real sense of what might have gone on inside Titian's studio, but it also betrays a misunderstanding (at best) or dismissal (at worst) of any model's contribution as mere private matters to the artist, whereas we otherwise do find ourselves interested in any contextual knowledge or factors that might have impacted the artist's working process and eventual artworks.<sup>6</sup> Surely it would be a benefit to our understanding of artistic practices to investigate this key group of people with whom artists work closely with?

A further thought worth pointing out is that this close relationship be-

tween artist and model can be mutually vulnerable and at times a risky one. The model is vulnerable in a threefold manner: they can be physically vulnerable, especially so if they pose in the nude; they are intellectually vulnerable by means of how they lend their creative ideas to the artist when they experiment with poses inside the art making session (especially bearing in mind that there is no routine citing of model names or their input in the creative process); and they are professionally vulnerable as they are reliant on the artwork's successful creation and transparent reception to have any chance of growing their network and getting their name out. What is key here is that the model's contribution is exceptionally at risk of being erased. Vice versa, the artist is vulnerable in their own way too. Who gets to see the artist's work in progress? Or their rejected artworks? Or experiments and thoughts that never quite make it out of the studio? The model is not only a privileged observer to these, being invited inside the artist's studio, but actively contributes to their development in a way that is highly intimate. Like the model, the artist is also creatively and intellectually vulnerable. In my own experiences working one-to-one with an artist, their works in progress were treated with great care, and walking around the studio felt in some ways like walking inside the artist's head as they worked through creating and solving the challenges they encountered in their art making. This mutual vulnerability, too, renders it especially important who both model and artist decide to work with. That vulnerability is further exemplified in the existence of model groups, the reliance on word of mouth to recommend both artists and models, and indeed casting as a means of selecting models in the case of fashion modelling.

Despite all of this, models are still employed in precarious and temporary contracts. This is in some ways merely a continuation of an existing practice where the job of modelling was considered something less than, and potentially even something morally deplorable – for who would be happy to pose (in the nude) for pennies?

So why do models bother? What are model reasons for posing and undertaking the creative work? While I can't pretend to know the personal reasons, there must be a real interest on the model's end in physicality, space and the type of body work that occurs in response to different visual artistic media – especially when it comes to professional models; they need to nourish and develop this interest to become a good model. I suspect the posing itself becomes a main pursuit, scattered across a series of visual markings made by someone else.

The discussion of what makes a good model is not only a helpful one to consider which skills may be involved, but it also lays bare most clearly why overlooking a model's contribution can drastically alter our aesthetic understanding of an artwork. (I don't mean that only highly skilled models are worth knowing more about.) Models can contribute creatively for their 'model reasons', maintaining a formal interest in posing as body-experts.

What I mean by ‘formal’ is that the model is attuned to the formal features of their pose, its physicality, and the aesthetic qualities they might be generating through their physical configuration. The model expertly navigates their unique body, its poses, and the artist’s aims; thus relying on their understanding of the artistic medium and iconographic convention. It is worth wondering what goes into someone becoming a good model, whether a life, photographic or fashion model. While some people may be naturally more at ease with posing, it takes time and active consideration for a person to develop their modelling skills and discover their strengths and weaknesses. This understanding of their body’s capabilities, in turns, enables models to engage with artistic briefs and the experimentation required within these.

Different types of models exist and there are nuances across their varied contexts, relating to the type of model, their posing, and the artistic practice they work alongside. We see, for instance, that successful models often create and rely on a personal brand, such that they become known for maintaining a particular physique, types of poses, or even specific artistic briefs that they work with. I increasingly think of modelling as an aesthetic practice, or perhaps a set of aesthetic practices, that is oriented on the pose, which exist within the artistic practices they contribute to and which can be aesthetically appreciated on its own right. The last section expands on this.

#### IV. WHY SHOULD AESTHETICS CARE FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNT OF POSING?

Becoming more consciously engaged with models’ contributions and branding can, where relevant, have a great impact on our understanding of a given artwork. This leads to the third question, namely: what is the value of aesthetic research into models and their poses?

First and foremost, mapping modelling as a set of creative practices that work with various art forms presents a rich avenue of research into models’ expertise, aesthetic qualities, agency, and creativity. The pose may then be understood as an artistic tool, employed by both model and artist to achieve the ends of art making.

Developing a scholarship around posing and modelling enhances our knowledge of well-established visual arts, models’ working conditions, and fine art education. Engaging with models refines our understanding of the influence poses and models have on art making and the artworks we behold. There are complexities worth unpicking related to the nude, gendered, and ethnic posing body, and the gazes of those who behold it. A large question that I strongly feel is worth more in-depth exploration is an account of aesthetic appreciation inside the studio; what about the model’s own aesthetic experience as they pose? Is there a shared experience between the model and the artist(s) they are working with? Can this aesthetic experience differ from that engendered by an artwork resulting from the session? Further considerations relate to



whether positive lessons can be drawn from poses, particularly nude posing, as empowering and normalising bodies by granting onlookers permission to look. It is for these reasons that it matters who poses, and that we should take care to better understand the dynamics at play.

Canonical Western art and popular imagery, such as magazine covers and indeed photoshoots, continue to have a complicated relationship with race and people of colour, particularly when it comes to beauty standards. The fashion industry favours Western features in its models. This continues to hold even for the few supermodels of colour, who tend to exhibit similarly Western-looking features. Elizabeth St. Philip's short documentary *The Colour of Beauty* (2010) explores racism within the fashion industry, and follows Renee Thompson, a Black model who aspires to become a supermodel in New York. It documents how blackness may be less attractive to designers, casting directors, and consumers. Shockingly, several people refer to Black models' beauty as needing to be 'like white girls dipped in chocolate'.<sup>7</sup> This is in line with findings that indicate how Black supermodels, over the last decades, have strategically emphasised or diminished their racial characteristics to improve their marketability. Elizabeth Wissinger remarks that 'unless they are expressly highlighting their exoticism, Black models seeking success in the mainstream feel that industry-wide aesthetic standards are more easily achieved by white models'.<sup>8</sup> Exposés like St. Philip's documentary, but also model and consumer behaviours, have drawn attention to the relevance of race as it pertains to editorial and commercial modelling within the advertising industry. Such racialised demands extend from popular media to the art historical canon, too, which is in the process of becoming decolonised.

Wissinger highlights the dominance of a 'White gaze' and 'corporate gaze' that influence decisions regarding aesthetic labour and who is represented. She argues that aesthetics is no fix-all, and can instead 'serve to continue and deepen the very kinds of stereotypes many in the industry profess an interest in breaking'.<sup>9</sup> Models' individual experiences will differ in the interpersonal treatment of their bodies, the (dis)regard of their creative input, and, most of all, in the reception of the images made of them, which in turn influences studio interactions, job allocations, and economic destitution. These minorities are already vulnerable groups within a Western and White-dominated society and cultural world. Their vulnerability opens them up to far reaching problems of objectification, exploitation, and other maltreatment that becomes even more pertinent. The exoticising tendencies we find in fashion is neither welcoming nor a whole-hearted recognition of the person as a subject. There is much work to be done still, to better understand the effects of imagery on the regard and presence of minorities in our visual repertoire.

It is certainly true that 'aesthetics', understood as visual characteristics and features in Wissinger's discussion (not aesthetics as a philosophical discipline), can be deeply harmful. These are the narrow beauty ideals that engender and amplify those same harmful ideas and perceptions. Philosophi-

cal aesthetics, however, has the capacity to provide and develop critical tools to work through the intersection of art making, artworks, and concepts such as race, gender, and the body-oriented creative practices that fall under the various types of modelling. Furthermore, developing our art philosophical knowledge about models can constitute a restorative act, both in terms of aesthetic experience, but also, hopefully, in terms of the real treatment of models and indeed the kind of art that may be created.

Identifying and understanding model contributions can change and enrich our appreciation of artworks, as evidenced in the 2019 exhibition ‘Posing Modernity’ which named previously unknown Black models in Modern Art after delving through archival material. One such model is Laure, who had been known only as the black servant in Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) before being identified as a person who modelled for several of Manet’s works. Another example is The Rijksmuseum’s retitling Simon Maris’ *Isabella* (1906), whose previous titles (*East Indian Type* and *Little Negress*) racially-stereotyped the painting and obscured the person of Isabella.

The ethical treatment of models and recognition of their contributions is one important area of research, which goes hand in hand with building an increased understanding of and plan of action to tackle the insidious creep of narrow beauty standards. Technological advances and changes in their use are further reasons to ensure a foundational understanding of the role of models within the studio. Elsewhere, I have touched on how models fared during the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns. They took to livestreaming their own sessions, resulting in greater financial and creative freedom, enabling models to become wholly responsible for executing their own briefs.<sup>10</sup> It brought out models’ knowledge of their usage of space, posing, and translating this to a digital 2D image. One could argue that this kind of posing veers into the realms of film and acting, but I won’t delve into this now – it is however a topic worth thinking about in terms of the implications of the artistic medium used and what happens when a model ‘curates’ their own space. A further technological advancement that has gained traction in the last year and a half is that of generative AI, especially image-generating AI. The various formats achieve their images differently. The takeaway for this discussion is that they are at a place where convincing images of non-existing people can be generated as portraits or indeed seemingly full-bodied fashion models onto which clothes can be virtually added – totally changing the relationship of the in-person model with a photographer, for instance, to one that is entirely AI generated, not just displacing but removing the in-person fashion model. One such example is the Amsterdam company LALALAND, a 2019 start-up that prides itself in generating AI models for designers and product managers to 3D model their clothes on. Their claim is that the AI models can be adjusted to ensure diversity of body, skin tone, and facial features, to suit the user’s needs.<sup>11</sup> They received several seed grants to fund their start-up, but this really took off in 2022 where they raised €2.1 million to create

and test AI-generated models, partnering with denim company Levi Strauss & Co in 2023. One curious feature about this partnership is LALALAND's aim to enhance diversity of imagery in a sustainable way, yet in practice, it is unclear what this will look like. Levi Strauss & Co issued an editorial in response to criticisms that using digital avatars does not necessarily solve the larger issues around representation and employing a diverse model force.<sup>12</sup>

The tensions between creative contributions, authorship, diversity, beauty standards, and the skills involved in working with a wide range of artists and artistic media present real areas where we need to consider the human element in modelling and the very real effects of this. As we move to a period where the images we see may not be based on actual people, we must not only research the particularities of the technologies in play, but we must continue to deepen our understanding of the actual practices in use across artistic media and technologies, as well as the implications of deploying media and technology. We must be prepared to understand what it is we are changing in art making, and what the impacts and differences are that come with using new technologies and approaches to modelling. While not an exhaustive list, it is for these key reasons that it is crucial and timely for aesthetics to consider the value and nature of models' contributions to the artworks we enjoy.<sup>13</sup>

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### ENDNOTES

1. See Callen 2003; Tosh 1999, for accounts of the male nude and tensions between life modelling, class and gender.
2. In Debaene 2021b, I argue for posing as an artistic tool that can be employed by both artist and model.
3. Debaene 2019, 218.
4. Entwistle 2004; Mears 2011; Phillips 2006.
5. In Debaene 2021a, I explored some of the ways in which I think skills involved in posing could lead one to consider models more like performers which I won't expand on here
6. See Debaene 2021a, 8.
7. St. Philip 2010.
8. Wissinger 2012, 137.
9. Wissinger 2012, 140.
10. Debaene 2021a, 21.
11. LALALAND.
12. Levi Straus & Co 2023.
13. I presented an early version at the 'Words, Voices, Bodies' workshop in January 2022 organised by Karen Simecek at the University of Warwick. I also presented a version at the American Society for Aesthetics' 81st Annual Meeting in November 2023 as part of a panel 'Musing on Models' with Tzachi Zamir and Peg Brand Weiser, where I received valuable comments from Mary Devereaux, Emily Brady, and Sondra Bacharach, as well as from members in the audience. Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to Peg and Tzachi for the exchanges we've had.

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