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## Naked, Fat, and Fabulous: Life Models in the Visual Arts

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to bring together two lines of thought that might seem unrelated. The first is the idea that the life class should be a safe space that respects and nurtures the creative autonomy of life models. The second is the idea that it is morally, socially, and aesthetically permissible to be fat and that fat persons are entitled to the same dignity, respect, and celebration to which straight-sized persons are entitled. Putting these two thoughts together, I explore the idea that the life class can be a space for the aesthetic exploration and appreciation of fat bodies and hence an important space for combatting fat oppression.

I would like to issue a warning about content that may be upsetting or triggering for my readers. In section II, I briefly discuss sexual harassment and sexual assault. In section III, I give quite a few examples of the kinds of harassment and hostility that fat persons face.

## I. INTRODUCTION

One thing I work on is the ethico-political dimension of art, where ‘art’ should be construed broadly.<sup>1</sup> Within this voluminous category, I have written about the ways in which artworks instantiate modes of oppression and social injustice—especially sexism, racism, and fatism—and I have also written about the ways in which artworks undermine these forms of oppression and social injustice. We might call the latter the liberatory political potential of art—its potential to fight against forms of social inequality and social injustice. Up to this point, I have thought about art’s liberatory potential mostly in the context of *artworks*; that is, in the context of the finished products of the creative process.

But in this article, I am having something of a Nietzschean moment. As the reader likely recalls, Nietzsche was critical of the fact that philosophy strongly tends to think about the aesthetic—about aesthetic experience and aesthetic value—solely from the perspective of the audience of artistic products rather than from the perspective of the maker of those products:

Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the ‘spectator,’ and unconsciously introduced the “spectator” into the concept ‘beautiful.’<sup>2</sup>

This results in an almost exclusive disciplinary focus on artworks rather than on the *making* of those works. So, my Nietzschean moment in this article is that I will be thinking *not* about the liberatory potential of *artworks* but rather about the liberatory potential of certain artistic practices.

The specific form of artistic process that I will be considering is life drawing and painting; that is, rendering a nude human figure from observation of a live model. Following recent arguments in the philosophy of art, I will be thinking about life drawing as a collaboration between painter/drawer and life model (as opposed to thinking about only the renderer as the artist and the model as their mere passive material) and I will up the Nietzschean ante, as it were, by focusing not on painters/drawers but, rather, on models; that is, we will be thinking about life models as artists in their own right.

Further, I focus here not on just any life models, but on fat life models in particular. This involves bringing together two lines of thought that might seem unrelated. The first is the idea that the life class should be a safe space that respects and nurtures the creative autonomy of life models. The second is the idea that it is morally, socially, and aesthetically permissible to be fat and that fat persons are entitled to the same dignity, respect, and *celebration* to which straight-sized persons are entitled. Putting these two thoughts together, I will pursue the idea that the life class can be a space for the aesthetic exploration and appreciation of fat bodies and hence an important artistic liberatory space that combats fat oppression.

My discussion takes the following shape: I first argue that the life class should be a safe space. I next discuss fat oppression and argue for the moral permissibility of fatness. Finally, I address fat life modelling.

Before beginning, I would like to issue a warning about content that may be upsetting or triggering for my audience. In the next section, I briefly discuss sexual harassment and sexual assault. In section III, I give some examples of the kinds of harassment and hostility that fat persons face. I avoid graphic detail throughout.

## II. THE LIFE CLASS AS A SAFE SPACE

I begin with a general idea based on the work of philosopher Aurélie Debaene and artist, life model, and writer Dominic Blake. Roughly, the idea is that art modelling itself is a performative *artistic* enterprise that collaborates with image-makers in the overall artistic process.<sup>3</sup> Far from passive objects serving as mere material to be used by artists to express their genius, Debaene and Blake have each in their own way made a compelling case that art modelling is a highly skilled, sophisticated, complex, creative, and deeply aesthetic practice that should be recognised as artistic in its own right, and that the resultant visual products should be thought of as deeply collaborative. Rather than focus our aesthetic attention on the *products* of the life class—as philosophical aesthetics, art history, and art schools have traditionally done—Blake and Debaene, for all their differences, suggest that we consider the life class itself in its entirety as aesthetically and artistically significant terrain. I begin from this general point, though I shall focus on a different aspect of the life class as a creative process, namely the ethical aspects of life modelling and of the life class.

Blake himself raises some ethical aspects of life modelling; e.g., the life model's working conditions, equitable pay, the artistic credit accorded life models for their work, and the respect and even prestige they are owed but so often denied.<sup>4</sup> To these important ethical issues I would like to add: sexual harassment, sexual abuse, discrimination of various sorts (race, gender, disability, body size), and bullying. It is no secret that the traditional conception of life models—as little more than passive material to be used by artists—sets up a power dynamic that leaves models quite vulnerable to mistreatment. Artists have been abusing this power over their models—especially in the case of male artists and female models—for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the case of recently deceased superstar artist Chuck Close. Beginning in December of 2017, seven women came forward to accuse Chuck Close of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct; in particular, of pressuring them to pose in the nude and of making lewd remarks and sexual advances in the process. Close denied any sexual contact but acknowledged speaking crudely to his female models about their bodies and issued a half-hearted apology:

‘Last time I looked, discomfort was not a major offence’, he added. ‘I never reduced anyone to tears, no one ever ran out of the place. If I embarrassed anyone or made them feel uncomfortable, I am truly sorry, I didn’t mean to. I acknowledge having a dirty mouth, but we’re all adults.’<sup>6</sup>

His comment about ‘adults’ implies that those who complain about Close’s remarks are not acting as adults; they are being immature and unable to handle ‘adult’ life. In *Complaint!* Sara Ahmed painstakingly theorises and explains the dismissal of complaints about sexual and other kinds of harassment.<sup>7</sup> As she argues, to complain is to transgress and this triggers defensive responses from the status quo, hence Close’s reply.

These are the sorts of concerns that come to light when we consider the life class as an arena not just of aesthetic attention but also of *ethical* concern. At the end of this essay, I’ll suggest that these bear on one another. This relates to the points that Blake articulates—just to remind us, concerns about life models’ working conditions, equitable pay, the artistic credit life models are accorded for their work, and the respect and even prestige they are owed but are so often denied—in obvious and perhaps less obvious ways. The obvious connection is with respect to working conditions. Life models, especially female ones, are and have for a very long time been routinely subjected to sexual harassment, sexual abuse, bullying, and various other forms of discrimination. Under patriarchy, any time a woman takes her clothes off in a public or semi-public setting (and, of course, also in private settings), she is making herself especially vulnerable to pervasive forms of harassment and abuse. To be clear, this is not to say that men are not also making themselves vulnerable when they get naked in public, nor to deny that men sometimes experience sexual harassment or worse. Rather, I mean to point to the fact that women live under an umbrella of sexual objectification and of constant threat of potential sexual harassment and sexual abuse. This is so ubiquitous and pervasive that it often goes unnoticed. Further, women as a group are vulnerable in ways that men are not. It is unsafe in a very specific way for me to walk alone at midnight in Chicago, not because I am a particular individual, but because I am a woman, a member of that group. Of course, this is different and worse for Black women, trans women, Asian women, disabled women, and fat women (where of course these categories may overlap). This is the sort of thing I have in mind when I say that female life models are making themselves peculiarly and especially vulnerable in particular ways.

The vulnerability of members of oppressed groups to forms of harassment, abuse, discrimination, and micro-aggressions is an ethical problem of the utmost importance that must be continually reckoned with. The life class should be what we call a *safe space*: a place and environment in which women and members of other oppressed and minoritised groups feel confident that they will not be exposed to harassment, abuse, discrimination, stereotyping, micro-aggressions, or other kinds of emotional or physical harm. Freedom

from harm is the minimum negative requirement for a safe space. To this we should add that a safe space is a place where a person feels that they belong, that their individuality is respected, that they are valued for whom they are, and that they will be listened to and that their contributions will be appreciated. Although Debaene and Blake make their point in a slightly different way, these requirements are precisely what they urge.

Before I say something specifically about how to make the life class a safe space, I would like to propose an idea. It occurs to me that the gender and power dynamics of the *paradigmatic* artist/model relationship in the European tradition are a significant part of what explains the underestimation of the profession of life modelling which Blake and Debaene so powerfully articulate. Even while it is true that there have been male life models as long as there have been life models in the European tradition (and at various points male models were all that artists had access to), when I say ‘artist and model’, or when I refer to ‘the nude’, what unreflectively and immediately pops into your head?<sup>8</sup> I think that for most of us—myself included, despite my training in feminist art history—the answer is: a male artist and ‘his’ (female) model. This, after all, is the gender configuration most commonly represented in the European canon, especially in the modern period when artists became especially self-reflective about their practices. My idea is that life modelling is underappreciated, even at times disrespected, and underpaid, and the autonomy of life models ignored or worse, precisely because of its deep and intransigent stereotype as ‘women’s work’. I wager that this a significant part of the reason that so many people are inclined to treat the life model as what Blake calls ‘a mercenary tool’. Women, after all, have long been considered ‘tools’ for everything from domestic work to sexual pleasure.

I now want to turn to thinking about how to make the life class a safe space. While I have never served as a life model myself, I do have some experience drawing in life classes and it is from this experience that I now draw. First, we should make sure that the institution in question has policies regarding conduct, that everyone knows these policies, and that the policies are enforced.<sup>9</sup> Second, as Blake insists, artists and instructors need to acknowledge the autonomy of the life model. How do you acknowledge someone’s autonomy for a given context? This is an extremely important ethical question for many different contexts, and it is not as easy to answer as it might initially seem. Here are my thoughts. One might ask a model: Do they have ideas about lighting, props, poses, etc.? Is there a particular mood that they would like to capture? Are there things they would like to try out or things that they think would work especially well in this space? Is there a mood they would like to express? This should all be balanced with the class’s needs. Further, it would be important to ask this in a way that does not convey any expectation that the model come up with something, for respecting their autonomy means leaving it up to them to decide how much and what they want to contribute.

Third, we should be attentive to the model's individual needs, strengths, and weakness. If the class hopes for a kneeling pose, is that going to work for the model? Maybe they have arthritis in their knee and so something else would be more comfortable, in which case the class should pivot to accommodate.

The fourth thing that I would like to suggest is inspired by something that I once heard erotic film-maker Jennifer Lyon Bell say about her own practice.<sup>10</sup> She discussed her acute awareness of and discomfort with the power dynamics involved in making erotic films. Her actors were naked, performing sex, and making themselves quite vulnerable right in front of her, while she remained fully-clothed and in a sense hiding behind the camera. She decided to do something to disrupt this power imbalance. Before beginning to shoot a film, she invites her actors to go to a sauna with her where they removed all of their clothes and relaxed naked together in a safe space. Now, I am not suggesting anything as radical as all participants in a life class getting naked together. Though I think that this would be a very interesting thing to try, there are also less radical steps that people could take to neutralise the power dynamics somewhat. For instance, everyone (teachers, students, models) could introduce themselves and say a bit about what they are hoping to achieve in the session. This would happen on the model's paid time and of course it would happen only if the model liked the idea. While this would take time from the actual drawing, painting, or sculpting, I suggest that it be thought of as an investment in the session as a way of creating some community, which is essential to creating a safe space. Again, I want to insist that none of these measures would be implemented without first consulting the model and making sure that they in fact want to do these things.<sup>11</sup>

### III. FAT OPPRESSION

This idea of actively and deliberately working to make the life class a safe space brings me to the main topic of my essay; fat life models. Before I turn to this topic directly, I want to make it clear that I am using the term 'fat' in a purely descriptive sense that is not in any way pejorative. The term 'fat' is not an insult; rather, it is a mere description of a body (a body type, a body part). Since I started working on this topic, I noticed that most non-fat and also many fat people do not like to use the term 'fat', at least not when they are trying to be civil, because the term seems inherently derogatory, as if just to use the term is already to insult someone. The fact that 'fat' seems to us like an insult is by itself quite revealing about our (collective) views about fatness; not just that there is assumed to be something wrong with being fat, but that there is something assumed to be *culpably* wrong with being fat in a way that makes one the object of disdain and ridicule. If this is what the term 'fat' means to us, then of course it is more polite to say 'heavy', 'saftig', 'overweight', or to use the medical term 'obese'.

Fat activists and scholars in the field known as ‘fat studies’ reject this way of understanding the term ‘fat’.<sup>12</sup> We use ‘fat’ instead of a euphemism precisely because we reject the view that there is something culpably wrong with being fat in a way that merits disdain and ridicule or even just correction. The unabashed use of the term ‘fat’ as value-neutral is a small part of a much larger project of combatting the all-too-common notion that fat is unacceptable, inferior, unappealing, and even gross, must be eliminated, or at the very least, reduced at almost any cost.

These common attitudes are part of the mainstream dominant culture and institutions which are fatphobic (or, if you prefer, *fat negative* or *fatist*). Fatphobia is one of the most ubiquitous, conspicuous, and overt forms of oppression in our culture today.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is sometimes said that fat people are the last acceptable targets of open discrimination.<sup>14</sup> Fat people live with blatant hostility, unabashed teasing, open bullying, mocking, shaming, stereotyping, and stigmatisation from early childhood onward. In addition to this, fat people are openly discriminated against in a variety of ways:

- Lack of appropriately-sized seats in planes, theatres, restaurants, classrooms, and other public spaces. Most U.S. airlines require passengers who cannot buckle their seatbelt to purchase an additional seat for themselves, which means that fat passengers must pay twice what ‘straight sized’ passengers pay.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this, the open hostility and shaming that fat passengers face on planes is well-documented.<sup>16</sup>
- There is a well-documented bias and discrimination against fat people in the workplace, especially with respect to hiring, wages, promotion, and termination.<sup>17</sup> It has been shown, for instance, that fat white females earn 11.2% less than their non-fat counterparts.<sup>18</sup>
- Fat children are more likely to be teased, bullied, and stigmatised.<sup>19</sup>
- Fat teens are much less likely to date.<sup>20</sup>
- Fat people are less likely than thin people to receive proper medical treatment due to a lack of appropriately-sized medical equipment (gowns, cuffs, stretchers, imaging equipment, etc.), negative attitudes on the part of health-care providers, and the assumption that fatness automatically precludes health.<sup>21</sup>
- Arguably more than any other group, fat people are *openly* mocked and ridiculed in all aspects of popular culture and are offered few, if any, positive representations of themselves.

Fat people are told at every turn that there is something gravely wrong with being fat, that they should not be the way they are, that they should change, and even that they are unworthy, unlovable, incapable, gross, pathetic, or

ridiculous. Furthermore, explicitly and clearly discriminatory attitudes toward fat people are openly socially acceptable: it is not just acceptable but even laudable for films to make fat jokes and for theatre audiences to openly guffaw at them. Television shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Makeover* glorify the use of fat-shaming and other humiliating techniques to encourage weight loss, while reality TV shows like *My 600 Pound Life* and the recent award-winning film *The Whale* chronicle fat suffering in painstaking detail.<sup>22</sup> Finally, there is public harassment of fat people, what fat activist Aubrey Gordon dubs ‘fatcalling’: the ‘unending stream of comments, judgments, and commands that inundate the lives of fat people, invited only by our bodies passing into a stranger’s field of vision.’<sup>23</sup> One study documents that fat women reported an average of three fatcalling incidents a day.<sup>24</sup> Gordon writes:

Anticipating and avoiding fatcalling is baked into every aspect of my life as a fat person . . . It determines how I will get home from work . . . it prevents me from wearing short sleeves because I remember the passerby that stared at my arms and said plainly ‘no one needs to see that’ . . . it determines how and when I buy groceries because I have come to expect the occasional stranger removing items from my cart at the grocery store’ or making snide remarks, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

I have been trying to give those of my audience who are not fat a sense of the many explicit ways in which fat people are shamed, discriminated against, and humiliated, all just because they are fat. Unlike some other forms of shaming and discrimination, fat-shaming and discrimination are thought by many to be justified because, they believe, fatness is deeply unhealthy and the shaming and hurtful treatment are just aimed at getting fat people to make changes in their lives. That is, people who shame and discriminate against fat people see themselves as justified not simply because they think that fat people deserve this treatment, but also because they often believe such treatment will actually *help* fat people get on the right track. What is especially nefarious about fatphobia is that the shaming, hostility, bullying, and discrimination go under the guise of *help* and *concern*.<sup>26</sup>

The primary factor that is used to justify people’s fat negativity is fatness’s purported unhealthiness. Indeed, we are reminded at every turn that an ‘obesity epidemic’ plagues not only the U.S. but is spreading throughout Europe as well, bringing with it an increase in heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, etc. I call this the ‘health argument’.<sup>27</sup> How exactly is this argument supposed to work? Here is my best reconstruction:

- Premise 1: Fatness is unhealthy.
- Premise 2: A person’s body size is under their control.



- Premise 3: It is always wrong for people to act in ways that contribute to their unhealthiness.
- Conclusion: It is wrong for people to be fat. (Or: people should do things to avoid being fat.)

What do we think about this argument?

We might wonder about premise 1. Is it true that fatness is unhealthy? And since both fatness and health admit of degrees, if the premise is true, how fat must one be to start having the negative health repercussions and how severe are they?

It might strike you as odd that I am even questioning premise 1, since the notion of fatness as very unhealthy is so widely accepted. But to my mind, public opinion has moved too quickly to simply identify fatness with unhealthiness. Instead, we should treat it with a good amount of scepticism for the following reasons: First, it is far from clear that obesity itself is the cause of the health problems attributed to it. Rather, obesity may be a collateral effect of other common causes, such as a lack of exercise, poor diet, or even poverty.<sup>28</sup> The culprit, then, might be social and behavioural factors, rather than body size. To my mind, this issue has not been settled, which is why, by the way, most studies say nothing more than that obesity is ‘associated with’ morbidity or mortality rates.

Second, we must consider, as I say above, that fatness (or ‘obesity’) exists in degrees. A 2013 meta-analysis of almost 100 studies published in medical journals showed that while persons classified as Grade 2 and Grade 3 obesity (BMI of  $\geq 35$ ) were associated with significantly greater all-cause mortality, persons who are overweight (BMI of 25-30) have a significantly *lower* all-cause mortality rate, and Grade 1 obesity (BMI of 30-35) was not associated with higher mortality than people of ‘normal’ weight.<sup>29</sup>

There is of course much more to say about this matter, but I do not think that it matters whether fatness is unhealthy because fatphobia is not actually grounded in concerns about health. Let us look at the other premises of the argument.

Premise 2 says that a person’s body size is under their control. This premise is important for distinguishing fatphobia from outright ableism. Fat-phobic folks are not simply shaming and discriminating against people for being unhealthy. Most would instantly recognise this as ableist and eschew it. What fatphobia targets is specifically the kind of unhealthiness that, it is believed, a person is *responsible* for.

So, are we responsible for our body size? Like premise 1, this premise is a hotly contested and extremely complex empirical issue. It is certainly true that many fat people sincerely report trying desperately hard to lose weight without results.<sup>30</sup> Such testimony is routinely dismissed by the fat-phobic because of prejudices against fat people—e.g., that they are lazy and so even if they earnestly *think* that they are trying to lose weight, they really

are not.<sup>31</sup> But I think we should believe fat people. In addition to people's testimony, there is evidence that body size is the result of some complex interaction between genetics and environment, where just to be clear, the former is something over which one has zero control and the latter is something over which many people—especially poor people—have no control. Given these considerations, it is far from obvious that all people can control their body size.

This brings us to premise 3, the idea that it is always wrong for people to act in ways that contribute to their unhealthiness. Notice that the argument needs this premise to succeed. Without it, a person could say, conceding the first two premises, 'Yes, fat is very unhealthy and yes people are responsible for being fat, but people are not morally obligated to avoid unhealthiness all of the time'. So what do we think of this premise?

First, consider that people regularly do all sorts of things that are unhealthy yet are not considered for that reason to be wrong—much less worthy of shame and ridicule. For example, most beauty practices and products are unhealthy: nail polish and a lot of makeup are toxic, hair removal risks ingrown hairs and other kinds of infection, high heeled shoes do permanent damage to legs and feet, tanning (whether by the sun or artificially) does permanent damage to the skin and significantly increases one's risk of cancer, Botox is literally poisonous, and cosmetic surgery, which is increasingly common, brings with it all sorts of serious health risks.

What this shows us is that we are far from accepting that it is always wrong for people to do things that are unhealthy. In fact, we do not just tolerate, but we even celebrate and appreciate, all sorts of unhealthy activities or things that result from unhealthy activities. This example is meant to shift the burden of explanation to those who think that fat is wrong, to explain why we should single out fatness from the myriad unhealthy practices that humans don't just engage in but even cherish. Why do people think that there is an obesity epidemic but not a beautification epidemic? A tanning epidemic? A Botox epidemic? A driving epidemic, as driving a car is one of the most dangerous everyday activities there is?

Let me be clear about what I am arguing here. Even if we grant that fatness is unhealthy and that people are to a great extent responsible for their body size, there is still no good reason to single out fatness from the myriad unhealthy activities that most of us engage in on a regular basis. Most of the time, we respect other people's choices to engage in unhealthy or dangerous activities, even if we do not agree with them. If you want to drive a car, go to the tanning salon, pursue a stressful career, sleep too little, play full-contact football, or wear high heels all day, go ahead. *Why do we treat fat differently?* When it comes to the size of other people's bodies, why do we suddenly become vociferous health crusaders who are so concerned with the well-being of our fellow humans, yet we otherwise let people go about their business and risk their lives and health for the most part as they please?<sup>32</sup>

My view is that the health argument against fatness is unsound on many counts and that it serves to disguise discriminatory attitudes as beneficence and concern. Unhealthiness is not, I wager, what actually bothers most people about fatness, although people may consciously believe that they are worried for fat people's health. But as I have just demonstrated, it is easy to find all sorts of completely unobjectionable cases of people jeopardising their own health for other goods that they value more. Premise 3 is the central weak link. If premises 1 and 2 depend on empirical issues that have yet to be proven, premise 3 is flawed, and the argument falls apart. The health argument was the only viable—in the sense of not blatantly discriminatory—argument against fatness that I know of. Without any viable argument, we must concede that it is morally permissible to be fat and that fat persons are entitled to the same rights, respect, dignity, and opportunity as straight-sized people.

Where does all of this leave us? To my mind the health argument fails and there are no remaining potentially viable justifications for expressing negative attitudes about and discriminating against fat people. Astute readers will notice that I just sneaked in '*expressing* negative attitudes'. It is to be expected that some negative attitudes about fatness or about fat persons will withstand the work of reasoned argument; especially feelings and unconscious and implicit biases. I myself find that despite having been reading and writing in fat studies for a decade, I still have much work to do on my own taste in bodies—taste in both my body and in others' bodies—and on my own internalised stereotypes and other implicit biases. I expect that I will spend the rest of my life struggling to expel the various ways in which I have, contrary to my explicit convictions and values, deeply internalised fat-negative attitudes. But fat negativity's intransigence, like the intransigence of so many forms of social injustice, does not mean that we should give up on resisting. We can all improve, and further, we have an obligation to continually work to identify fat negative attitudes, to stop ourselves from expressing them, and to do what we can to change them.

This returns us to the topic of the life class. How to create an inviting, welcoming, appreciative, and supportive environment, i.e. a safe space, for fat models to express themselves artistically (recall that, as Debaene and Blake have persuasively argued, life modelling should be considered an artistic practice? Creating such spaces is something that some life classes have been doing for some time. Let us explore this in the next section.

#### IV. FAT MODELS IN THE LIFE CLASS

I would like to begin by tracing two trends that I have observed during my own experience with life drawing. The first trend is that while I have taken a lot of life drawing classes in many different venues, from universities to local art collectives, I was never taught how to properly render fat bodies and fat

on bodies in places other than the ‘appropriate ones’ (breasts and buttocks). In my experience, anatomy for the artist is presented primarily in terms of ‘underlying structure’ involving bone, muscles, tendons, and ligaments. This is borne out by my own collection of ‘anatomy for artists’ books but also by a quick scan of such books on the internet. This trend is slowly being corrected as one starts to see instructional videos on ‘the most overlooked drawing topic—FAT’.<sup>33</sup>

The second trend, which is in tension with the first, is that over the years I have seen a lot of life models who are to some degree fat. This is important because until very recently, being a model in other realms has required being thin, often extremely thin. Even so-called ‘plus size’ models in the U.S. are typically the size of average U.S. women.

Consider Jamie Gonzalez, a life model who wrote an interesting article titled ‘Being a Nude Model Helped Me Love My Fat Body’.<sup>34</sup> Gonzalez explains that in the life class, ‘I—a short, fat woman—could be what I’ve always wanted to be: a model’. She continues:

Once the class was done, [the teacher] had all the artists turn their works so she could critique them. This was also the moment that I saw myself for the first time through the artist’s eye (or 10 artists’ eyes, rather). In short, it felt fucking amazing! I saw my belly, my saggy breasts, the part of my butt that does that weird thing—all the parts of myself I considered flawed, thoughtfully drawn in a range of beautiful pastels. Needless to say, that experience changed everything about the way I saw myself. My body isn’t flawed; my body has movement and the shapes it creates are appreciated and wanted. My body is art. I think that feeling had more to do with the fact that I finally felt free—free to look at my body in positives rather than negatives. I felt free because I went into a space that applauded and praised the fact that I’m fat. I was allowed and encouraged to take up space, then rewarded with art of my beautiful fat body and \$60 cash. Definitely not a bad way to spend a Saturday morning.<sup>35</sup>

Gonzalez offers an account of the life drawing class as a liberatory, safe space that helped her overcome her own internalised fat negativity and brought aesthetic appreciation to her own body. The life class, as she describes it, is a primary site of fat liberation: a place where a fat person can engage in the radical act of shamelessly daring to fully reveal their body as an object of appreciation in a semi-public setting. To be clear, I mean ‘object’ here in a grammatical sense, as that toward which the appreciation is directed. I do not mean ‘object’ in a dehumanising sense.<sup>36</sup> The life class is a place where a person can display her fat body not only without ridicule, hostility, and concern-trolling, but more importantly, for artistic admiration—her own and that of others.

From the perspective of someone making drawings, I can say from my own experience that being encouraged to look attentively and appreciatively at every nook and cranny of a person who is right there before me, and then to draw them with the knowledge that they will see my drawing, is a powerful way to confront my own internalised, unrecognised, and unacknowledged prejudices by exploring the aesthetic and artistic affordances of the particular body in front of me.<sup>37</sup>

Putting this thought together with the Debaene-Blake arguments discussed in the first section of this paper, we come to the idea that collaborating with fat life artist-models can also be an opportunity to produce artworks that challenge fat-hatred. This could mean producing artworks that show fat bodies as beautiful, but it need not mean this exclusively.<sup>38</sup> Cheryl Frazier persuasively argues that producing and pursuing *only* representations that beautify fat bodies is insufficient to bring about needed change, for multiple reasons. First, representing fat bodies in just one way risks homogenising the rich plurality of fatness, where this kind of homogenisation is one form of invisibility.<sup>39</sup> Second, Frazier argues that if we produce and seek out only representations of fat bodies that we find aesthetically pleasing, we risk ignoring, excluding, and further stigmatising those people whose bodies are seen as too deviant and too unpleasant. Frazier concludes,

To have true fat visibility, we must centre a plurality of fat bodies, recognising and responsibly depicting even those bodies which we see as imperfect or otherwise falling short of our moral and aesthetic expectations. If people learn to accept and even like or celebrate fat people by viewing fatness at its best—attractive, likeable, desirable—they may only change their attitudes towards fat people that they see as similarly attractive.<sup>40</sup>

The life class, then, welcomes, provides a safe space for, celebrates, and appreciates fat people with all sorts of bodies.

Emily and Isobel, who host an ongoing online life class called ‘Fat Life Drawing’ argue for something similar.<sup>41</sup> These sisters insist that:

[We] really want our classes to represent *all* bodies, in all their glory. We tend to say that our models are the kinds of people that you wouldn’t ordinarily see in a life drawing setting on a regular basis. There are certain poses that bigger bodies may feel less comfortable holding, and we want our space to be welcoming and inclusive for models of all shapes and sizes to try out modelling, and to be seen and represented in the world of art.<sup>42</sup>

Isobel and Emily represent precisely the sort of thing for which I have been arguing, and they embody precisely the principles advocated by Debaene and Blake. The life class can and should be not only a safe space for members

of minoritised and oppressed groups, but even a space of empowerment, liberation, celebration, and aesthetic appreciation (which, channelling Frazier, need not mean outright beautification). Further, the life class can be a space for those who are not members of these groups to confront and begin to dismantle their own unconscious collaboration in various modes of oppression. This is not only indicative of the life class's ethical potential, but it is also part of its aesthetic potential.

I leave you with this parting question: Is a life class of the sort that I have been discussing sometimes best realised in an online format? Emily and Isobel describe the advantages of online life class:

The best part about running the classes over Zoom is that the model is allowed to pose and take up space—in their own space. They can curate how they want to be depicted: some have posed with their pets, some have posed with their own artwork in the background—one time a model even posed in their bath because they felt most ‘themselves’ in water!<sup>43</sup>

This is precisely the sort of creative autonomy that Debaene and Blake request, and it allows for the plurality of fat bodies that Frazier advocates, since not everyone has the same level of mobility.

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### ENDNOTES

1. I presented the first draft of this essay at the BSA Symposium ‘Revaluing the Life Model in Art Practice’ at the University of Kent in May of 2022, where I received valuable comments from Dominic Blake, Aurélie Debaene, Hans Maes, and Murray Smith, as well as from other panelists and members of the audience. I also presented a version of this paper at the Boston University Art and Philosophy Colloquium in October 2023 where I received valuable comments from Aderemi Artis, Robert Chodat, Jodi Cranston, Naomi Scheman, and Eric MacTaggart, as well as from audience members. Finally, I am grateful to the two anonymous referees for this journal for their insightful comments.
2. Nietzsche *GM* III, 16.
3. Debaene 2021, Dominic Blake has lectured widely on this topic. See his website for recordings of these lectures and also for his compelling performances: <https://www.dominicblake.co.uk/>; see also Masten 1992, for an art historical approach to this issue.
4. Again, see Blake’s website. An anonymous referee for this journal pointed out that Blake does not discuss the fact that marginalised persons are more at risk of harm in the life modelling space, nor does he address the fact that life models are not homogeneous nor are their experiences. The referee is right that these are important oversights, some of which I try to address here.
5. As far as I know, there is no study that traces the general trend, but one can find accounts in the lives of individual artists. Picasso, for instance, was notorious for abusing his models. Thomas Eakins has recently come under criticism for sexual

- harassment and abuse (and thanks to an anonymous reviewer for making this point). Linda Nochlin 1989, especially the essay ‘Women, Art, and Power’, is the *locus classicus* for feminist critiques of this long-standing power dynamic.
6. Pogrebin.
  7. Ahmed 2021.
  8. Nead 2002; Eaton 2013; Lavalley 2016.
  9. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.
  10. Lyon Bell discussed this during her keynote address for the University of Kent’s ‘Sex and the Cinema’ conference, 10-11 December 2016. For more about her, see: <https://blueartichokefilms.com/biography-jennifer-lyon-bell/>.
  11. I keep insisting on the model ‘liking’ these ideas to make the point that they should not simply consent to them, but that they should be enthusiastic about doing these things.
  12. See Rothblum and Solovay 2009; Pausé and Renee Taylor 2021, for an introduction to the field of fat studies. For a recent philosophical account of fatphobia, see Manne 2024.
  13. See Eller 2014, who argues that fatphobia is a form of oppression. While this article relies on an outdated understanding of gender identity, the discussion of fat oppression is useful and instructive.
  14. Puhl and Brownell 2013.
  15. Hardingham-Gill.
  16. Gordon 2020.
  17. Puhl and Heuer 2010.
  18. Cawley 2004.
  19. Weinstock and Krehbiel 2009; Pont et al. 2017.
  20. Cawley, n.d.; Cawley, Joyner, and Sobal 2006.
  21. Puhl and Heuer 2010; Puhl and Brownell 2013; Gordon 2020.
  22. Two excellent explanations of the ways in which *The Whale* is fatphobic are Gay and West.
  23. Gordon 2020, 94.
  24. Gordon 2020, 94.
  25. Gordon 2020, 95.
  26. See Gordon 2020, ch. 4, for a discussion of ‘concern trolling’ and other forms of nefarious concern that fat people regularly receive.
  27. I discuss this in Eaton 2016.
  28. To be clear, low levels of physical activity and low-nutrition diets are not at all coextensive with fatness: a quick internet search will reveal a plethora of fat marathon runners, swimmers, yogis, and other fat athletes, and plenty of fat people have nutritious diets. In fact, in some sports—such as shotput and open-water swimming—many practitioners think that it helps to be somewhat fat. I think it’s likely that fatness per se is not the problem but, rather, that fatness and, say, heart disease are collateral effects of a common cause such as low levels of physical activity (and note that to say that fatness may be an effect of low levels of activity is *not* to say that fatness is a problem). Low levels of physical activity may increase the chance of fatness, but low activity levels are neither necessary nor sufficient for fatness. For evidence that poverty may be the ultimate underlying cause of both fatness and certain kinds of poor health, see Lantz et al. 2010.
  29. Flegal et al. 2013.
  30. See Gordon 2020, ch. 3, for a summary of various reported attempts at weight loss.
  31. Dismissing fat people’s testimony about weight-loss efforts is a classic case of testimonial injustice, see Fricker (2007) 2009.
  32. Answering this question would take us too far from the topic at hand. Suffice it to say that the causes of fatphobia are probably multiple. Sabrina Strings has recently made a compelling case that fatphobia has roots in racial hatred, see Strings 2019.
  33. See <https://www.lovelifedrawing.com/how-to-draw-fat/>.
  34. Gonzalez.
  35. Gonzalez.
  36. Thanks to Bailey Szustak for encouraging this clarification.
  37. This is a form of what Sherri Irvin calls *aesthetic exploration* Irvin 2017.
  38. In Eaton 2016, I primarily focus on artworks that show fat bodies in an aesthetically positive light; See also Frazier 2023, for a persuasive argument that this is not the only way to combat fat hatred and that it can even have detrimental implications for fat communities.
  39. On this point Frazier follows Taylor 2016.





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