

LANDMARKS: EXERCISES NAVIGATING  
A PERSONAL HISTORY OF SCULPTING  
THE HUMAN FIGURE

by

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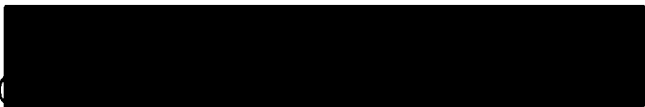
An Abstract of the Thesis of

Stephanie Gai Goetsch for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts

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Title: LANDMARKS: EXERCISES NAVIGATING A PERSONAL HISTORY  
OF SCULPTING THE HUMAN FIGURE

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Laura Alpert

My thesis was an investigation of three-dimensional depiction of the human figure, chronicling my study, understanding, and representation of the human form. I adopted techniques to focus on the creative process, and identified what intrigues me about the human figure and the process of sculpture itself. The resulting artworks show my interest and my experimentation, but more importantly making the sculptures prompted self-analysis and careful communication of all that I have learned.

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I began my thesis with the broad goal of investigating the three dimensional depiction of the human body. I planned my thesis work to encompass and chronicle my study, understanding and representation of the human form. In addition, I undertook to identify what intrigues me about the human figure and the process of sculpture itself.

At the beginning of my investigation, I knew I was interested in going beyond chronicling what I see. I could proficiently model the human figure, and I could measure and re-create accurately the way a human posed in front of me looked. My challenge was to move on to include more of my own personal ideas and perceptions in my sculpture. I wanted to focus on my response to a measurable object. In order to tap into that response I decided to apply a technique I was introduced to last summer by my watercolor painting instructor Satoko Okita. She first directed the class to do a precise, measured painting of the scene before us, paying attention to detail, color, distance, and light. As soon as the initial painting was finished we quickly had to start with a fresh sheet of paper and do another painting of the same scene but without measuring -- in a fifth of the time the first one demanded. In the first painting our eyes, brains, and muscles had learned about what we were trying to depict. In the second painting, when we were freed from concentrating on those functions and forced to work faster, the result was a flowing, easy, unintellectual response to the scene. Our personal interpretations and styles directed our hands. The processes of creating those two different paintings involved different kinds of thinking: left-brained intellectual responses

versus right-brained instinctual responses. The results, in the form of completed paintings, were a revelation to me. I realized that I can make a realistic version of the scene in front of me, but that it feels dry and involves few traces of me, the person who translated it. The paintings that were interesting to look at again and again were the "response" paintings. The looseness and sureness--my confidence in painting--were evident and intriguing, and bespoke the presence of a person who interpreted a scene in a highly individual manner.

Going into my Honors Thesis project I planned to apply this practice of engaging the right side of the brain in response to left-brained technical skills in the three-dimensional realm. I wanted to use my studies of the figure as a starting point for "response" sculpture, abstracted to address the essence of the pose or model. Over the course of the last year I have been thinking, talking and working on my thesis. The methods and the materials I planned to work in went through several changes, yet my motives remained grounded in the issue of finding my personal expression through melding technical and creative skills. The work that resulted was an outgrowth of all of my influences, study, and experience, but it was directly prompted by a particular exercise suggested to me by my advisor, Laura Alpert. Laura's suggestion paralleled Satoko's in its focus on trusting one's own response.

The body of work I am presenting as my thesis is a series of torso studies in ceramic and cement. Laura saw a life-sized clay torso in my studio that I had modeled from looking at my own body, and declared it to be an example of work that was wholly me. She directed me to engage in an

exercise in which I was to complete one study of the same pose of the same size and material every day for a week in order to see where it would lead me.

I had been mired in a period of frustration, so Laura's structured assignment came at a good time. I knew that I was intrigued by the planes that define the torso when a body twists. But I questioned whether that was an appropriate and "thesis-worthy" thing to investigate. I had wanted to work with both bronze and marble in order to take advantage of their solidity, permanence, classical heritage, as well as the opposite additive and subtractive natures of each. The University of Oregon's bronze foundry was out of commission for safety reasons and a lack of funds so I had to rule out bronze work. I realized that at the size I wanted to work, marble would be prohibitively expensive. So I had to rethink my materials with the goal of finding a medium that would allow me to maintain some of the qualities I appreciated in marble and bronze. Time was passing quickly and my problems with materials only added to my distress.

My thoughts turned to using cement. It had the qualities of communicating solidity and permanence and its surface could be finished in a number of different ways. I was not familiar with using cement as a sculptural medium but I envisioned the end results: a large abstraction based on a reclining figure. Using a model I did a torso life study in clay and proceeded to make an armature and apply cement. After working on it for a week I was frustrated to acknowledge that it had no "fire" -- my professor Paul Buckner's word for spirit and gesture. In hindsight there was no life to the piece because I approached it pressured to come up with a finished product to show that I was working. I unceremoniously hauled it out to the dumpster

and spent several days writing out my frustration in my journal. I realized that in my attempts to think up and achieve "thesis-worthy" work I had neglected to pay attention to what I enjoy looking at and doing, and I had forgotten all about the importance of the process of making art. A journal entry from March 10th detailed my acknowledgment of the values I had lost sight of under the self-imposed pressure of trying to sum up the whole of my sculptural experience in one project.

A revelation yesterday, after a day's frustration with constructive processes. I realized that what I value in art above all is the evidence of immediate response -- the mark-making associated with gesture drawing. And I found I was very unhappy with the medium I was working in. I realized that what I want is to work with something like ceramic clay -- soft, easy, and above all, fast.

The next day I went into my studio with the goal of having fun for a day to remind myself of what *was* fun. At that point I made a clay torso covered with tool markings that followed my thinking as I tried to understand the nature of the form that appealed to me so much. Laura's subsequent suggestion that I make more torsos was a breath of fresh air because it gave me direction and permission to indulge in what I felt compelled to make without questioning the worthiness of the endeavor. Receiving positive feedback about my own inclination put me back on track and restored my lagging confidence. The time, frustration, and dead ends that at first seemed to be a waste were a step in the process that allowed me to arrive at the point of fruitful study. I continued to use my own body to model from because I could experience it in a visual and tactile way, and it is a subject that continually fascinates me both on a personal and cultural level.



By limiting the time, material, size, and subject I was working with I found myself free to explore the elements of the torso that drew my attention. I came to focus on the nature of the planes that limit the masses of the body or the "topography" of the torso. I realized that there are so many interesting and subtle plane changes, intersections and curves in any one area that a single body could fuel a lifetime's worth of study. Every facet I explored suggested other directions I could follow. In narrowing my focus I widened the number of avenues for further study.

The crucial byproduct of distilling my interest through a particular series of pieces was that the process led me to address what I thought were disparate elements of my education. I was forced to become aware of and attentive to the thinking behind my making of art, and began to see the connections that link my education and experience in school and in the world. My thesis was an exercise in addressing things I had taken for granted and finding that they all feed into my experience as an artist and a human being. I found myself dealing with ideas about the creative process; issues of culture, society, and the human form; representation of the body; media and methods of depiction; the historical aspects of the artist in society; and the challenge of translating the visual and intangible into words.

In my quest to pin down the theory behind sculpture I turned to the writings of the poet William Stafford on the advice of Paul Buckner, a lifelong artist and my figure studies professor. Paul directed me to a writer rather than an artist for ideas on the creative process because in his experience artists are too dictatorial. "We work how we live --individually, with all the leanings that come from our own experience. And everyone is convinced

that his way is the right way, the only way to do it."<sup>1</sup> His words seem to accurately sum up the sentiment I would later reach in the search for my own response, when I realized that after being exposed to different ways of teaching and learning everyone inevitably has to come to his or her own conclusions about the "right" way. When I am doing art I get to filter the various influences through my own value system -- a largely unconscious process -- to reveal my beliefs about how art should be done. What makes each belief system richer is the collection of influences enmeshed in it.

William Stafford's Writing the Australian Crawl , a writer's view on writing, has had an effect on my belief system because the author eloquently put into words what I consider to be the essential elements of the creative process. Stafford's thoughts made an impact on me because I had not previously given much thought to the concept of establishing an atmosphere in which to develop creativity. When asked before to describe the creative process I concentrated on explaining to others how I came up with ideas for my work. Yet beyond the generation of ideas, a complicated process in and of itself, there is another element of creativity that is largely unrecognized. The part I had taken for granted to the point that I did not consider it to be a learned behavior was the trust in oneself that is the basis for every creative endeavor. Stafford emphasized that openness and trust are traits that can be cultivated. Creativity is not something that only certain "special" people can attain, rather it can be achieved through the act of engaging oneself in a process and trusting the results, whatever they may be.

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<sup>1</sup>From a conversation on March 4, 1998.

A writer (artist) is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. That is; he does not draw on a reservoir; instead, he engages in an activity that brings him a whole succession of unforeseen stories, poems, essays, plays....<sup>2</sup>

The main stumbling block to creativity then seems to be editing one's ideas for worthiness instead of following them to wherever they may lead. This is evidenced by the frustrating paralysis that ate away at my confidence at the start of my thesis project.

So, if you behave alertly and readily...you will not dismiss your own ideas, your own pictures, your own puzzlement; you will engage willingly with the events that occupy your mind, even the events that at first appear to be trivial or odd. Those mental events are primary, and all explanations must accommodate to them, not the other way 'round.<sup>3</sup>

His principles hinge on cultivating a basic trust in oneself; that anything you come up with is worthy of further examination simply on the merits of it being on your mind. While trust of this type seems audacious, it is more about being respectful and attentive to your own experience. Reading Stafford's elegant summation was valuable to me because I recognized myself in it. Now I honor the fact that despite occasional lapses into self-doubt, I have internalized and taken for granted an underlying trust that has been cultivated in me by my parents, instructors, and friends.

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<sup>2</sup>William Stafford, Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1978) 17.

<sup>3</sup>Stafford, 5.

My thesis project has been a good forum to examine the nature of trust and the creative process because it showed me that when I second-guess my inclinations in favor of concerning myself with the scope, worthiness, or public reception of the artwork I absolutely limit myself and change the dynamic of the process. I learned that I do edit myself when I focus on the destination rather than the journey. And a way to get past that is to consciously grant myself permission to play and experiment. It is essential to take that leap of faith.

The origins of the ideas themselves seem to be a blending of my body of experiences as well as an observation on my current situation and thoughts. I recognized from the start that my work would deal with the human figure but did not know in which direction my investigation would take me. I wanted to clarify for myself what it is that is so alluring about depicting the human form. But I realized that it would be prudent to first consider the issues that surround the human body and its representation because my work is not created free of the influence of lifelong immersion in my culture and society.

Laura Alpert posed the question to a group of sculpture students: "What is it like being an artist dealing with the figure in this day and age?" At first I felt that I did not have enough experience to answer the question from my position as a mere student, insulated in a university environment from the public market and the world. After all, what could I contribute to the long and distinguished history of figurative sculpture? My experience working with the human figure consists simply of studying it and bringing

my own biases and life experiences into portraying it. *But that is the key to it all.*

The figure has been humankind's favorite subject since the beginning of recorded history, and each artist has been doing the same thing: expressing her times, experiences, beliefs, truths and self through her necessarily unique portrayal of the human being. I think we are driven to depict the human body because we want to understand and share the nature of being human. The fact that there are so many issues to contend with when we consider the human body as subject matter is evidence that a large part of being human is being grounded in a physical body. However spiritual and cerebral we consider our species to be, we commonly interact on a physical and visual level--so the external, measurable aspects of our selves are what we judge and compare. Bodies carry the burden of being the ultimate metaphor. Art that portrays the human body reflects all the issues involved for both the creator and the viewer.

Representation of the body mirrors the culture that produces it. Depiction of the body has come to serve as an historical measuring stick for how a culture saw itself or wanted to be seen. The human body can be holy and sacred or base and profane. It can be nude or clothed, sexual or sensual. It can be powerful or weak, feminine or masculine, gloriously heavy or grossly fat, elegantly slim or skinny. The significance of alternatives in physical appearance can best be exemplified by comparing four sculptures by four different artists who focused on the same subject: David, the biblical hero who defeated the giant Goliath. The earliest David, made circa 1428 by Donatello, is depicted as a slender, graceful adolescent standing over the head of the

giant (Appendix 1) He is nude except for boots and a helmet, and his sinuous musculature is specific without being overdeveloped. He looks relaxed and confident. Andrea del Verrochio's adolescent *David*, made forty years later, stands in a similar pose of hand on hip, sword in his grip and body in a *contraposto* pose -- a balance of opposing axes of shoulder and hip, tension and relaxation (Appendix 2). However, his David displays a bold, brash tension, with wiry, taut muscles under his short tunic. The body of Verrochio's *David* is more angular and alert than Donatello's gentle, curvy figure. Michelangelo's statue of David of 1504 shows a young man who also seems to take an elegant, classical relaxed pose (Appendix 3). But the first reading is misleading. The artist chose to represent the moment before the action takes place. The controlled tension of *David's* fully developed nude body is subtle. Gianlorenzo Bernini's *David* of 1623 also shows the young man before the fight, but his pose is dynamic and dramatic, frozen mid-swing (Appendix 4). The body is athletic and functional and invites the observer to imagine the next action. The physical manifestation of each version of David reveals the artists' interpretation of a common theme. Each sculptor inherited impressions from their culture, and each sculpted body reveals the culture-specific characteristics of a hero. Donatello's elegant young hero was an example of classical beauty. Verrochio's was a young nobleman. Michelangelo's muscular *David* came from the common people. Bernini's *David* was dramatic, spirited and graceful. The representation of the height of the human form reflected the values of each age.

Besides commenting on physical values, the state of the body can also stand for the state of the soul. Donatello's wood carving of Mary Magdalene

depicts the saint as old and emaciated (Appendix 5). Her youthful beauty has been sacrificed for her soul through years of repentance and humility. The body is not merely the mortal shell of the immortal soul, but a metaphor for her divine sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the characterization of the body tells the viewer about the social climate in which it was created. In the political painting *Oath of the Horatii* by Jacques-Louis David the virtues of courage, patriotism and loyalty are embodied in the firm, strong bodies of the men going off to fight (Appendix 6). The soft, curvilinear forms of the women communicate the less heroic emotions of sorrow, love, and despair. The values of the culture are explicitly communicated through the symbolism of art. Some distortions were exaggerated for a reason. Ancient carvings of full-bodied female forms expressed fertility by emphasizing feminine characteristics. Distortions can also be ingrained in the visual language as part of the standards of beauty. Parmagianino painted his well-named *Madonna with the Long Neck* to communicate elegance through distortion (Appendix 7). While the artist has remarkable power to interpret or steer perception through his representation, the reconstruction and interpretation of art from another time and place is limited by our distance from the thought patterns of the culture we are studying and by the obstructions to understanding raised by our own thought patterns -- the assumptions, presuppositions and prejudices peculiar to our own culture.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout history, the aesthetics of a culture have been linked to its values. Being fat has been a sign of wealth and plenty, or conversely of

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<sup>4</sup>Richard G. Tansey and Fred S. Kleinger, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, (Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996) 689.

<sup>5</sup>Tansey and Kleinger, 8

laziness and lack of self-control; being skinny has meant being poor and underfed or conversely youthful and healthy. In a society like ours that communicates via visual media, the body types that are shown as the norm are far from representative of the population as a whole. No longer do most jobs involve the activities that would make a person be muscular, fit, and tan. Instead, refining the body and face are endeavors undertaken on top of daily life activities, and often rank higher. The struggle to achieve the ideal body image has become an end in itself. Our culture's aesthetics show that we value aesthetics. The feelings of inadequacy that develop and are cultivated in the face of this have left their mark. I think it would be safe to say that a majority of people are not physically comfortable in their own skin.

There are also social reasons for discomfort. Western religion has taken a dim view on the corporeal. Our culture is stamped by the traces of Puritanism and Christianity which link the body to sin, sex, and shame. Generations of people have been taught that the body is just a vessel for the soul, and that physical yearnings must be denied and repressed. The unhealthy association of physical pleasure bringing feelings of guilt developed as a result of such training.

Nakedness is reproached by religion, and it is also frowned upon by nearly every culture as socially unacceptable, even among communities wherein only the genitals are routinely covered. Being clothed is an element of privacy and protection, so nakedness brings up not only physical but also emotional and mental vulnerability. The word "civilized" implies clothed -- in direct contrast to "naked savages" who need to be rescued from their own (moral) ignorance. Nakedness suggests shame and vulnerability and



powerlessness. Yet when we do see images of naked bodies in Western art and media they are generally in a sexual context, so sex is also linked to guilt, shame, vulnerability, and power issues. The most intimate things we do with our bodies can be tied up in negative connotations.

Another social aspect of the naked body is that in our culture the ones we see are usually female. While the male body has long been put forth as an embodiment of the rational and civilized, the female body has been linked, through its status as a subject for art, with the natural and emotional. The male/mind and female/body traditions continue. It remains socially unacceptable to show full frontal male nudity within the realm of popular culture, and the male nude in art is notably absent as well.

A person who would seek to learn about the physiology of male genitalia solely through the visual documentation of painting and sculpture (rather than that of pornography) would be sorely puzzled by the discrepancy between the evidently phallocentric world of culture, of political and social dominance by men, and the less than impressive appendage to representation of male nudes in art.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time images of naked women are used to sell a wide range of products, including, of all things, clothing! The naked female body has become an object in and of itself, free from association with the person that inhabits it. A painting by the Surrealist artist Rene Magritte captures the essence of the practice of using the female body to stand in place of the individual (Appendix 8). In *Le Viol* a woman's face and neck are framed against a simple background, but a female torso replaces her facial features.

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<sup>6</sup>Mira Schor, quoted by William G. Doty, "Baring the Flesh, Aspects of Contemporary Male Iconography" Men's Bodies, Men's Gods: Male Identity in a (Post-) Christian Culture ed. Bjorn Krondorfer, (New York, New York University Press, 1996) 290.

The image is disturbing in its simple summary of the lack of importance of the female as an individual rather than a symbol. The message is that a woman is no more than the sum of her sexually distinguishing characteristics. But if sexual differences are considered to be the most significant departure point between men and women, then it makes sense that the female body be examined as the intriguing "other". A male is often the viewer and recorder. Depiction of the female body in the visual arts has largely been from a male point of view within a patriarchal society. The concept of "the gaze" or the power balance between the looker and the looked-at explains the disembodiment and commodification of the female body.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female....In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.<sup>7</sup>

The sexual imbalance is related to and reinforced by the amount to which the female body is naked much more often than the male body. Scenes of clothed men and incidentally naked women abound (Appendices 9 and 10). According to Naomi Wolf, author of The Beauty Myth, cross-culturally, unequal nakedness almost always expresses power relations. For a woman, living in a culture in which women are routinely naked while men are not is to learn inequality in little ways all day long.<sup>8</sup> Even the issue of what is

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<sup>7</sup>Peter Brooks, BodyWork: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 101.

<sup>8</sup>Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women, (New York; Doubleday, 1991) 90.

beautiful is charged with deeper implications for women. The qualities that are considered beautiful to look at change with the times, and that change reflects the female behavior that that period considers desirable.<sup>9</sup> No artist can approach the subject of the female body without being aware of the wealth of historical and contemporary issues that surround its depiction in art. And we relate to the depiction differently if we are male or female. I believe that the way a man and a woman approach sculpting the figure differs because of the experience of growing up one gender or the other in this society.

What makes the body an intriguing subject is that it demands and receives a highly personal response from every viewer because of the large number of issues surrounding it. There is no such thing as an objective analysis of a human body or of art about a human body. Everyone comes to the subject with his or her own experiences and biases coloring the response. It is impossible *not* to respond; we all have a stake in how the body is depicted because it re-anchors us firmly in our own physical selves. Because we are human we cannot help but try to fit human images into the larger context of humankind.

Surveying what I considered to be the main issues surrounding the human body and depiction of it was originally an exercise to think about how my sculpture might be interpreted by an audience. I felt that I was trying to summarize the important issues other people have even though they did not seem to be issues for *me*. I did not realize that I was revealing the societal and

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<sup>9</sup>Wolf, 14.

cultural influences that have subconsciously affected my world view, and therefore my art making.

Because I am accustomed to seeing and working with naked bodies I considered myself to be beyond discomfort with the topic of nudity and therefore liberated from getting tied up in those issues. But I operate out of my own normally imperfect body. And the fact that I was highly aware of the possible reactions of my audience to sculptures modeled on my own body told me that I was very wrong in thinking I was free from body-issue baggage. Not only am I putting my work out for public display and judgment but I am also airing some of my own issues regarding my body and how I feel about it. My project was more concerned with ways of depicting elements of the body than with the fact that it was my own body I was modeling from, yet that did affect my process and my thinking. I was interested in understanding the nature of certain fascinating shapes and slopes of the body, but by focusing on my body in particular I paid attention to my thoughts on and reaction to it as an entity as well. I have experienced my entire life from inside this body and finally appreciating it in an aesthetic sense separate from the pressure of ideal body types was a good life lesson and body self-image builder. I have found an aesthetic attraction in figure studies already, but applying it to myself was a new and timely exercise.

I find myself operating from a formalist viewpoint: I value attraction outside of or in spite of the meaning a subject can carry; I appreciate pure form for its own sake. I have tried to analyze what it is that draws me to study the human form, but find it difficult to put into words the allure of recreating the solidity of a physical body in front of me. I use the term

"aesthetics" to sum up the appeal because it connotes delight in the sheer physicality and beauty of a body taking up its space in the world. I like the idea of mass and massiveness because it suggests bold existence as it inflates bodies to their outermost boundaries. The hardness and softness of flesh and bone interacting has an elegance accentuated by the potential for movement. Every body is a variation on a "normal" body that does not exist; the bliss is in examining how each body deviates to be an individual. Using my eyes, brain and hands to interpret life is immensely satisfying. Modeling the human body gives me a sense of connection to myself, my senses, and the human species.

My goal is that my thesis work communicates my enjoyment of working with the aesthetics of the figure. While my study stems from a tradition of close study and re-creation of the figure, my work is not an attempt to precisely mirror the original but to respond to the nature of the body. I am interested in not just what the body looks like, but *how* it is and how that translates into potential movement and expression. I wanted my personal approach and style to work in conjunction with my learning about the figure.

Laura's process was appropriate for my needs because it hinged on thrusting me into production within a framework, so that the process would be the focus. She urged me to continue in the same materials, size, and pose because she sensed that I was comfortable with all three. Indeed, working with ceramic clay at nearly life-size proportions on a dynamic pose proved to be fruitful.

Ceramic clay was well suited for my project. It is the most natural art-making material I have used: it is basically mud worked by human hands, as it has been used for thousands of years in the human traditions of utility and decoration. It is an organic material which seems to go well with the organic subject; I would not use welded steel to communicate a fold of flesh. Clay is soft and pliable and fast to work with. It can be built up and scraped down quickly so decisions and variations can be made easily. It is a hands-on medium, and I am pleased with the way it clearly carries the marks given to it by the artist's tool or hands. When working in bronze the original is two steps removed from the finished piece; working in marble the carving tools are the intermediary between the artist and the stone. Clay can be modeled directly and made permanent by allowing it to dry and then firing it. I learned the limits of the clay by working extensively with it, and I pushed its limits by virtue of the fact that I am not trained as a ceramist. I approached construction from a process rather than a craft-based standpoint, applying clay in ways that would apparently make a potter faint. The ceramist's way is to carefully craft a piece with the demands of the firing as the main focus. This involves constructing a piece with thin walls and fine joining that is free of air bubbles. My process followed the construction standards I learned working with oil-based clay in figure studies classes. Oil-based clay will never dry out, so special care in application need not be taken. The focus can be on the subject rather than the material. I used the same mentality with ceramic clay. I built up clay around a wooden support post and then added and removed it in order to arrive at the surface I desired. I used a variety of wooden rake tools I made in order to work the surface. Then I cut each torso

in half, hollowed out the clay to leave a half-inch thick shell, and reattached the halves. The size I worked in was somewhat large for ceramics work as well.

In addition to clay I used cement for the two later pieces, Landscapes #1 and #2. I had completed the ceramic torsos at that time but was interested in exploring the issue of size and fragmentation that had begun with Torso #7. I decided to make extremely large studies of two interesting portions of the body -- the hip and the small of the back --because I had been trying to understand their changing planes in the smaller torso studies and found myself wanting to zoom in further in order to have a larger canvas to work on. The second and third attempt to use cement were very satisfying and successful, especially in contrast to my first experience with it. Cement can be applied and shaped rapidly, and like ceramic clay it is durable and solid when it sets. Cement cannot hold its own shape as clay can, so I had to apply it over a cage-like armature of welded steel and aluminum mesh. The two cement pieces were out of proportion with the rest of the series, but their size was the draw for me. I had never worked in such a large scale before and found that I enjoyed it immensely.

For the ceramic torsos I worked at life-size scale because it was large enough for me to really see and get my hands around and use my tools boldly. The size communicated substance and weight, and kept me from getting picky and tight which happens when I work too small. The particular pose I chose involved a twist in the torso and weight carried on one hip that produced folds, creases, swelling curves, and points where the flesh clearly attaches to bone. The plane changes across the surface in such places are

complicated and difficult to understand because they are wholly contrary to mechanical, manmade joining. It is at the same time both a subtle and dramatic landscape. The pose continues to hold boundless possibilities.

The time frame of one day's work on each pose was a helpful limit. I worked quickly and got my subsequent ideas out of my system in a satisfyingly short time. I could see the changes and evolution of my thinking from day to day as I finished a torso and compared it to the others. If I chose to focus on the point at which the torso terminated in space I could try making a straight cut one day and evaluate how that effect suited me. The next day I could vary the angle at which I cut, and in addition would notice the way the different angles and planar cuts had affected how I dealt with the mass of the body. By making comparisons every day I was made aware of the conscious and unconscious decisions I had made. The time frame caused the torso sculptures to function as landmarks of my thinking process from day to day.

Working in a series was a new experience for me that made incredible sense. In the process of fleshing out an idea there are innumerable other possibilities that suggest themselves. Rather than insisting on fitting everything into one all-encompassing piece, creating a series sets up a situation of continuing investigation and open-mindedness. Working in a series allows you to expand or concentrate your focus from one piece to the next. The pieces play off each other and suggest new combinations. The act of simply starting a new piece makes ideas blossom, and a fresh canvas every day is refreshing and stimulating. A series is the perfect avenue to explore the creative process.



In limiting the material, size, pose, and time of each torso I was able to focus on the elements of depiction I found intriguing. The surface texture was the first and most noticeable quality I addressed. I used raking tools to work the surface on several of the pieces, leaving ridges and furrows to trace the directionality and curve of the planes. The raking action was an exercise to understand the surface rather than a decorative technique. For example, on Torso #2 I examined the swelling curves of the body by using the rake tool to follow the way the surface plane would rise and curve from two perpendicular directions. The complicated interface of muscles was better understood by detailing the direction each emerged from and the way they met. A real torso is characterized by being very smooth and subtle, and my instinctual response was to capture the shapes by overemphasizing and roughening them. The word "topography" kept springing to mind as I worked because I had made a note to myself about the landscape-like nature of the body. On Torso #3 in particular I raked the surface to show how the planes crisscross and unite the body in the same way that hills and valleys are distinct yet they form part of a continuum.

The second quality I addressed was the way the torso entered and exited space or how I resolved the upper and lower limits of the piece. I was working with a fractured part of the body, so even if I ended the top by just ceasing to add clay as I did on the first two torsos, it was still a decision to not make a decision. I experimented with straight, flat cut borders for torsos #2, #7 and #8 in order to connote a deliberate termination of the form. The geometric flat cut contrasted strongly with the organic curves of the body. On the third and fifth torsos the upper limits were rounded to follow the curves

as they show the relationship between the front and back of the body. The bottom limits of the torsos articulated with the flat surface of the ground horizontally every time, but I varied the amount of thigh that rose beneath the pelvis to create some elegant and some awkward effects. The apparent weight of each piece is strongly affected by the way it meets the ground. A large surface area at the base looks much heavier than a torso that begins smaller and swells upward.

The final characteristic I addressed was what I chose to include or leave out when depicting the human torso. The first four torsos I made began from the bottom border at the upper thigh and extended up to the midpoint of the rib cage. The legs seemed important to help explain the weight balance of the torso, but I later found that the tilt of the pelvis alone could achieve that. The first four also did not have breasts because they did not need them in order to communicate that this was a female body. Torsos #5 and #8 did have breasts because they concerned the interactions among curves across the torso. None of the torsos had heads or faces, which is an interesting revelation in retrospect. Heads were not important because these were not people so much as forms or maps. Focusing in on parts of the body made them seem abstract and removed them from the realm of being human figures. The smallest piece in the series, Torso #7, is a zoomed-in view of the side of the rib cage and stomach where the main effects of the torso twist show. The piece is so abstracted it no longer looks like a part that could be replaced into a body. That quality led me to create the two later and larger pieces in the series. I named the two concrete fragmentary studies "landscapes" because they were so large that the sections of the body I depicted, removed from recognizable

size relationships, looked like organic land masses. I was pleased with the way the two pieces invited disorientation in some viewers because it reminded me that no one who approaches a piece I make will see it the same way I see it, much less even recognize parts of the body I have examined and recreated in depth. The fragmentation of three of the torsos was an exercise in challenging myself and the audience to look more closely at the nature of the subtle shapes that make up the body.

Explaining the thinking behind the variations in the series feels dry compared to the flashes of ideas that characterized the actual making of the pieces. The decisions I made seemed to fall in between wholly conscious or wholly intuitive acts. I was aware of the cognitive connections that helped lead me, yet settling on what was right was a matter of feeling. Feeling has a well-earned place in the artistic process, yet its intangible and unmeasurable nature make it a weak link in the defense of art as a viable intellectual discipline. The artist and author Ben Shahn outlined the difference.

Besides perceiving things, the artist must also feel them. Therein he differs from the scientist, who may observe dispassionately, collate, draw conclusions, and still remain uninvolved. The artist may not use lines or colors or forms unless he is able to feel their rightness. If a face or a figure or a stretch of grass or a formal passage fails in that sense, then there is no further authority for it and no other standard of measurement.<sup>10</sup>

William Stafford concurs, "The important thing is the feeling, not the points that we can list to account for how we feel."<sup>11</sup> Making art requires abilities that draw on several realms: the cognitive thinking and summation of life

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<sup>10</sup>Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) 39.

<sup>11</sup>Stafford, 5.

experience; sensitivity to interpreting visible and interpersonal cues; physical ability to use materials in order to successfully communicate ideas; and trust in the appropriateness of responses. Because few of these qualities can be taught from a textbook in a standard, testable way, art is placed in a category apart from other types of education.

In American culture we do not value the classical concept of the whole person being schooled not only in traditional intellectual pursuits but in the fine arts as well -- the social and spiritual pursuits. Art is separated and de-valued because it is not considered to be logical, useful, or applicable in the world of technology and production. Our culture has institutionalized the de-valuing of the arts because we have lost sight of their benefits for the artist and the viewer. Using the word "artist" to describe someone whose business is to create rather than acknowledging that everyone is creative puts a barrier between the artist and the general public. The separation is supported by the image of the artist as someone driven by a higher power: a medium who does not control her own work but instead lets it flow through her. The transition of art from an intellectual to a subconscious act follows the advent of utility and purposefulness as traits valued by modern society. It can also be traced to particular artistic movements that responded to the triumph of science, realism and industrial society. Dadaism and Surrealism emerged in Europe and the United States after World War I as a response to the upheaval of previously held social and cultural beliefs about the nature of humans. The evidence that "man", that intellectual creature, was capable of being so horrifically destructive and cruel was reason to question and rethink the characterization of humanity. And with the rejection of the old values of

rationalism and conscious thought as the loftiest achievement of humans, came the veneration of the subconscious mind. Art was the clearest manifestation of the shift because it was emerging as a highly visible way to invite dialogue and reflect society. Artists attempted to subvert rational acts or influences and tap into the subconscious because they felt that therein lay truth. In doing so they redefined the role of artists and the perception of art making for the masses. The subconscious and personal became the new standards, alienating the artist from the audience and insulating art against traditional modes of qualitative and quantitative judgment. As personal responses became the only the measuring stick there was no common ground on which to discuss art. The line was drawn between art and the other educational pursuits and we continue to operate under a value system that classifies art in the realm of education as something one *experiences*; we do not "experience" calculus or biology, we study them and learn them.

I contend that art making is a conscious, intellectual process as well as a physical and emotional one. The argument derives from Ben Shahn's definitions of content and form:

Form is not just the intention of content; it is the embodiment of content....Form is...a setting of boundaries, of limits, the whole extent of idea, *but no more*, an outer shape of idea....Form is, further, the abolishing of excessive content, of content that falls outside the true limits of the theme. It is the abolishing of excessive materials, whatever material is extraneous to inner harmony, to the order of shapes now established. Form is thus a discipline, an ordering, according to the needs of content....Content can be anything. In such an initial theme lies the cue, the point of departure, the touchstone of shape. But from that point, from the setting of theme, the development of form must be a penetration of inner relationships, a

constant elimination of non-pertinent matter of both content and shape.<sup>12</sup>

So making art is an ongoing process of *consciously* honing the physical manifestation of an idea -- drawing on the intellectual, physical, and emotional response of the artist.

Being an artist requires being present as a whole person and interacting with the world with mind and senses attuned. The process of creating a series of torso studies for my thesis project made me recognize and integrate my learning, experience, ability and thinking to show me that I am a whole person. The sculptural process resulted in artworks that show my interest and my experimentation, but more importantly for me making the sculptures prompted the self-analysis and careful communication of all that I have learned. My thesis work has given me the opportunity to conduct a close examination of the roots and manifestations of my beliefs and biases in the realm of both my art and my life. Never before in my education have I been challenged with such an essential and relevant undertaking. I leave college and enter the larger world armed with self knowledge and the ability to communicate it.

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<sup>12</sup>Shahn, 72.

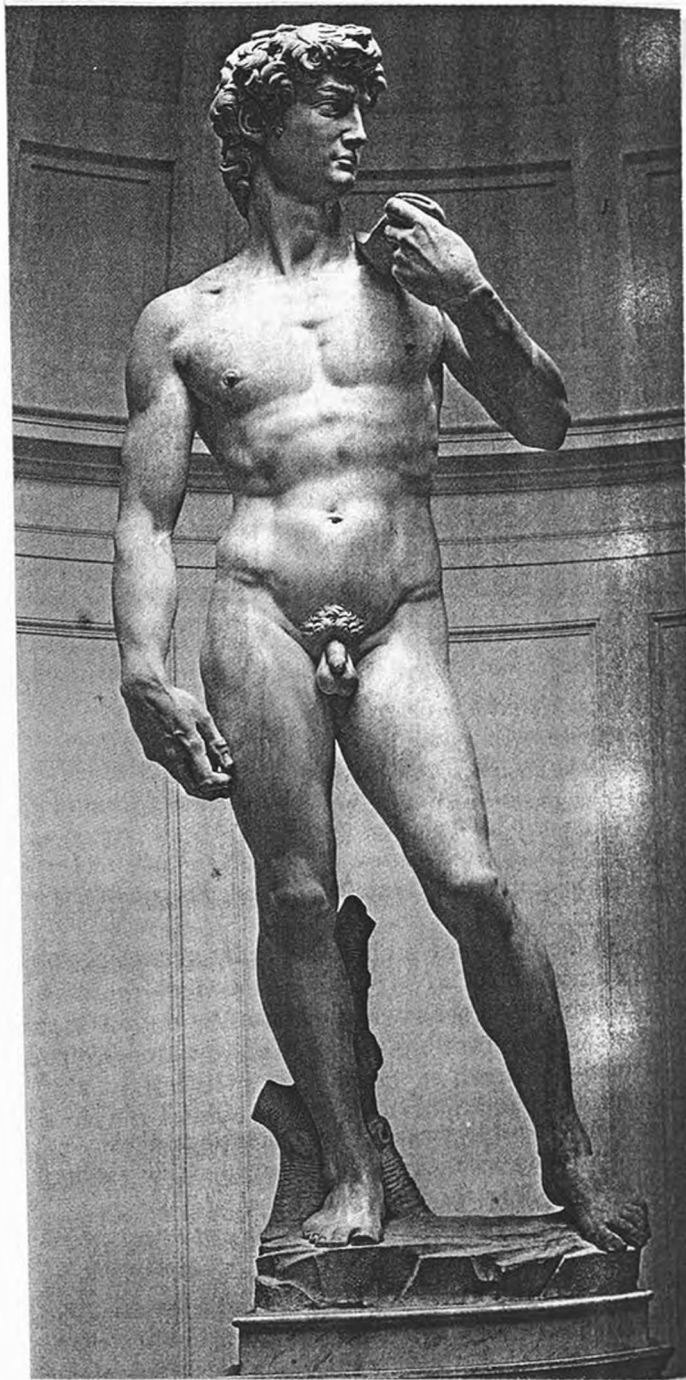


Appendix 1. Donatello, *David*, c.1428-1432, Bronze. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.



Appendix 2. Andrea del Verrochio, *David*, c.1465-1470, Bronze. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.





Appendix 3. Michelangelo, *David*. 1501-1504, Marble. Galleria Dell'Accademia, Florence.



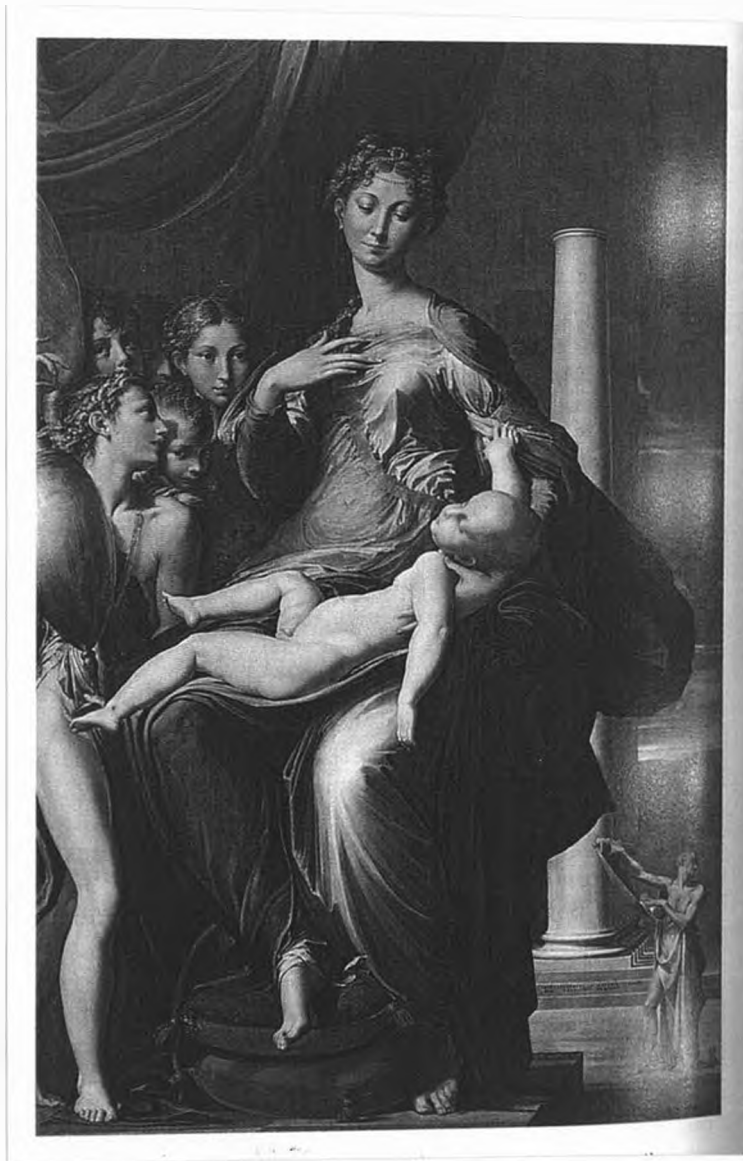
Appendix 4. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *David*. 1623, Marble. Galleria Borghese, Rome.



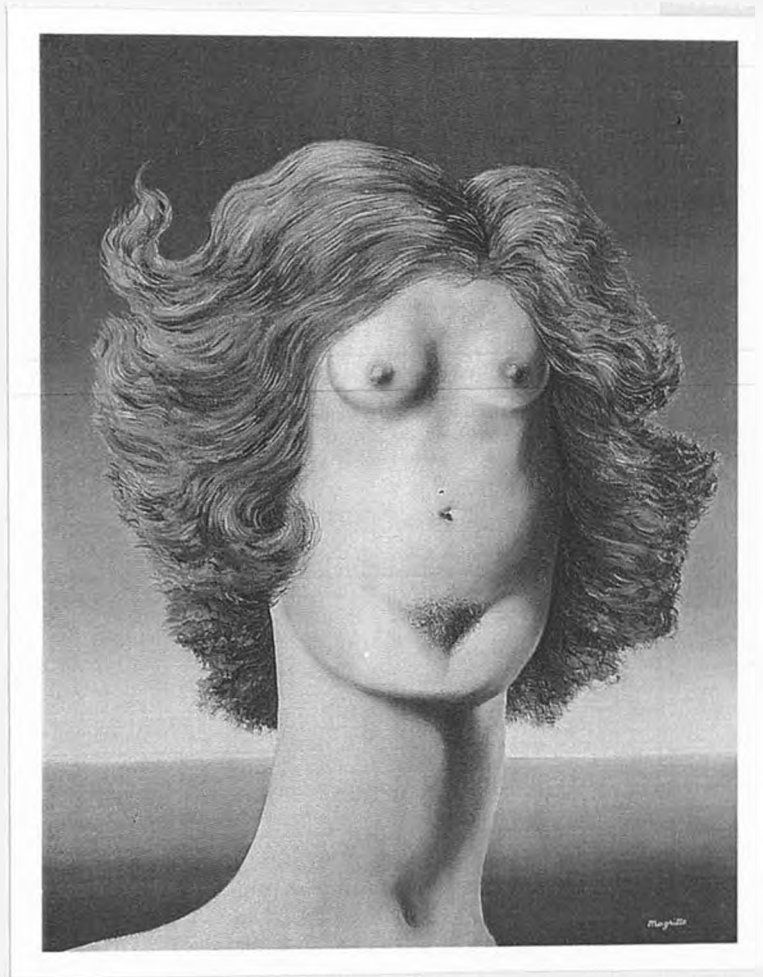
Appendix 5. Donatello, *Mary Magdalene*. 1454, Wood. Baptistry, Florence.



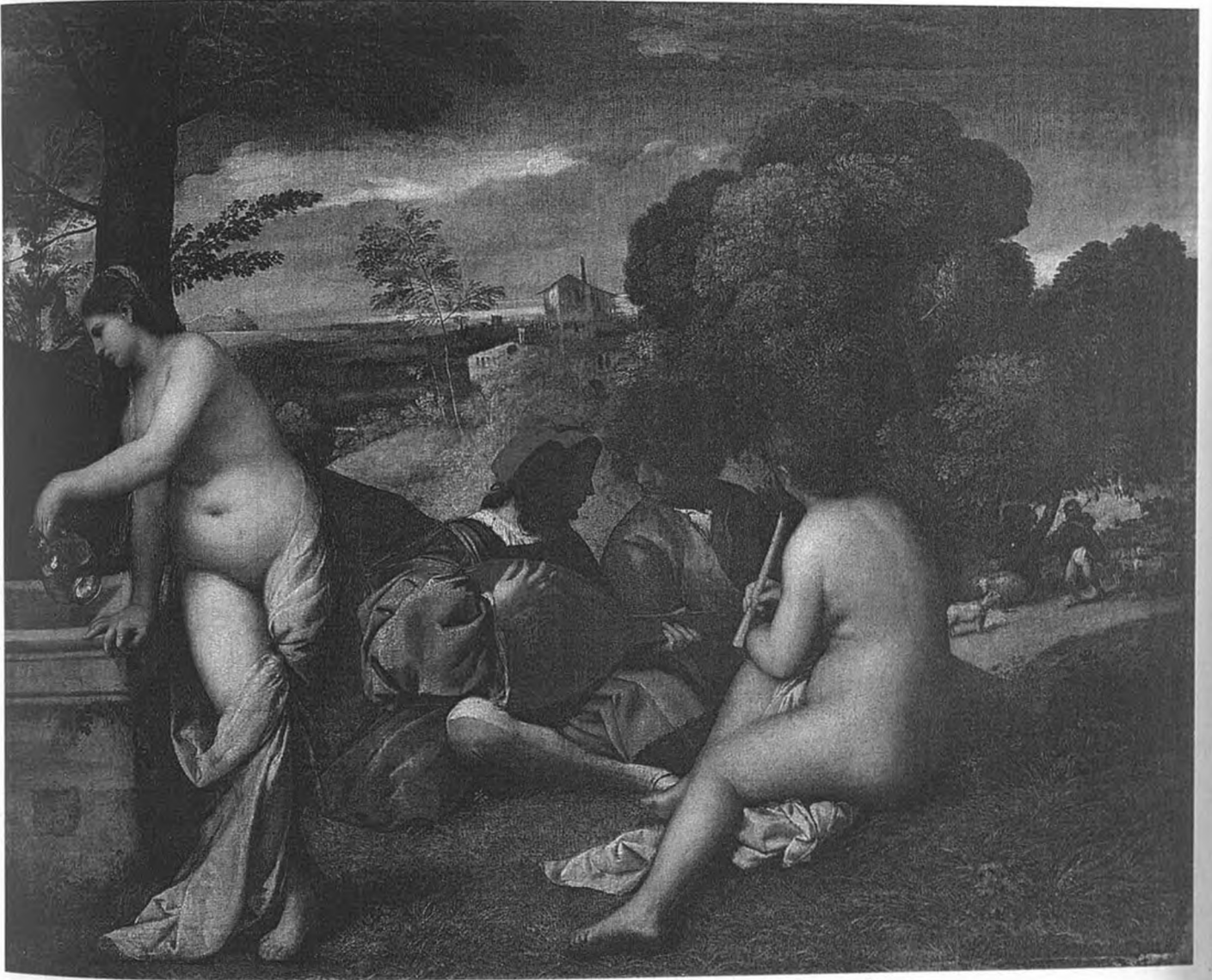
Appendix 6. Jaques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*. 1784, Oil on canvas. Louvre, Paris.



Appendix 7. Parmagianino, *Madonna With the Long Neck*, c.1535, Oil on canvas. Galleria Degli Uffizi, Florence.

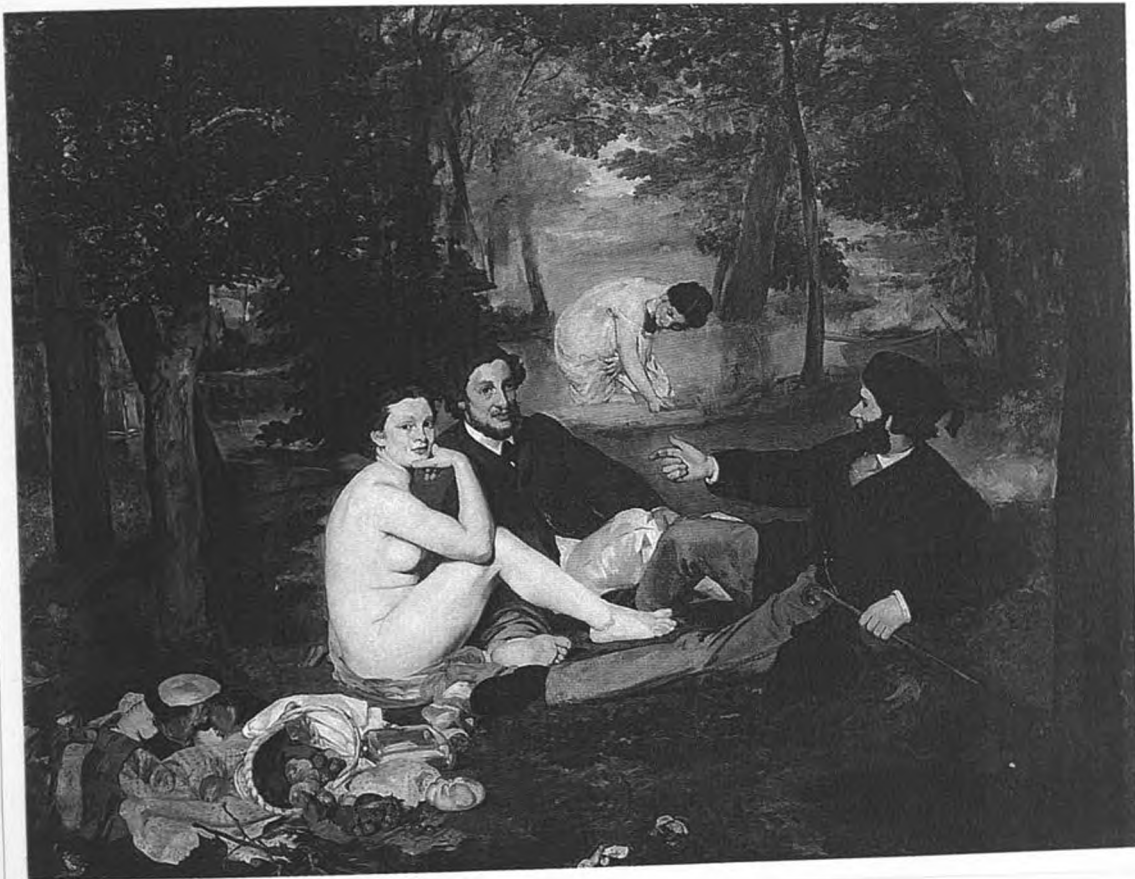


Appendix 8. Rene Magritte, *Le Viol*. 1934, Oil on canvas. Meril Foundation, Houston.



Appendix 9. Giorgione, *Pastoral Symphony*. c.1508, Oil on canvas. Louvre, Paris.





Appendix 10. Edouard Manet, *Le Dejeuner Sur L'herbe*. 1863, Oil on canvas. Musee d'Orsay, Paris.



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