

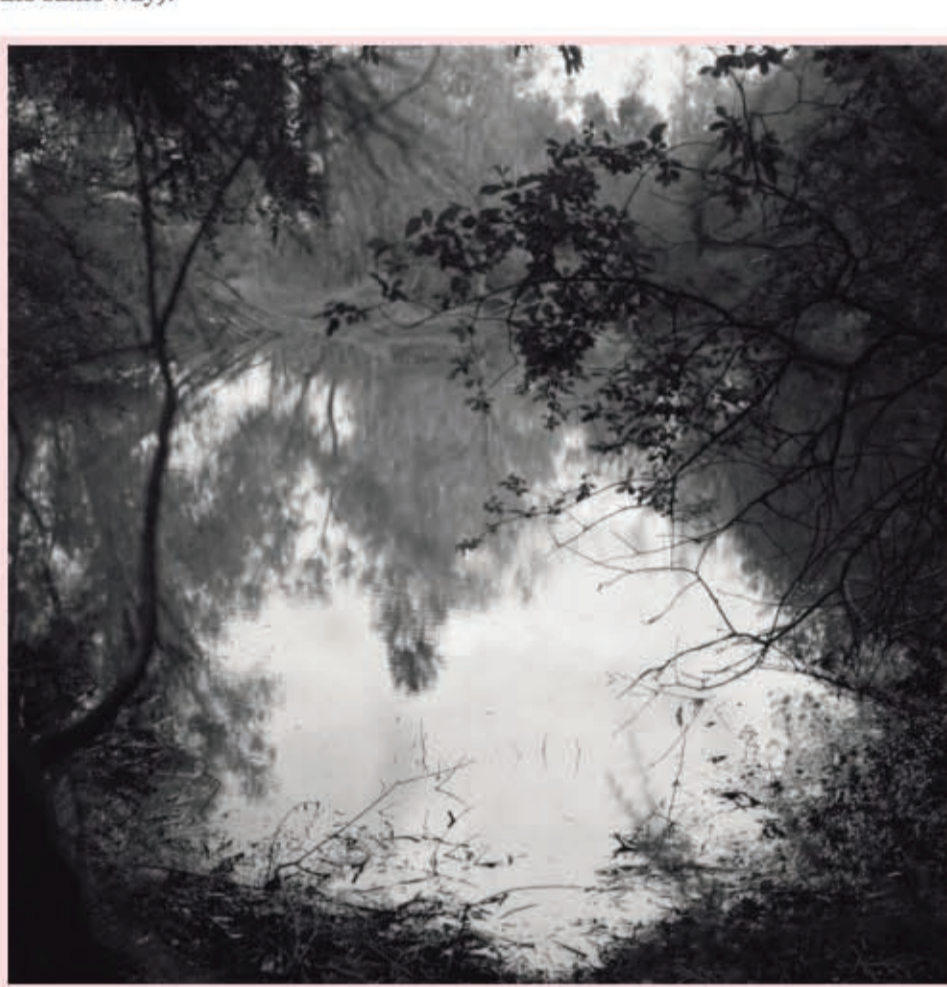
Naked or Nude? The Simplicity of Mona Kuhn

Wednesday night was one of those mad evenings of PVs across London; my main aim was to get to Art London – the first of the October art fairs – but, on the way, I decided to pop into Flowers to see their new exhibition of works by Mona Kuhn. I'm familiar with Kuhn's photography by sight but don't maintain to have had much, if any, knowledge of her actual practice before this. Her photos struck me in a way that made me want to find out more.



Mona Kuhn, Portrait 33, chromogenic print, 2011. Image © Mona Kuhn, courtesy Flowers, London (www.flowersgalleries.com).

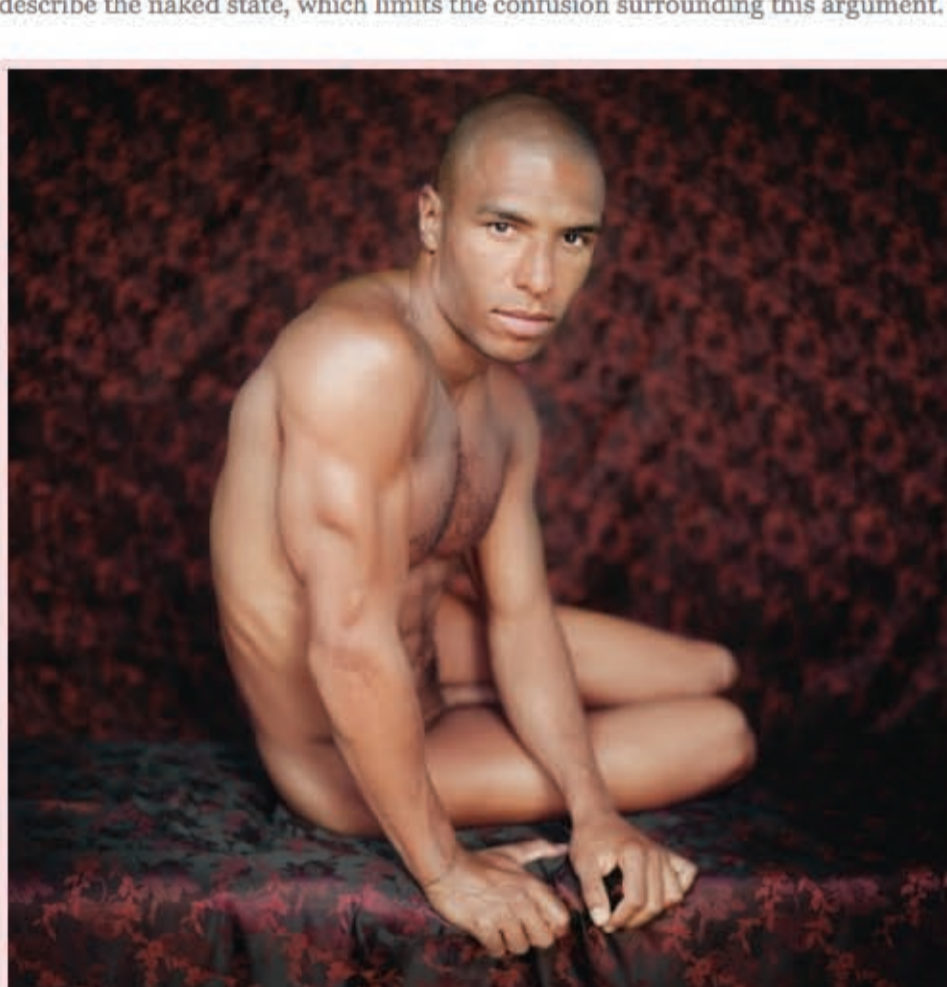
Each year, Kuhn, a Brazilian artist living in Los Angeles, heads to a remote area of France, near Bordeaux, where she lives with no electricity or unnecessary distractions. She takes on a simple life and, instead of valuing worldly possessions, she concentrates on, and cherishes, the people with whom she surrounds herself. This is the parallel reality in which Kuhn is able to work, where she is influenced by her surroundings and the calm state she is able to invoke (I don't think that living with such bare necessities would inspire me in the same way).



Mona Kuhn, Paysage 5, Silver gelatin fibre based paper, 2011. Image © Mona Kuhn, courtesy Flowers, London (www.flowersgalleries.com).

Amusingly, the reason why Kuhn chooses France as her hideaway is that, in France, people are very casual about being naked, and the nakedness is probably the first thing that one notices about the work.

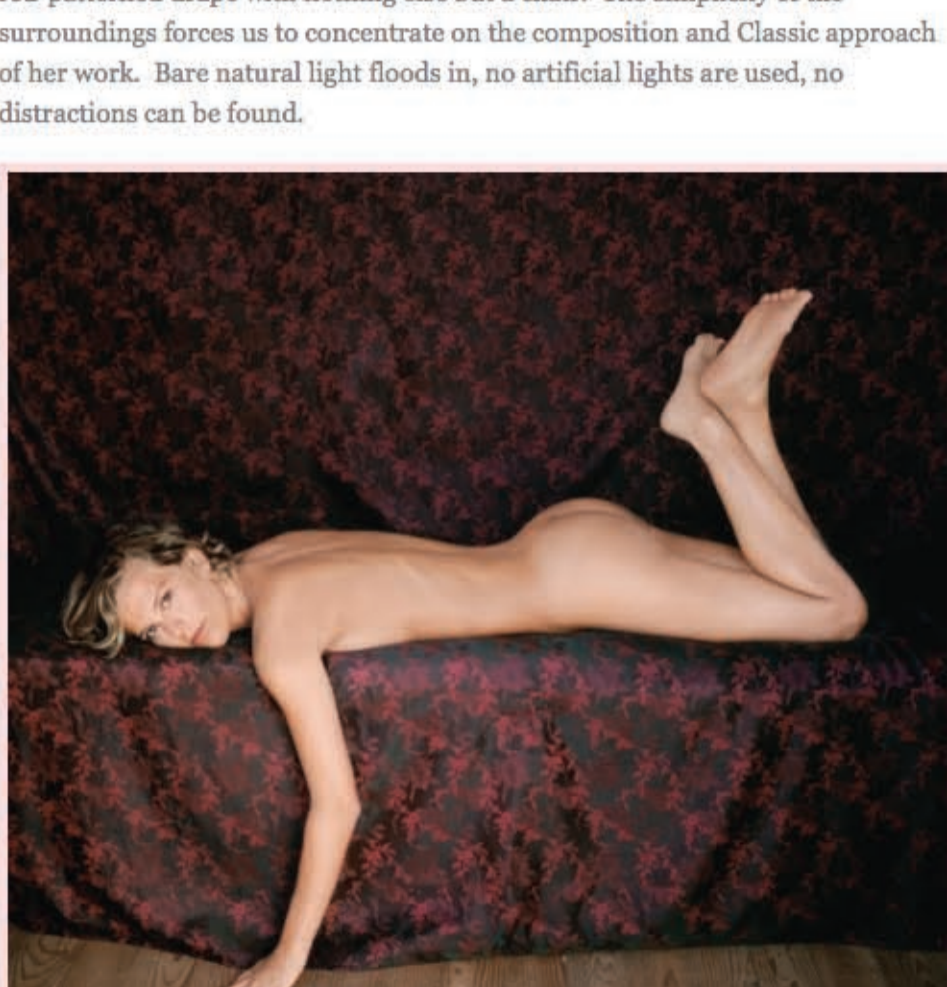
But her models aren't naked. They are definitely nude... Although Kuhn is a contemporary artist, her use of the nude has an overriding Classical feel (Kuhn is a classically trained artist and has studied art history extensively). Nakedness as such did not exist in the Classical period; nearly all the sculptures of that era were nude. This is a debate that I have always relished and, as an art historian, was something we delved into quite early at The Courtauld. Although nude and naked are officially synonyms, in art they have subtly different connotations; nude is an ideal form of nakedness that has been prepared in some way, whereas naked is more of a startled appearance. The nude, implying a suggestive display, has no discomfort to it whereas the naked has a sense of embarrassment. Naked tends to connote vulnerability at being found undressed, or deprived of clothes, whereas nude is often posed or modelled nakedness, designed to be aesthetically pleasing especially in artistic contexts. Nude is the body re-formed that stands proud and prosperous, the body on display, and this is exactly what Kuhn powerfully presents. Due to the complexity of the English language, these charged words add a confusing dimension to the discussion that we project onto works of art. German art historians, for example, only have the word 'nackt' to describe the naked state, which limits the confusion surrounding this argument.



Mona Kuhn, Portrait 14, chromogenic print, 2011. Image © Mona Kuhn, courtesy Flowers, London (www.flowersgalleries.com).

Kuhn rarely looks at the fact that her models are naked. She only photographs them in this way as she does not wish them to be limited by clothes, wanting them to be more timeless than fashion allows. The body is a place where our mind resides and that is what Kuhn's work focuses on. For her, nakedness or nudity is a form of abstraction. She is interested in the body as an element of culture rather than a gender. Her works request that we look at the compositions and relationships in the image rather than studying individual elements.

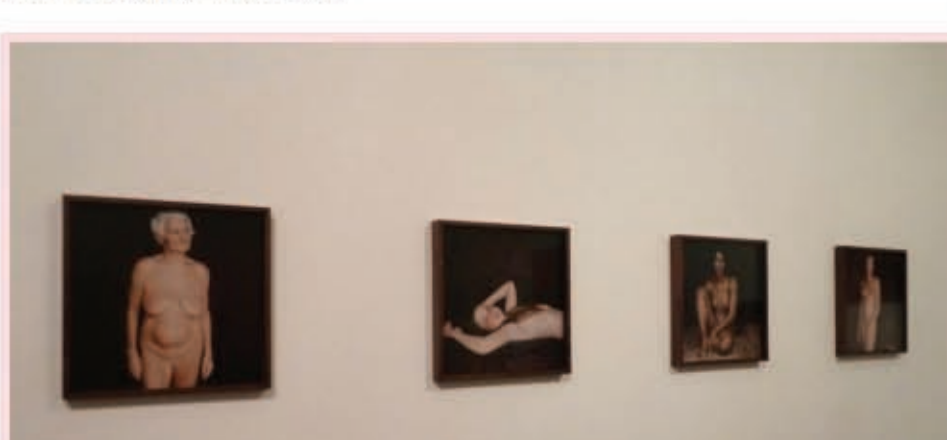
Kuhn is a figurative artist and only works with models who are her friends and family. This latest body of work shows these people posed against a red-patterned drape with nothing else but a chair. The simplicity of the surroundings forces us to concentrate on the composition and Classic approach of her work. Bare natural light floods in, no artificial lights are used, no distractions can be found.



Mona Kuhn, Portrait 34, chromogenic print, 2011. Image © Mona Kuhn, courtesy Flowers, London (www.flowersgalleries.com).

Kuhn doesn't dictate to her sitters; instead, she allows them to move around freely, finding a position that makes them comfortable. This means the works truly express the sitters' characters.

For her, photography is fast and fascinating. Kuhn's works are intimate and natural explorations of compositions. You can't just look at the photographs, which however beautifully executed and interesting, lack something. When you know more, they come to life.



Mona Kuhn at Flowers. Own photograph.

So, now that you understand Kuhn's incredible working environment, enjoy this exhibition in a different light. Don't just view, understand.

Mona Kuhn's *Bordeaux Series* is at Flowers, Cork Street, until 29th October 2011, www.flowersgalleries.com.