

The Nude as a Metaphor

Becky Young

One must believe that private dilemmas are, if deeply examined, universal, and so if expressed, have a human value beyond the private and one must also believe in the vehicle for expressing them in the talent.

— Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*

We are all more or less alone. The extent to which we are paralyzed by this depends upon familial, societal, and cultural experiences. Our ability to integrate these experiences — to view them from an appropriate perspective — defines our identity, our ability to become autonomous.

In the society I grew up in, men were dominant and women subordinate; women were expected to avoid aggressive behavior, to shy away from autonomy, and to feel incomplete without a man.

I grew up in an extended family in a small town in Massachusetts; my widowed maternal grandmother lived with us. My mother was discouraged from developing her own identity. She was raised to believe that her husband and children completed her life, and all her energies and hopes were experienced through us. She blamed outside circumstances for her situation, and indeed it was a time when choices were few for women. Her mother encouraged this, as she herself had been taught to do. My mother had no opportunity to question; she carried her paucity of experiences with her into her own marriage and thus passed them on to us.

My mother was a "good mother." There was a great deal of love and care from both my parents, a great deal done for us. My mother was talented in her domestic endeavors, making a comfortable home for our family. She was a fine cook and a fine seamstress, talents I learned from her and enjoy now. But the anxiety, anger, and fear that controlled my mother was as infectious as her love. They became mine. I believed I was unlike her because I had a career and no children, but despite my facade I was trapped as she. I too blamed circumstances for keeping me in bondage.

Becky Young is a 44-year-old photographer who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. She graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she was Harry Callahan's assistant. She is currently working on a book of her photographs.



Figure 1 Becky (left) and Nan, 1982.

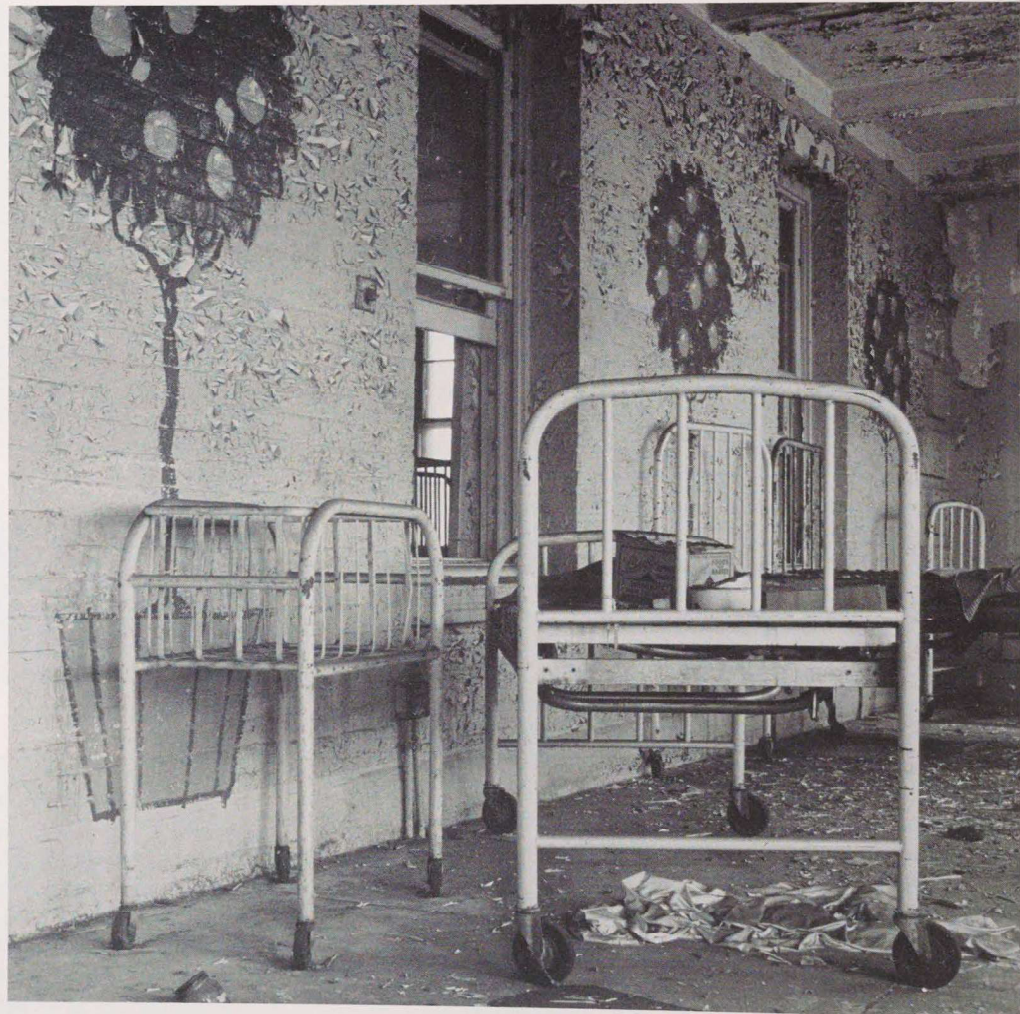
My father was a talented and successful businessman who loved his work and provided well for his family. He showed little emotion, so as a child I saw him as strong, stoic, and invincible. I identified with him, and to win his love and attention I performed for him. Whatever he taught me I learned, and in later years I demonstrated my worthiness and impressed him through my art. He was a challenge to me and I felt competitive with him. The relationship I set up with my father was later transferred to other men.

My fraternal twin sister, Nan, was an excellent athlete, and although artistically talented, she was less motivated than I was. She performed well in front of audiences, something I shied away from. I both adored and envied her (Figure 1). I thought she was prettier; she seemed to do everything right and managed ordinary tasks far better than I. I often wondered if some of my drive resulted from my envying her more "applauded" talents. I competed with her, made myself special by staying alone, painting, and being a rebel. Recently I have learned that she envied my ability to be alone and work, and my freedom from conventional "mother-directed" behavior. We often said between us we made a total woman. My older sister, Marilyn, had no hold on me.

I found that personal history is repeated if ignored. I felt powerless and insecure, creating illusions and fantasies of what my life would be. These illusions would be broken and re-created countless times until

Photographs by Becky Young.

Figure 2 Welfare Island,
1967.



physical illness, frustration, and despair forced me to examine my life pattern. Until then, without having a clear perception of what was happening, I ignored the child in me, the part of me that was repressed, denied, and transferred. The anxiety, anger, and fear from my childhood paralyzed me as an adult.

I think it is possible to understand behavioral patterns learned at a young age and to be aware of how they are transferred to someone else. Destructive patterns need not recur generation after generation. My mother became her mother; I would not become my mother. My father was my challenge; I would not become a competitor to other men. This determination does not negate the many positive experiences I shared with my parents. In fact, the healthy experiences provide a viewpoint from which I can see the neurotic experiences in their true perspective.

Self-realization can be derived from deep introspection. But there is a self-perspective that can be more clearly defined by communication — in significant friendships, intimate relationships, and therapeutic relationships. Through introspection, psychoanalysis, and my photographic study of other women, I started actualizing my own power. I started becoming myself.

My introduction to photography occurred almost by chance when I took a photography course in my junior year at the Rhode Island School of Design. I started using the camera simply as a tool to record things, and my black-and-white images looked just like every one else's. Despite these clichés, I knew the first time I picked up a camera that this would give me a new way of seeing. Within a year I took a few lessons in color photography. Color printing was tedious then, taking nearly an hour to make one print.

Figure 3 Doll, Providence, R.I., 1962.



But it was exciting for me as it was more unusual, and I knew that this was the way I would ultimately be able to express myself.

Earning a living for several years as a commercial photographer and now as a teacher, I have concentrated my personal work on color photography. In the beginning, I focused on the "evidence of people" such as decaying rooms, isolated chairs and beds, and broken dolls (Figures 2, 3). There was a feeling of desolation and a sense of loneliness that I could relate to in these abandoned objects, and I wondered who had occupied the empty beds and chairs, who had played with the battered dolls, and what significance the dolls held for me. During this period, my commercial work in black-and-white dealt exclusively with people and activity; my personal work in color never did.

As I became less preoccupied with the evidence of people, my attention was scattered and for three years I struggled with ideas that didn't work. My first nude photograph was made rather casually when a young woman asked me to do her portrait (Figure 4). During the shooting session we included a series of nude poses. This was in 1967; during the next ten years I returned to nudes a few other times, always in black-and-white. They were traditional, formal, and abstract. They too looked just like everybody else's, and I needed something more strongly defined and more personal. Where previously I looked at the female form as a classical "nude," I began confronting and photographing individuals rather than a concept. I started by photographing a friend, and since then many women have posed for me. Some I asked, others volunteered. Their reasons for posing varied.



Figure 4 Jill, Boston, 1967.

Some wanted to live out a fantasy, some thought it would give them a sense of freedom, and others simply had no qualms about having their picture taken without clothes on. They are pictures of real women who don't have stereotypical "ideal" bodies. They were taken in color, in natural light, informally in the women's homes, and during the sessions we talked freely about our lives, our interests, and our experiences.

I first made single images, then serial images, as I carried my interests to the full complexities of women in familial relationships — women as daughters, sisters, lovers, wives, and mothers, showing how they changed depending on which member of their family they were with.

In reevaluating where the work had started from and what stage it was going into, I became interested in what Carolyn G. Heilbrun (1979) refers to as three

phases of suffering in her book *Reinventing Womanhood*. The first phase is mute, speechless suffering — the sufferer sees her actions as submissiveness and powerlessness. Phase two is the state of articulation; in this stage the sufferer becomes aware and is able to speak and express despair. The third phase is that in which actual change is accomplished. The pictures I have made of women since 1967 parallel the phases of womanhood Heilbrun describes.

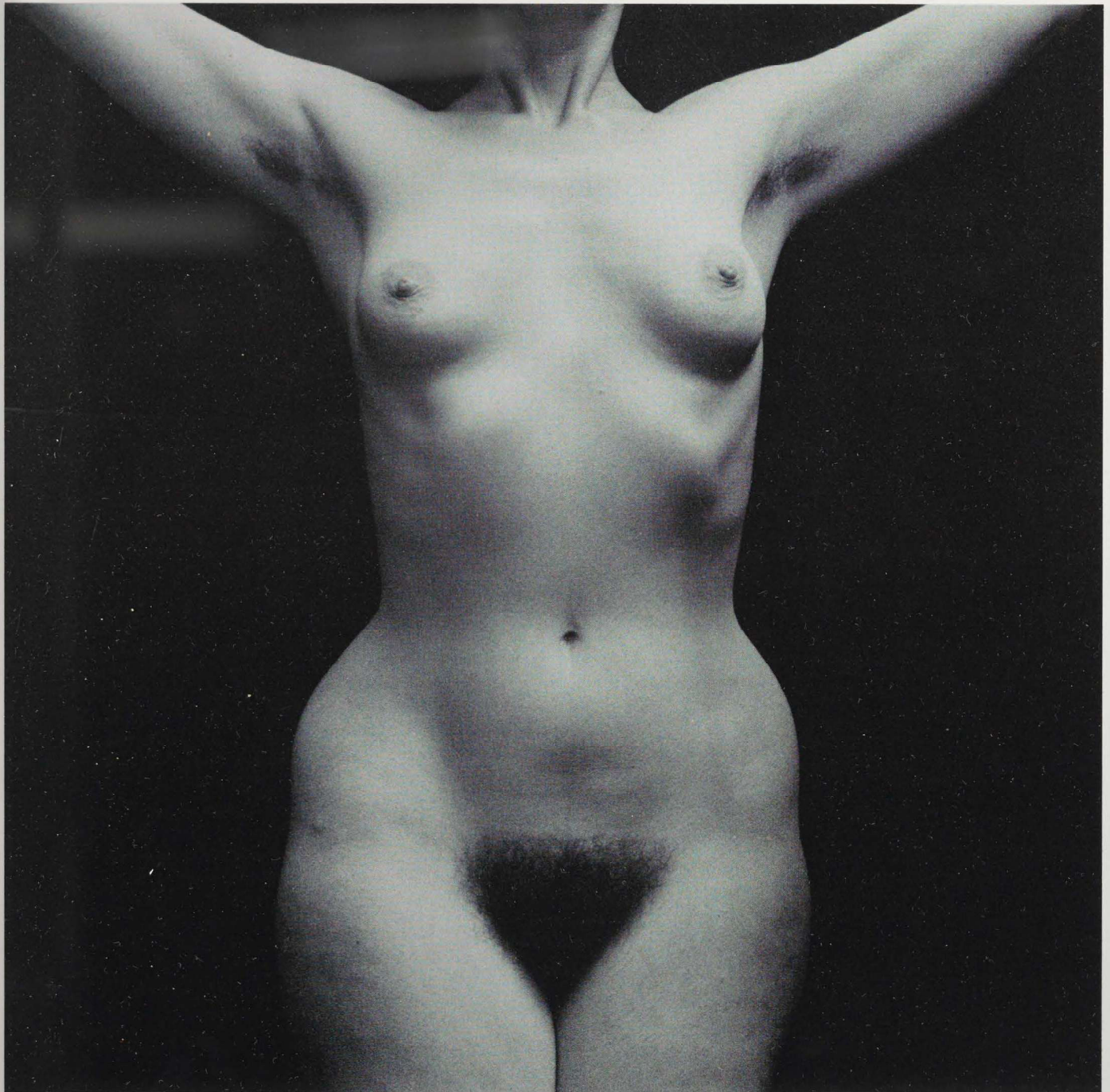


Figure 5 Judy, 1977.



Figure 6 Judy and John, 1979.



Figure 7 Judy and her mother, 1982.

The first picture of Judy, as an object, standing with only a torso showing was symbolic of my own lack of identity (Figure 5). My photographs of woman up to this point were all without a self — they could be anyone or no one. The next two photographs were taken at different times; both address identity and separation, stages that took me several years to understand and actualize. One shows Judy emerging. She appears as an individual — a woman with an identity (Figure 6) — and the other shows her with her mother (Figure 7). At that time I was confronting real separation from my own mother, empowering myself as a woman, not as my mother's daughter.

As I continue this work, I am changing the perspective from which I approach these extended portraits. Earlier the visual images reflected to a great extent my own perceptions of relationships, but I thought I was seeing them clearly. I am now allowing the women to define their perception of themselves. Whereas I picked the photographs in the past, now we go over the contact sheets together, discussing and selecting which pictures I will use. I am also synthesizing my concerns by complementing the visual images with biography to complete the portrait.

Through tape-recorded interviews, and in some cases journals in which the women have recorded their feelings about posing nude, I explore the experiences that have affected, shaped, and manipulated these women as individuals. After the interviews are taped, I transcribe and then edit them using the information that is most pertinent to the issues discussed. From the facts of their early lives, I can see myths and illusions that were perpetuated from generation to generation, and I follow them as they search for their own identities.

This work is a metaphor for the continuing exploration of my own life. I can relate my subjects' experiences to my own and find there is tremendous empathy between us. By sharing their fears, joys, and defeats, their hopes and aspirations, and understanding their methods of survival on emotional, intellectual, and psychological levels, I can better understand my behavior patterns and clarify my own place in the world. In a sense, I am purging myself of the nonessentials of my own identity by comparing my experiences with those of others. A change is occurring.

Liz

Excerpts from a Journal

6/80

Everybody should feel comfortable with themselves. People have enough to worry about without dumping on themselves for the way they look. I think back on all the positive and negative influences on my self-image — parents, peer pressure, and the media have been the most prominent negative forces.

I began to be overweight when I was around ten years old and that has continued up to now. It changed the way I dealt with people. The way I made myself popular was to be a comedian — to perform and be quick-witted. Also, I never did anything wrong — never deviated or questioned authority. I was making up for my fear that I would be unpopular, unloved because I wasn't beautiful.

My mother was always critical of my being overweight because I was a reflection on her. My father was the same, seeing my weight problem as a by-product of my parents' divorce. Being overweight and having family problems in high school made me build up a lot of defenses. I went to a very small public school, and the social life was very cut and dried. The best-looking girls went out with the best-looking guys — all-American style. Being overweight and always performing to make up for it, I must have been always unapproachable. Though I was popular and well-liked I was never "asked out."

I resent the media for setting up illusions and denying the power and beauty of strong, genuine, life-laden women.

By the time I was in my twenties I had come across a few people — very few — who were encouraging and positive in accepting and even admiring (how unheard of for me) my body. I think of them as replacements for the negative influences that my parents bestowed on me. I did have a few friends who I thought were so beautiful and capable that at times I was pained to be with them. That hits closer to home than the media models. Those are a delusion that one can eventually intellectually confront. Though I certainly don't deny their impact on me as well. It's odd that these people I thought were so beautiful had negative self-images themselves.

My self-image only recently has been developing into a positive one. I'm sure many of the factors affecting the way I feel about myself are virtually universal. Nearly everyone in this country who has attended school or heard a radio broadcast has been given no small amount of calculated biased information about their daily lives and thereby compared it to themselves. I can think of times when my own identity wavered under threatening illusions of what I would have to do and be in order to be happy.

8/10/80

I'm still in varying states of confusion, coming and going over my motivation and attitude changes. I identify with your shifts between confidence and confusion. Your "awareness-attitude change-behavior change" is the perfect slogan for my psychological goals. It's taken twenty-six years to arrive at a reasonable level of awareness (of myself), and now trying to accomplish the attitude and behavior changes in six months (I started therapy in March) is like dealing with two more decks of cards.

On Posing Nude

5/28/80

Posing nude is a statement of growth for me. I can approach my problems differently. I know my self-image is lower than it could be because of my mother's criticisms and anxieties induced by media barages. Now I know I can be perceived as a strong real person through Becky's interpretation of me. At the same time I can talk with her about my defenses and vulnerabilities because I trust her photographing me. I know it's genuine inquiry and not an exploitation. Now I can't hide behind the excuse of my looks when I have problems relating to people. I'll have to approach the way I act now. Granted the way I act is sometimes affected by the self-image-related defenses, but I can recognize those now and learn to relax with myself.

What the contact sheets in front of me do right now is replace that negative feeling that was left by the media images. You're precluding that corporate manipulative image-making with a frank, sincere record of appearances — of someone the way she appears and is — not hopes to be or is ashamed of.

The closeups are a little eerie to me at first because my expression is so similar to that strange look I see recurring in a lot of my Connecticut childhood pictures. (I'm drawing strength from that early part of my life.)

The photographs reflect what you saw, what you were looking for — in the photo and in the person — strength, confidence, security: just what you're heading yourself into. Now I feel incredibly valid. There I am just "being" in the photograph. Now I have to learn to just "be." I'm still a little self-conscious about approaching people, but I do it anyway and it gets easier. I do have something to offer so I can hold my own; no more comparing myself to others. The multiples of myself that I present to people or have presented to people in the past are wearing off or building up in accordance with my growing sense of strengthened identity.

9/82

In May 1980 when I posed for Becky I was beginning to confront my identity. It was a challenge to examine my self-image, and dealing with my body was the first step in confronting all the factors that affected the way I led my life.

Having a negative self-image had been my style for so long that my attitude and behavior in relating to people was full of fear, doubt, mistrust. In two years I was able to accept the challenge of looking for the sources of my attitudes, to realize that negativity *surrounded* me, but did not emanate from me. I was not producing negativity; rather I was responding to negative forces around me.

As I became clearer about my *identity* as an artist, a strong surviving person, and finally as a lesbian, I learned I could make choices. I narrowed down and then expanded into circles of people that I *chose* to be with. It was no longer important to perform and be accepted by everyone in general. Putting myself in supportive circles reinforced a positive self-image.

I managed to be honest with my family and develop a good relationship with my mother. I can now accept my mother's hardships and the mistakes she made with me, since many of my needs are now being met in the supportive atmosphere I've cultivated.

In the journals of 1980 I see bitterness, but honesty in that bitterness. I was very angry at my life at the time, but still somehow ready to confront my feelings. Therapy was the most consistent factor in helping me to confront. In 1980, that summer, I also lost twenty-five pounds; shedding the excuse and protection that allowed me to be bitter and distant. That was a key to my conditioning my sexuality also, since my overweight image kept me from being intimate or sexual with people (or that's what I allowed to happen). I actually discovered I was an attractive person once I started being confident and taking care of myself.

I still have doubts and anxieties about my relationships with people — but the issues I'm confronting now are on deep intimate levels that I've never experienced before.

So my new self-image is supported by loving relationships that I've cultivated with friends, lovers, housemates, and professional contacts. Now I am responding to positive energy and choosing to leave behind the negativity that I used to feel safe with.



Liz, 1980.



Liz (right), her sister (left), and her mother, 1981.



Liz, 1982.

Sitting for Becky, 1982

I feel a certain heightened awareness as I sit in the chair — the same feeling as when I go in to therapy. I trust what's happening but also know that I'm about to present genuine parts of myself. So I feel that I must situate myself and be ready for Becky and the camera, like I'm getting ready for confronting truths with my therapist.

Terry and Linda (Twins)

Terry:

Twins have a symbiosis problem, just as a mother might expect as much of her daughter as she does of herself. Linda was extremely critical of every move I made because I was her to her. It was like having two mothers.

Linda:

I wanted her to be more like me as our mother did. Our mother was a perfectionist and wanted us to be the perfect image that she desired to be. It wasn't my place to appraise Terry, but I did it constantly. I thought she dressed unattractively and didn't care about her appearance. She acknowledges that now, but that should have been her right. I was doing what my mother did. On the other hand, Terry wanted me to be just like her, criticizing the boyfriends I chose. They weren't right in one way or another. She didn't respect my right to choose.

Things got worse when we got involved in show business. I taught her how to mime, how to put on makeup. She refused to do certain things correctly. I had to beat her over the head, but that made her retreat even more.

Terry:

It turned out I never did anything right on purpose. I was rebelling against being told how to do everything. In a family of perfectionists, criticism flowed freely, and I had it all my life. Linda and I were in counseling together for six months, which helped us get acquainted with the patterns of our behavior. We were arguing so much that our careers were in danger. Now we are close. We help each other instead of just blaming, accusing, criticizing. That had been the only way to communicate before.

Linda:

Our friends have always had problems dealing with us as twins. Twins create a particular and powerful force in their unity. It is a closeness of energy that people become envious of, even intimidated by. I've found it to be true with all of my twin friends as well. Twins get special attention, become celebrities just being and looking alike.

Terry:

It creates a very unique set of problems. For me, it created more trauma than for Linda, because I confused our identities and had to break away, after sixteen years of dressing alike every day (which we did for fun and because it was easier). I had to find out that I was not her. It was harder than a divorce, and it took years to sort out.

Envy

Terry:

I always envied Linda's ease with people. I don't extend myself with friends so much. I envied her flair for clothes and fashion, and used to imitate her style. In doing so I tended to repress my own style. We were terribly competitive. We had to have equally good grades, praise, etc. Both of us were on equal footing when it came to art ability. Linda has greater technical skill. My true talent came out in art school when I started painting seriously. I have worked hard to develop confidence in my own abilities, and I believe in myself as a painter now. I believe painting is what I do best.

Linda:

I had a kind of ability that developed at an early age—draftsmanship. It was applauded. Terry's was a different kind of style, which I envied. I had flair; Terry was more primitive, sophisticated. I envied Terry's understanding of why she was doing it. It came from her gut; she painted for hours. It wasn't until I later cultivated a love for costume design and mime-performance that I no longer felt the need to be a painter as Terry is. I also do surrealist collage.

Parents

Terry:

Our father was always a talented painter. Our mother was very gifted but became overshadowed by dad's success in his career when she had three children.

Linda:

Our mother is a natural comedienne. She could have been excellent, but she lacked the drive. Women of her era were encouraged toward families and not careers.

Terry:

In our family, feelings were dramatically and temperamentally presented. Affection was not easily expressed. It was a family of artistic egos struggling with one another. The love was strong but it was obscured.

Linda is much more accepting of parents. I won't let them get away with treating me like a child at twenty-seven. Linda rolls with it. She's the good girl, always. They called us lovable Linda and terrible Terry. Occasionally we switch off.



Terry (left) and Linda, 1979.



Terry (left) and Linda, 1982.



Terry (left) and Linda. Hair advertisement. Courtesy of Daniel Lee Studio, New York.



Jane (the twins' mother), 1982.

Linda:

For an artistic family ours was a conservative one. Very little emphasis was put on change or risk. Terry and I have always pushed ourselves to great limits because we believe fear leads to very sheltered lives. Religion was viewed skeptically in our family, but we overcame those feelings.

One reason we were so driven toward show business was that personality was highly praised in our family. If you didn't have personality you might as well hang it up. If you were witty and could take center stage you could take first prize. We spent energy on that area to compensate for our insecurity about our appearance. We were not made to feel attractive. We were always compared to our pretty cousins.

Terry:

Confidence in one's own beauty lends to confidence in life. I love costumes because they give me that confidence. I love being tall and statuesque—like an odd piece of sculpture.

Linda:

As a performer I can make myself into a beautiful Goddess of the Madison Avenue variety, but in the same respect we are mocking the need to maintain this false image. In our performance, we impersonate high-fashion mannequins come to life as robots.

Terry:

We love the entertaining part. Theater gives so much to people. It can be seen in a spiritual way. You can heal people through performance if you are coming from a spiritual place. We improvise dance, comedy, mime, and singing. They've never seen this—they love it.

Linda:

We've been through a miraculous healing experience that has led to extensive spiritual growth over the past year. Until then we had had serious health problems since our teens. We performed in spite of severe pain for several years. Finally a friend suggested a woman healer who worked physically, and we have improved under her guidance. It is an ongoing process, but we are like new people.

Terry:

We believe that people get illnesses because of their emotional and spiritual orientation. This is a difficult concept to grasp unless one has been through a spiritual healing. We are studying now to develop our own power to heal others.

Jane (the Twins' Mother)

The twins were quite conservative when they were young. They wouldn't wear makeup and I wanted them to. They wouldn't even wear lipstick. I'd say things like "Why don't you straighten your hair—it's too curly!" I wasn't proud of the fact that they wouldn't fix themselves up. I always thought they were attractive. I wasn't talking about their features. They have beautiful features; they just didn't seem to care. I compared them too much to my cousin's daughter, who was very pretty. I think I leaned on that. It was compare, compare, compare about their looks and even trying to get them to participate in sports which they didn't like. When I was young, I too didn't like my looks, but I got past it through wit and other things. Before they got into show business they never tried to fix themselves up—it wasn't until they were twenty-one. It was a real flipover.

About the Nude Photograph

We were at a dinner with several people, and one of them had the *Philadelphia Magazine* and showed me the photograph of the twins in it. At first I let out a gasp and thought "But the twins don't have any clothes on," but I thought "What a beautiful photograph" at the same time. I passed it on to Jamie [her husband], and he was immediately thrilled—*my* twins! I got pleased with it too. I have it in my wallet.

About the Other Photograph

I was very upset about that photograph. I opened up a newspaper and it was so big and that hurt a lot because that was my basic thing. After telling them so often that they should fix themselves up—the picture was a reminder of that. I couldn't look at it. I didn't like it.

Myra

Excerpts from "Waiting for Becky" (Chanin 1980)

"You want to pose with me next time?" Phyllis asked bluntly. I tried to think of a clever way of saying no. "I don't think so." I demurred. "I'm not really very comfortable with my body. I couldn't pose without clothes." All the negative programming I had always received about my body was assaulted by the narcissistic impulse to hang in the "altogether" in a gallery. Why did I consider my body inferior? Unworthy to be displayed? What was a good body? One that worked, I answered my own question. Well, mine worked pretty well. It had tremendous energy and it hardly ever got sick.

I suddenly found myself accepting the invitation. "Okay, I'll do it. It may not be gorgeous but it's me." The idea intrigued me.

That night when I got undressed I took a good look at myself in the mirror. Lumpy hips. A girdle of fat where more fortunate women showed a waistline. A bulging belly bisected by a hysterectomy scar. I looked like what I was: a middle-aged lady whose body had nurtured several pregnancies. I looked at myself again and found myself smiling. What the hell! It would be one less exposure to fear.

About the Photographs

When I first saw the contacts I was surprised that I was as attractive as I appeared. Alvin had always taken pictures of me that seemed to specialize in making me look enormous, but on Becky's photos, even nude, I was a reasonable size. There were two photographs that resulted from that first session. The one of me and my husband, Alvin, shows the point in the relationship when I realized that he had feet of clay. I was physically timid, but he was an emotional "chicken shit." He could race down mountains, but he was afraid to bare his penis. In this photograph, he is wearing a robe and I am sitting naked, looking at him with a slightly mocking smile on my face. The next one in the series is me looking very vulnerable on a stool. This is the one photograph that shows all my insecurities and all my fears.

The third photograph in the series was done with my mother, and we were able to re-create the relationship that had always existed between us. She is in the foreground, fully made-up and in a pink satin dress, looking like Madame Iron Balls, and I sit in the rear in a dark dress, obviously not able to cope with or challenge her authority. I look very plain and wear no makeup. We both sit with our hands held in the same position, and there is tremendous tension in her face, while mine looks distorted, as though I had a small stroke.

The last photograph was taken for the jacket of my first book. I am now wearing the pink dress and the makeup, but where my mother is tense, I am free. I have obviously become her, but without the guilt and the tension.

I think the series shows me as a woman in transition. I sometimes don't believe that I had the courage to take off my clothes and expose a body I thought was so imperfect. Posing for Becky gave me an entirely new image of myself—not totally positive, I'm no beauty—but I look like mostly everyone else . . . maybe even better than some that wear clothes with more grace. I don't have any rolls and my flesh is very solid.



Myra, 1978.



Myra and her husband, Alvin, 1978.



Myra and her mother, 1979.



Myra, 1980.

Mary

We had so many people in the family—so much going on. Most of the entertaining done in our home was family-oriented: grandmother, cousins, seven children—huge meals.

I spent most of my time alone. When I was with people I needed to be with them, but with all that stuff going on, I needed to be different from my siblings. I needed desperately to be different from my sister. I adored her, absolutely worshipped her, but I couldn't be like her. It was foreign to me to be what she was. She was the first daughter, the quiet, good girl. You always knew where I stood because you asked me and I told you and she was not like that. She hid everything. There is still a great deal about her that I don't, and may never, know.

Both my grandmothers were very strong-willed people. My mother's mother was an incredibly able and somewhat dominant woman, and she had a strong influence over my mother. But if my mother becomes too demanding, I can't allow it. To arrive at a point when I could tell her this—to state my case without arguing was a fight for my adulthood, a fight for me. I could not allow myself to consider myself a child who could be told to do this or that anymore. I had to tell myself and my mother, "I adore you, but don't butt in—it's not fair."

Lots of people feel like outsiders. When I told my dad that I felt like the black sheep in the family, he said All you guys feel that way. Every one of you feels that you're the one who is different. You all think your brothers and sisters don't think much of you, that they don't care. You should hear what they say when you aren't here. They're very respectful. They think you're great. They won't tell you to your face but they tell me.

I have confidence about some things. That's why I did art so much. When I was a kid, it was a defense mechanism. Something I could do that other kids would respect me for, and they did. I had it all over them in that department. Even my siblings thought that was nice.

I think you could find out most of what is important about me without ever mentioning my family. I think the most important things about me have little to do with them. For a long time I felt that I was not part of my family. This family existed and I was a separate entity and they all had these effects on me and I lived this life with them. You know I adore my family. But if I were with my family for an extended period of time I would get sick; up until several years ago this was so, but it doesn't happen anymore. But that is where I came from. What I am now, what my life is and how I live it, is important to me. Aside from my loving them, they are beside the point.

On Appearance

I was convinced I was ugly—absolutely hideous—from my peers and siblings. My mother would tell me my time would come. That it really wasn't that bad, and that not everyone can be pretty, that I too could be attractive. Until a certain age I was the most important thing there was. Everything was seen through these very hurt eyes—I was feeling like a victim. I felt all these things were done to me. Why couldn't I be pretty, why couldn't I be smart, why couldn't I be nice, why couldn't people like me? Somewhere along the line I got very tired of listening to myself think like that.

One of my understandings about seeing things in a more objective way—not me, me, me—came when I realized that I judged people by the way they dressed. I also cut off an openness to a whole group of people because of the way they dressed. They dressed conventionally and I thought they had conventional minds and that doesn't always follow. Sometimes you can meet very fascinating people who simply fall into a mold because it's easiest or that was what they grew up with. Facing the fact that someone who wears lots of makeup can be just as interesting as a woman who would never put it on in a million years was important to me.

I don't conform to any kind of normal understanding of what beautiful is. I know I don't. But the question with me was not am I beautiful—the question with me is, is it all right that I'm not.

I come off like a well-adjusted person who knows what I'm talking about and thinks well of herself—tells people exactly what she thinks—so why the hell was I so sick for twenty years?

"You are not what you think you are and not who other people think you are. You are what you think other people think you are." I think how much I project that on my life. How much I insist on that. Insist on projecting an image because it's what I get back. It's like looking at myself in a mirror. How much power can we have to change that? How much responsibility can we accept for our own lives? So much that we can change it—completely. You can just change it!



Mary and her father, 1982.



Mary and her mother, 1982.

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