



FORM AND FUNCTION

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO NUDITY
& DISABILITY IN WESTERN CULTURE

WRITTEN BY TASHA FIERCE

REPRESENTATIONS OF NUDITY IN WESTERN POPULAR CULTURE ARE RARELY INCLUSIVE OF "PHYSICALLY DISABLED" OR "NON-NORMATIVE" BODIES. IF NUDE DISABLED BODIES ARE REPRESENTED AT ALL, IT'S USUALLY IN A MEDICAL, "OTHERED" CONTEXT—CASE STUDIES OF THE "DISFIGURED" OR COLLECTIONS OF OUTRAGEOUS PICTURES OF "FREAKISH" BODIES.

Our cultural relationship with physical disability is contradictory: we're trained to look the other way when clothed disabled bodies enter our field of view, but we're encouraged to gawk at nude disabled bodies on display for our entertainment and wonder. Exposure to positive portrayals of disabled bodies in the nude isn't something that most people in Western culture experience without seeking it out. So, it's no surprise that our attitude towards nude disabled bodies as a society is generally a negative one since, of course, our culture's attitude towards disability itself is rarely positive. Institutionalized ableism serves to marginalize non-normative/disabled bodies and keep empowering representations of them, nude or not, from becoming part of mainstream visual consciousness.

Because our Western society values the concepts of "strength" and "self-sufficiency" so highly, a disabled body is judged by its perceived lack of either. Disability is seen as weakness and is not only socially undesirable, but also undesirable sexually. In a sex-saturated culture, desirability is a large part of a body's worth. For men, from whom society demands unwavering strength, this is a harsh blow to their ability to express themselves sexually or to be seen as a sexual being. Inferred weakness or helplessness in a man shifts the gaze of desire onwards for a great many. Women are given more license to be viewed as helpless or weak. However, if any disabled body is shaped in a way that is radically different than what we're taught to see as normal, it's deemed "disfigured." Any value it has is primarily based in its usefulness as a specimen or as an object for "fetishization." Rarely are we treated to see the bodies that society calls "disfigured" presented as desirable in a non-exploitative manner.

Thus, for many people, seeing a nude disabled body can bring up negative emotions, feelings of disgust, fear, pity, etc. Disgust perhaps because we're trained to view bodies through a narrow lens of normalcy; we can't imagine a body that looks radically different than the bodies we're told are "normal." It couldn't be anything but "disgusting." Fear because our response to anything unfamiliar or that we don't understand tends to be a level of fear. Pity because our culture drums it into us that living in a body that isn't "normal" and is harder to operate couldn't possibly be worth it.



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM L TO R
 TLC Woman With The Giant Legs | Helmut Newton Vogue 1995 The Empowered Woman
 Lady Gaga MTV Video Music Awards 2009 | Discovery Channel Extreme Bodies

The concept of "normal" is incredibly flawed. Western values dictating that worth lies in productivity lead us to devalue bodies that don't live up to the idea of how a body must function in order to be productive. All of this cultural training skews the lens through which we view a nude disabled body.

This worldview on disability leaves little room for productive discussions of disability and nudity in the mainstream media. When popular portrayals of

(continued) nude disabled bodies are relegated to the Discovery Channel's "Extreme Bodies" or TLC's "The Woman With Giant Legs," there's no opportunity given to discuss how disability justice must include sex and body-positivity. There's no back-and-forth about why society presents disabled bodies this way.

But disability activists and disabled artists are working to create positive representations of nude disabled bodies, in both a sexual and a non-sexual context that actively challenge the societal construction of disability, and open a dialogue on how we determine a body's "worth." Tanya Raabe, a disabled British artist, has painted a series of portraits, many nude, of disabled people's bodies in a collection entitled Revealing Culture: Head On. Holly Norris' American Able series of photographs spoofs American Apparel's use of nudity in their ads and challenges their lack of inclusiveness of non-normative or disabled bodies. Jim Ferris' Uncovery to Recovery: Reclaiming One Man's Body on a Nude Photo Shoot requests a discourse on disability and the performative nature of gender, via the presentation of a queer disabled man's nude body.

BECAUSE OUR WESTERN SOCIETY VALUES THE CONCEPTS OF "STRENGTH" AND "SELF-SUFFICIENCY" SO HIGHLY. A DISABLED BODY IS JUDGED BY ITS PERCEIVED LACK OF EITHER. DISABILITY IS SEEN AS WEAKNESS AND IS NOT ONLY SOCIALLY UNDESIRABLE BUT ALSO UNDESIRABLE SEXUALLY

Although our sex/body-positive work surrounding disability should not necessarily be aimed at having nude disabled bodies be validated by mainstream society as desirable, the body-positive principles of affirmation and celebration of all bodies dictates that we must work towards having disabled bodies represented equally in mainstream media, and accepted as natural variations of body type. A "disabled" body, as any other body, can be used to express sexuality and personality, can give affection, can lay damp and naked on the bed letting the cool fan breeze dry it off. Disabled bodies can dance, can skinny dip, can feel stress deliciously melt away when a lover lays their hand upon it. All that, just maybe differently than yours can, differently than another disabled person's might, even. Our work, as always, should be focused on highlighting the commonalities between bodies and lovingly appreciating the differences—functionally and aesthetically.