



If the thought of picking up a pencil, let alone using it to sketch a nude man, is not your everyday experience, read on...

DRAWING



inspiration

BY DANIELLE HAIRS



“Male strippers are definitely OUT” is the edict faced by many a bride’s best friend when planning the critically important hens’ night. Could this be why The Artful Hen is booked out every weekend, with two-hour classes back-to-back from 10.30am through to 10.30pm? Launched in 2001, these very special life drawing classes are the brainchild of Sydney artist and teacher Rayni Bonne, who began with just one studio, one teacher and one model. These days, the business runs in six venues across three cities, employs seven regular models and seven teachers while Bonne spends her time fielding ceaseless daily booking requests and enquiries.

So what is it? The Artful Hen is a one-off class designed to teach hens’ groups, or any group looking for a fun night out, the art of life drawing. Throw in some champagne, music, games and hot-to-trot naked men and you have yourself a

thoroughly entertaining learning experience.

For those students who know what they’re in for, the mood upon arrival at the studio is a mix of fear and “bring it on!” Meanwhile, the oblivious hen, a vision in taffeta, L-plates and the odd handcuff, spends the first five bemused minutes staring at the easels while sipping champagne through a penis-shaped straw.

The classes begin with each intrepid student detailing their previous drawing experience; 99% of the time the classes are full of women for whom the thought of picking up a pencil, let alone using it to sketch a nude man, is outside the realm of everyday experience. “‘I can draw stick figures’ is a fairly common answer,” says Michelle, one of The Artful Hen’s teachers. “That and, ‘I can finger-paint.’”

Just when the class is seated, introduced and comfortable – out walks a naked man. There is nothing quite like a nude male sneaking up >>



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behind a group of unsuspecting women to raise the temperature in a room.

But this is an art class – and art is the focus. Any blushing and giggling subsides as the party shifts into class mode and sneaking peeks at the “nude guy” become intentional studies of the human form. With no time to waste, the classes plunge into drawing with a blind contour exercise, in which each student draws the model without looking at their page.

“The class perception of nudity shifts after the blind contour drawings, because they are suddenly given permission to look,” says Ben, a model with The Artful Hen. “The joke stops being about me being naked and becomes about their drawings instead.”

Bonne started the classes as a favour to a friend for her hens’ night. She persisted because she realised they were a great way to introduce drawing to adults who don’t believe they have a creative bone in their body. “If even 2% of people leave the class at the end of the session feeling like they’ve achieved something and are inspired to do more, I’m happy,” says Bonne.

And that is the biggest challenge for The Artful Hen’s teachers: getting students to overcome their psychological barriers and make magic

happen in less than two hours. (That, and holding the attention of groups who arrive after a long day of celebrating.) “Most students leave amazed at what they’ve drawn,” says Michelle.

Conscious that art and business make for strange bedfellows, and aware that the juxtaposition of life drawing with blatant titillation might be frowned upon, Bonne kept a low profile – until a national newspaper ran an article about her classes in late 2007.

That publicity resulted in an influx of male model wannabes. Suddenly, Bonne found herself spending hours trawling through e-mails of half-naked men vying for the chance to flaunt their physiques. These ranged from pasty-white, thin and hairy studs ramping it up in red undies, to one geriatric in the buff, complete with costume shots in pirate outfits. One keen applicant even pointed out his ability to maintain an erection for three hours as a sure-fire selling point. “I just thought, Oh. My. God, and deleted the e-mail immediately,” says Bonne.

Her catalogue of models has included a fireman, architect, student, mechanic, stripper, personal trainer, landscape gardener, academic, and dancer. Unlike traditional life drawing classes, in The Artful Hen the model is the focus and the teacher the tool. Models are expected to connect with the class on a personal level, be completely comfortable naked and hold dynamic, expressive poses. And it helps to be easy on the eye.

Generally, the classes are very wellbehaved and

rarely need to be reminded that the models are there for drawing only. “Apart from an incident where the hen ran up and played the drums on the model’s bottom, students seem to understand the ‘no touching’ policy,” says Michelle. No touching, that is, except for the photo at the end of class, when the model lies across the hens’ laps for a group photo.

The power relations in the room are not lost on groups of women who attend The Artful Hen. Ben recalls how he was asked how it felt to be the one objectified “for a change”.

Jumping to the defence of men (you have to hand it to the guy: the only male in a room of 15 tipsy women, naked, holding a pose and still fighting the good fight), Ben innocently pointed out that breasts are much closer to eye level than a penis.

The response? The hen picked up her chair and repositioned herself centimetres from Ben, where she proceeded to talk at his genitals for a good five minutes – a fairly blatant comment on the male gaze’s lack of subtlety. Ever the professional, Ben didn’t flinch.

The increase in popularity of experiences like The Artful Hen is symptomatic of a shift in attitude: sex has become more socially acceptable. Bonne is adamant her classes are about art... with a smidgen of sexuality for that extra frisson. Gone are the days when Studs Afloat was the desirable choice for a hens’ party. “My favourite question is whether the model is naked,” says Bonne with a chuckle. “‘Yep!’ I reply. ‘Completely naked from the moment he makes his grand entrance until the end.’”

It is the nudity’s context that sets apart The Artful Hen from other life drawing classes. Designed to inspire students to capture the human form, students typically say how therapeutic they find it to draw – and how quickly they forget the model is in the buff.

The classes’ popularity, meanwhile, shows no signs of slowing. Could the knock-on effect be a wider appreciation for the arts? Who knows. Perhaps, as Bonne suggests, it is simply a way to reconnect people with their creativity and inspire healthy self-expression. +



ROAD TEST

Kathy Buchanan signed up for a life drawing class

LET’S BE HONEST – I don’t know many hot-blooded women who’d complain if a gorgeous naked man offered them a glass of champagne. Although Ben is a 198-centimetre, brown-eyed hottie with a lean, swimmer’s body, alas I have to share him with 17 other 30-something women here for a life drawing session.

The Artful Hen has been considered the place to go since Heidi Middleton of fashion duo sass & bide chose it for her hens’ night with fellow fashionistas.

I hold back behind my wooden easel initially and take in the charming bohemian surroundings as our art tutor announces with a cheeky smile, “Put on your black aprons and get ready to have fun!”

This inner-city space has wooden floors, gold and ruby-red velvet curtains, and drawings of nudes adorning the walls. Apart from the disco ball and the CD player set up behind a wooden stand, where Ben is stark naked and flexing his muscles, it’s much like you’d expect a 1920s Parisian artist’s studio to look. Danielle, our tutor, briefs us on the night’s proceedings as we gorge on champagne and platters of cheese.

Then it’s time for introductions and I confess that I cannot draw to save my life. A pretty brunette pipes up with bravado, “I can’t draw either,” then adds, “And more importantly, I haven’t seen a man naked for six months!”

We kick off drawing Ben, who has expertly taken a pose like Rodin’s famous sculpture, *The Thinker*. We’re instructed to keep our eyes on Ben – not hard! – and not our paper until the exercise is over. “Look for details – hair, toenails, nipples...” says Danielle. We giggle like schoolgirls.

Five minutes later, my blonde neighbour’s artwork looks amazing. Mine? More like a stick figure than a man, but hey, guess what? I’m having fun.

We break to inspect each other’s art and bare-skinned Ben stands directly in front of the hen’s future mother-in-law. She laughs along good-naturedly when someone asks Ben what his day job is. “I’m an architect. It’s all about erections.”

Justin Timberlake’s song “SexyBack” is playing. Danielle continues taking us through the drawing process, explaining how to draw a skeleton... then add a rib cage, hips and thighs. The third



stage, she says, is when you add in final details such as the, er, penis.

Ben stretches out of his pose once again and walks around the room, inspecting our art. “Hmm,” he says thoughtfully, looking at the bride-to-be’s effort. “Flattering! Thanks!”

The last drawing is a group effort, with every hen putting her individual stamp on each of the 18 life drawings. There’s lots of laughing and when it’s over, the group gathers together for a photo. Eighteen very happy women pose as one naked man lies across them, smiling like a Cheshire cat. Ben’s clearly enjoyed the night as much as we have.

The Artful Hen (www.theartfulhen.com.au) has locations in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Minimum charge of \$540, from \$40pp. Sydney and Melbourne classes are BYO.