

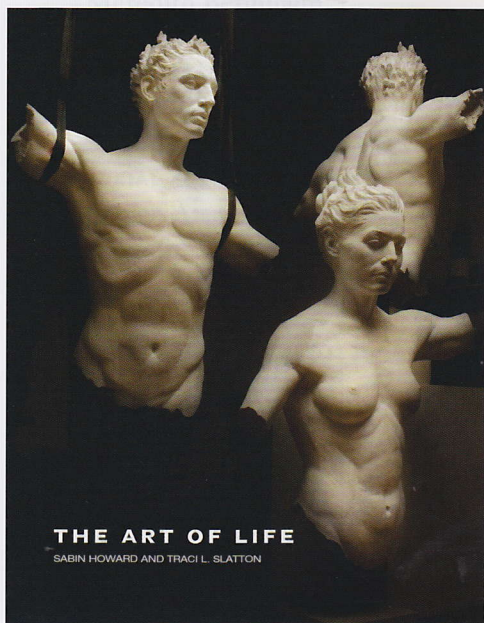
The Classical Nude, Pornography and the New Philistines

by James F. Cooper

Not long ago, I received a message from Traci L. Slatton, who is married to the New York-based figure sculptor Sabin Howard (b. 1964); together they co-authored the superb book *The Art of Life* (Parvati Press, 2011) in order to describe and illustrate his process. Traci reported that Facebook would not permit a “boost”—essentially an advertisement for their book that would help it reach a larger audience—because the firm prohibits imagery that might be deemed offensive. This includes nudity, whether sexual in nature or not, even if it is intended for artistic or educational purposes.¹ Since the book is focused primarily on a scholarly analysis of contemporary classical anatomy, Sabin Howard, students, teachers and art academies are understandably concerned. So they should be. This corporate policy does not make any distinctions between great art and pornography. It affects not only reproductions of contemporary art, but it also censors great art of the past: drawings by Michelangelo and pornography have been tarred with the same broad brush.

I have been familiar with Sabin’s sculpture, research and teaching for the last twenty years. His work extends far beyond the realms of mere style and mimesis. It encompasses philosophy, cultural history and iconography. Such “radical” ideas are not his alone, or even new. Just the opposite. They reflect the origins of Western culture and civilization. They only seem new to us today, because, after almost a century of postmodern semiotics, they appear revolutionary, strange, contrary to the relativity of contemporary cultural standards.

Sabin’s art is Aristotelian, meaning his art is based on observation, study, seeing. It is not Platonic, focused on unseen higher values and forms. It



The Art of Life by Sabin Howard and Traci L. Slatton



Sabin Howard, *Apollo*
in clay with the artist, 2011
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

begins with Protagoras (490–420 BCE): “Man is the measure of all things.” Athenian classical civilization constituted the Golden Age of sculpture, architecture, music, theater and civics, an era when virtues were measured by human standards. It makes sense that this epoch’s architecture—such as the dimensions of the Parthenon’s columns—had the same proportions as the nude

figure, 7:1 or 6:1. Even 2,500 years later, these are perceived as beautiful—that is why we still say “classic.” Once these standards were set, the process of reproducing them in the real world—out of clay, marble, chalk, bronze, stone, paint, etc.—became art. How closely they were adhered to (“good” or “excellent”) entailed an aesthetic judgment. It is no coincidence that the Old Testament begins with Creation, which is judged to be “good.”

Perfection is impossible to maintain forever, so the ideals of the ancient Greeks, and the arts themselves, changed through the Hellenistic, Carolingian, Gothic, Romantic, Expressionist eras, and so on. But as the history of art reveals, every cultural renaissance begins anew with rediscovery of the classical model. That is what Sabin is doing today—trying to create a new foundation. To censor it for some short-sighted, bureaucratic reason is ridiculous. To censor Michelangelo’s nude *David* (1501–04) would be ridiculous, but, in fact, Facebook did that, too.

Sabin has taught figure drawing for twenty years, and his sculpture is featured in many important collections. Some regard him as the natural heir to the mantle of Frederick E. Hart (1943–99), who created several of the most important public sculptures and memorials in Washington, D.C., including the *Creation Sculptures* and *Ex Nihilo* for the National Cathedral and *Three Soldiers* at the

Sabin Howard, *Standing Rear View*, study, 2014

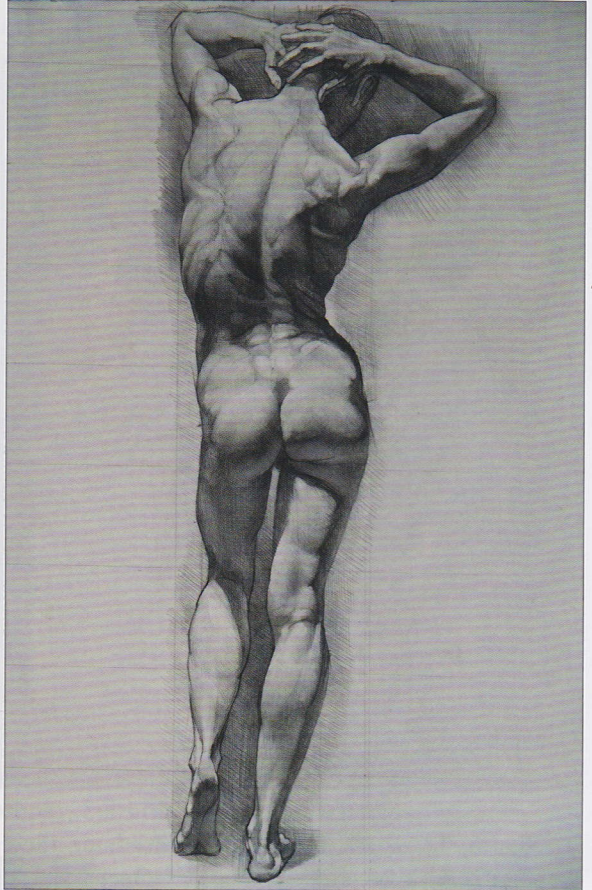
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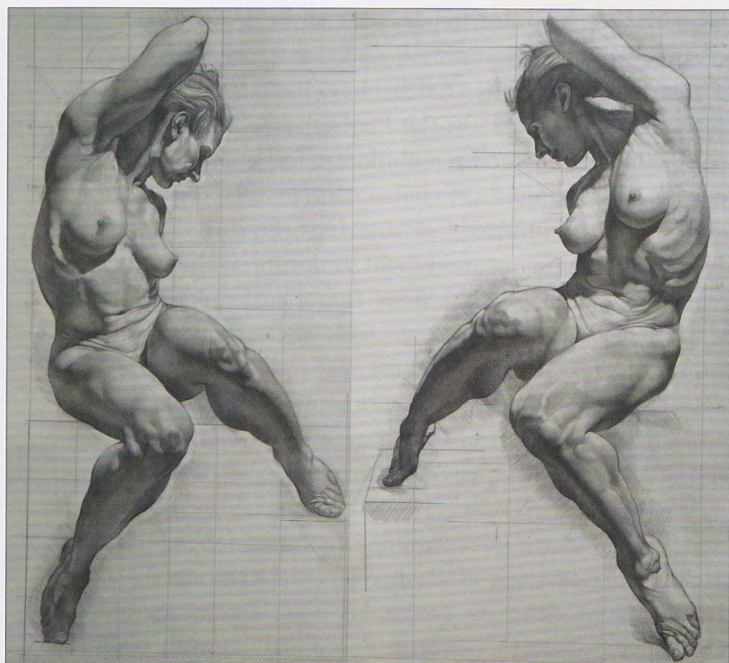
Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall. It is extremely appropriate and encouraging that, just this January, Sabin was selected by a jury to sculpt *The Weight of Sacrifice* (in collaboration with architect Joe Weishaar) for the National World War I Memorial at Pershing Park in Washington, D.C. Sabin will create bas-reliefs to adorn the memorial's long bronze walls, and also a three-dimensional sculpture.

The irony is keen. Thirty-five years ago, the cultural establishment brought enormous pressure to bear upon the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts to block installation of Rick Hart's beautiful *Three Soldiers*, which had already been approved by President Ronald Reagan.

Equally egregious was the National Endowment for the Arts' rejection of Hart's application for a modest grant to support the *Creation Sculptures*. Most media outlets, including *The Washington Post*, censored any favorable coverage related to this project for almost twenty years. This is hugely regrettable because Hart was attempting to restore beauty, honor and gravitas to public art. The NEA also rejected an educational grant application from the New York Academy of Art, where Sabin has taught sculpture and figure drawing, because, the NEA official letter claimed, "teaching students to draw the human figure is revisionist and stifles creativity."

Some readers may recall that I had the honor to commission Hart to create a life-size bronze *Herald Angel* for the entrance to the Newington-Cropsey Foundation's headquarters at Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. In my eulogy at





Sabin Howard
Twins, study, 2014
 COURTESY
 OF THE ARTIST

the artist's memorial service, attended by some 2,000 mourners at the National Cathedral, I fervently prayed that the long-term impact of Rick's doors might one day match that of Lorenzo Ghiberti's bronze portals for the Baptistry in Florence. Centuries of admirers, including Michelangelo, have considered his "Gates of Paradise" the genesis of the Italian Renaissance. Coincidentally commissioned six hundred years apart, Ghiberti and Hart both took twenty-five years to complete their doors. I also expressed the hope that Rick's doors would one day usher in the spiritual and artistic renaissance that America so desperately needs. As a capital, Washington—like Athens, Rome, London and Paris—is the focal point for what a nation holds most dear, expressed through its art, monuments and architecture. As they laid plans for the Lincoln Memorial, the sculptor Daniel Chester French and architect Henry Bacon thought it so important to study the Parthenon that they traveled to Athens together frequently.

The Art of Life is an important book because Sabin Howard is a gifted and intelligent artist, which is also why *American Arts Quarterly* has published several articles on his work. In her recent email to me, Traci Slatton noted that Facebook had closed down the account of the Italian artist Roberto Ferri (b. 1978), who has been commissioned to paint a portrait of Pope Francis, because, in one of his paintings, the angel's upper torso is bare. Traci is a historian, a graduate of Columbia and Yale, and has written several novels, while covering cultural issues for *The Huffington Post*.² Needless to say, there was nothing gratuitous about the marvelous Ferri image.

Like Hart, Sabin Howard has toiled for decades, alone, learning his craft. Unlike Hart, who was self-taught, Howard enjoyed one crucial advantage—studying figurative anatomy with Walter Erlebacher (1933–91) and his wife, Martha Mayer Erlebacher (1937–2013), at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. They enabled him to pursue his ambition to follow in the footsteps of the two sculptors he most admired: Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Hundreds of drawings, dozens of powerful sculptures and a decade of teaching anatomy and sculpture at the New York Academy are the source material for *The Art of Life*. The Erlebachers were classmates of mine, similarly enmeshed in the chaos of the 1960s and 1970s wrought by the nihilism of Abstract Expressionist academia. After graduation, they began a tortuous twenty-year process of re-learning how to draw, paint and sculpt the human figure. Of course, they encountered much resistance. Walter's heroic bronze of Thomas Jefferson, which placed first in an open juried competition, was rejected by Pennsylvania officials because they considered it "racist" and "anti-modern." A second open competition, which again awarded the commission to Walter, was similarly rejected for the same reasons.

The process employed by Sabin to create his nude figures may seem mechanical at first blush, yet it is aesthetically designed and intensely cerebral. The finished sculpture always differs from what Sabin actually sees in the live model posing in front of him. He maintains an inner vision of what the sculpture should look like, shaped and funneled through aesthetic judgment and craft. The first *Apollo* he sculpted took nine months. At the end, he was dissatisfied because the stomach protruded beyond the chest, the swayed hips were too effeminate, reminiscent of Donatello's *David*. A year wasted. Nevertheless, he tore it apart and started from scratch. There is nothing wrong with the Donatello; it is a great work of art. But Sabin was seeking another paradigm, one



Frederick Hart
Three Soldiers, 1984
Vietnam Veterans
Memorial
Washington, D.C.

suggesting upward flight. The proportions of the next *Apollo* are slimmer. The tibia has been elongated by an inch, to give it more grace, more power to soar.

For our troubled century, this sculptor is seeking spiritual renewal. Michelangelo's introspective figures suffered; their gaze is inward. The influence of the Renaissance stretches from Michelangelo to the existential sculptures of Alberto Giacometti. Existentialism, nihilism and melancholy are fitting subjects for our troubled time. But Sabin Howard, like Rick Hart, seeks a new vision of faith, fit for a people who seemingly have everything, yet despair nevertheless. He has not discovered it yet. It requires a formal resolution, an aesthetic one melded inseparably with an ideological theme. It is difficult to persuade talented artists today, who have worked so hard to create classical perfection, to stretch beyond the cultural confines of today, to seek a spiritual enlightenment. It means compromising with the classical order they have achieved. It threatens the proportions of the "Golden Mean," the Vitruvian Man.

This search is not confined to the visual arts alone. Music, architecture and poetry are apt outlets, too. Who sought perfection more avidly than the industrial designer Steve Jobs? Cinema provides another worthy path. Mediocrity, dumbing down, compromise and thinking small have become our ways of life. Rick Hart often quoted Goethe: "Dream no small dreams, for they have no power to move men's hearts." Great art sets the highest standards, advised Aristotle. The contour line of a drawing by Michelangelo or Raphael and the exquisite proportions of the Parthenon carry more spiritual and moral weight than all the political speeches ever given. That is why Lincoln's speeches are so short and memorable. The ongoing debate over the Core Curriculum is not worth fighting about because it ignores what inspires the soul of a nation, what builds character, what instills honor and courage. It does not represent what inspired John F. Kennedy when he initiated the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities: excellence. The culture of today has lost touch with the people.

The trouble some artists and art historians have had with social media is symptomatic of larger issues. Innovative companies like Facebook can contribute to the solution by being more discriminating. Let us work together to illuminate the standards that separate banal pornography from excellent art that is the crowning glory of humankind.

NOTES

1. See Traci L. Slatton, "Social Media Censorship" (December 7, 2015), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/traci-l-slatton/social-media-censorship_b_8738566.html.
2. Her novels include *Immortal* (Delta, 2008), set in the Italian Renaissance, and *Broken* (Parvati Press, 2014), set in occupied Paris.