Julie Lluch, *Thinking Nude*, 1988.

I, THE THINKING NUDE

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ABSTRACT

This critique/poetics is an exploration of the concept of the "Thinking Nude," a term coined by Julie Lluch to challenge the traditional portrayal of women as passive objects. The author reflects on John Berger's ideas about nudity and the gaze, highlighting the importance of self-recognition and empowerment. Through a personal and introspective narrative, the author shares her journey of self-discovery, reclaiming her body and emotions from the societal expectations that have shaped her. The essay celebrates the fusion of body and mind, reason and emotion, and the power of art to facilitate self-actualization. Employing the ekphrastic autotheory, this essay is a tribute to "The Thinking Nude, celebrating women's agency, self-awareness, and the transformative power of art.

KEYWORDS: ekphrastic theory, agency, feminism, female body

There you are with your bare back toward me, facing your oval mirror. Motionless. Are you still breathing, or have you turned back into a terracotta sculpture?

Listen, I am here. Am I prying into your privacy?

You are still. Your hair that rests just above your shoulders does not move an inch. It covers your face, and I need to take a few steps toward your left to see it. Your hair now is tucked behind your ear.

Do you hear me? Do you hear my breath? My steps? My gasp as I see the scar on your abdomen?

I try to meet your eyes through the oval mirror, but yours are looking somewhere else. At your body. At your nakedness. At your breasts, as your right hand gently presses against the softness of your full right breast. Your eyes look pensive. Your gaze is pregnant with recollection. Contemplation. The folds in your skin from both sides of your nose to the corners of your mouth deepen, as you watch your hand touching your nakedness. Is it your first time to meet your Self?

I see your scar—a vertical line from below your navel to your pubis—and I think of my mother's. Hers, too, marks a place of both creation and pain, the scar of a birth that brought me into the world in 1995, just seven years after you were born from Julie Lluch's hands. Two women—one of flesh, one of terracotta—carrying the same silent wound. As I trace the curve of your abdomen, I realize there is no distance between us: my mother's scar, your scar, and the invisible ones I carry, are all part of the same unspoken history etched onto female bodies.

I know that look you have on your face. It is the look that says, "Oh, I am here." Yes, here I am sharing that look of self-recognition. How did you lose yourself?

I remember my fifth-grade Sibika at Kultura teacher warning us, "Huwag niyong ipapakita ang katawan niyo sa kung kani-kanino"—not to our mothers, not to our doctors, unless it is the only choice left, but only to our husbands. It was my awakening—a sudden, silent knowledge of my body as

something to be hidden, a forbidden fruit I had not realized I carried. Standing before you now, I feel that same tension. Your scar is a mark that both exposes and conceals. Like me at ten years old, you seem caught between revelation and restraint. Is your stillness a defiance, or a learned silence?

As a kid, I used to feel nothing when I looked at myself naked on a mirror. I was just my body with no clothes on. These were my breasts, and I never really cared if they would grow voluptuous, like the breasts of females I saw on TV. This was my vagina—or my vulva, as I learned later, which contained my urethra—where I peed. I had legs and feet that allowed me to move around, and arms and hands for holding and manipulating things. I had my back to support me and my buttocks so I could sit.

What was the big deal about being naked?

This innocence was replaced by shame when I took that bite of the fruit from the forbidden tree. I was made to think that I should feel guilty because I was born with a female body. I was made to believe that my body was meant to be looked at, to be touched, to be desired, to be owned by my husband.

I wonder why it was guilt that I felt. Perhaps I felt sorry for myself. It was as if I was remorseful because I did not know that a man was given the privilege to take possession of my body. Thinking about it then made me want to run back to my mother's arms and stay safe in her embrace. I am not trying to say that I felt I would be unsafe with my future husband, if ever I got married, but the idea of being owned by another never sounded right to my ears.

Since then, I always made sure no one would see my body. I avoided clothes accentuating and exposing parts of the female body that the camera often devours whenever the scene in a film or a television series would turn

sexy. Oh, god! Even the tucking of hair to one side exposing the shoulder could turn into a way of seduction, if one really sexualized the female body.

When alone, I felt like someone all-seeing was watching me taking a bath and getting dressed. I always had the urge to grab my towel to cover my exposed body, the way Eve must have grabbed the biggest leaves to cover hers when she realized her nakedness and felt shame for the first time. That was probably my way of protecting myself from the fate I was made to believe in. Soon, I realized that I could not look at my body as mine in the mirror anymore. As my own body became estranged from me, my gaze became estranged too. I did not realize how quickly I saw my body as another's possession. Maybe that is why there is a pang of jealousy from my end, not only for how you look at, but also how you touch your naked body.

When my niece was born in 2021—the first time I ever held a baby—I witnessed how early on the female body is policed. "Huwag kang bumukaka! Kababae mong tao!" my sister-in-law and the baby-sitter would scold my two-year-old niece, gently pushing her knees together whenever she hugged them to her chest. She was just a child reaching for her feet, but even then, her body was already a site of correction.

I think of you, your legs firmly closed, your body a sculpture of restraint. Is your stillness a choice, an act of self-ownership, or does it echo the way we teach girls to take up as little space as possible? In the Philippines, modesty is often weaponized as morality. A girl's crossed legs. A woman's covered shoulders. The way we are taught to fold into ourselves. These are not just postures but performances of propriety. Your stillness, then, becomes a double-edged image: a quiet rebellion or a learned silence. Perhaps both.

Like my niece, my body felt as if it never really belonged to me too. Iris Marion Young writes:

> Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences which move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections (152).

Tie your hair. Do not cut your hair short. No wearing of makeup. No sleeveless tops. Plunging necklines are indecent. Do not expose your belly. Do not expose your back. No shorts. Wear bottoms that cover your thighs. No loud laughing. Laugh only a little. No melodramatic crying in public. Cry only when no one is looking. No getting enraged over something. Maintain your composure at all times. Do not make big movements. Keep your arms at your sides. Keep your knees together. Keep your hands on your lap. Keep your ankles crossed. Feet flat on the floor. I recall these dos and don'ts as audio vignettes that automatically play whenever my attention shifts to my body movements, even up to now.

Can you imagine that my school even required us to keep a handbook on how to be a lady? It was distributed during our Technology and Livelihood Education class, which was more like a class on domestication to me, in which we were taught how to cook meals, set the table, and operate a sewing machine. Although these are things that everyone, regardless of gender, must learn, the class felt wrong to me, because I was not offered other choices, like carpentry, when I was more interested in building something. The handbook was a lime-green pocketbook. I wonder why they did not use pink. Its title, written in cursive font, looked like the fonts used in the covers of Precious Heart Romances pocketbooks, in invitation cards for weddings and debutante balls, and in table d'hôte for multi-course dining. This was in the 2000s.

In my Philosophy classes at De La Salle University, I first learned the distinction between sex and gender—"female" as biology, "woman" as a cultural construct." Simone de Beauvoir's words, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (283), felt radical then. But I wondered how this distinction fit into the Filipino context where our language folds sex and gender into one—"babae" means both female and woman, collapsing biological sex and gender identity into a single word. To be babae is to be both a body and a role, a fact and an expectation.

Looking at you, I feel the weight of this. You stand both as a nude supposedly free from social markers, and as a woman with your scar as a silent reminder of the body's history. Like me, you exist in a language that makes no distinction between what you are and what you are expected to be. It made me realize that in the Philippines, gender does not always speak. Sometimes, it hides in language, in the unspoken rules of how we move, and in the silent labels we carry without ever naming them.

Judith Butler complicated this further. Building on Beauvoir, Butler argued that even sex—the supposedly immutable foundation of the body—is as socially constructed as gender. I thought of your scar then. It is not just a mark of flesh. It is a scar shaped by both biology and the world's gaze. It speaks of pain, but also of expectation—the ways a female body is taught to shrink, to adjust, to bear both visible and invisible wounds. Like Butler's theory, your scar reveals that even what seems most "natural" about womanhood is often a script we inherit.

And I thought of my own body—how I learned to move, to sit, to shrink myself in ways deemed appropriate for a woman. Your scar is visible, but I wonder how many unseen scars we both carry. These are the ones left behind every time we have folded into ourselves, crossed our legs, lowered our gaze. The world may have called me female at birth, but my every gesture,

every adjustment, every softening, was a repetition. They are a silent carving of womanhood onto my body. Your scar is both a cut and a closing, a mark of what has been done to you and what you have done to survive.

I also learned about the problems of body image and the concept of beauty, the fight for body autonomy from societal and political restraints, the unshackling of oneself from things women were told they could not do only because of their being a woman, the physiological wonders and the limitations of the female body, and how all these are part of reclaiming the power of women. Our power. Power does not mean to reign above other sexes and genders, but simply the agency of women to reclaim what was stolen from us, so we could reach our full potentials.

I had just finished writing an essay for my MFA Creative Writing thesis project at De La Salle University, revisiting my first feminist work in 2015. I once mistook my participation in raunch culture, mimicking the sexual scripts of mainstream pornography, as rebellion against my repressive upbringing. I thought shedding modesty was liberation, but I was only trading one performance for another. Looking at you, I see that same ambivalence. Your hand rests on your breast, which is a gesture that seems both protective and exposed. It makes me wonder: was I ever truly reclaiming my body, or was I simply shifting from the grip of modesty to the grip of hypersexuality, both dictated by gazes other than my own?

There was a time when I thought feminism had won. With modern contraceptives within reach, with women boldly choosing to be childfree, I believed the struggle for bodily autonomy was behind us. But standing before you, I felt an unease. Your scar—a silent, unyielding mark—seemed to contradict this narrative of freedom. It reminded me that liberation is not always loud. Sometimes, it looks like stillness, like the way you hold yourself,

both claiming your body and acknowledging the invisible wounds it carries. I, too, have scars. They are not carved into my skin, but into my sense of self. The world may have given me choices, but it has not erased the imprint of years spent policing my own body. Autonomy, I realized, was not the absence of struggle. It was the quiet, daily negotiation between freedom and the marks left behind.

So why, then, do we still return to the body, one of the fundamental concerns of feminists, when we are told we can do what we want with it now? I realized that I am only free and safe in certain spaces—classrooms where I meet my teachers, cafés where I gather with fellow writers and artists, rooms where we speak of feminist ideas and write ourselves into being. But outside these spaces, the body remains contested. In the Philippines, a woman's body is rarely her own, not even in the family home, where multigenerational living makes privacy a fragile luxury, nor in the streets where the male gaze follows women, regardless of what they wear.

Virginia Woolf wrote of the need for a room of one's own—a physical and financial independence necessary for a woman to create. But what does a room of one's own mean in a culture where privacy is often a privilege, not a right? Here, a room is not always a literal space. Often, it is internal. It is the quiet we carve within ourselves, where we reconcile the freedoms we claim with the silent policing of our bodies. I think of you, standing motionless yet unyielding. Perhaps your stillness is a room of your own—not an escape, but a quiet resistance. A refusal to be anything but fully present in your body, despite the world's attempts to own it.

The urge of my duende to write the essays in my project comes from what the feminist movement is presently trying to achieve, and what it has yet to achieve, because our struggles are not over yet. While more women are choosing to become childfree, a mother's labor pains remain a trivial,

if not a romanticized aspect of motherhood. Not to mention that despite women's right to work for their financial independence, or to earn a living for their family, much of the burden of childrearing are still carried by them as mothers. Or a nanny, who is also always a woman, carries this burden on behalf of the mother. While there is now a Reproductive Health Law, full reproductive rights of women are still not met. Decriminalizing abortion is off the table still, and no one knows when, or if, it would ever be laid on the table, given the resistance which the RH Law advocates met with, even after the law was passed. True conversations about sex are gaining traction these days via online platforms, the online platforms themselves and other forms of media. But the insufficiency and inefficiency of on-the-ground approaches – that should give the youth tools to protect and empower themselves while exercising their right to sexual exploration – make the youth still vulnerable to the false promise of empowerment from raunch culture. While there is now a social movement advocating love of one's body, because all bodies should be accepted as beautiful in their own ways, for as long as the concept of beauty remains the core of discussions, initiatives are still trapped within the beautiful/ugly dichotomy. And while the LGBTQIA+ community is gaining visibility in spaces they used to not be seen in, the country is seemingly not taking them seriously. Take the lack of urgency to pass the SOGIE Equality Bill as an example. Only the passing of this bill into law would mark the start of the country's genuine acceptance of this community.

Feminism is still very important today. Only those blinded by their privileges can claim that women have achieved full freedom over their bodies, that is, both the "freedom to" and the "freedom from." Meaning, "true liberation and freedom must include both the freedom to do what we want, and the freedom from oppressive structures and demands." (Fahs 269)

I do not claim that a woman's essence lies in her female body, but that her body—whether she was born with a female body, or does not identify

with the body she was born with, hence the transition—is the very body that allows her to experience the struggles and the joys that come with being embodied.

In acknowledging my privilege to immerse myself in feminist theories, I will also have to acknowledge that I have, as Virginia Woolf called it, a room of my own to think and to write in. I now wonder if this room has a door for me to slam shut, the way feminists did when they marched out of their oppressive domestication. How ironic that I am isolating myself from the world, in the very space where women were once oppressed, to attain my self-actualization. Perhaps my words are an extension of my body that wants to obstruct the status quo. I have no theory to justify why, of all forms of art and of thinking available to me, it is in creative writing that I find euphoria and release. I think this articulation from Dr. Marjorie Evasco's *The Obligations of the Writer* perfectly encapsulates this deeply personal connection between a writer and her words:

> I would like to believe that we all chose to become writers motivated only by a deep need to listen to the call of words. For if we truly loved words, we would seek its music the way one who is thirsty follows the sweet sound of water. Thus, this is to be our way of being today: we are seekers of the watershed, the healing springs, the rushing falls, rivers and streams, the deep wells, the lakes and reservoirs from where our lives as writers draw sustenance.

And then, there was a dream. I dreamt of a river beneath a river. I was naked—like you—squatting at the riverbank. A man dressed in khaki stood on a rock formation, the cave glowing, not from the light above, but from the depths of the water.

The river called me not with a voice, but a pull, a string tugging at something deep in my womb. *Dive deep*, it seemed to say. *Come*.

As I prepared to dive, the man stepped forward, his voice calm but firm: "The river is depthless," he said. "You'll drown." His smile faltered at the edges, his body trembling as if restraining something larger than his words.

But the river flowed steadily from left to right, unbothered by his warning. The pull within me only grew stronger. It was not a reckless urge, but a quiet, certain desire to know for myself.

So I dove. My hands sliced the water, the man's voice fading behind me. Deeper and deeper I swam, not knowing how far or how long. I only knew that I needed to keep going.

As I swam deeper, I reached an opening to another river, but a thin membrane stopped me from breaking through. It reminded me of you. Your scar is its own membrane, a mark of something both closed and open, healed yet still speaking. Like the river beneath the river, you carry depths beneath your stillness. It is a silent world hidden just under the surface.

My face reflected on the membrane, still and unyielding; it stared back at me. It had the same expression you wear. A silent defiance. A refusal to turn away.

The image reminded me of the Wild Woman, the archetype of the knowing nature of women. I had read Clarissa Pinkola Estés' *Women Who Run with the Wolves* in my undergraduate years. It was a gift from Dr. Raj Mansukhani, whose classes in the Philosophy of the Unconscious and the Philosophy of Science I sat in, way before I told him – which was the first time ever I said it out loud – that I wanted to be a writer. Estés introduced the image of the Río Abajo Río or "the creative force [that] flows over the terrain

of our psyches looking for the natural hollows, the arroyos, the channels that exist in us." (299)

When I woke up, my head had never been clearer. It was as clear as the river in my dream. I knew I wanted to write. I had to write. The dream was an affirmation that writing was a calling, a vocation, a purpose, a tool, an activism, whatever it is called that my wise knowing Self wanted me to materialize in my waking life. Could it be Hélène Cixious telling me to "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth." (880)

But the clarity of that moment stood in stark contrast to the confusion I often felt during my undergraduate years in the Philosophy program. I could not philosophize about the world and beyond without having to ask: "Am I still here?" The question followed me like an echo, growing louder when I took Modern Philosophy courses, especially those on the rationalist thinkers, and again in classes on analytic philosophy. It was as if theory demanded I sever my thoughts from my body, that thinking required me to abandon the very experiences that shaped me.

It was only later, when I encountered Lauren Fournier's *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, that I found a way to bridge this divide. Fournier offered autotheory as a response to the disconnection between theory and lived experience, describing it as a practice that "allows artists, writers, activists, and scholars to process theory and philosophy in their work in ways that are relevant to living." (95) As a writer, autotheory freed me. It opened the box that philosophy had enclosed me in. This box was the one that separated my thinking from my being, as if my lived experiences were irrelevant to my ideas. With autotheory, I no longer had to choose between the abstract and the embodied. I could, as Fournier writes, "[shuttle] between self and theory…using firsthand experience as a person living in the

world as the ground for developing and honing theoretical arguments and theses." (35)

Autotheory allowed me to bridge the gap between what I had read and what I had lived. I no longer needed to ask if I was still here—my body, my mind, and my words were no longer at odds.

The autobiographical writer's mirror, through which I look at myself and my own lived experiences as a woman with "self-analysis and criticality"—with a theoretical mode of looking, in other words—allowed me to claim my gaze of self-recognition similar to yours. This self-recognition gave me the voice—one that is firmer, more hopeful, more empowered, fiercer, and more open—to the present "I." I would go as far as to say that you and I owe this image of self-recognition to the long history of feminism, because the history of feminism is a history of autotheory, in a sense. While I raised my issue against abstractions, it was in reading feminist theories where I understood my lived experiences as a woman better:

> …Feminist theory is by its very definition theory inextricable from practice—theory for life, and theory that emerges from lived experience. A feminist comes to the practice of theorizing from a lived sense of urgency: theory is a way of better understanding the realities of one's lived experience as a woman, or for that matter, as a man. Theory must be grounded in a material practice of living in order to be efficacious, and this point of emphasis directs attention to one of the ways that autotheory is invested in a long-standing tradition of feminisms. (Fournier 244)

Already schooled in feminism, I am not saying that all the techniques of positing female characters in my literary works survived

feminist criticism. Once upon a time, in my Poetry Writing Workshop under Dr. Marjorie Evasco, I submitted an erotic poem of a young woman's sexual rendezvous, thinking that my female persona had liberated her body from societal conservative expectations. My language, however, was critiqued as pornographic and objectifying. I was told that the persona had not liberated herself yet, because she hushes the reader from telling her mother about her nights with different men.

This experience proved to me that knowing theory is a different skill from embodying feminist ideas in literary works. With the help of constructive critiques from feminist writers, thinkers, mentors, and friends, I was able to sharpen my skill in constructing the female-narrator in my creative works.

One of the women I imagine in my feminist ancestry is Dr. Marj herself. She did not just sharpen my feminist writing, she ruptured it. I remember her critique of my erotic poem, how she pointed out that my language, though meant to be liberating, echoed the very pornographic tropes I thought I was resisting. I was jolted by the sudden realization that, even in my attempts to reclaim the female body, I was still speaking a language not entirely my own.

Looking at you, I see the same tension. Your hand resting on your breast. Is it an act of self-ownership, or a gesture shaped by a world that sexualizes your body? Like me, you seem caught between defiance and conditioning—both aware of the gaze upon you and wrestling with how to break free from it.

Dr. Marj once told me that the things that unsettled me likely troubled other women too. As Cixous wrote, "In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history." (882) These entanglements followed me into my final year in the

program, where Dr. Marj, an ekphrastic poet herself, guided me in deepening my engagement with visual works by women artists. I learned that to write about art—about you—was not just an act of description, but a confrontation with the histories etched into both the artist's hand and my own body.

There is a passage from Dr. Noelle Leslie dela Cruz's "The philosopher as romantic wanderer: An ekphrastic engagement with Caspar David Friedrich's paintings" that perfectly articulated my affinity for metaphors, literary and visual:

> Even though much philosophical writing withers on the dead branch of theory there are exceptional works that bloom with images. Plato talks of an underground cave, Albert Camus describes Sisyphus' rock, Nietzsche narrates Zarathustra's descent from his mountain, and Sartre shows us a hellish living room. These literary devices concretize what otherwise would have been transcendental—that is, abstract concepts. These allegories refer, respectively, to the metaphysical division between the ideal and sensible realms; the relation between a mind that seeks reason and a world that does not yield it; the task of redefining morality at a time when the human belief in God has faltered; and finally, the problem of co-existing with other free subjectivities. At first reading, these ideas may seem like stars that you cannot reach out and touch. But when a poetic mind transforms them, they hurtle down, tearing into the atmosphere in a blaze of cosmic insight. This is the indispensable power of metaphor, utilized in art and literature to a much greater degree than it is in philosophy (15).

I was first drawn to ekphrasis because "[it] brings together the abovementioned fields by verbalizing, in a creative or literary way, an artistic or visual metaphor that corresponds to a philosophical idea" (dela Cruz 15). Feminist theories, however, are not as abstract. Feminist theories cannot be disentangled from the lived experiences of women. However, lived experiences of women, such as labor pains, one's sacrifice of oneself for childrearing, the trauma of abortion or lack of such an option, sexual pleasure as much as sexual harassment, the pressure to keep up with the beauty standard, and discrimination based on one's SOGIESC can be abstract concepts for those who have not or do not experience them. There is a disconnection between women's experiences, and the experiences of others, that could be a factor in women's struggles until today. I differ a bit from the approach of Dr. Leslie, for I not only seek for a visual metaphor that would correspond to these experiences that I claim as abstract concepts, but I pose the "I" *as*, *with*, or *beyond* works of visual art to affirm and to converse with the visual metaphors, in the way intertextual identification does in autotheory.

Dr. Les too is one of the women to whom I owe my formative years as a feminist. I was surprised to find myself taking the same path she had chosen—from finding joy in doing philosophy, to advocating for women's place in the intellectual realm, to seeking for a sense of wholeness in creative writing. The only course in the program that made me feel something different from the sense of uncertainty for my existence was her class on Existentialism and Phenomenology. At last, I was able to place myself in the philosophical texts as a human being who not only thinks and rationalizes, but as a human being who feels and experiences things. It was a philosophy that was no longer detached from concrete human experience, but draws from and philosophizes on the concrete human experiences themselves. We discussed Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka alongside other philosophers

and philosopher-writers. She asked us to read literary texts that allowed me to experience literature in a very different way—one that allowed me to experience the power of a literary text as a philosophical work. Not all philosophical works are literary; but all good literary works are philosophical.

Another woman among my mentors is Prof. Portia Placino from my Art History course in UP, who prompted me to have a feminist eye for looking at works of visual art. While I did not have the opportunity to deepen my relationship with her, her writings in various platforms continue to inform me how to look at art historically, theoretically, and critically. Her preoccupation in her art writing positions contemporary art in a society that continues to oppress whoever it can oppress.

What I learned from her class is the reason that, in this poetics essay, I choose not to be any of the many naked females in Benedicto Cabrera's Erotica Gallery. I am neither the female caught in the act of lifting her shirt over her head, face covered, unaware of the viewer, nor the female passively lying on her side naked with her back against the viewer while they ogle her buttocks. I choose not to be the female who is reduced to her torso in Hernando R. Ocampo's untitled series of abstractions of the naked female form in which the female figure is faceless.

Let me cite to you a cliché I often heard before studying Creative Writing: that writing the self as subject is like undressing one's self and exposing one's vulnerabilities to the reader. The cliché is proven false, I learned later, when one writes one's self as a form of artistic creation. In my attempts at good writing, I not only undress myself for the reader's eyes, but I look at my autobiographical writer's mirror, so I can look at my body and my scars, and recognize what my body has become, what my body has gone through, and how my body has changed. And given all these, how my body now navigates the world.

It is true that a writer can simply be an exhibitionist who takes pleasure in exposing her body to the reader. But for what purpose? Unless the writer desires to produce a work of pornography, in which she poses herself as an object, making her whole body available for the viewer's gaze, she must write with a pair of eyes that recognizes herself as a subject. It is easy to fall into the trap of allowing the reader to look at the writer's body as an object, but the way the writer looks at her body, with mindful and critical eyes with the help of the mirror, will instruct a good reader on how to look at the "I." The writer remains in control, even in her vulnerable state, because as J. Neil Garcia said, "the 'self' in literature—as in any other art—is always an imagined and composed self. Needless to say: it is a self who poses." (172)

It is for this reason that I choose to be you. In this essay, I am composing my "I" standing with my bare back towards the reader. Motionless, but still breathing. From the mirror, I can see figures moving behind me, but I could not care less. I am still, and so is my hair tucked behind one ear. I can hear people breathing life into their own bodies, moving around me at their own pace, and gasping as they see the scars in my body, revealing in different forms the traumas my body had gone through. I do not wish to meet their eyes through the mirror, but I let them look at me. Look at me looking at my body, unclothed for *my* hand to explore, to identify, to familiarize itself with. Trace with their eyes where my hand is moving. It is moving across the mountains and the valleys of my body. *Come. Closer.* Look at my eyes defining and recognizing myself, contemplating, the folds in my skin, from the sides of my nose to the corners of my mouth.

Flaudette May V. Datuin admits finding the nude genre in visual art "disturbing," because "the relationship between the male artist as the master of the gaze and natural world, signified through the naked body of the woman as model and nude, is firmly entrenched in the western academic tradition." (260) She finds it "twice problematic" when the nude work of art is

created by a woman artist, for "it lays claim to a territory (the woman's body) fought over by males." (260) This claim would cancel out the female artist's claim over the territory of the nude art, which Datuin ceded as historically male. This would be very problematic, in view of feminisms that open up all avenues which used to be closed off to women.

Datuin offered some possibilities for the female nude, that is, by rendering those "imperfect, ugly, and undesirable" bodies visible. The female body, according to Datuin, "is open to a range of possibilities, including its re-appropriation…into a voyeuristic interpretation." (269) Given this, you as "the woman who looks at [yourself] in the mirror and contemplates [your] naked body…saying that living in and looking at a female body are different from looking at, but not living in it, as a man" (268) is not enough to escape male surveillance.

How devastating it seems that we can never reclaim the female body, our bodies, unless we render them in "imperfect, ugly, and undesirable" states. I am not implying that rendering the female body in that way is wrong. It is part of reality, but this is not our only Truth, for our Truth also includes our Beauty and our Goodness. How is Datuin's claim different from how patriarchy is taking our bodies away from us? Why can we not celebrate healthy female bodies just because we are in constant anxiety of being under the male gaze?

"To be naked is to be oneself," John Berger said. "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude." (54) You are not an object for you are not rendering yourself as one. The look. The touch. The self-recognition. Berger added that "The way the painter has painted her includes her will and her intentions in the very structure of the image, in the

very expression of her body and her face." (58) *Your* look. *Your* touch. *Your* self-recognition. *My* look. *My* touch. *My* self-recognition.

There is an empowering reason behind your name, the *Thinking Nude*. We have often been portrayed as passive objects, slaves to our emotions, beings not capable of rationality. Lluch named you the *Thinking Nude* because women do think *and* feel, and live our lives according to reasons *and* emotions. We reason with things without abandoning our emotions because our emotions are our inner wise Selves telling us what we need, what is good for us, and what we are bound to do for ourselves.

I go back to when I was a child and thought of the naked body as only a body with no clothes on. The naked female body is inherently neither "good" nor "bad." I think that women have stopped undressing themselves to look at their bodies in the mirror only because they were made to believe that their bodies constitute a territory that males lay their claims on. They have become detached from whatever having a female body and being a woman had meant for them.

For me, this ekphrastic autotheory mode of writing the essay allows me to become like you, a Thinking Nude. Theories and philosophies about my Self that I learned in the ivory tower are concretized by a visual metaphor of an artist. I pose my "I" *as*, *with*, or *beyond* these visual metaphors, because of the resonance they have with my lived experiences. My ekphrastic engagement with them is my affirmation that Lluch and I have both struggled over a similar issue. We are sisters by our feminism, where there is no dichotomy between body and mind. These works of art—whether literary or visual—allow us to achieve self-actualization and to celebrate our Selfhood.

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