

Drawn from life

What can you learn about yourself when you let a stranger draw you naked?

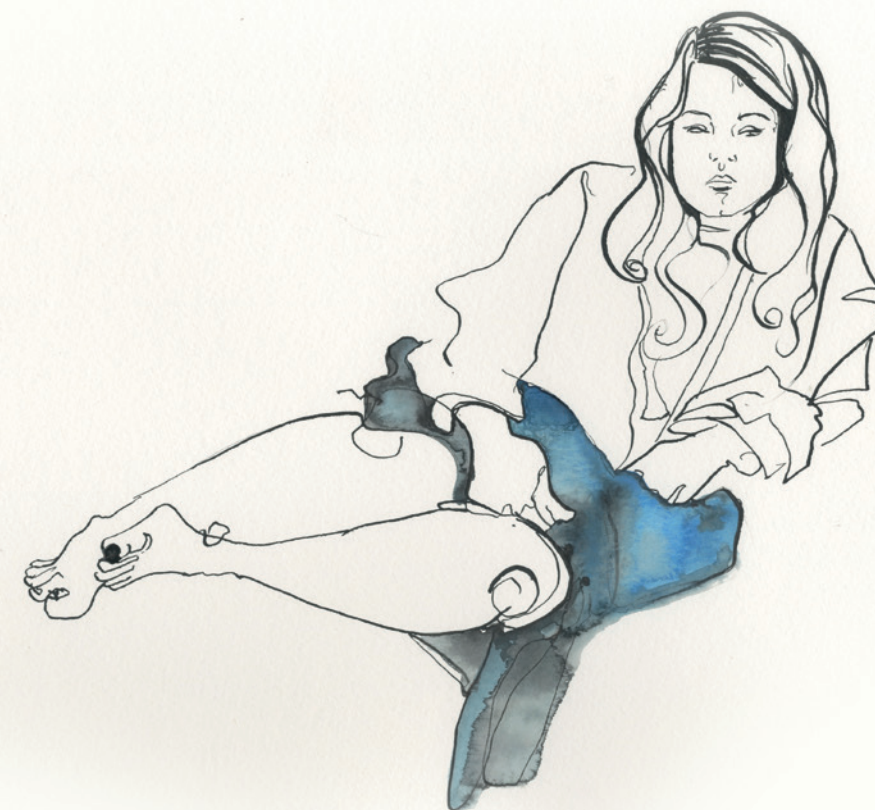
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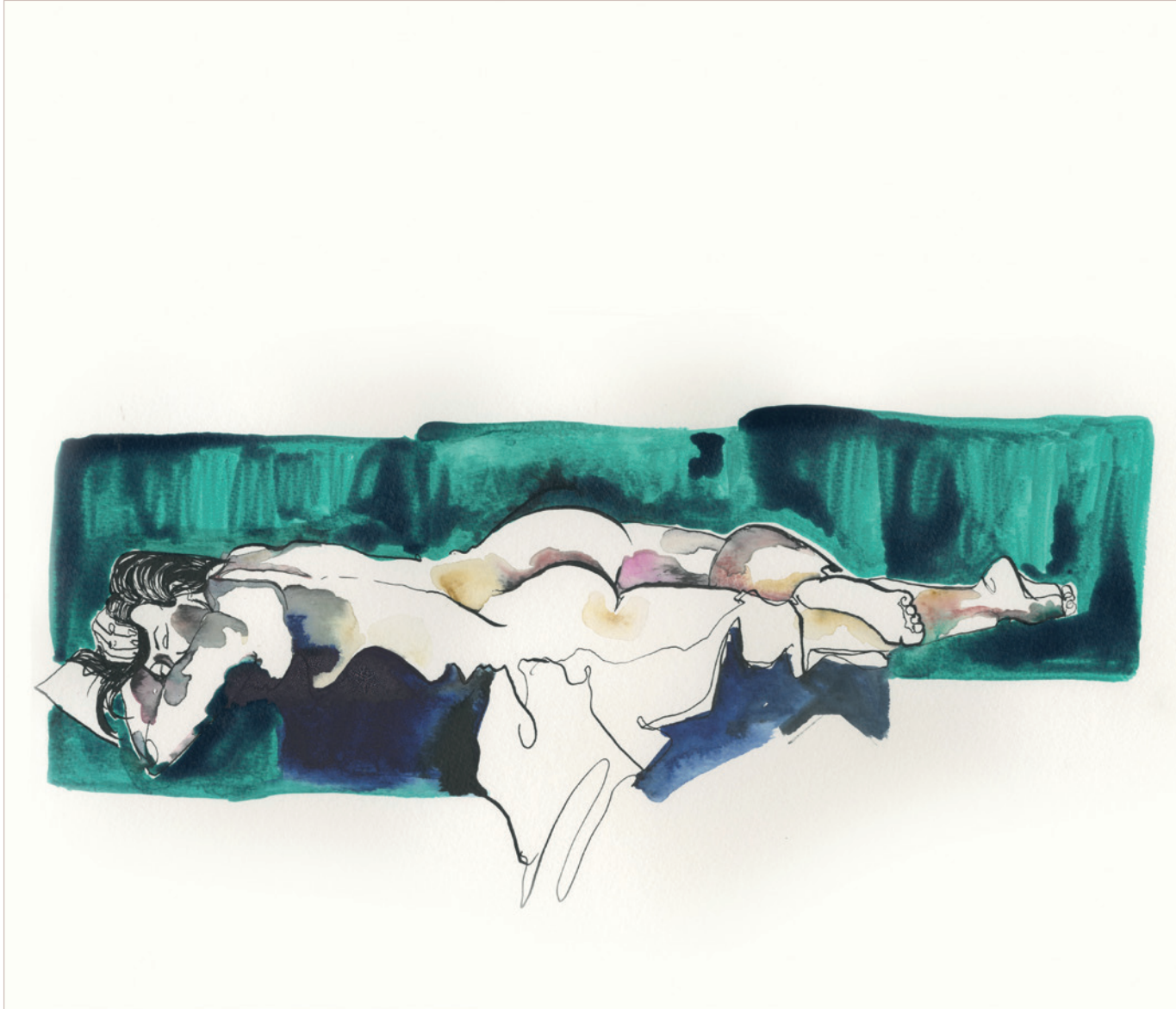
I'm standing in Layla Mohamed's home and she's waiting for me to take my clothes off. Where do I start? My blouse? My trousers? I hesitate. Should I turn away? We've all been there, I think, shielding ourselves from the gaze of others in gyms and doctors' practices. There's discomfort in these everyday gestures – a wriggle here and a tug there, hair caught in neck holes, the sweet sigh of an unclasped bra – for what they reveal of our intimate selves to strangers. And Layla is a stranger. I've barely known her for half an hour. She's cooked me eggs, avocado and mushrooms on toast, then laid her tools out on the cleared breakfast table. Palettes dirty with drips and splashes, watercolour pans in reds and ochres, brushes and dipping pens, jewel-bright bottles of ink. Layla is an artist. Like the 40 or so ordinary people who have washed up on her doorstep before me, I've come to be drawn by her.

The most uncomfortable thing about nakedness, it turns out, is getting undressed. I learned this years ago at art

school, where life drawing models only seemed to exist in two separate states. Fully clothed, they were anonymous, just another grey figure melting into the ebb and flow of the street. But in the nude they populated whole rooms with shapes and shadows: arms stretched out in impossible arcs, skin glowing in the red light of heaters, knuckles and clavicles like punctuation in the softness of flesh. There was always a robe, which they could slink out of in the space of a breath. We would look away as they stripped, more bashful at this halfway house than at the full glorious display of nipples, hair and testicles to come. They never seemed to take any notice of us, of our outstretched pencils measuring their limbs dispassionately, of all those pairs of eyes skimming over the surface of their skin. They sat in stillness, warm flesh turned marble, never giving us any clues to their inner thoughts or what might have brought them there.

And so I've brought a robe, and I slink out of it. I sit on a plump sofa, propping myself up with an elbow for →





"I have made myself bigger. I have made myself take up more space in the world"

a five-minute pose. I feel self-conscious, not because I'm improbably, comically nude but because I don't know what to do with my body, how to shape it into something that will look right on the page. I stare at the corner of a chair so my eyes don't wander. Within seconds this focus becomes the most arduous task in the world. Where does my mind go in this amorphous swamp of time? To the weight of my breasts, to the way my hand, plump and sturdy, rests on the flab of my stomach. To the last time someone drew me: I was 23 then, slim and toned, and lay naked in my lover's bed. He sat on the floor in the semi-darkness, practiced and beloved, drawing my form out of a cloud of soft limbs, tangled hair and burnished skin. I was beautiful then, in his sculptor's eye, when my own had only been trained to pick on the faults and cracks of my appearance. The edges of my body – my whole existence, in that moment – seemed to start and stop in his gaze.

Now, I sit in stillness like a sack of potatoes, looking in. I feel every ache and strain of the 17 years that have lapsed. The stretch marks scratched out

on my flanks, the raw purple patch of skin where my thighs rub, the crunch of vertebrae, the calves like sausages, the small pocket of fat underneath my chin. How much we put our bodies through, how little we show of them! I have made myself bigger, I know. I have made myself take up more space in the world. The girl I was – the one with the slender neck and wrists men could too easily wrap their hands around – could just have blown away at the slightest gust of wind, the slightest pull and push. There's comfort in my weight on the sofa, in the spread of my hips; there's a sense of control in choosing how much I reveal of myself and how I occupy the space Layla has given me. This, I realise, is why I am here. I hear the scratch of pen on thick paper, but her gaze barely registers. I know from having been in her shoes that there is no judgment there, just curiosity. I remember a pregnant model I drew in class once: an alien woman's body, swollen and ripe, generously lent to us to explore. Curves, marks and scars – the things we too easily refer to us as flaws – just make us more intriguing to draw. →



*"Whatever beauty I crave in my life,
I can conjure for myself now"*

Layla beckons me over to look at her first sketches. I stumble between vanity and recognition. I am not this brown, watery mass slumped on the page, and yet it's me, too, cautious and closed, sad, frowning. Where are my eyes, warm and unflinching, my raucous laughter, the pertness of my breasts? I try a standing pose next, pulling myself up and away from the ancient drag of my body, its heavy weariness.

This, I hope, is the most vulnerable I'll ever feel, standing there naked, at 40, in front of a stranger. I take comfort in feeling completely at ease. My feet, my spine, my arms grow like saplings, strong and proud, from the ground. Whatever beauty I crave in my life, I can conjure for myself now, rather than waiting for others to see it in me. I sink and recline, opening up, stretching out across the sofa, taking up as much or as little space as I wish. I'm completely at ease with the truth of my body, putting my trust in whatever form it will take on the page. "That's a beautiful pose," says Layla, and I hold myself there, for 10 minutes or 20, in that still, peculiar peace. ♦

Artist Layla Mohamed's work took a new direction when, one hungover New Year's Day, she decided to invite people into her home to draw them. She organises art parties *Buff Drawing* @buffdrawing, *shibari life* drawing sessions *Drawn to Rope* @drawntorope and the costume-tastic *Milliner's Drawing Room* @millinersdrawingroom in London. She'd like to draw you. Visit inkylayla.com or give her a follow on Instagram @inkylayla