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Studio Nudes

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Nick
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born 1975

currently lives and works in New York City. He studied photography under Stephen Shore at Bard College before receiving a BFA in film from New York University Tisch School of the Arts. For the past twenty years he has developed a commercial photography business specializing in Architecture and Interiors. His work appears regularly in Architectural Digest, House Beautiful, and Luxe Magazines. Simultaneously he has focused on a studio practice concentrating on portraiture. Johnson's studio images were featured in the American Photograph 2008 and 2011. This will be his first solo show in over 10 years.

Cover / Thelda, 2009
Inside L / Stanley, 2009
Inside R / Erin, 2010

Growing up on Chicago's south side, Nick Johnson had an early proclivity for the arts, studying drawing and painting at the Art Institute of Chicago from the age of 8. The process of looking and training the eye to see and reproduce shapes and tones of the human body was the technical "practice" most artists employed daily: light, shadow, color, form, repeat. The learned process of drawing and painting in a classically formal approach formed Johnson's artistic foundation. Like a concert musician, practicing the music he would play each day, drawing is practice. But it is also important for learning how to make an image, what to include, what to leave out.

Studying under Stephen Shore, a master of the photographic medium, was a formative experience for Johnson's craft. Shore introduced him to large scale photography and taught him about the necessary technical knowledge required to make images with large format cameras. While at Bard, Johnson started working with the 8x10 camera which he continues to utilize throughout his studio practice. In the beginning, Johnson made images in the vein of Stephen Shore, Thomas Struth and Walker Evans. Images focused on the realism of capturing the

world as it is, documenting urban landscapes of New York and Chicago. It was a quote from Shore's seminal book *Uncommon Places* that really changed Johnson's outlook on the subject of his work.

"When the picture is there, I set out the 8x10 camera, walk around it, get behind it, put the hood over my head, perhaps move it over a foot, walk in front, fiddle with the lens, the aperture, the shutter speed. I enjoy the camera."

Johnson realized the same technical muscles were at work when photographing with an 8x10 camera as when drawing and painting as a teenager. Determined to move beyond merely documenting the world as it was, he saw the opportunity to merge the technical necessities of the large format camera and the way an artist might practice drawing the figure.

The nude is one of the most explored subjects throughout art history and photography in particular. While early photography focused on very traditional interpretations of the the nude form, much of contemporary photography seeks to explore either the naked body's perfection or serves to document the wide variety of human bodies. Contemporary photography rarely explores the nude in the traditional method. *Studio Nudes* aims to create photographs that a painter might make. Photographing the nude in a studio with deadpan accuracy, careful attention is paid to the room as well as the body. Anyone who has drawn from a live nude model knows it is not an erotic experience, the body becomes an object broken down into line, shadow and form. Johnson's images occupy a space in contemporary art unlike the nudes of old and unlike contemporary nude images, an uncommon reworking of a traditional practice.

Johnson starts his process by selecting and populating sets for the models to occupy. Striving to maintain a timeless quality, the models are chosen for their ability to remove contemporary context. The model and lighting are added, slowly a pose is arrived on. The model

must hold the pose for roughly 20-30 minutes (similar to nude life drawing poses). Lastly the camera is put in place, the frame is perfected, the lighting fine tuned and the focus set. The images from *Studio Nudes* are crafted, from the backgrounds, to the props, the models, and the poses to create complete pictures. They are not document, but an imagined scene so close to the familiar, but not the same. The models represented are not examples of societies perfection but an amalgamation of the average.



The technical precession of the 8x10 format allows each photograph to contain extreme amounts of information. Hair, goosebumps, muscles and skin texture call the viewer in for closer inspection. Reminiscent of Lucien Freud's nude paintings, Johnson's *Studio Nudes* are simultaneously erotic and grotesque. The photographs are designed to entice a stare, not to be consumed in one bite but to be savored. Walker Evans once said "The eye traffics in feelings, not in thoughts." As voyeurs we seek the joy of looking. "Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long."