

This will get them interested in art

A new twist on the life class puts burlesque models in a bar to get people drawing — and it's catching on all over the world. Paul Croughton tries his hand

I surprised myself, I have to say, with her suspenders. I was really rather good with those. Delicate yet masterful. My problem, when it came, was with her breasts. Embarrassing, really, at my age (35), but I couldn't figure them out. Size was an issue, obviously, as was general placement in her upper-body area. At one point, the poor girl was *this close* to looking like a camel-maid — as if the process that creates a mermaid had gone horribly wrong and left me with a lady in lingerie from the waist down, welded to the torso of some weird beast with a lot of out-of-place humps and bra straps.

It's not, as I said to my girlfriend

later, how it sounds. This was not some acid-laced orgy in wonderland. I was merely attending a life-drawing class, albeit one with a difference. Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School marries the ribald stylings of the burlesque movement with a further-education art class — assuming that the teacher is drunk, dressed like Noël Coward, and insisting that everyone draws with their “wrong” hand.

Dr Sketchy's began in Brooklyn, New York, five years ago, when Molly Crabapple, an “art-school dropout and former artist's model”, then 22, hatched a plan while doing a spot of burlesque herself. “My friends in the underground

performance scene were such out-size, lavish personas, and I wanted to introduce them to artists. At the time, there was nothing like it in New York, and most bar owners didn't have faith in the idea of a nightlife event based on drawing.” Now there are 150 licensees of the Dr Sketchy's name, in such diverse places as Colombia, Chile, Taiwan and Tasmania. Not all of them incorporate burlesque or cabaret, but each one provides something unexpected and unusual to inspire budding artists.

“All of our branches draw on the local underground performance scene,” Crabapple says — and these events can get pretty lively. “Dr Sketchy's has had visits from the vice cops in Kansas City and Nebraska,” she says. But it's the Roman enclave that's the place to be if you want to get crazy. “They've been ravishingly outrageous — gender-bending, naked girls under red lights...”

I haven't attempted to draw since leaving my coursework folder on the train on the morning of my art GCSE. I wasn't great back then — or very bright, evidently — and I was fairly sure I hadn't improved, but I'd been assured that the point wasn't to be good, but to be fearless.

Back at the London branch, in an upstairs room in a pub in Islington, the DJ played old blues records as I tried to spot those who would be able to draw and those who wouldn't. Some were easy. You'd put your money on those who turned up with sketchpads and, in one case, watercolours. Pencils, paper and charcoal are provided, though, so there were plenty of empty-handed Picassos arriving and heading straight for the bar. Are they going to be as bad as me, I wondered?

Once we got under way, though, there was no accounting for the range of styles on display — from Donald McGill-type saucy



Strike a pose: Bon Voyage at Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School, left; and below, Paul Croughton's 'sylph in suspenders'



session, with added charcoal — but there is a semi-serious message in here somewhere, namely that countless people are put off drawing at school when someone tells them they can't do it. Sod 'em, say Dr Sketchy's little band of artists and artistes. Grab your HB and give it a whirl.

And whirl I do. Cheesecake is replaced by the 1950s type Bon Voyage, a sylph-like, tattooed figure in a corset. It is her suspenders that I tackle with such gusto, her breasts that I stumble upon. Searching for inspiration, like a school cheat I peek at the pencil-work going on to my right and left. One woman's drawing is so good, it would grace Mrs Mills's page in Style, and I recall that she was one of those with her hand in the air earlier, when Dusty asked who considered themselves a bit rubbish at drawing. I tell her she's a big liar. Turns out Katrin is a former illustrator. She hasn't drawn for “years”, she says, and seems oddly touched when people around her tell her how good she is.

It's not all drawing, however. Now it's Marianne Cheesecake's turn to do a turn, and she comes back to the stage elegantly piped into a long black skirt, a cruel-looking corset, elbow-length satin gloves and a red feather boa. I'm fairly sure you don't get that at art college. It seems almost a shame, having struggled into such an outfit, that she must remove it, but off it comes, slowly, surely, down to the last nipple pastie, and with such fanfare and pizzazz that the room is filled with cheers, hoots and whistles (and feathers), nearly all of which are from women (the hoots, not the feathers). Burlesque is very much a girl-power movement. There are more women than men here, and the atmosphere is celebratory, rather than ogly.

Perhaps emboldened by my visits to the bar during the intervals, I find my own style daring to come to the fore. It's a (very) poor man's Quentin Blake in places, with a touch of Beryl Cook, if both artists preferred to work in pitch darkness and hold their implements in their

mouths. But it's a style of sorts, and, with the introduction of the voluptuous Ophelia Bitz, it finds its moment. Encouraged to be bold and grasp — artistically speaking — the chance to delight in Ophelia's fuller figure (“Some of you have drawn her flat-chested,” shrieks Dusty Limits. “How is that possible?”), I go heavy on the heaving, using judicious charcoal smudging in a bid to add bounce. I'm not sure it does justice to Ms Bitz, but it's, you know, not that bad.

I show my drawing to my muse, Ophelia. She's polite enough to

neither laugh nor vomit, which I take to be a crashing endorsement of my newly rediscovered (yet still a bit rubbish) artistic flair. Molly Crabapple had assured me that “Dr Sketchy's is a comfortable environment for newbies and art stars alike”, and, after a few drinks to calm the creative flutters, I have to say I agree.

I leave with my favourite drawing tucked under my arm, artfully ripped in half, so all that remains is a sylph in suspenders. Of her camel-maid horror-show other half, screwed into a ball, it's as if it

never existed. That's the thing with art, I've found. It helps you to redraw history. [E](#)

The next Dr Sketchy's in London is on August 2; for details, visit drsketchylondon.co.uk. For Dr Sketchy's events worldwide, go to drsketchy.com/branches

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