



**GEORGE COPELAND AULT (1891-1948)**

*Reclining Nude*, 1930

Oil on canvas

19 x 26 inches

Signed and dated 1930, lower right

Painted in 1930, this work by George Copeland Ault represents the early phase of the artist's career before he made his move to the artist colony of Woodstock, New York in 1937. The 1920s had been difficult for Ault, as he experienced a succession of family tragedies marked by early deaths and suicide pacts. Yet with this portrait, Ault is suddenly playful and indulgent; the pain of the previous decade subsumed momentarily by the sensuality of the nude before him.

A true realist, Ault studied in London as a teenager at the Slade School of Art and Saint John's Wood School of Art. Born in Ohio, he spent most of his career working in the New York area, though his family had lost their fortune in the Stock Market Crash of 1929.<sup>1</sup> Ault, like several of his family members, appears to have been deeply troubled by this turn of events. By the early 1930s, around the time he painted *Reclining Nude*, Ault's erratic behavior began to alienate him from the gallery world despite a successful run in the 1920s exhibiting at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, Jsrael Ber Neumann's New Art Circle Gallery, and the galleries of art dealers Stephan Bourgeois (ca. 1920-1965) and F. Valentine Dudensing (1892-1967).<sup>2</sup>

Though Ault's relationship with Halpert was contentious, with the artist complaining of her notorious commercialism, his exhibitions at the Downtown Gallery from 1927 to 1954 helped to garner him critical attention. For the first exhibition in 1927, Halpert purportedly selected a group of drawings and watercolors of scenes of Bermuda, France and New York, and an exhibition the following year featured nine oil paintings including *Sullivan Street Abstraction* (1924) and *From Brooklyn Heights* (1925).<sup>3</sup> Given the artist's primary fixation with landscape, it is likely that *Reclining Nude* was completed for inclusion in the Downtown Gallery's exhibition "Artists' Models: Figure Painting by Leading American Artists" in October of 1930.<sup>4</sup>

---

1 Lubowsky, Susan. *George Ault* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1988), 7.

2 Lubowsky, *George Ault*, 21 & 29.

3 Lubowsky, *George Ault*, 23.

4 There are no other known full-body nude portraits by Ault at present. In 1930, the artist may have been attempting to master subjects from a classical art education including the female nude and still-life. That year he painted a work called *Fruit Bowl on Red Oil Cloth*, which at the time Lubowsky's catalogue was published in 1988 was in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barney A. Ebsworth.



HAWTHORNE  
Fine Art

As scholar Alexander Nemerov concluded in his Smithsonian exhibition on Ault's work in the 1940s, after witnessing the atrocities of World War II, Ault began painting landscapes to communicate a kind of reticent emptiness à la Edward Hopper and other disenchanted American Scene painters.<sup>5</sup> In these early years, however, Ault displays a certain openness to formal experimentation. His *Reclining Nude* most overtly communicates a *joie de vivre* through her coy gaze towards the viewer, the robustness of her form, and the boldness of her exhibitionism.

---

5 Nemerov, Alexander. "To Make a World: George Ault and 1940s America," exhibition, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D. C., March 11 to September 5, 2012.