



**Who Told You That You Were Naked?**  
Surveillance and Human Vulnerability



00110001 00110001 (detail), 2019

We are constantly being monitored: online, in public parks, in grocery stores, in our homes... and in art galleries and museums. This exhibition expands upon the work of activists, whistleblowers, and scholars to encourage a dialogue about digital nakedness and vulnerability. *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* integrates traditionally rendered paintings with video technology to create an immersive experience.



01000001 01000111, 2019

In this exhibition Gary I. Wolfe has painted a plurality of body types, humans linked only by their shared identity as Niagara and Erie County residents—and the fact that they, like all of us, are constantly under surveillance. Represented are folks of different ages, economic backgrounds, genders, and health metrics. Buffalo is one of the most redlined cities in the United States, and mere blocks separate food deserts from co-ops, and adequate medical care from environmental, racial, and poverty based discriminatory practices. Niagara Falls contains one of the natural marvels of the world, and an economy that has faltered for decades, with a disinvestment leading to higher-than-average rates of crime. We live in divided, polarized places, and it can be very easy to compartmentalize people into assumed boxes. As these figures step out of the grid, so too can we step out of assumptions about our neighbors.



00110010 00110100 (detail), 2022

Visitors may be wondering about the title, *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* It is a phrase drawn from the Book of Genesis found in the Bible, when Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge, against God's advice, and realize for the first time that they are naked. Their immediate response is shame. God realizes they have transgressed, because now they *know* about their nakedness, and as such have rejected the perfection of the Garden of Eden. In this narrative, knowledge is a sin—and bodies become sinful by extension. This is humanity's doing: we learn something, and use it to make a system worse, oppressing each other in the process. One could read the Genesis story through the lens of surveillance—it's not that Adam and Eve were not being surveilled before, but now they *know* about it, and feel worse about it. The corollary is that knowledge can be used for positive change, and is worth the discomfort. As Wolfe's portraits suggest, we are "naked" online, being seen in all our mundane purchases, vices, and credit scores. A gallery of naked paintings may be discomfiting for some visitors—but discomfort can be used to bring us to a greater awareness of the spaces we operate within.

**Anna Wager, Ph.D.**  
Curator of Exhibitions  
University at Buffalo Art Galleries



To understand more about binary code, visit this QR code

All works oil on canvas on board. Photographed by Pencil in the River.

gary I. wolfe's work is installed at University at Buffalo Art Galleries and Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University (CAM). The collaboration between our institutions is a crucial project component. Visitors encounter the dual nature of surveillance culture through distinct thematic experiences: the "seductive" side at UB Center for the Arts Gallery and the "sinister" side at CAM.

Together, wolfe's installations feature 80 paintings—40 naked figures and 40 portraits—arranged to surround viewers, combined with hidden video cameras, interactive digital elements, and a soundscape featuring the models' voices. The figures are not idealized and pose with an object or gesture that obscures and thereby protects

their identities. They are painted against a grid, a crucial reference to online infrastructure, surveillance, and measurement.

In wolfe's universe, we are all reduced to data points on the grid in a digital world of binary code sequences of 0s and 1s. These numbers are referenced in the paintings' shapes. The binary code symbolizes the reduction of our humanity, as does the grid that attempts to constrain us to some measured version of ourselves. Yet in these paintings, the models step through the grid and they extend into our space. They are both a warning and a welcome for self-examination, literally and figuratively.



01000111 01010011, 2022



00110000 00110011 (detail), 2019

In an era where the boundaries between public and private spheres are increasingly blurred, gary I. wolfe's multi-site exhibition, *Who Told You That You Were Naked? Surveillance and Human Vulnerability*, emerges as a poignant exploration of our surveilled existence. This groundbreaking project not only challenges our perceptions of privacy but also interrogates the very essence of human vulnerability in our hyper-connected world.

wolfe's body of work, comprised of 80 meticulously rendered paintings on canvas, stands as a testament to the artist's technical virtuosity and conceptual depth. The collection, evenly split between figurative studies and facial portraits, ventures into uncharted artistic territory that seamlessly melds traditional realism with cutting-edge surveillance technology.

At first glance, wolfe's large-scale canvases appear to be a celebration of classical realist painting, evoking the masterful techniques of Thomas Eakins and Everett Shinn. However, upon closer inspection, the works reveal a subversive undercurrent—hidden surveillance cameras and monitors ingeniously embedded within select paintings. This juxtaposition of pre-tech artistry and post-virtual elements creates a visual tension that challenges viewers to confront the omnipresence of surveillance in contemporary society.

wolfe's work activates a complex network of observation and display across two locations creating a closed-circuit of watching and being watched that mirrors our daily experiences of surveillance.

The exhibition's dual-site presentation further amplifies its conceptual impact. The UB Art Galleries houses works that explore the "seductive" aspects of surveillance culture, while the Castellani Art Museum presents pieces that delve into its more "sinister" implications. This geographical and thematic division invites visitors to become active participants in a voyeuristic scenario, simultaneously observing and being observed across the two locations.

Ultimately, *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* transcends mere artistic commentary to become a powerful societal critique. By merging classical artistic techniques with contemporary surveillance technology, wolfe compels us to confront uncomfortable truths about privacy, identity, and human vulnerability in the digital age.

**Michael J. Beam**  
Curator of Exhibitions  
Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University



CASTELLANI  
ART MUSEUM  
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY



University at Buffalo  
Art Galleries  
College of Arts and Sciences



Council on  
the Arts

Exhibition on view September 19, 2024 - February 23, 2025 at both sites

UB Art Galleries, 103 Center for the Arts, Buffalo, NY 14260

Castellani Art Museum, 7 Varsity Dr, Niagara University, NY 14109

*Who Told You That You Were Naked? Surveillance and Human Vulnerability*  
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