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Butt-ing artists find way to make ends meet

By **Darren Garnick**/ Working Stiff

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It's called the "Butt Sketch." And it's probably the only time co-workers can blatantly ogle their office crush without being accused of sexual harassment.

It's also the great equalizer between bosses and employees. Fashion doesn't care what your business card says.

"If there was any tension before in the office, it's gone when I get through with them," grins Butt Sketch artist Pjae Adams, who captures "posteriors for posterity" in up to 10 cities per month. "Hopefully, they'll go back to work with a new sense of camaraderie."

Adams was sketching butt this past weekend at the Hynes Convention Center, where thousands of college students gathered to scout entertainment acts at the National Association for Campus Activities Conference. Her act seems gimmicky at first — Project Runway meets amusement park caricature — but those who walk away with the charcoal picture may momentarily fantasize about posing for the next Macy's newspaper ad.

Revere's Jeff Smith, a student affairs administrator at Salem State College, plans to hang his likeness in his office. "It's a different perspective of you," he says. "You never see what you look like from the back. There's no mirror to do that."

"Some people are shy at first, but there's a little bit of exhibitionist in everyone," adds the 29-year-old Adams, who used to design boutique shop windows in Atlanta and Dallas.

The artist's outgoing personality must have been wasted on the mannequins. Adams begins her two-and-a-half minute sessions with friendly banter urging her models to relax. Usually, the Butt Sketch becomes a group experience with co-workers smirking and laughing in the background.

"I think this is great for guys and girls," says Butt Sketch devotee Krystal Johnson, a student at the University of North Carolina. "But you can't take it too seriously."

Sage advice.

My turn on the Butt Sketch runway was enlightening. At the risk of sounding trite, I have gained new respect for fashion models. I had trouble standing frozen yet "relaxed" for more than two minutes. And I still can't pull off a pouty expression.

Nonetheless, my butt does look fantastic. In fact, everyone's butts look fantastic off the charcoal pencil of Adams, who admits using a flattering touch.

"Whether people believe me or not, that's what I see. Every butt is different. Every butt has its own personality," she says.

Just as fascinating as the psychology of the Butt Sketch experience is the backstory. Dallas sidewalk artist Krandel Lee Newton first set up his easel in 1987 at the West End Marketplace, a tourist spot similar to Faneuil Hall. The popularity of his "Original Butt Sketch" appearances at trade shows, conventions and private parties eventually encouraged him to build a Butt Sketch empire.

Today, a dozen artists travel the country to immortalize the tushes of people who'll likely never have the opportunity to model again.

Newton's company, which charges between \$1,700 and \$3,000 for a four-hour session, boasts more than 250,000 Butt Sketches in its portfolio — including the famous rear ends of Alex Trebek, Donnie & Marie Osmond, Ted Danson and Queen Latifah.

"I never imagined I'd be sketching people's butts for a living," says Adams, who

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hopes the gig will advance her art career. "But I always hoped to use my gifts to support myself."

Specializing in acrylic paintings of the human form, Adams sometimes finds that her rapid fashion drawings of accountants and dental hygienists subconsciously influence her future work.

"The more butts I sketch," she says, "the more inspired I become."

Darren Garnick's Working Stiff column runs Wednesdays in the Boston Herald. Story tips from the workplace are welcomed via e-mail at heraldstiff@gmail.com or by writing to Working Stiff, PO Box 49, North Billerica, MA 01862.

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