

Painting the Nude

—An Adventure



A memoir by Christian Beels

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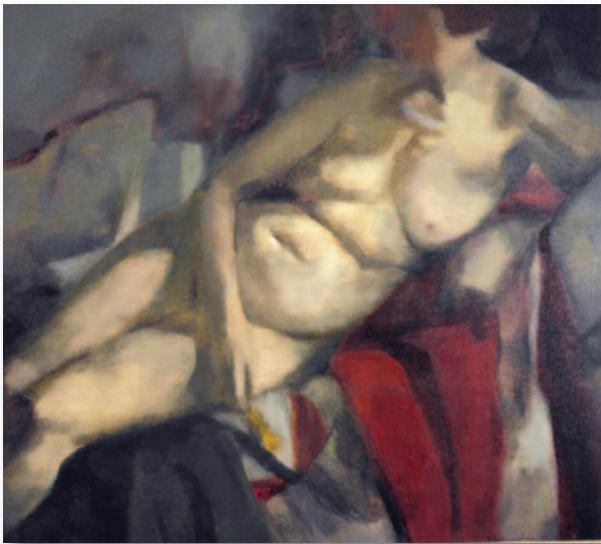
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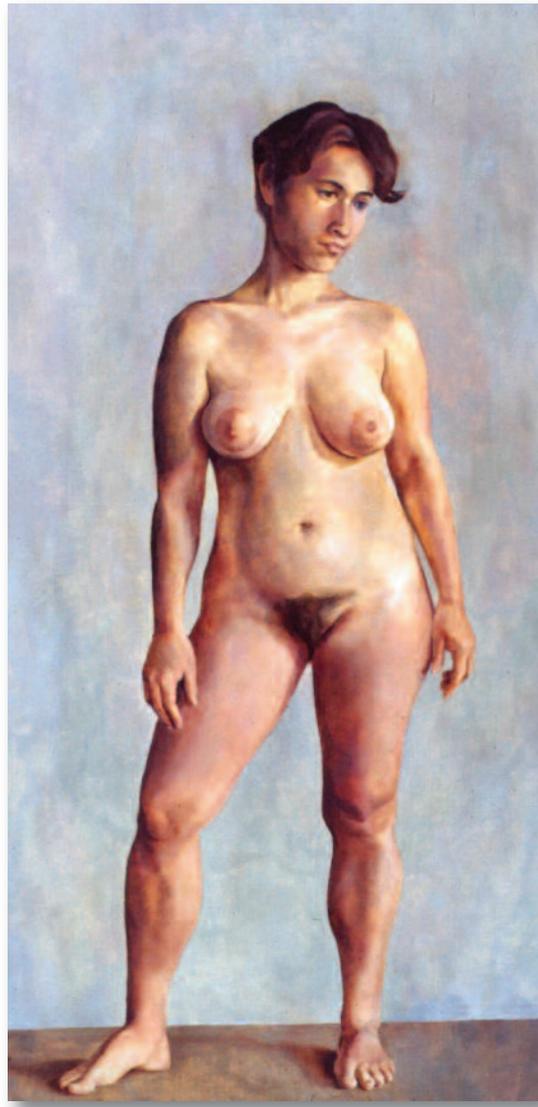
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Painting the nude - an adventure

My adventures in painting the nude began in 1967 when, returning from Washington to New York and living three blocks on West End Avenue from my college room mate, Dick Cunningham, I was invited to join him and a few of his artist colleagues in a sketch group on Tuesday evenings to draw from the model. It was a convivial, meditative evening that produced many sheets, including some charcoal drawings that still hang in our dining room (right). They are of Mimi, a favorite model of Dick's from the Art Students League, and a retired chorus girl. There have always been nudes in our house – our first purchase of paintings after we got married included (below) an oil of Mimi, by Dick, which hangs in our living room.



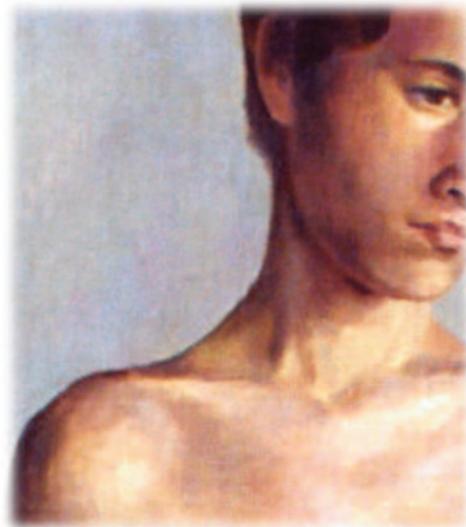
There has been an air of the erotic about my own nudes ever since I drew home made pornography as a boy. Between my nudes and Cunningham's lies a vast territory of many different sensibilities – extending ultimately to a boundary marked by his tender, final tribute to Mimi in her advancing age, sitting (dozing?) in his old Hitchcock straight chair in his studio, the flesh of her shoulders settling in an honorific “cape of age,” one of the anatomical features of older models Dick was fond of pointing out. We could say there is nothing erotic about Dick's last nude of Mimi, just as we could say there is nothing erotic about a Christ on the cross, but only because we have restricted our definition of Eros to the exciting, rather than the compassionate or tender. This painting of an old woman shows the tender side of Eros. It expresses love as a cherishing regard, an empathy, that is called forth more poignantly by her nudity than it would have been by a clothed portrait. Nudity also conveys a human universal – in particular, a timeless moment captured in the flesh. Think of the crucifix and imagine the emotional impact of it fully clothed. We may cover Jesus' loins with a cloth, but how otherwise would you clothe Him? Jeans and T-shirt? A burnoose? Nude, He is the Son of Man, the Word made Flesh. Some day I may paint nudes in this part of the territory, but as I say, perhaps with time's winged chariot at my back, I have tended to pay attention to the quickening rather than the steady, or slowing, pulse of Eros. That is the joy of it for me.



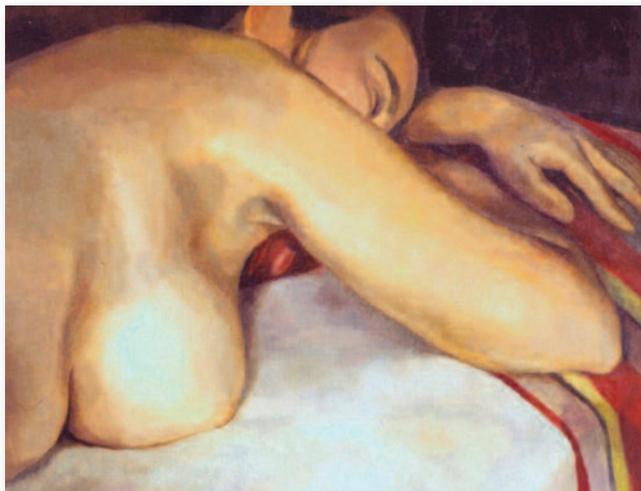
Getting back to my story, some time in 1976, Dick announced that it was time for me to move from drawing to oil painting, and he summoned me to his barn in Sheffield, Massachusetts where, over the course of ten summer days (a still life in the morning, and a landscape standing beside him in a field in the afternoon) he instructed me in the mysteries of observing, mixing and laying down spots of oil color. I still have those two paintings on the wall. Then in 1980 Dick and Barney Hodes started the New Brooklyn School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, and I went for the next four years every Sunday while the school was in session, to paint the nude. The nude was the focus of the school, since in observation, drawing, and putting down color, it is the most unforgiving, and therefore the most instructive, subject. The nude does not involve “likeness” in the way that portraiture does, but you know when it’s wrong, and when it’s right. You can’t make it up out of your head. Developing that kind of disciplined eye and hand was the great gift of the school.

The first year I was in Dick’s class, and the year-long project was a standing life-size nude painted during almost eight months of a model holding the same pose every Sunday. We did drawings on brown paper, got the perspective right (“as if she’s standing across the street, so that wherever the viewer is, the vanishing point is infinite”) and then the finished painting (mine at 60” X 32” was not quite life-sized – seven feet felt beyond me, both the work and the storage). This figure is standing in her own space on the other side of the picture plane. Dick has written eloquently about the mutually respectful and privileged stance of the painter in the presence of the model, in a painting like this – a unique interpersonal experience that you can sense in his nudes, and perhaps a little in this one.

The most important painting technique the school taught was the "color spot" method of establishing form by placing carefully mixed spots of color next to each other to describe a surface such as the neck and shoulders here, the warm skin showing just a little cooler and bluer as it goes towards shadow. These colors are not from a method or rule, but from exact observation.



The second year I studied with Richard Talcott and in his class the model changed every month, so it was easiest to do a finished painting of only part of the body, choosing the size of the frame for the task at hand. Richard encouraged this, because we could focus on the problems of getting small passages right – doing them over on a new canvas if necessary – and focusing on color, form and composition without struggling at the same time with all the larger problems of the life-size figure. In these smaller paintings I was able to read contours and colors up close, letting the frame crop the figure to produce many other kinds of composition and varying degrees of zoom. The difference was that here I was in the model's space, on the edge of, or inside, the picture plane, and had to select my own composition within that space. The adventure continued with these explorations over the terrain of the body, from monumental to mysterious. I was very pleased when later my son Alexander went to graduate school in New Haven and took a collection of these studies of parts of bodies with him for the walls of his apartment.



• 10" X 14"

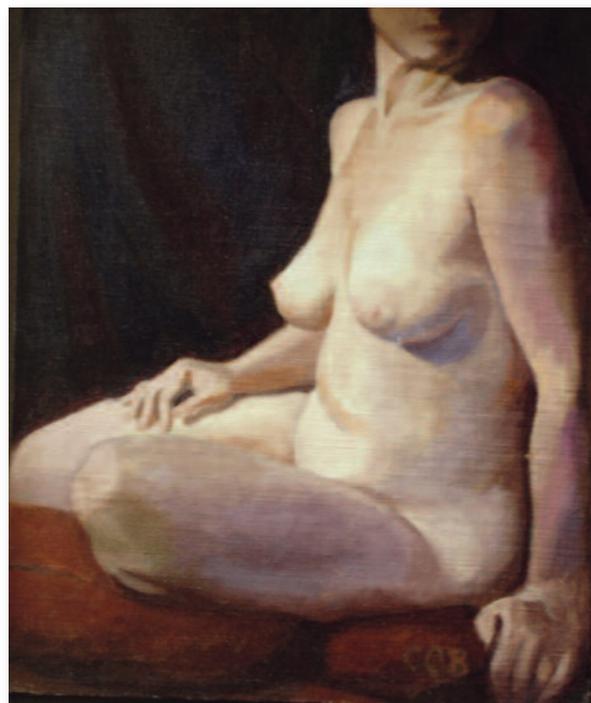


* 18" X 16"

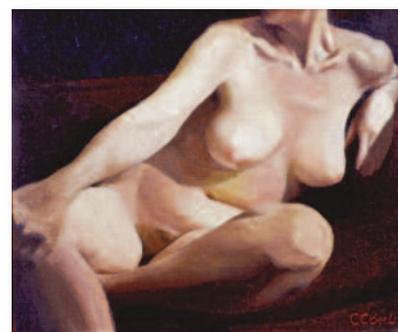
I didn't have a studio yet, but two institutions made up for it. One was the Century Association, which thanks to the sponsorship of Dick and Peter Judd I joined in 1989. At the Sketch Club that met there on many Saturdays of the year, I taught myself to do pastels and watercolors of models posing for 20 minutes, an excellent discipline that reminded me not to finish every detail, but to choose. The Sketch Club is also a place to get to know a variety of models, and begin to think about the connection between their knowledge, personality and experience and the success of a drawing — even more so, of a painting. The process that begins with observing and thinking about their bodies in the first moments of work, planning the drawing, immediately becomes an empathy with what they are trying to do with those bodies, a shared sense of purpose that is the start of inspiration, of the model as muse.

A voluptuous red-head named Virginia really seemed to have this sense, to know how she looked, and what was arresting about a pose. After drawing her several times I asked her to pose privately for me, and she agreed (for a higher fee) to let me take a roll of slides. I explained that I wanted to explore ways in which the body could be composed within a rectangular space, as if it were itself a landscape or a sculpture enclosed there. She understood, and the result was a collection of slides that I could project onto a canvas, adjusting the frame to the space. Usually some parts of the body — sometimes the head, often hands or feet — were outside the frame, because what remained inside was the essential composition. Besides this close framing, the choice of a 9”X12” cigar-box size for the panels brought the painter-viewer in close, as in the black and white photographs of Weston or Atwater. They are intimate paintings, within an arm's length of the mind's eye.

The disadvantages of these early paintings of Virginia was that having used daylight slide film under tungsten floodlights, the color was “off,” and so I made it up out of my head, using a convenient formula of blue and burnt sienna. And photographs are no substitute for the live model. Nevertheless, two of these were sold and one accepted as a gift, and they were my first experience that other people wanted to live with my paintings. I kept the others, some finished and some in a grisaille state, to think about. The project stayed in the back of my mind.

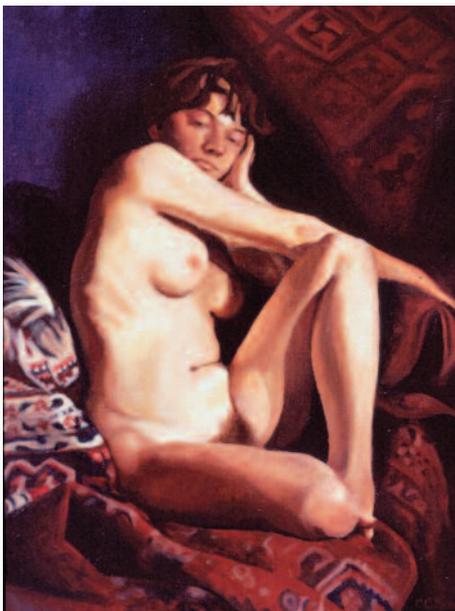


* 12" X 10"





Color slides, with similar problems, provided the series of mid-sized paintings of Stephanie, another Century model who came to my office and posed in an environment of oriental rugs, whose rich textures and patterns played against the sentience of her skin. The larger scale and the furnishings left her in her own domain, a space full of tactile exploration, following her hands and feet into the folds of rugs and sheets. Stephanie said this experience encouraged her to pose for the camera, which she hadn't done before.

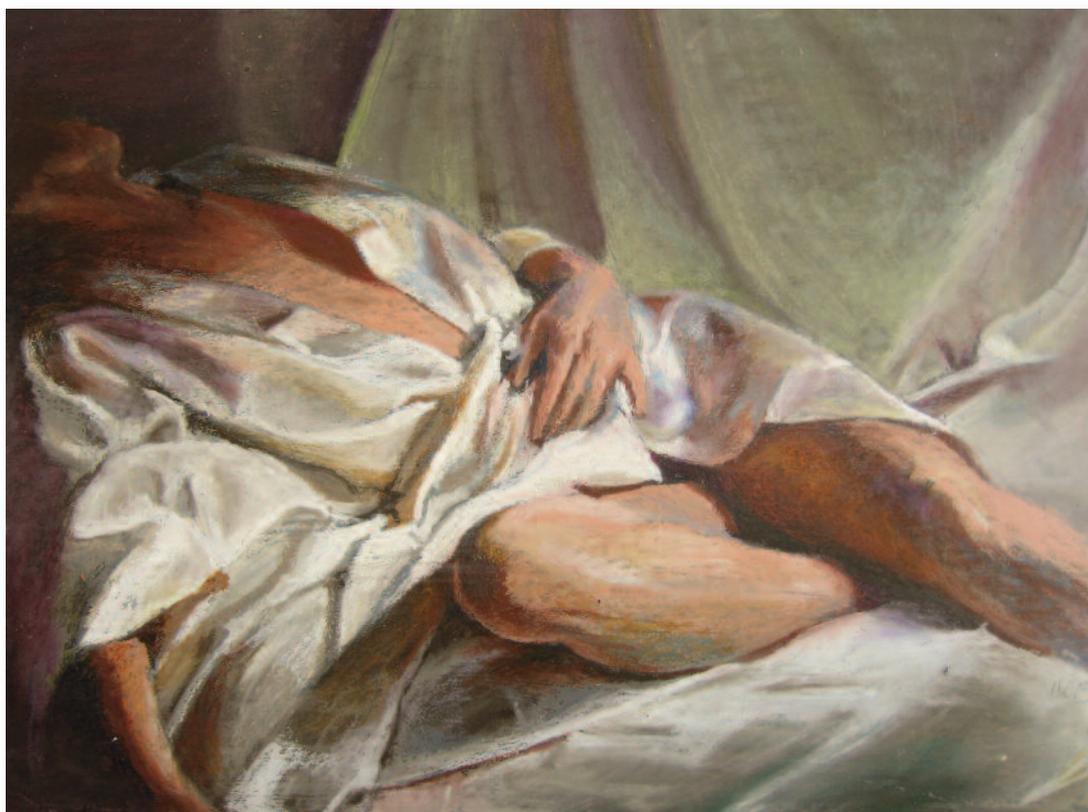




* 20" X 15"

The other institution that was important in those years was The Palenville Arts Colony, a former children's camp in the Catskills that I visited for four summers. It provided studio space and a varied landscape for trying out new things. One summer I hired a model and was experimenting with both dry and oil pastels, when it struck me that what she needed was a white silk kimono. That part of the Catskills was thick with antique stores, and in an hour or so of shopping I had secured the very thing. Two oil pastel drawings began my preoccupation with drapery as the accompaniment, the vehicle and panoply, of the nude. These were again from slides, because I hadn't figured out how else to freeze the folds of the drapery.

The kimono was a wordless intuition at this point, only later invested with an explanation.



* 15" X 20"

A Room of My Own

When in 1994 I did get a studio share on Desbrosses Street, with north light windows and plenty of space, I was ready to work larger, almost life-sized, and the white kimono, as well as the oriental rugs, came along into the daylight. What a difference! I was steadily learning more about color, and I finally had a situation where I could paint from life in the daylight with all the time in the world. The first model in that space was Alison, and the luxury of being able to dwell on the warm-cool differences of the shades of dark in the muscles of Alison's back, as illuminated by the north-light window, was a revelation. The white kimono completed the composition.

The kimono came into its own when Alison put it on for the next pose, and I started to think more about the role of drapery like this in painting the figure.

The crossing diagonals that locate the figure in the space of this painting are the start of the composition, but the folds of the kimono falling over Alison's breast mirror the curve of her hip in a matching embrace of fabric, trailing down to the foreground. In this way I learned that painting sensuous undulations of cloth was as absorbing as painting the figure. But I needed to find a way to keep it from moving every time the model changed out of the pose for a rest. Having liberated myself from the camera by having my own studio, I bought a photographer's dummy that could assume the pose and support the cloth in daylight for as long as needed.



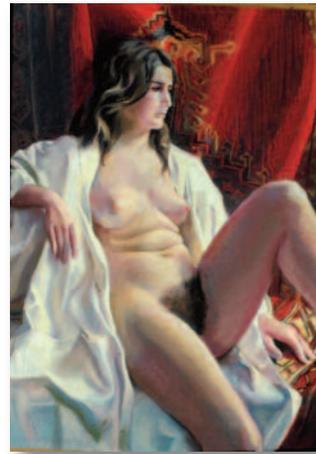
* 32" X 23"



* 23" X 28"



* 24" X 35"



* 25" X 19"

The dummy helped with the composition of cloth and figure in a series of paintings on the theme of Danae, a princess locked in a tower to whom Zeus appeared as a shower of gold. The gold shower has been represented as light entering a chamber in paintings of Danae by Rembrandt, Corregio and Titian. The light in my paintings came in through a window in my new studio-share at 81st street, and to show it advancing upon the figure, and the figure's response, I used the fabric as a dramatic accompaniment. Here are three pastels and two oils.

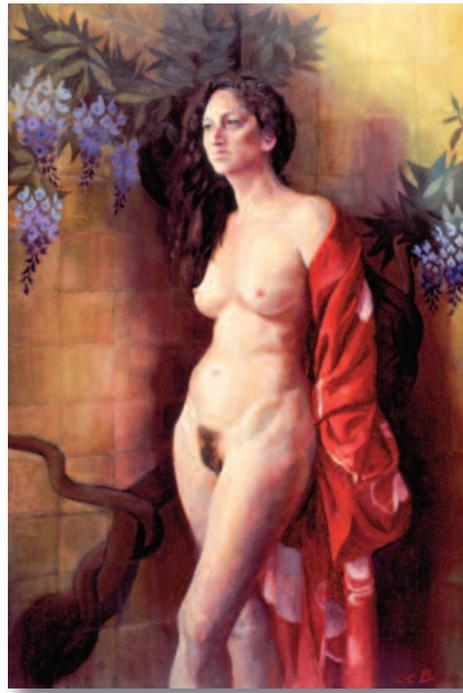
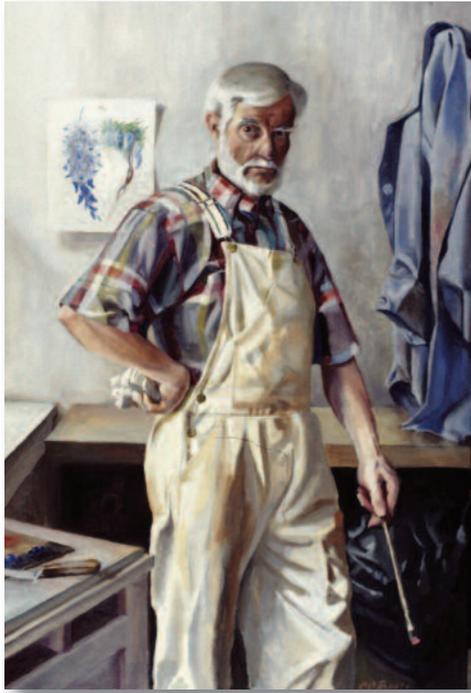
In the first two pastels (above), where the light is from the right, the model is close to a small window, and the effect is more chiaroscuro. In the other three, the light comes from the left through a large window and floods the terrain of body and cloth. In these three especially, the cloth provides a feeling of animation to the figure, as if she had just come to rest, or perhaps was still moving.



* 23" X 33"



* 26" X 32"



* 36" X 24"

Before I left that studio, I asked Shifra, the model for the last painting above, to bring in the beautiful red kimono (her mother's) that she had used in the sketch group. I made a folding screen that I found in the corner of the studio into an imitation of a gold-leaf Japanese screen covered with a Wisteria vine. The composition needed a balancing pendant, so I did a self-portrait from a mirror in the same light and distance: artist and model.

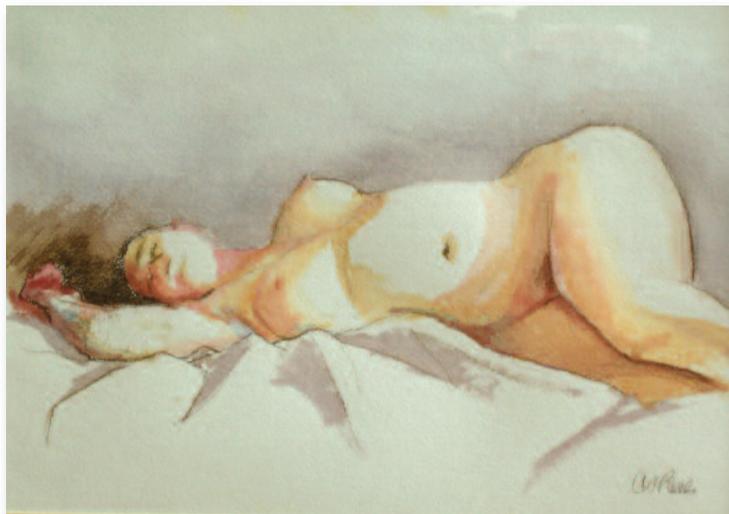
Incidentally, both of these paintings of Shifra, the reclining white (previous page) and standing red kimono, came from two poses she took on one day at a meeting of the Sketch Club, from which I did drawings. Shifra is a model who knows about inspiration.



* 20" X 16"

In 2004, two new opportunities changed the adventure. I joined the Painting Group, 20 or so artists who met every Wednesday night to paint from the figure with the supervision and companionship of Aaron Shikler and David Levine. There I learned, especially from Dan Schwartz, the effect of underpainting and glazing with different colors. Here is one on a green ground.

Steve and I celebrated the opening of our new studio by inviting Regina, a favorite model of ours and of Dick's, to join us for champagne and caviar. Here's a watercolor from that afternoon.



*8.5" X 11"

The Ideal Studio

The more important change in 2004 was the invitation from Steve Chinlund to join him in the new studio/office he was renting after his retirement from being the director of Episcopal Social Services. Steve wanted to continue two of his many passions in life: painting and working to reform the New York prison system. He and I met at the Century and painted together in the Sketch Club. We found we had very similar interests, both in landscape and the nude, and Steve, an accomplished watercolorist, wanted to learn oil painting. So, among the other shared activities in our studio on 39th Street, I had the pleasure of passing on some of what had been given to me. We shared the models, Alley and Manou, for these paintings. Here are the ones from my station point. I think there is something a little banal, a little expectable, about these poses, that comes from our hurry to get started. We didn't take the time, through drawings and discussion, to tune into the expressive possibilities of this particular situation.



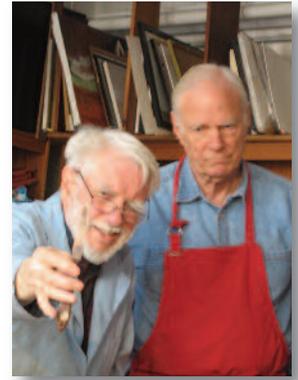
* 18" X 14"



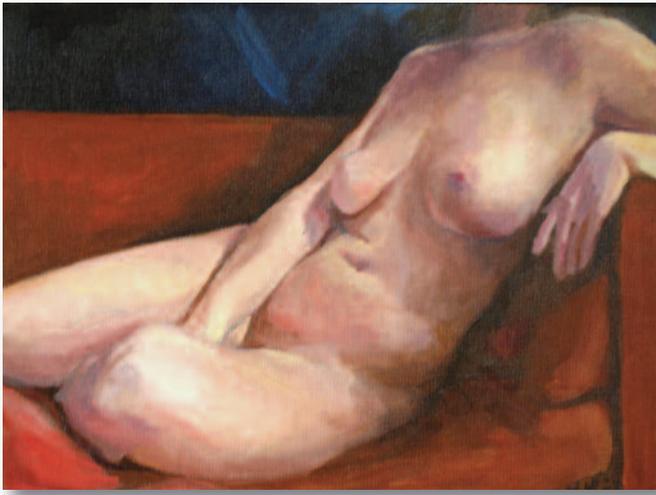
* 22" X 36"

How to rescue a painting from this problem? In these, animated folds of white satin helped. And the eyes — Manou looks outside at the light, and Alley, who preferred to keep her glasses on while working, can see us as well as we see her.

The white satin made up an integral part of our third and most successful partnered paintings. The light here is tungsten flood, but from life, not slides, except that we used photos to freeze the drapery. The success had several sources, two of them based on analysis of our previous experience, and advice from Ephraim Rubenstein, a colleague and teacher I depend on more and more. One, we took our time and did plenty of drawings before going to the canvas. Two, we consulted at length with the model, Lillian, about what she thought would work for the long project we were undertaking. It was very much a three-way collaborative enterprise. In the middle of it, Lillian borrowed my camera to take pictures of me and Steve plotting our next move. The end results are very much Lillian's paintings as well as ours. Here is mine.



* 16" X 22"



*9" X 12"



*9" X 12"



*10" X 12"

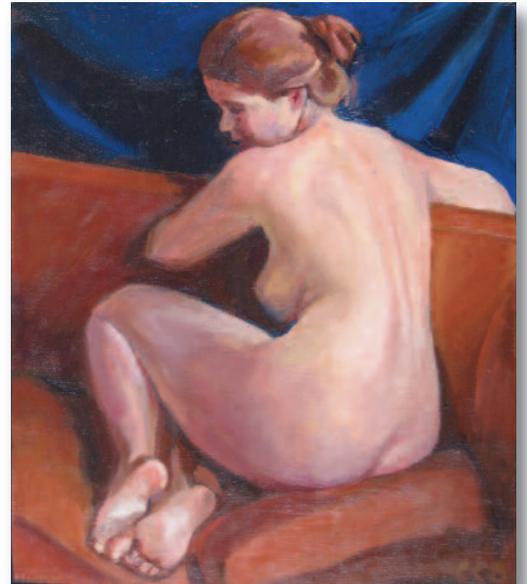
I have made a lot of drawings of Lillian in recent years, both in the Sketch Club and in the studio, and her confident attitude, her splendid body and red hair, reminded me of the project begun in 1991 with Virginia, the grisaille unfinished panels from which I had kept in storage. I got them out and showed them to Lillian, who agreed to take most of the same poses, this time lit by the daylight coming in through our North windows, and illuminated as well by what I had learned about observing color in the intervening sixteen years. Lillian felt a little strange inhabiting the body of another woman, found some of the poses alien, learned something from others, and finally, as the project went on, insisted on devising her own approaches to the challenge of composing a figure in rectangular space. These three are of Lillian taking Virginia's poses.



*12" X 10"

The last two (left and right) are Lillian's inventions, and I find it so striking how different they are from Virginia's. Virginia stretched limbs and head into corners and off the frame of the rectangle, leaving her torso for the composition. Lillian closes the space of the composition with her gaze, directed in one at her feet, in the other at the space enclosed by her arms and legs. Her head and gaze are an indispensable part of a meditation on rounded enclosure.

This part of the adventure completed with Lillian has been satisfying enough to provide a place for pause, but even before such an interval, like other painters I am always thinking about the next painting.



*12.75" X 10"

Words

I find the wordlessness of painting at the center of its attraction for me. My other work, organizational work, writing – all require words. Painting is another world, with energies connected neither to words nor to actual encounters in the daily world, although as I have tried to show, the encounter with the person of the model plays a part.

Part of the appeal of the endless adventure of painting is that there is no need for a conclusion, for the kind of summing up in words that usually comes at the end of an essay. On the other hand, I have been more interested recently in some of the words that have been used to describe various kinds of success in painting. This is largely due to my friend and teacher, Ephraim Rubenstein.

Every semester at the Art Students League in New York, Ephraim gives a seminar on the Literature of Painting, because he believes that painters who go there to study the practice should also know something of the theory, of what has been written. I have taken Ephraim's seminar three times, partly for the sheer pleasure of being in school again (it's been a long time) and partly because Ephraim's judgment and teaching about this body of writing is so discerning. He has found words to describe what happens in painting – at least in looking at it. One of the best things we read is Bernard Berenson's *Italian Painters of the Renaissance*. Among a hundred other things, Berenson attempts an account of what we get out of looking at paintings – what is the joy of it? What makes painting come alive?

Like William James, Berenson emphasized that the sense of touch is the earliest and most fundamental way humans register reality. Babies instinctively touch to confirm the reality of sight. Berenson named one of the values that comes from the experience of painting, "tactile value." The painting mediates and overcomes the social risk of touching – you imagine touching without risk. Safety, then, makes possible the suspension of disbelief, as in the theatre you participate in the tragedy's distressing action from the safety of the audience.

For figure painting, a second pleasure that Berenson described is the potential for movement. Imagine the figure's potential for going into other gestures besides the one presented. A great pose resolves these energies – a potential flow of movement. Eakins studied with Gerome and then did paintings of rowers. Gerome criticized Eakins' rowers because the movement was arrested at the wrong place, at the end rather than the beginning of the stroke. Describing a drawing of "Wrestlers", Berenson says "I see two men wrestling." Looking at the drawing provides "a less fatiguing realization which we may enjoy at our leisure."

So looking back at the white silk kimono I can understand that its contact and response to the model's body was another way of painting the sense of touch, and the rugs and sheets contribute a potential for movement, either completed or beginning, but observed from the respectful safety of my seat on this side of the canvas.

These notes from Berenson capture the experience of painting as well as looking at painting. More recently I found these words of Wallace Stevens, about what art adds to both representation and to actual experience.

*Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.*

*It is an artificial thing that exists
In its own seeming, plainly visible,
Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be...*

