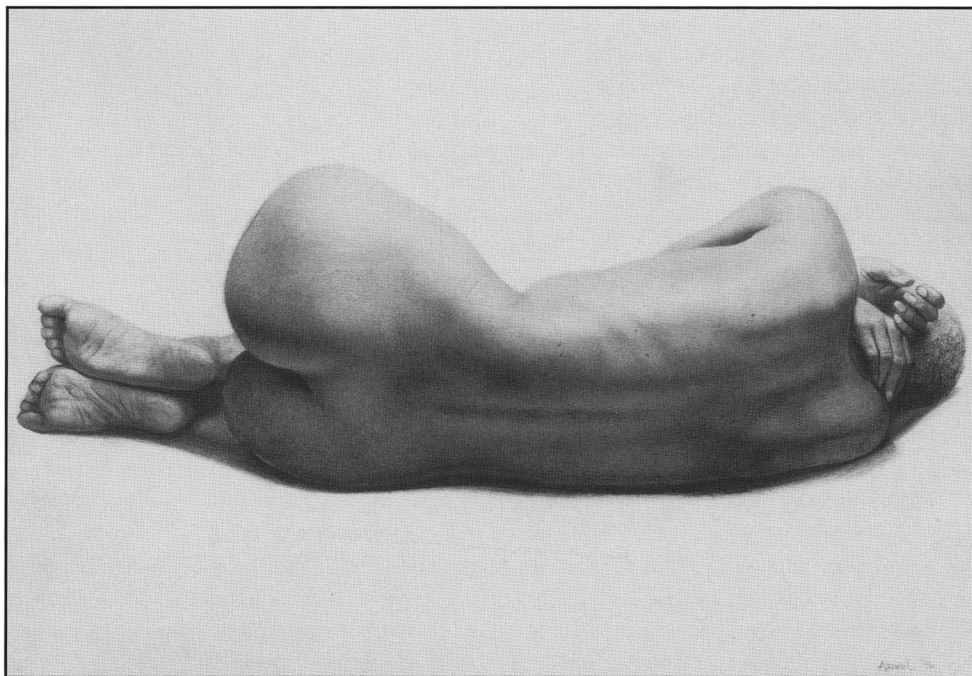


Steven Assael: Selected Drawings. Preface by Townsend Wolfe. Introductory Essay by Arlene Raven. Edited by Karen Kolada. Linden Hill, New York: Linden Hill Art Books, 2000. 69 pages, 49 illustrations.

Born in New York City in 1957, Steven Assael has established himself as one of the leading figurative artists of his generation. Represented by the Forum Gallery in Manhattan, he has had numerous group and solo exhibitions including a recent ten-year retrospective at the Frye Museum in Seattle, Washington. He studied at Pratt Institute and independently in Europe, and he has been teaching at the School of Visual Arts since 1985. These bare-bones facts of his career, however, hardly prepare the viewer for the formal elegance and psychological power of the drawings reproduced in this handsome book. They are portraits and figure studies, evidence of encounters with living models. Essayist Arlene Raven notes that Assael distrusts the fraction-of-a-second glimpse of the individual provided by a photograph, insisting on “the magnetism and resistance in the exchange” between artist and model over time.



Stephen Assael, *Reclining Figure (back)*, 1996

Private collection

These exchanges are especially tender when Assael depicts family members, his children and his father, as in two studies of sleeping infants—*David, Newborn* (1987), ink and mixed media on paper, and *Claire, Newborn* (1982), ink on paper—and the poignant *Father* (2000), pencil on paper, an emaciated head on a pillow. Other portrait studies introduce us to fully formed personalities with faces and bodies that look lived in. The 1996 *Portrait of Gilda*, pencil on paper, depicts a middle-aged woman with the eyes of a seer and a luxuriant witch’s tangle of hair. Dramatically lit, the drawing is a tour de force of chiaroscuro. Some subjects are defined by what they wear—or what they don’t. *May with Gloves and Hat* (1996), ink on paper, is a wind-blown enigma; the blankness surrounding the gloved hands and round, solemn face suggests snow as much as the negative space of the paper. In contrast, the artist has finished

every inch of the paper in his pencil drawing *Meagan* (1988). The subject, curled up in a chair and naked except for tattoos of flowers, dragons and a labyrinth, regards us warily from under a glossy wave of hair. Often, the dynamic of the composition centers on the relationship between hands and face. The artist seems to capture personality in a characteristic gesture: the relaxed reticence of *Gina* (1990), ink on paper, her wrists crossed across her raised knees; the intensity of *Phillipa* (1997), mixed media on paper, who clutches her fair, tousled hair and hides her mouth behind her hands.

The nude portrait is a hybrid genre that seems to interest Assael. With her shaved head and swan-like neck, the African-American *Nicol* (1998), pencil on paper, presents a contemporary gloss on self-aware beauty. *Bari* (1996), graphite and charcoal on paper, despite her multiple piercings, seems almost shy; she bites her lip and looks away from us. There is a wonderful series of nude couple portraits, variations on Adam and Eve that explore the vocabulary of body language. *Robert and Naomi* (1996), ink on paper, shown half-length, turn away from each other slightly, arms folded protectively across their chests. The other couples face us head-on and full-length, although their limbs are folded up compactly. *Joseph and Lisa* (1998), pencil on paper, seem to float. A few shadows suggest a bed for Lisa; her wings of hair could be spread along a pillow or flying. The more angular Joseph perches on an unsupported chair seat, one leg raised in a strong diagonal across his body. *Claudia and Ulese* (1998), pencil on paper, are arrangements in Zen-like geometry. Serenely symmetrical, Claudia forms a diamond: knees spread, hands crossed over the ankles. (Assael makes bare feet as eloquent as hands.) Ulese sits in perfect Lotus position, gripping the toes of one foot. Both have the extravagantly long hair and quiet bliss of idealized Hippies. These nude portraits demonstrate that, for Assael, as Raven notes in her catalogue essay, "the brain is a body part; the body, inherently a social segment that is as personally telling as a diary entry."

This book also contains examples, however, of the artist's work in the more traditional genre of the academic nude. A complementary pair of torsos viewed from the back, although executed a decade apart, *Seated Figure, Male* (1985) and *Seated Figure, Female* (1995), both ink on paper, are close to anatomy lessons in their articulation of the spine and muscles. Two opulent color drawings—*Seated Figure in Pink and Green* (1993) and *Figure with Raised Leg* (1994), both mixed media on paper—have the classical grace of Pierre Paul Prud'hon's (1758–1823) figure studies. Most of the drawings are monochromatic, and many, even in the figure study category, carry a subdued emotional charge. The 1996 *Reclining Figure (back)*, pencil on paper, is curled up in a gesture of self-protection. The hands reaching around and obscuring the back of the head and the weathered soles of the feet hint at life experiences. The realism of the detail in this richly finished drawing is striking. In contrast, a 1995 *Reclining Figure*, mixed media on paper, seems loose and Romantic—hands and feet barely sketched in, the body bathed in blue twilight. Another *Reclining Figure* from 1995, pencil and mixed media on paper, is as spare and erotic as a sketch by Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), headless, abstract, stretched across the paper like the contours of a landscape.

This is a remarkable group of drawings. Uncovering the common humanity and rich diversity of his models, Assael works within traditional genres to explore the formal possibilities of line and tone on paper. His superb draftsmanship reminds us of how powerful this most intimate of art forms can be.

—Gail Leggio

Steven Assael: Selected Drawings can be ordered on the Web at www.lindenhallartbooks.com; or write: Linden Hill Art Books, Dept AA, P.O. Box 1341, Linden Hill, NY 11354.