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# Steven Assael: Line, Texture, and Inner Personas

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“Suyeon Lee,” 2013, by Steven Assael. Graphite and crayon on paper, 14 inches by 10 3/4 inches. (Courtesy of Forum Gallery)



A A Print

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NEW YORK—Every drawing begins with a line. The first lines determine the boundaries of the objects. Then, shading suggests three-dimensionality.

Some artists obscure all traces of these foundational lines with shading. Others, like **Steven Assael**, allow line and shape to play off and enhance each other.

“I try never to erase my lines. I don’t think of anything as a mistake but as a point of departure,” he said.

A prominent feature of his drawings is a heightened sense of light and shadow. Using graphite and crayon, he builds silky, burnished darks. Then, using an eraser, a razor blade, or sometimes his fingernail, he scratches out stray hairs that catch the light or metallic threads that run through a flowing shirt.

The results are drawings full of texture. From lace and diaphanous wedding veils to knits and denim, all are studiously rendered. One of Assael’s specialties is wild, windswept, bushy hair. The dark, long locks of Julie, a repeat sitter for Assael, offer him hours of study.

The New York-based artist studied at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in the ’70s. He currently teaches at the School of Visual Arts and at The New York Academy of Art.

His drawings are represented in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Columbus Museum of Art, and other public and private collections.

Twenty-three of Assael's new drawings featuring contemporary men and women are exhibited at New York's **Forum Gallery** until Feb. 1.

## Externalizing the Internal

In Assael's drawings, the sitters' attitudes and personalities reveal themselves through their gazes and poses. Nudes are candid rather than idealized (blemishes on thighs, farmer's tans, pubic hair) without being voyeuristic.

This feeling develops naturally from the way Assael thinks of his work.

“The inner personage I try to capture is pretext and subtext. Pretext is the outer persona we create, like a businessman's business suit—a manufactured persona. Then underneath that, there's an individual persona that we shelter,” he said. “When I paint a person over time, I create a relaxed setting, try to think of my sitter in a dignified way. It creates an easy and comfortable atmosphere.”

The ease of being that the sitters seem to exude allows us to relate to them as a neighbor, a remembered high school classmate, or the local mechanic.

Assael likens a sitter to an actor. As the metaphorical director, he can have a vision, but he cannot control the outcome of a

performance any more than he can force serendipity. In the give and take between “actor” and “director,” sometimes the artist shows himself in an unconscious revelation that manifests in the spirit of the work.

Other times, “having a strong actor can change everything; it can steer the narrative in one direction over another,” Assael wrote in a description of his methodology. “These moments embody the fullness of an experience; the advantage working from life is in the representation of what is expected or unexpected through this sequence of events.”

Working from photographs doesn’t allow chance to enter the process, he said. Chance is precisely what brings most of Assael’s sitters through his studio door.

“I don’t consciously look for a certain type of person,” he said. “A few times people came into my studio without me even knowing who they were.”

Once, a woman with a baby in a basket walked right past him and into his studio. He drew her, and all sorts of people, “from club kids to firemen,” whom he met through a chain reaction of connections.

“There are no models,” he wrote. “Even [hired] models are never taken as models. Everyone is everyone, unique, and alike. ... I personally love people even with their tragic faults. We are the most interesting subject in the universe. The ‘figure’ or ‘portrait’ is only an extension of those feelings for me.”

# The Power of Suggestion

Assael's reclining nudes rest on white paper and a few lines that tether them onto a couch or bed in our minds. If not for those few light, expertly placed lines, figures would seem to pop from the page and float in space.

Assael's treatment of negative space is as interesting and calculated as his treatment of the subject. Sometimes a figure stretches to fill the paper from elbow to toe, as in "Reclining Figure Resting on Arm." At other times, it sits off-center, leaving white space for us to fill with our imaginations.

What's missing draws more attention to what's there. "An area that's of interest will get more developed as I go, whereas other areas get more subdued," he said.

In "Ava," the model's elegant profile stands out from a mass of curls à la Julia Roberts in "Pretty Woman." Among that immense area of texture is the simple line formed by nose, lips, chin—highlighted by light from an invisible but certain window.

In nearly every drawing we are able to "see" more than what's shown—plush couch cushions as represented by a few kitten whisker lines, or an upturned collar where a woman's hair suddenly ends.

Assael's ability to convey an artistic vision without micromanaging a drawing's development allows the sitter, and ultimately the viewer, to fill in the blanks. It's what makes his drawings so emotionally engaging.