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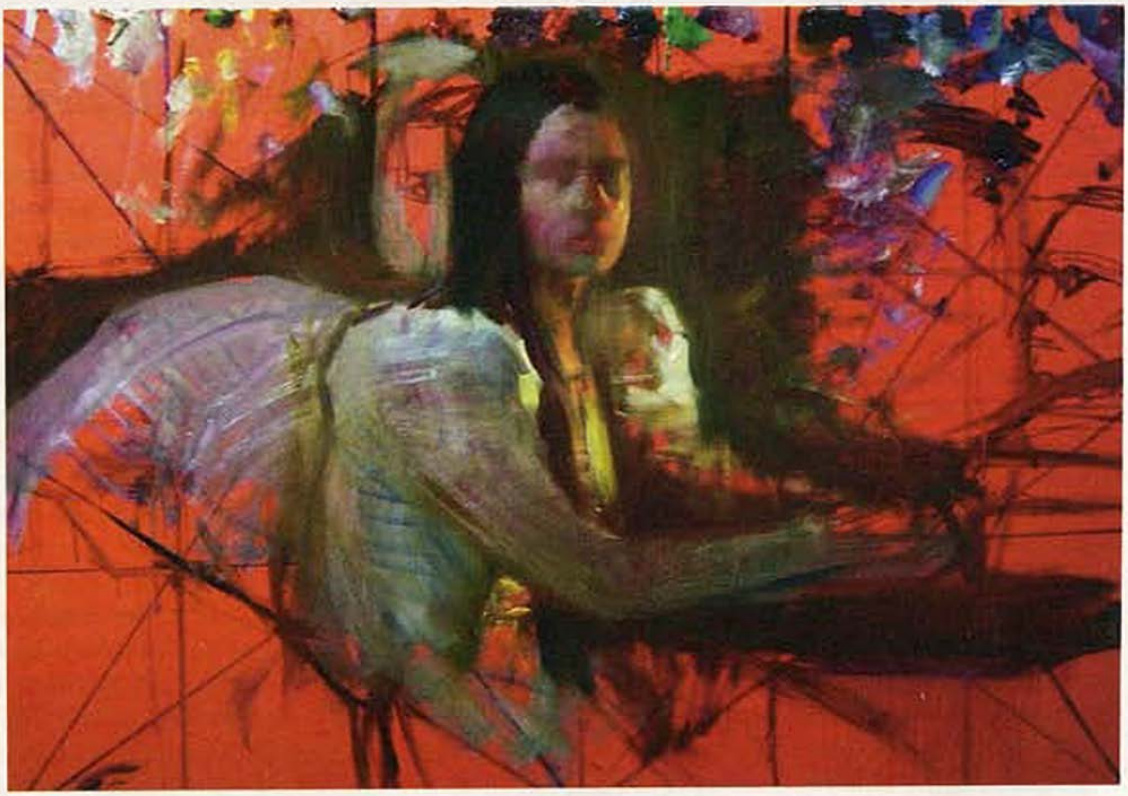
Untitled
(work in progress, detail, reversed)
by Steven Assael

ABOVE
Untitled (work in progress)

RIGHT
The above painting in an earlier state.



The EYE of the Painter

Steven Assael and the New Realism

Steven Assael's complex figurative paintings and vibrant working method reveal that concept and technique work hand in hand to further an artist's vision.

—

by Michael Gormley

A cloud of voluminous fabric hangs over Steven Assael's painting studio: crinoline, silk, and taffeta crisscross the loft's beamed ceiling and spill to the floor like waterfalls. The crush of gauze contrasts starkly with a stack of rough wooden pallets encrusted with mountains of dried pigment. An old couch and a jumble of worn folding chairs nestle under the tenting gowns. In an adjacent studio room a workshop is soon to commence, and a dozen easels and taborets crowd around a model stand.

Assael is also preparing for a solo exhibition at the Naples Museum of Art, in Florida, titled "Steven Assael: Illusions of Reality." A large canvas in full production sits on his easel. It depicts a bride in waiting. We see her seated at a table; our eyes meet hers as she pulls a sole card from a deck. Through the back of her veil, a shadowy father figure emerges toward her.

The card gets my attention. I guess (correctly, it turns out) that it is from a tarot deck, and as such it is a prime player in this enigmatic mythology. Tarot cards' archetypal symbolism stages a behind-the-scenes narrative presenting a cast of characters enacting rights and rituals informed by conflicting motives. Symbolizing both powerful character types and driving instincts, these actors play out the drama of real life. Both the tarot and Assael's painting do not actually claim to know the mystery of fortune telling. Rather, their magic offers an illuminated present.

Tarot cards warn us that we cannot know the future because it has yet to form itself, and Assael's uncanny power to bring the present moment to life with paint and canvas is synergistic with the tarot. "Painting is an activity that happens over time," Assael says. "It records a series of sequential, observable conditions occurring over time, unlike photography, which essentially records a discreet moment." Both the tarot and Assael's painting heed us to attend to our present circumstances—to really see and feel what is in our midst. Indeed, to be conscious and ever virtuous (as a bride in waiting) is an invaluable edge against the vagaries of Fortuna.

Brides reappear throughout Assael's oeuvre, and their presence exerts a powerful archetypal influence on his storytelling. In the artist's narratives, brides represent a state of preparation—a transformation, occurring in time and aided by rituals, that signifies unification. He notes that this can represent a spiritual unification—a union of the spirit with the flesh. Assael cites the biblical Parable of the 10 Virgins, Jan van Eyck's iconic painting *The Arnolfini Portrait*, and the sublime romantic artwork of Gustave Courbet as other works that employ bridal narratives to symbolize the metaphysical nature of transformation.

Preparation of the Bride, a large canvas depicting a bride being fitted in her gown, will be shown in "Illusions of Reality." A kneeling woman runs a tape measure up the voluminous skirt of the bride, who raises her arms in a gesture that hides her face. Her hands, touching at the wrist, turn outward in opposite directions; the pose is stiff, charged, and sacrificial. Faceless, her identity hidden from the viewer, she appears to be moving away from herself, transforming into something and someone else. Her veil spills out over an ironing board onto the lap of her elderly, wheelchair-bound father—who in actuality is Assael's own father.

Assael was grappling with his father's passing at the time he painted *Preparation of the Bride*, and its reference to Courbet's *Preparation of the Dead Girl* is undeniable and profound. Both paintings offer cathartic narratives within the context of cultural rituals that support our movement through the inescapable and incomprehensible stages and events of real life. Alas, time passes. We marry, bear children, and watch our loved ones die. All are contained here, within the empty yet fecund whiteness of a bridal gown.

The exploration of life and the investigation of the universality of the events and relationships that inform our shared human experience underpin the whole of Assael's art production. His avid curiosity for this life motivates him to work and keeps him painting. He carries a sketchbook wherever he goes, and he enjoys traveling and observing his fellows. These observational sketches are records of what gets his attention—what he finds baffling or intriguing about the human condition. Often a sketch becomes the basis for a painting, in which he can further investigate questions that arise in response to his observations about life's strange and often bizarre occurrences.

On a train trip through Europe, for example, Assael observed a fellow traveler asleep. He noticed that the movement of the train had lulled the passenger to sleep, yet the same

OPPOSITE PAGE
Preparation of the Bride
1994, oil, 96 x 108.
Collection Seven Bridges Foundation.
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.
© Steven Assael.

RIGHT
Untitled (work in progress)

movement had not had the same impact on the traveler's pet, a very agitated dog endlessly pacing in a carrier. That observation intrigued the artist. Why could the human sleep and the dog not?

Assael's observations about sleep surprised him; he had an emotive response to this life observation. Once he distanced himself from the initial experience and the concurrent emotive response and became an outside observer, he could begin to explore the etiology of his observation. He then set out a strategy—a map—which would support this investigation. The initial observation, and his conscious attention to his rising interest, inspired a painting. *Passengers* is the end product of that initial observation and subsequent questioning.

Passengers transforms Assael's initial sketchbook notation into a puzzling multifigure composition full of symbols. A slumbering American family replaces the lone sketched somnambulant, and two monkeys are the pets. Both these changes nod to time, evolution, and procreation. A train car is implied; bags are strewn about the travelers' feet, and bits of belongings, including a Superman costume, invade the painting's top edge. The father's reflection appears in the window, yet a hanging luggage strap throws a telltale shadow on the passing view; a clue that we are not seeing a pretty country landscape but rather a painted backdrop—a Renaissance pastoral trope referencing art history rather than the present day.

Assael postulates that humans can

RIGHT
Passengers
2008, oil, 72 x 90.
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.
© Steven Assael.

sleep when they are traveling because they comprehend the relationship of time and space and can rest with reasonable assurance, knowing that a predicted outcome or destination is likely to occur. Animals can't—they don't comprehend the passing of time nor do they imagine a future. Animals live in the present. The family's slumbering state begins to take on additional significance when one considers that humans can—and often do—spend a lot of time in an imagined future or a remembered past at the expense of living in the present moment. Like Assael, I begin to wonder how much we really see as we travel through this short life. Do we wake up one day, discover that we are old, and wonder where we were when time passed?

The Superman suit provides another clue to unlocking *Passengers*' enigmatic mythology. It traffics another loaded archetype—the hero, or in the language of the tarot, the knight-errant. Assael explains that the painting assigns his Americans with the heroic task of saving figurative realism, an art birthed then abandoned by Europe, the land presumably depicted in the landscape backdrop.

I am also struck by the family's physical appearance—they are bedraggled beyond the usual lack of deportment Americans display while traveling abroad. Their sleep seems to be a deep exhausted slumber rather than a motion-induced catnap. Assael has explored the topic of homelessness before. Here he seems to be depicting refugees—at least in a symbolic sense. I wonder if they, or indeed if any of us, have a true resting place or destination beyond that offered in death.

A FEW DAYS LATER I return to Assael's studio. He is sitting with about a dozen students, half men and half women, all seemingly under 30. He is giving an introductory talk before the day's demonstration. He is trying in all earnestness to make a point, and after each rephrase he asks, "Does this make any sense?" Some students nod. Others appear perplexed. Assael increases his effort to restage words and phrases into plausible concepts. He is talking about painting from life, and he clearly believes this manner of working is important. Very important.

"Painting starts with a response to a life observation that appeals to you," Assael says. "On the model that could be a turn of a hair or how that hair falls on the shoulder. You need to form a strategy for recreating that moment or event that enlisted a response from you. First, take pause and separate yourself from that emotive response so that you can become an acute observer of that event. Then, formalize a strategy for how you will seek and selectively capture, with paint, what you have observed."

He likens the initial steps in a painting to a game of chess. At the start of the game we push out our pawns as tentative exploratory gestures. Pawns are small players in the big picture; we use them to try out our "map," and if necessary they can be sacrificed to an altered course of action to accommodate unexpected changes in what we are observing. Assael urges his students to be sensitive to these changes (i.e. in the model). These discreetly observed "particulars" represent special characteristics. They add an element of variety to a painting, and that variety holds the viewer's interest.

Assael offers an anecdote about Degas to illustrate how the observation of a specific characteristic reinforces the whole of a painting's expression. "Degas

was painting a portrait, and he noticed that his sitter's vest button had come undone," Assael says. "He was alert to that change, and that 'particular' represented what he was after—it initiated a response in Degas because it reinforced a larger theme informing the painting, and it provided him the means to selectively express that overriding theme."

Assael teaches his students to keep their eyes moving over the entire model when they are working. This strategy forces them to remain sensitive to the particulars that surprise them and activate responses. He adds, "Particulars are wedded to the moment. In specificity, the miracle of individuality finds its way to be observed. Your responses are choices.

LEFT
Crowd No. 1
2009, oil, 72 x 96.
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.
© Steven Assael.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Maria
2000, oil, 30 x 24.
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.
© Steven Assael.

BELOW LEFT
Untitled (work in progress)

they are the product of what excited you, and they advance you to each successive moment and the next surprising observation. For example, you may be captivated by the transparent cool shade thrown by the model's head as it travels down the shoulder and comes up against the warm opaque light reflecting off the chest. You can respond to that experience (and express the feel of life) by employing a painting strategy that simplifies, separates, and establishes the essential characteristics of the oppositional relationships you are excited about—in this instance, the sensation of cool versus warm and transparency versus opacity."

The artist also urges his students to keep their eyes moving over the entire model rather than focus on a specific part so that they can better understand the relation of the parts to the whole. He helps them see the symmetry, rhythms, reoccurring angles, or curves that lend form unity and wholeness to their work. "The artist needs to observe closely and see the veins of the leaf—to see all the variety that characterizes this one leaf," he says. "Then he needs also to step back to see the leaf in relation to the other leaves and how they tie together symmetrically to form the whole which is the tree. Likewise, without this sense of unity, a painting falls apart to the eye. Conversely, if there is just symmetry and no variety, the painting becomes monotonous. Both are hard to look at.

"Your painting both identifies ande brings together opposites—a process that moves from part to whole," Assael continues. "As you selectively move from moment to moment, the particulars of your experience get imprinted on the painting's surface—the particulars are what surprise you in each moment. Your overarching aim with painting is to lock in a genuine expression of each subsequent surprise. If you let this fresh perspective take precedent and lead you as you work, your painting will express a feeling of life as it builds and moves from the specific to a complex whole."

To drive home his point about working from life, Assael offers his thoughts about working from a live model. "The model is alive; a spirited presence that you must respond to," he says. "Avoid objectifying the model to suit your desire to get a certain form or color right. You need to work through the challenge that

About the Exhibition

"Steven Assael: Illusions of Reality"e runs through January 9, 2011,e at the Patty & Jay Baker Naplese Museum of Art, in Naples, Florida.e The exhibition is organized with thee cooperation of Forum Gallery, in New York City.e

an intimate confrontation with another human being entails—allow yourself to be thrown back on yourself. Allow the uncertainty. You will begin to see in the model a true reflection of yourself and, in a larger sense, the human condition you both share. The experience of the model will then take on greater significance. Attend to the particulars that you are observing, while remaining open to seeing the whole of the experience that is unfolding before you. Become conscious of your changing perceptions as you struggle to take in the model's presence and your uncomfortability with that presence. Also be aware of your struggle and your effort to comprehend the barrage of sensory perceptions you have laid yourself open to. Take note that the act of painting engages memory. As soon as you turn your head from the model to the canvas your initial observation becomes tainted, whether you like it or not."

Assael asks his students to define what excites them and what they think is important. The question is rhetorical; he wants them to ask themselves these same questions when they are in front of the model and starting to paint. He adds that if they are not open to an emotional or intellectual response to their experience with the model, they will be simply engaged in an exercise: the modeling of form. "If you base your painting on this sole motive—an academic concern for verisimilitude—you will eventually cease working," he says. "If you have no understanding of what excites you, you will cease starting to paint, because you will have no sincere and individuated motivation to do so."

The workshop students assemble for a painting demonstration. Warm lights bathe the model in an orange glow; the brilliant color is mirrored in a multitude of prepared canvases stacked around the studio room—all alight with a startling red-orange imprimatur. The model is male, dark, brooding, and strikingly handsome. I think about Assael's discussion with his student about interacting with the model on an intimate basis, and I wonder how Assael will interact with this swarthy masculine presence.

Few contemporary realists have successfully depicted the male nude with the force and conviction that Assael has. *Robert Twice*, for example, is much more than a simple figurative painting. His back up against a mirror, Robert averts his gaze, yet in his reflection we are made aware that he is conscious of our own penetrating gaze. The painting comments on such archetypal figures as Narcissus and Saint Sebastian, and ite works to subvert concepts concerning thee male gaze and the female as object—keye motives in the history of Western art.e

Before the workshop demonstration commences, Assael offers a brief introduction. He discusses his working map—his strategy for observing, organizing, and painting what he is experiencing and seeing before him. For example, he notes that he looks for opposing relationships. Shadow forms on the model recede from the eye and appear cool and transparent in comparison to forms that are in the light, which advance and appear more opaque. He advises painters to keep their eyes moving over the model so that they can experience these oppositional relationships that signal form changes and placement in space. Again comparing the act of painting to that of a card or chess game, he recommends a strategy

OPPOSITE PAGE
Robert Twice
2003, oil on panel, 96½ x 42. Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York. © Steven Assael.

LEFT
Double Portrait I
2004, oil on board, 12 x 14. Private collection. Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York. © Steven Assael.

About the Artist

Steven Assael was born in New York City and studied at Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn. Since 1985 he has been an instructor at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City. His paintings have won numerous awards and been featured in many solo and group exhibitions, including a one-person retrospective exhibition at the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle. He is represented by Forum Gallery, in New York City. For more information, visit www.stevenassael.com.

that keeps key plays in reserve. Like an ace in hand, he advises holding back on the brightest colors, lightest lights, and darkest darks, which can be selectively summoned to express the painting's most important relationships.

Assael begins the head study by roughly sketching in a pentagram shape with thinned black paint lines that vibrate against the red-orange canvas surface. Assael uses the pentagram's criss-crossing lines, which have divided the picture plane into discreet sections, to situate the model's heads and shoulders. The placement is spot on. Next, he quickly establishes patterns of light and dark to express the major planes, form changes, and volumes of the head and shoulders.

With this basic yet true modeling, Assael has already captured the model's likeness. He could stop right here. He doesn't. He rapidly applies bold color strokes that at first glance appear garish against the red-orange base coat. He paints with a loaded brush of pure and highly saturated pigments and breaks one color over another in a quick succession of staccato strokes.

Assael's alla prima painting method is not for the faint of heart or the unaware. His strokes are fast, deliberate, and have a slight backhand snap that releases the pigment in an almost splattering pattern. Overworked strokes tend to lessen oil paint's brilliance by flattening the pigment crystals; Assael has arrived at a method of action painting that keeps his paint colors pure and brilliant. He often employs a fan brush and rolls the fiber tips over separate colors simultaneously, allowing them to mix as the brush is tapered on the canvas. He also moves inside and outside the figure with regularity, ensuring that the figure emerges yet remains anchored in a breathable atmospheric space. The resulting figure pulsates with blood-filled color and dimensional force. It feels like life.

The artist then plays his ace and applies a brilliant yellowed flesh tone to express the light that has cut a halo on the right side of model's face. He stops. The model breaks and the students, unabashed, crowd the painting and Assael for a closer inspection of the creation that has left us in awe.

Assael's painting technique demonstrates a defining motive informing his production. Technique is wedded to concept. The two cannot, the artist asserts, be conceived or enacted as separate artistic processes. Assael ventures as far as to insist that, even in an artist's early training, intent and method of production be explored and developed simultaneously, as both are key to the development of a meaningful and sustainable art practice. Assael's painting process mirrors his interests. He is fascinated by human beings and their myriad expressions of quirky uniqueness. He is not attempting to depict an idealized classical beauty, but rather he advances a deeply sensuous and romantic view that explores the very strangeness of being alive.

His symbolic imagery, mythic narrative, and alla prima painting technique merge into a singular and compelling expression. He presents us with paintings that evidence an abiding curiosity driving an in-depth exploration, which in turn reveals the complexities of our often flawed, forever intriguing, sometimes alarming human existence. ■

Michael Gormley is the editorial director of American Artist.