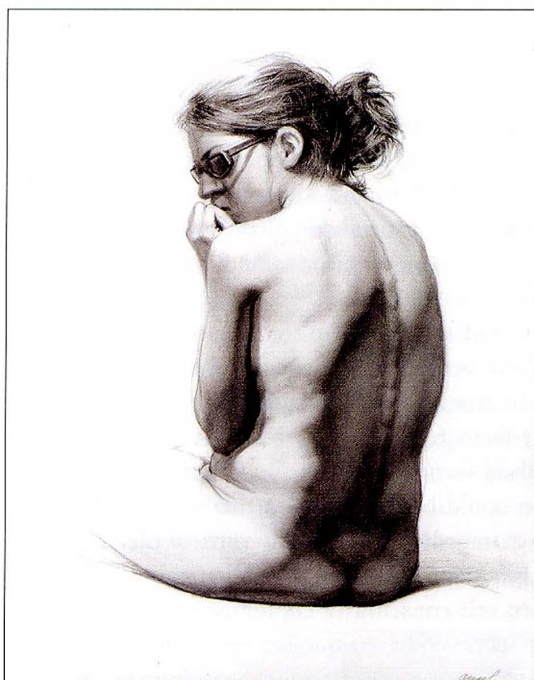


**Steven Assael**

Drawing is perhaps the most intimate of artistic practices. That intimacy can take a variety of forms: the rough sketch that records the initial visual thinking behind a composition, the close analysis of details of drapery or gestures, the polished exploration of line that becomes an end in itself. New York City artist Steven Assael (b. 1957) is a passionate and meticulous draftsman, and his solo exhibition of drawings at Forum Gallery in Los Angeles promises to be a highlight of the fall season. (A group show, featuring Assael and other contemporary realists, along with older works, titled “The Fine Art of Drawing: Modern and Contemporary Works on Paper,” was on view in September at Forum Gallery, New York City.) The present crop of realist artists could be characterized as working in the classical tradition, for the most part. Assael can limn an academic nude as well as anyone today. In *Seated Figure with Sunglasses* (2005) the young woman’s spine and muscles are



Steven Assael  
*Seated Figure with Sunglasses*, 2005  
COURTESY FORUM GALLERY  
LOS ANGELES

elegantly articulated, reminding us why masters such as Ingres and Prud’hon were enamored of the back view. But Assael’s neoclassical polish has a contemporary edge. The model’s personality comes through not only in the raffish sunglasses but in her body

language. Her closed-in posture and the way her fist covers her mouth convey wariness. Her hair is pulled back in an unruly ponytail, and while Assael’s pencil captures the sheen and texture of her hair beautifully, this model is not going along with the idealized-nude scenario played out in old master studios. The model for *Sheila Wearing a Mask* (2007), in contrast, clearly relishes the spotlight. An outré temptress with dark stockings, beads and a feather headdress that explodes around her face, she could be a Weimar nightclub habitu . As a painter, Assael places his old master technique at the service of some extreme Romantic exotica, exploring the tribal fashions and attitudes of contemporary goths and punks. His approach to his tattooed and pierced models, many of

them hired off the street, remains humane and respectful. *Amber with Peacock Feathers 5* (2002) depicts a counterculture prom queen in fingerless long gloves, a flower tiara and a peacock-feather skirt. Like Ingres, Assael combines different kinds of drawing to focus attention on the most important features. The peacock feathers are lightly sketched in, a silky burst of bodice feathers more tightly delineated, the face and hands carefully filled in for a fully three-dimensional effect. Classicists are sometimes accused, frequently justifiably, of generalizing to the point of chilly perfection. Assael uses his formidable technique to capture the vitality of his subjects. It would be easy to exaggerate Amber's idiosyncrasies and push for the grotesque. Assael finds a lively individual who embraces her own theatricality. At its best, classicism encompasses both an array of skills and a respect for the visible world as something that deserves honest representation. Assael's drawings are a testament to that tradition. The exhibition runs from November 9 to December 21, 2007, at Forum Gallery, 8069 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90048. Telephone (323) 655-1550. On the web at [www.forumgallery.com](http://www.forumgallery.com)