

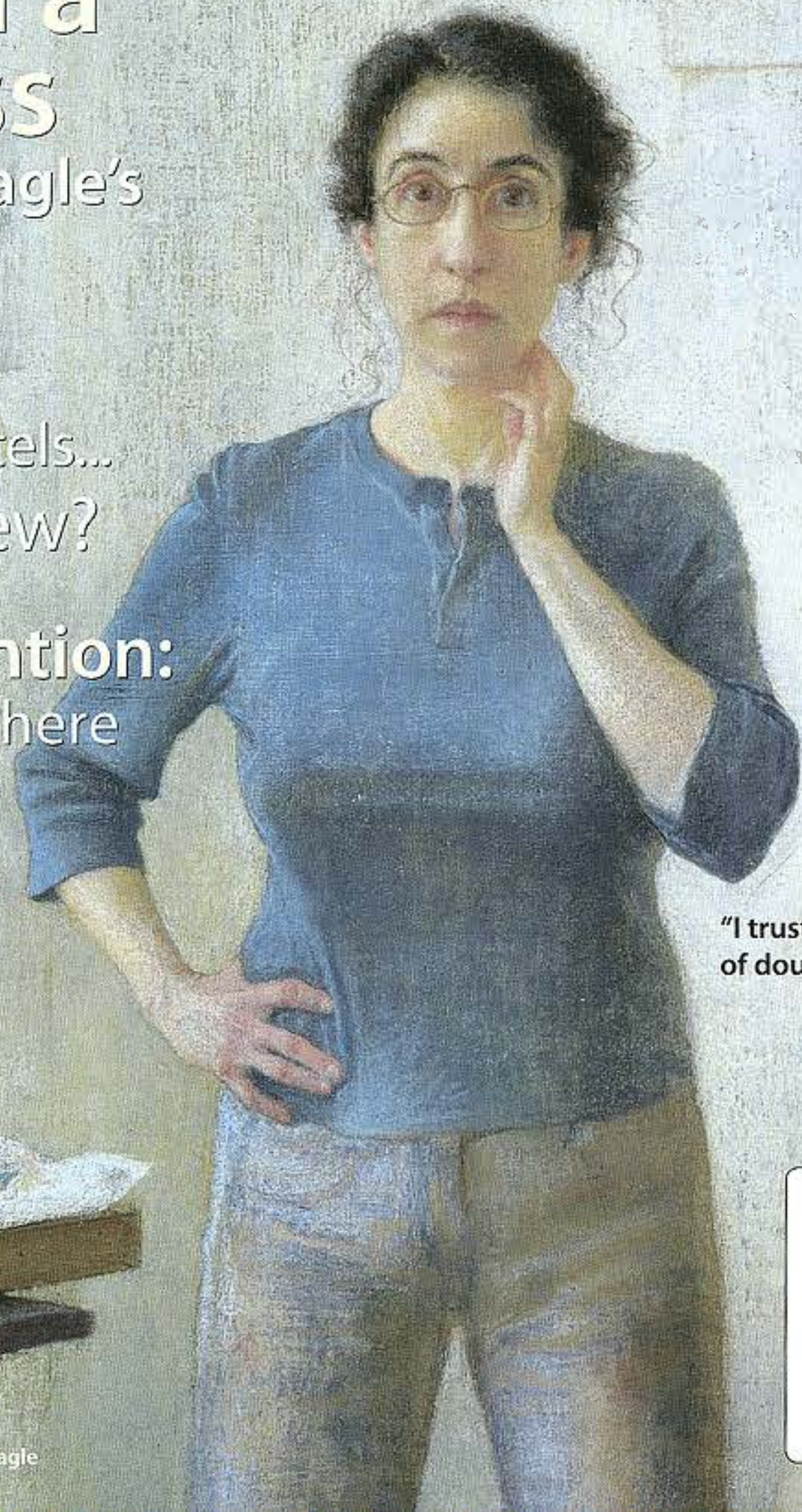
The Pastel Journal

ISSUE NO. 44 JUNE 2006

Pushing Portraiture Beyond a Likeness
Inside Ellen Eagle's Studio

Exclusive Janet Fish's Pastels... Who Knew?

Defy Convention: Create atmosphere with fixative & spray paint



"I trust the sensation of doubt."
—Ellen Eagle

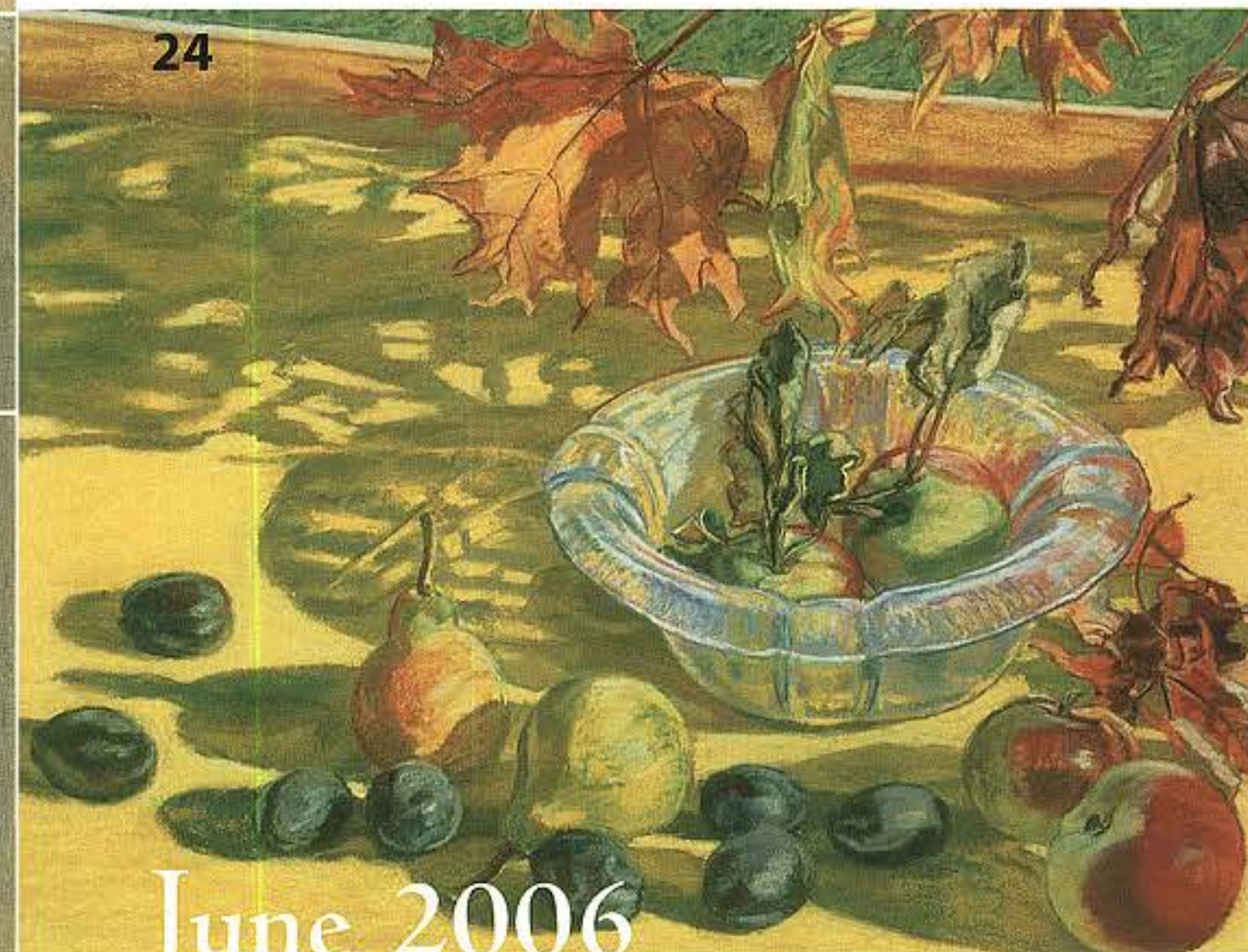
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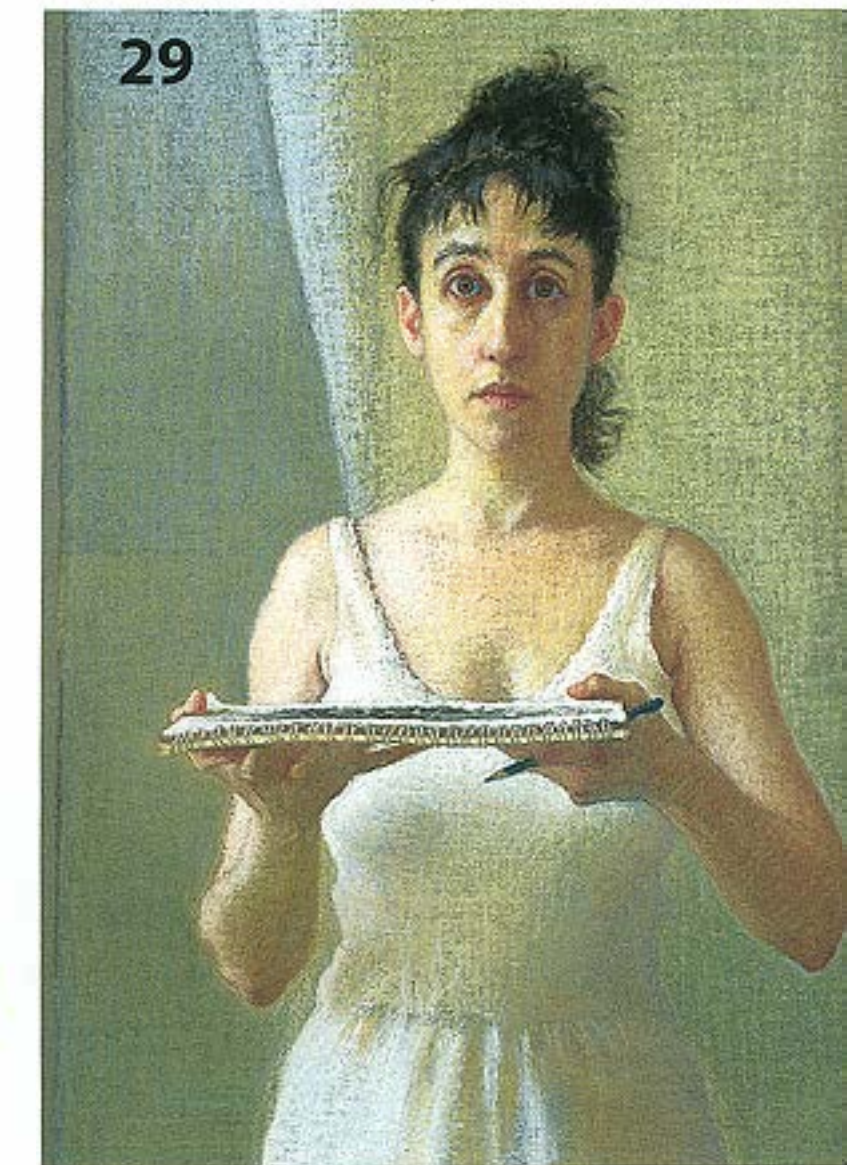
Display until July 3, 2006

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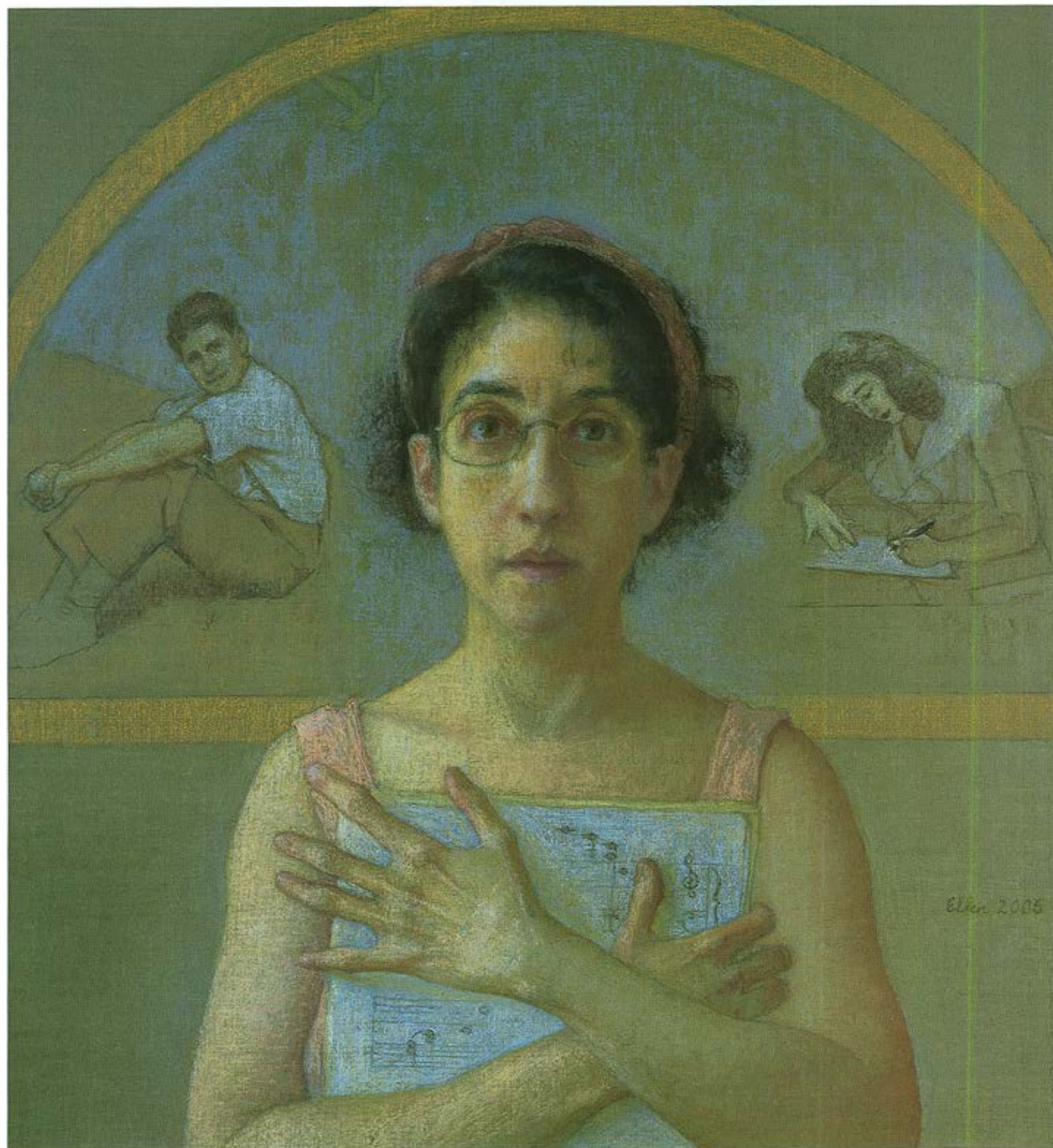
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Roslyn and Arturo
(13x12)

Ellen Eagle

The figure in its endless variety is the subject of an artist's intense gaze.

By Loraine DeBonis

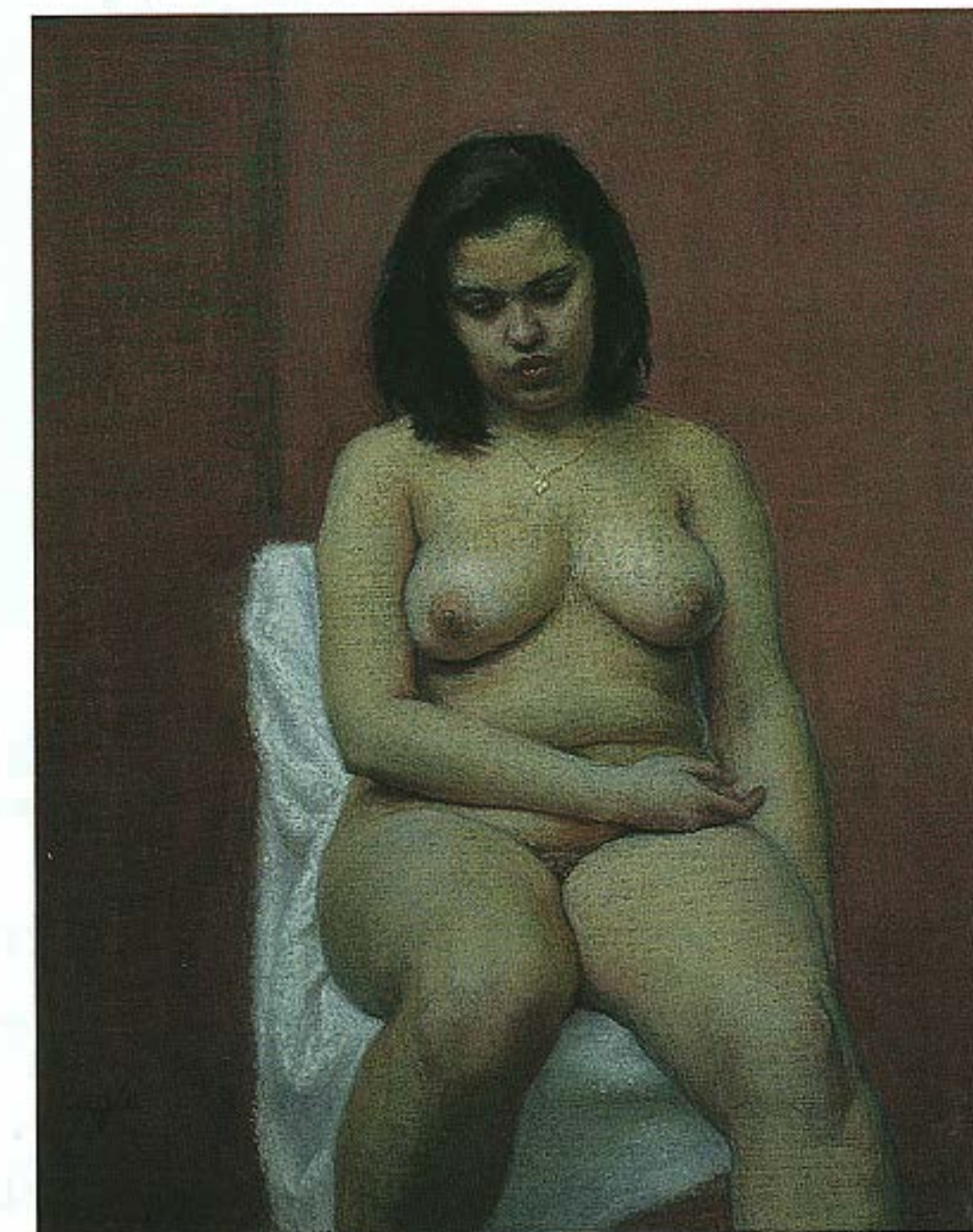


Mercedes With Hands in Lap
(above, 12x3)

Seated Nude
(at right, 9x7)

Ellen Eagle doesn't shy away from sadness, fragility, anger, or flesh. She addresses, without hesitation, the range of psychological and physical states we find ourselves in. Wrinkled, sagging, raw—all conditions are illuminated. By refusing to romanticize her subjects, the artist connects with them, and she paints them in such a way that we connect with them, too. The artist herself stares back at us from the surface—inviting us inside her studio, into her world, both external and internal.

"I'm never tempted to remove a bump from a nose or a vein from the side of a face," says Eagle. "I love the shapes of our individuality, our humanness." Devoted to capturing the human figure as she sees it, Eagle says her complex subject has



everything an artist could want: form and color as revealed by light, and the full range of human emotion. "The human figure has soul, spirit, fear, courage, fatigue, energy. My paintings develop slowly during a series of sittings. Inevitably, the model's mind drifts to private thoughts, which register on his or her body. Even when the body is most obviously still, there's a subtle virality. As the artist, I bring my own emotions into the studio every day. I want to extract, from the many expressive moments the model reveals, that which is most meaningful to me."

With so many elements to organize on the page, simplicity is Eagle's goal. "I want to observe the complexity of the human presence and express it with simplicity," she explains. "For me, simplicity has to do with form revealed in one enveloping light, the large forms and selected details working in concert to create oneness. The human presence is full of emotional contradictions. I try to hold them together in a single light to express my emotional response with clarity."

Drawing: A Starting Point

For Eagle, who actually began college as a music major, drawing the figure was a vital starting point for the development of her visual art. She attended the California College of Arts and Crafts (Oakland), where she earned a degree in drawing. "It was the only program I knew of in which the drawing department wasn't a subtext of the painting department," Eagle says. "At that time, drawing the figure was my sole interest. I wasn't prepared to consider color. I was focused on line and value. Now my eye constantly craves color."

When she returned to her native New York, Eagle also returned to the Art Students League—she first took classes there at age 10—to study life drawing and painting with several renowned artists, including Harvey Dinnerstein. Although she learned many things at the League, the most important was: "My work is my responsibility. It's my own personal statement and only I can do it." Now that Eagle is herself a teacher at the League and at the National Academy School of Fine Arts, she tries to impart that lesson to her students. "Some of my students begin my class asking to learn to do what I do. But my work looks the way it does because of my temperament, because of the way I perceive my subject. I do have a very strong aesthetic sense of what I respond to in painting—I love the elegant and psychological portraits of Ingres and Eakins, and the simplicity and light of Vermeer. Those artists and all great artists expressed their own personal visions. That's the foundation of any meaningful artistic statement. As a teacher, I have no interest in creating mimics of me."

An Evolving Process

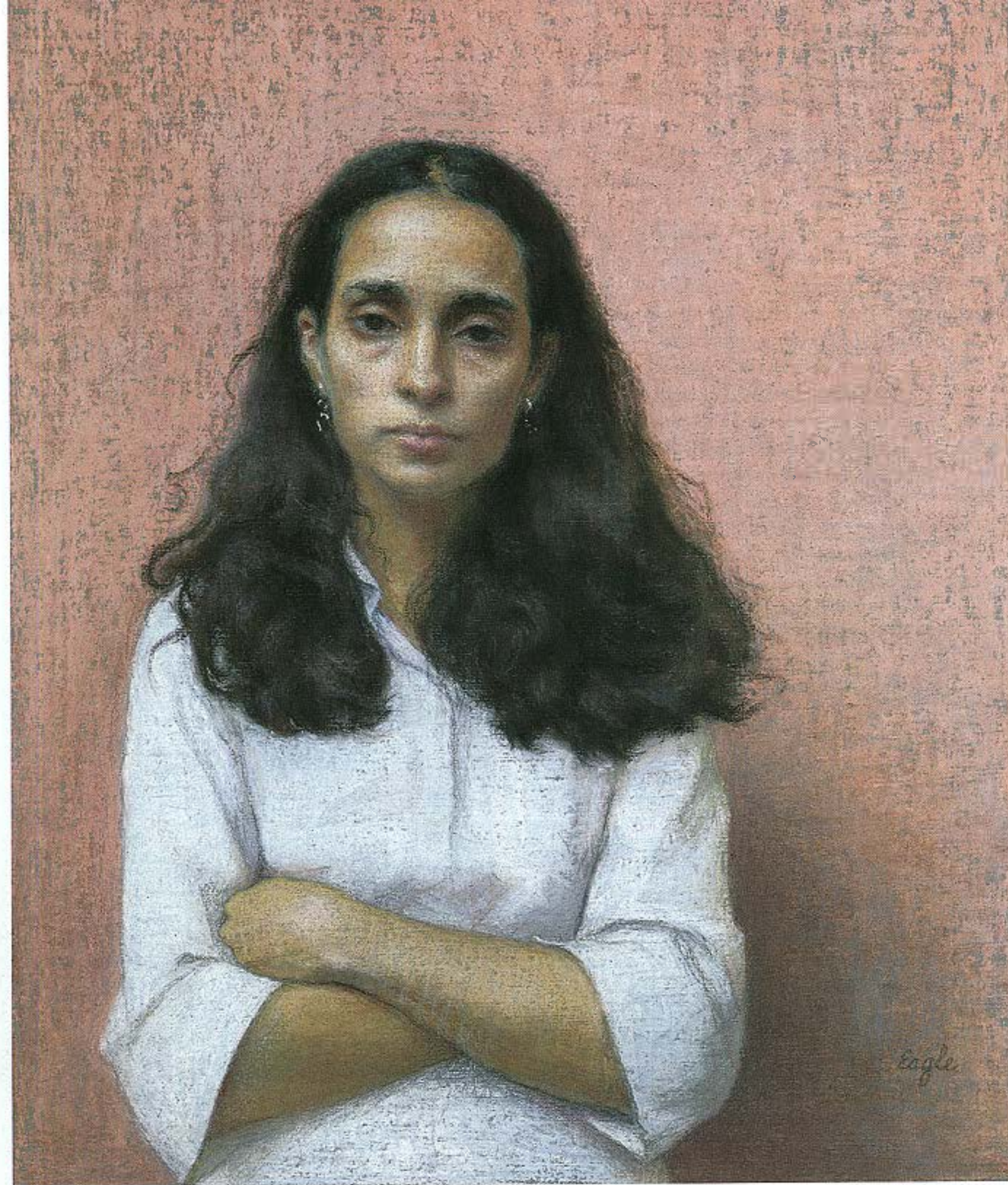
As for her process, she's happy to share technical knowledge but notes that her process is always changing. "I don't really know when I start what's going to happen," she says. "That's actually the subject of one of my paintings, *Each Time, and Again* (on page 33). The painting



shows me in my usual state of befuddlement at the easel. There's not really an exact linear progression in my process—I look at my subject and begin to record my main impressions. Then I assess what I've drawn, adjust, and address subtler and subtler color and value relationships, always striving to coalesce the parts into an overall unity."

Eagle starts her exploration with a black-and-white pencil sketch. She then prepares an illustration board with pumice and gesso. "I've touched prepared boards; they feel cold and mechanical. I prefer to make my own." After she applies a middle tone of Liquitex acrylic—usually a cool or warm gray—to her surface, Eagle starts to apply layers of pastel. "Students often ask how many layers I use. The answer is 'as many as it takes to achieve the color I see.' Sometimes I need just one layer of one color; more

Machado
(7x5)



Evelyn With Arms
Folded (11x9)

often I need many interweaving layers of several colors. That's what I love about pastel, the building and interweaving of strokes of color."

Rembrandt, Nupastel, and Grumbacher are her mainstays, but she also has sticks of various other brands. Rarely using workable fixative, unless it's to regain tooth or to correct a mistake, Eagle usually lets her pastels breathe. Once, however, even after she framed a painting, she found that she had to go back and rework something.

Interestingly enough, the painting that expresses her confusion at the easel is one that Eagle felt compelled to revisit. "Each time I go to the easel I'm questioning what I did before, hence the title *Each Time* (see page 33)," she explains. "I trust the sensation of doubt. If I have an intuitive desire to explore

something, I go for it, but then I have to judge objectively whether or not it worked. That has as much to do with content as with form; they're inseparable. I had *Each Time* framed, but I felt unsatisfied, as though I'd approached the idea but hadn't probed it fully. There was something missing. I realized that my figure seemed unconnected to the board. I took the painting out of the frame and added the two drawings taped to the back wall. The papers seemed to speak of the artist's transference of impulse and thought to the surface, and completed a compositional circle I'd been seeking. I realized that my process of unframing and reworking the painting was an enactment of the painting's premise, and I renamed it *Each Time, and Again*." (See the finished painting at the bottom of page 33 and on this issue's cover.)

Homage to Parents

Although she often paints self-portraits, a recent painting proved to be the most personal subject Eagle has tackled yet—her relationship with her parents. “Painting *Roslyn and Arturo* (see page 29) was an extremely important experience for me,” she says. “My father died two years ago, and I realized that I needed to make a painting about my love for him. I was filled with grief over my father’s illness and death and filled with awe for my mother’s extraordinary strength. I needed to make a painting for them.”

“I looked at photos of my parents when they were very young, and their kind and gentle natures were so evident. In my painting, I portrayed my mother in the act of writing as an embodiment of her focus and industry, and of the words of wisdom she has always imparted to her family. I portrayed my father outside because he felt so close to nature.” The artist positioned her father turning and facing toward her because, she says, “He loved being a father. I left his shoes pale because he’s not walking on the earth anymore.” A bird—her father’s spirit—flies away, out of the frame. “I know this symbolism risks great sentimentality, but I figured if ever there was a painting in which to take that risk, this is the one.” The bird, though leaving, faces the artist’s mother, implying her parents’ connection to each other. You’ll also notice that in the center the artist’s arms are crossed. She explains: “Clearly this picture is about my heart, but I didn’t want just to be touching my heart. So I had the idea that I should clutch sheer music. To my eye, musical notation is beautiful unto itself, and the sheet music also relates to my father’s encyclopedic knowledge of music. He brought music into our home and made it a central part of our lives, but mostly the music represents the intricate places in my heart, feelings that accompany me because of the kindness my parents

showed me.” To complete the image, Eagle put a gold frame around her parents to unite them and suggest that their depictions are based on impressions from the past—separate from the present moment in which the artist is at work in her studio.

Life Illuminated

Whether she’s painting herself, people she knows well or slightly, Eagle says painting from life in natural light is imperative. Luckily, her studio, which is in the attic of her 96-year-old house, has plenty of northeast light. “I have one wall that’s almost all windows, and I’m fortunate to be on the third

floor because when I look outside, I see sky and trees. Today’s it’s a bit foggy and the light is just gorgeous.” Other days the sun proves too bright and colors appear bleached out, so Eagle plans to get a translucent window shade. A sink, mirror, and model stand complete the space, and just recently she added a small CD player. “I generally work in complete silence, but sometimes I like to work with a particular piece of music that feels in keeping with the tone of my painting. For instance, when I did *Roslyn and Arturo* I listened to Rosa Ponselle (1936-1952) one of my father’s favorite opera singers.”



Each Time
(above, 23x18)

Each Time, and Again (23x18)



Mei-Chia With Blue Ribbon
(above, 9x7)

Just Look (above, right, 14x8)

When you look at Eagle’s paintings, it’s obvious that she has found a signature style. Her images, strong and subtle at the same time, convey a likeness as well as the emotions not only of the model but of the artist. “How did I select my style? I didn’t. I just hold my pastels and this is how the work comes out. I’m looking to represent what I see. I love what I see, and I want to pay tribute to the beauty and power of nature. I want to be a witness.”

Through her vision, she hopes to make us all witnesses, to help us see ourselves a little more clearly. “I



want to capture something very specific about my individual subject, but I also want the viewer to recognize something about him or herself in the paintings, so there’s something universal, as well,” she says. “A choreographer once told me that when she tried to achieve something universal, she ended up with nothing. But when she tried to go for things that were specific, she ended up with things that were universal. When viewers look at my work, I want them to recognize something they feel about being alive.”

Ellen Eagle grew up in Staten Island, New York. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing from what is now called the California College of the Fine Arts (Oakland, San Francisco). She continued her studies at the Art Students League and National Academy School of Fine Arts, where she now teaches. She has participated in exhibitions at the Frye Art Museum (Seattle) and The Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio). Her work is represented by Forum Gallery (New York, Los Angeles). Visit www.forumgallery.com for more information.

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