

AMERICAN ARTIST

DECEMBER 2004 \$3.95 U.S. / \$5.95 CAN.



PASTEL PAINTING

Ellen Eagle, of Glen Ridge, New Jersey, studied with Daniel E. Greene, as well as at the California College of Arts and Crafts, in Oakland; the National Academy School of Fine Arts, in New York City; and the Art Students League of New York, also in New York City. She is represented in New York by Forum Gallery, which hosted a solo exhibition of her work in 2002. In addition to participating in numerous group shows, Eagle has had solo exhibitions at such venues as the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, in Old Lyme, Connecticut, where she taught a workshop last summer, and Concordia College, in Bronxville, New York. Her pastels hang in many private and corporate collections.



Each Time, 2004, pastel, 23½ x 17¼. © Ellen Eagle, courtesy Forum Gallery.

In art Ellen Eagle values honesty above all else. This would explain her aversion to flamboyance and her attraction to models who convey modesty in appearance and demeanor. She recalls seeing a quote on the wall of the 2002 Thomas Eakins exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art: "I came upon a quote that said, 'I hate affectation,' and I laughed, delighted by Eakins' blunt expression. But this is a serious statement." Indeed, Eagle is intent when speaking about her pastel portraits. To her, they are an undeniable extension of herself, representative of her temperament. "I'm a quiet person," she says, "and I'm looking for the simplest possible expression. Simplicity feels right for me."

Eagle describes her method as a response to the subject at hand, but also a process of delving more deeply than surface appearance to offer a glimpse of an inner life. In *Self-portrait, In Blue*, for example, she pictures a moment in which she steps back from the easel, removes her glasses, and looks again, literally and figuratively, to see what is before her as it actually appears. A feeling of vulnerability pervades the work, reinforced by the open gesture and the nearly transparent gown. Here I am, she seems to say, as I really am.

Besides allowing her to address some personal issues, the painting created an

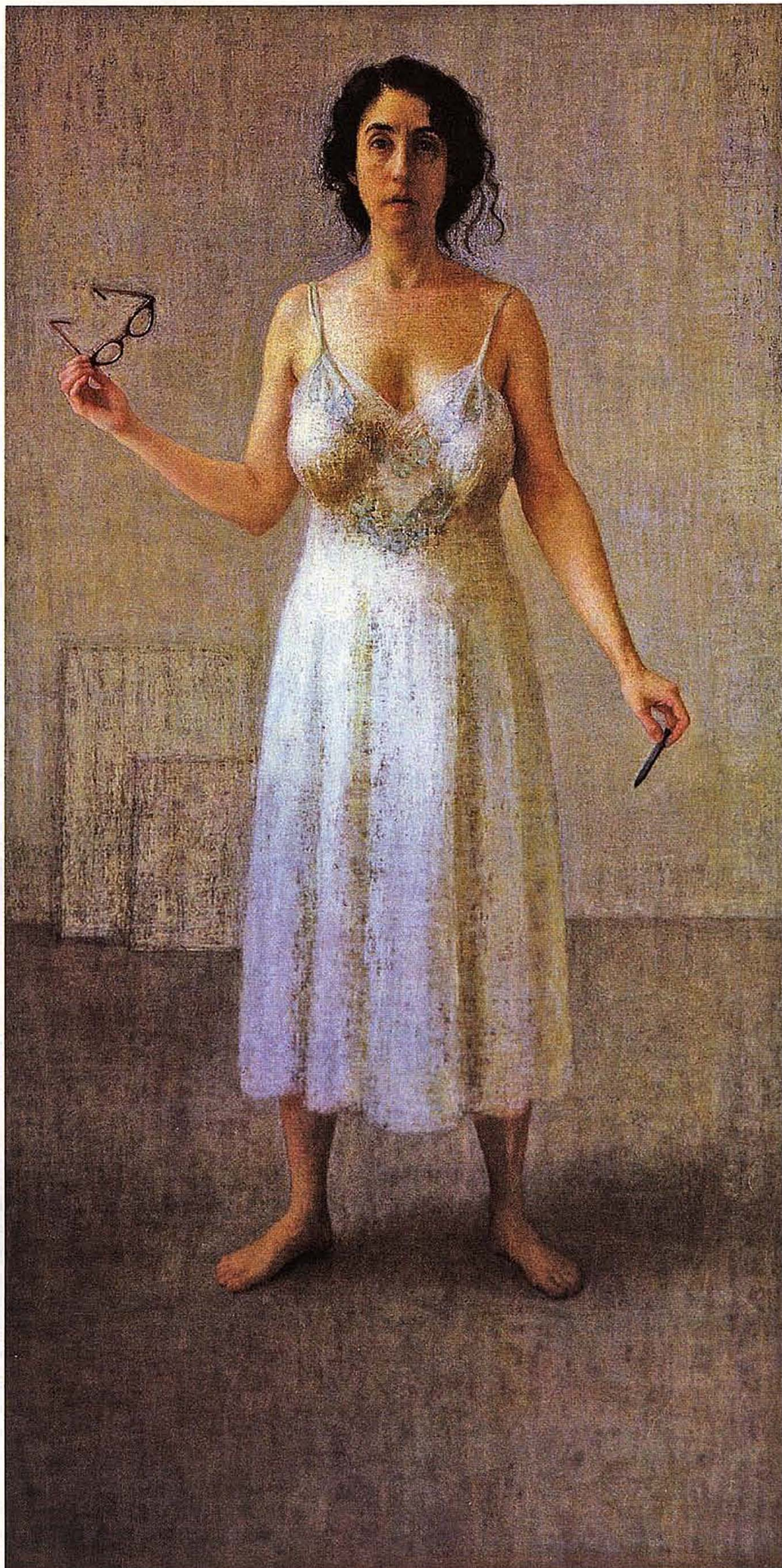
opportunity to experiment with a close value range, an equally important part of the painting's development. "I was taken by the monochromatic quality," the artist says, "the light-blue gown against the white wall, the gray areas on the walls, and the gray floor. I liked the warm yellow-green on the right side of the gown compared to the wall, and the subtle transition from the shadow side to the light side." In establishing the value structure, she concerned herself with the formal objective of "achieving unity while accounting for all the important differences we can see within the form if we really look carefully."

The idea for the painting first occurred to her three years before she began the final work. She happened to see herself in the light of her studio at just the right moment, and she made a quick tone drawing to preserve the idea. Not until she faced a personal crisis, the illness of her father, did she pick up the idea again and explore it fully. "My feelings of vulnerability were acute as I saw my father slowly lose his struggle to hold on to life. Many of the gestures in my paintings seem to express an inwardness, maybe even a self-protection," she explains. "This pose is about vulnerability. But it is also about creating a painting—about questioning one way of looking and considering another in pursuit of clarity and understanding.

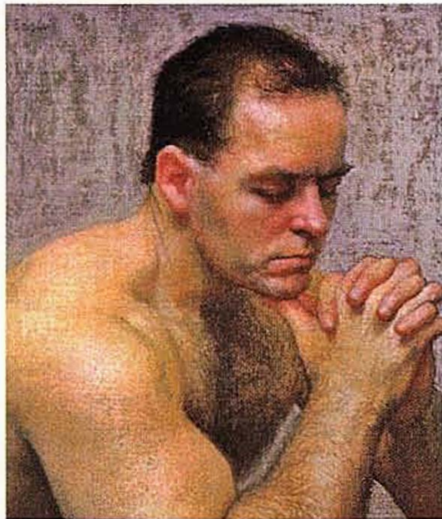
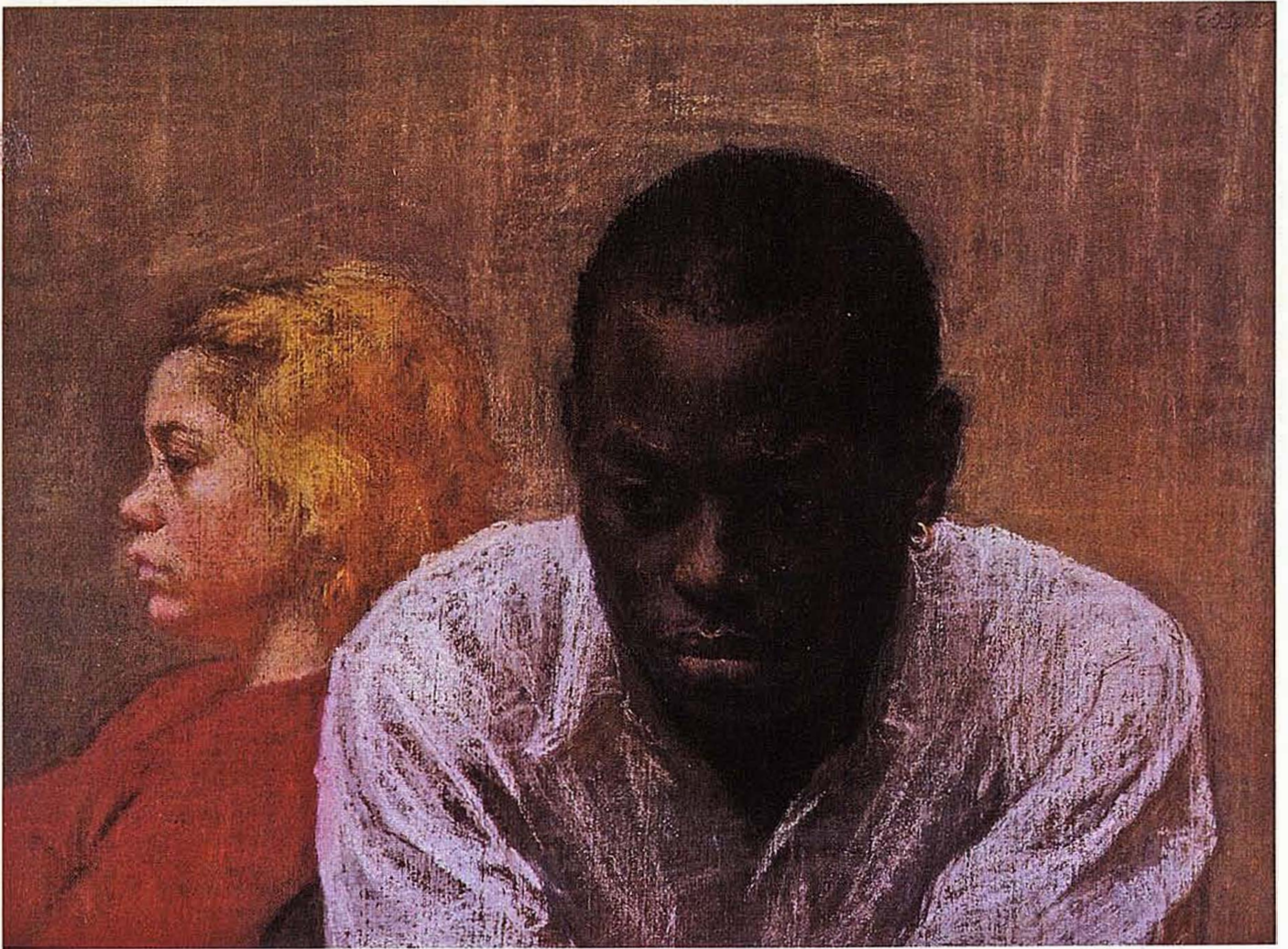
Ellen Eagle creates intense, meditative pastel portraits by carefully observing and responding to both subject and environment.

The Empathetic Portrait

BY LYNNE MOSS PERRICELLI

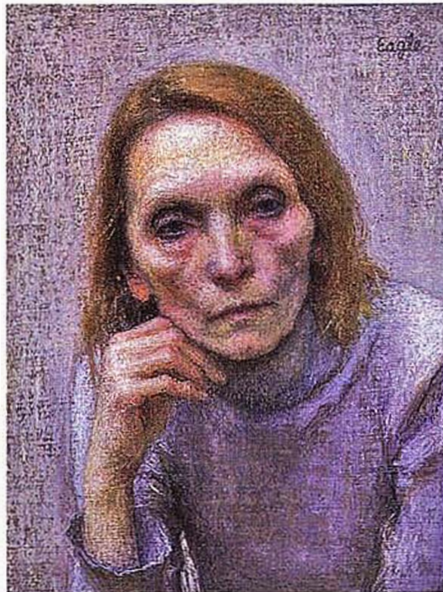


Self-portrait, In Blue,
2003, pastel, 35¼ x 16¼.
© Ellen Eagle, courtesy
Forum Gallery. In this
work Eagle strove
to depict the nearly
invisible transitions
from dark to light.



Top: *Monica and Tony*, 2000, pastel, 6½ x 8½.
© Ellen Eagle, courtesy Forum Gallery.

Above: *Lee*, 2001, pastel, 7 x 6½. Private collection.
© Ellen Eagle, courtesy Forum Gallery.



Nina, 2003, pastel, 6½ x 4¾. © Ellen Eagle,
courtesy Forum Gallery.

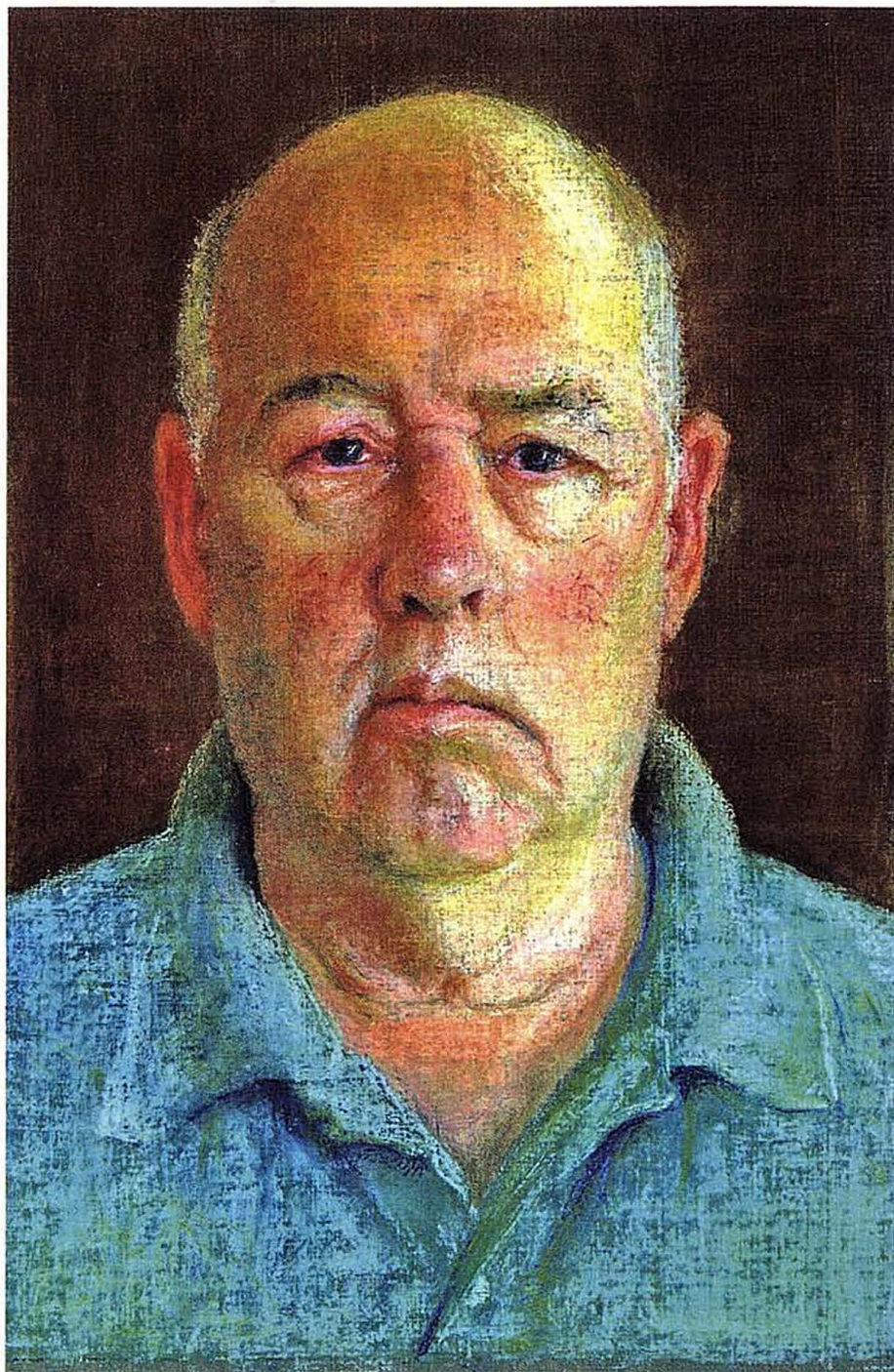


Mei Chiao (Yellow Blouse), 2001, pastel, 6½ x 5½.
© Ellen Eagle, courtesy Forum Gallery.

These two themes are linked by a sense of being open. The development of a painting is so intuitive, but I think the gesture is rooted in that link. Everything is transitory, and we have to adapt.”

Eagle begins a new portrait by making a small sketch in graphite to establish the gesture and proportion. She also decides at this point which part of the model’s body she will focus on. She prepares her surfaces before painting by applying gesso and pumice to illustration board and toning the surface with gray acrylic paint. She then lays in color directly with Rembrandt pastels or Nupastels. In building up the forms, the artist always works from life and says she does not adhere to a consistent manner of application, although a close look shows thin strokes made with hard and soft pastels, with little or no blending. Initially working from dark to light, she is soon “all over the place,” she says. “I want the colors to weave together within a unified value range.” She continually works throughout the picture and adjusts the values as necessary. She applies a fixative only in the rare case in which she needs to make a correction. To the artist, careful observation is key. To achieve the close values in *Self-portrait, In Blue*, Eagle simply placed color where she saw it, “looking for the largest relationships,” she says, “and trusting that the result would be a true record of the harmony I saw.”

The sense of air and light in Eagle’s paintings contributes significantly to the intensity of the work. Often she must employ a process of elimination to pare down the composition to its most vital information. Early in the development of *Self-portrait, In Blue*, for instance, Eagle added a filing cabinet and a pair of shoes to the background. She later decided to remove those elements, feeling they detracted from the simplicity of the statement. “I wanted to stick to the point,” she says. “I wanted the simple activity



Maurice, 2004, pastel, 8¼ x 5½. Private collection. © Ellen Eagle, courtesy Forum Gallery.

of the figure, wrapped in light and air, in a simple space.”

The models are primarily professionals, while others are friends and family members. Most sit for 15 to 20 sessions. The nude images, however, can require up to 25 sittings or more, as can the self-portraits. She never talks to the models while she is working, preferring instead to observe quietly. She always paints in natural light and works exclusively in her home studio.

In selecting a subject, Eagle looks for “an expressiveness that exudes intelligence,” she describes. As the model poses, the artist watches carefully as he or she begins to relax, which will likely lead to an evocative gesture or expression. In fact, in discussing her sources of inspiration, she cites this stage of her process “as all I really need.” In an essay she wrote for *Linea*, the journal of the Art Students League of New York, Eagle explains the

importance of this connection: "Long before I became aware that artists think about principles like selection and unity, I was captivated by seemingly simple paintings of people. My eyes fixed on a quiet tilt of a head, a tension at the corner of a mouth, a posture that implied an emotional state."

Essential to the intimacy in Eagle's paintings is their small scale. She says the choice is intuitive, but when pressed, she points to the quiet, private moments she favors. "Working large requires a distance," she explains. "Distance is the last thing I want in a painting. However, distance is a necessary component of judgment. Closeness and distance work in concert. But I paint to get close to something, to connect from the other side of the easel. I have a need to explore very closely, to try to come to an understanding. Paintings, in addition to being records of the artist's living experience with the subject, are entities unto themselves. When I hold one of the small finished paintings, I feel an intimate connection with the work; it's consistent with the feeling I had when I created it."

The artist acknowledges Harvey Dinnerstein, with whom she studied at the Art Students League of New York, as having a profound influence on her sensibility as an artist. "Harvey's influence is beyond measure," she says. "He encouraged me to be open and responsive." Eagle finds that once this process is under way, she is often touched by something beyond the physical material. As the model's mind wanders, she begins to perceive changes in musculature and posture that have an emotional impact on her.

Eagle believes the desire to connect with a subject is a fundamental part of the artistic process. In her quiet, unpretentious approach and expression, she hopes, she says, to "give shape to compassion." ■

Lynne Moss Perricelli is the senior editor of American Artist.

