

The Artist's Model

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THE LIGHT the morning of Raphael Soyer's death was clear. It sifted through the three tall dirty windows of his empty studio. But he wasn't there. He was at home in a hospital bed, slipping away from us before we had even gotten used to the idea that he was ill. Raphael Soyer, one of the most respected realists of the twentieth century, was eighty-seven years old when he died in November of 1987. Until his final illness he had been working every day at his studio on the Upper West Side. He walked there, a slight man with a limp, from his apartment on Central Park West where he lived with his wife Rebecca.

I started posing for Soyer more than nine years ago. I was one of the last in a long line of his models—he called us his disheveled girls. We had met late in 1977 when I went to his studio to interview him about a book he had written. I had a feeling then I would become his model but I don't remember if he asked me to sit for him or if I asked him if I could. He told me later that I reminded him of Gitel, one of his first models. She was thin, dark-haired, and brown-eyed like me. Other people commented too that I looked like Gitel, and when I saw paintings Soyer had done of her in the 1930s, I noticed something similar, her face like mine withdrawn into an inner space. But that reflective quality wasn't special to Gitel or me. It drifts across faces in many of his portraits. And in real life I saw that look on Raphael's own. It flickers too across his self-portraits, where he painted himself a melancholy witness at the edge of a crowd.

I sat for Soyer every Sunday morning except during the summer months when he went away on holiday with Rebecca or when I too was out of town. The first years I sat for two hours, from ten to noon. During the last years we began half an hour later. Soyer was always at the studio ahead of me, even a little early, and once or twice, when I was more than ten minutes late, he was out in the hallway waiting.

His fourth-floor studio in a turn-of-the-century building on 74th and Columbus faced north. The lower halves of the windows were covered with cloudy plastic sheets he had tacked up when he moved in more than twenty years ago. On bright days the light was fairly good but on dark days when it rained it was poor. Then he would put on the overhead light and draw. Earlier in his life, he told me, he had had other studios with better exposure in the old Lincoln Arcade building on Broadway and 66th Street and downtown on Third Street and Second Avenue. But I loved this last place; it was old-fashioned. I didn't know but I thought maybe painters Soyer knew like John Sloan, Arshile Gorky, and Edward Hopper might have worked in studios like this one during the Thirties.

The furnishings—old wooden chairs, a well-worn table, its surface deeply scratched, two looming easels—were modest. But they were what Soyer required, turning up regularly as background props in his oils. The daybed I

rested on during breaks was covered with a worn paisley spread. On it were faint charcoal lines where Soyer had marked out poses for his models. Over the years the hole in the center got bigger and bigger until finally one of his models replaced it with a fresh blue sheet imprinted with butterflies. But I knew he preferred the old spread. In one corner was a space heater to keep the models warm in the winter and nearby a large industrial-size fan to cool us down in the dog days. Old pantyhose, a pair of jeans, and a few ratty sweaters hung over the edge of a folding

The lying down poses on the bed were my favorites because they were the easiest to hold. He would come over and fix my petticoat, back off to study the effect and then pick up his pad and begin to draw. Sometimes I fell asleep.

There was a certain unspoken understanding between us. It was the implicit etiquette between artist and model. And I never knew if it was just between us or the way Soyer was with all his models. But I knew not to look at a painting when he was just beginning. Once I did and I could feel his dissatisfaction. And I rarely asked him how the painting was coming. I remember once looking at a drawing he had just done which made me, I felt but didn't say, look squatter than I am. As if he read my thoughts, Soyer told me that Degas agreed with a critic who commented that the artist struggled with proportion. "I struggle with proportion too," Soyer said.



Raphael Soyer, *Artist and Model*, 1987

screen near the door.

I never took my clothes off behind the screen. In the early days I felt shy in front of him but after a while it seemed natural. And Soyer painted many of his models in Degas-like poses, putting on stockings, pulling off slips and petticoats. If it was cold out and I was wrapped up like a Russian doll, he would smile and shake his head as I shed my layers.

It never took long for him to choose a new pose for the next painting, and they were usually simple ones. I sat on a straight hard chair with my hands on my lap or my arms drawn across my chest. But the pose for one of the last paintings he did of me happened to be difficult. I sat at the table with my hands propping up my chin. There was another model, Caroline, who could take more taxing poses. But Soyer was always very solicitous and encouraged me to take lots of breaks. If I wiggled slightly while he was painting, he would say quickly, "Take a rest, take a rest."

Sometimes he worked standing up at his easel. Other times he was seated. Often he carried a clutch of brushes in his free hand. A passionate realist—his gods were Edgar Degas and Thomas Eakins—the closest Soyer came to abstraction was on his palette. It looked like a wild and colorful sea with swirls of browns, reds, greens, and grays. After a while he cleaned it with Kleenex, which drifted through his fingers to the floor. Once in a while he scratched the canvas with his finger and then swiped it clean on the side of the frame, leaving behind little mysterious traces on the white canvas. Sometimes we talked. Not always. He didn't dwell on getting older. Still, it was there in the air and when his friend Alice Neel died, I knew the landscape around him was thinning out.

I asked him once during a break how he began to paint. Imitating how his father had taught him, he half sang, half spoke in Russian, drawing on a piece of paper, an oval for a face and then filling in eyes, ears, and a nose. Soyer, who was

born on Christmas Day 1899 in a small town near Borisoglebsk in Russia, came to the United States in 1912 with his family. He used to walk four miles on Saturday mornings from his parents' house in the South Bronx to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his twin brother Moses and their other brother Isaac. Later all three became painters.

Sometimes we looked at art books together and I remember that we studied closely a photograph of Renoir as an old man in a wheelchair. We talked about how Renoir, his hands crippled with arthritis, had painted at the end of his life with brushes tied to his fingers. Soyer's hands were supple. They looked like the hands of a much younger man.

He cleaned the studio himself. He paid scant attention to the bathroom, except to buy paper towels and toilet paper from the local supermarket, which he left in shopping bags on the floor. The tub spigot didn't work; it was bound like a mummy's crooked finger in black tape. And the sink was in bad need of a scrub. Resting on it were cakes of Ivory soap worn thin in the center by the motion of the brushes which he cleaned at the end of every session. "Raphael," I would tease him, "that bathroom is a disgrace." "Yes," he said happily, "Rebecca thinks so too." One day I came in and found it transformed, the tiles sparkling, the sink so clean the enamel shone. It turned out that Peter Orlovsky, posing then for a portrait with Allen Ginsberg, had taken it upon himself to clean the bathroom. He spent several hours in there, singing cheerily to himself, swabbing down the tile floors. All was fine until the next visitor flushed the toilet. It overflowed into the studio. It seems that Orlovsky, once the cleaning was done, had blithely stuffed all the rags down the toilet.

Very few people came by while I was there, and when they did, it was always at the end of the session. Once in a very great while I brought friends round. Soyer was unfailingly courteous as he hauled his canvases from the back alcove to show. He would have no one help him. He lined them up like large playing cards, resting them one beside the other in a precarious balancing act on the floor. One time I asked him if I could bring around an artist named Michael Heizer. "Who's he?" Soyer asked. I told him that Heizer had once dragged a thirty-ton boulder with a bulldozer back and forth outside the Detroit Museum of Art to make a sculpture. Soyer shrugged. His shrugs were eloquent. But then he said, "I always like to meet those guys."

Sometimes we went out to eat lunch on Columbus Avenue with Rebecca. As we got ready to leave the studio, I thought of how we would seem outside on the street together. I was suddenly conscious of how small he was and how tall I was. "I'm La Goulue," I said, "and you're Toulouse Lautrec."

I liked going outside and eating lunch with him but our real life was in the studio. It was peaceful in there, it seemed the most peaceful place in the world, and I had plenty of time to think about what it meant to be his model. It was simple. He painted. I sat for him. After he finished the painting, we walked over to it and looked at it together, at a certain distance from the easel. I saw myself on the canvas. I also saw that I had somehow become him. He had painted his soul on my face. □