



Robert Schefman



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Oakland University

Robert Schefman

A Retrospective of Painting

written and curated by
Dick Goody

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*on cover: **Apprentice at Urbino (II)**, 2004, oil/canvas, 54" x 66"*

*back cover: **My Own Worst Enemy**, 1994, oil/canvas, 80" x 76," From the Collection of Tim and Karen Dam*

From Sculpture to Painting

Throughout the 1970s Robert Schefman built a successful career as a Modernist sculptor. In 1982, a sculpture project led him to one of the oldest inhabited places on earth. He made three life-size plaster figures in Turkey and installed them on the grassy slopes just beyond the gates of the ancient city of Troy. The sculptures were a departure for an artist chiefly preoccupied with constructing large reductive works in steel. The sense of place ceded by the location's ancient roots convinced Schefman that the figure was the only viable means of responding to the extraordinary emotional tug and pull he was experiencing as he considered how to address this unique challenging landscape. Allotted to him was an arid sloping meadow with an assortment of large and small rocks bordered by a peripheral lining of trees, which skirted the ancient city walls. However, the location's spatial properties were soon eclipsed by its immense historical imprint.



The finished work, *Isimsiz* (English translation from the Turkish: the nameless ones) integrated the sculptured figures into the topography of the landscape. Of course, from his previous public Modernist commissions, Schefman was well attuned to the vital relationship between sculpture and place, and part of his reasoning for *Isimsiz* was to explore narrative aspect of the figure in the context of one of the most historically charged sites on earth. It got him thinking about something that had preoccupied him for some time, that is, the nature and singularity of sculpture and about the *objectness* of sculpture in general. It struck him that his sculptured figures were no longer monolithic entities disconnected from one another. They had become fused into the storyline and geography of the landscape. He began to think about the expressive possibilities of narrative art while at the same time he perceived the limitations inherent in the once-removed nature of the sculptured figure/object. This was what set him eventually on a new trajectory where he started to consider the figurative and illusionist properties of painting.

Schefman did not have art instruction in high school; he worked at both drawing and sculpture on his own. He entered college with an interest in medicine, having previously worked at a hospital where was introduced to surgery, and trained to perform autopsies. He began his serious art studies at Michigan State University. This eventually led him to pursue a graduate degree from the prestigious sculpture program at the University of Iowa. Later, living in New York, when he started to think about painting his two-dimensional representations began with the mindset of a sculptor; he had a profound interest in the structure of things and this is what imbues his paintings with their extreme formal assurance.

Schefman's existential jolt after the *Gates of Troy* incident moved him from heavy macho metalwork to full, lush, flagrant, figurative paintings full of sexual machinations and drama, which is another way of saying he became interested in the narrative thrust of tragedy. As a painter he indulges himself. Occasionally he does irony, but he is particularly good at tragedy and knows it – the bitter pill of heartbreak makes Schefman laugh out loud, but only metaphorically. On the outside he remains poker-faced and inscrutable because catastrophe is a serious business. In fact, sometimes his paintings appear so earnestly tragic that one could almost expect someone in the wings, an uncouth cynic (or maybe even the artist himself), to blow a massive disrespectful raspberry – *the wings*: these paintings are nothing if not dramatic and there lies their punch.

Being out of sync with your time could be a problem for Schefman, but it doesn't worry him. If anything disconnects him from contemporary art it is his technique. Arthur Danto says that art schools no longer teach skills. Schefman had to teach himself his painting methods, but he didn't just learn them, he refined and became a connoisseur of them – his school of painting left no technical stone unturned. This is inevitably what happens when sculptors learn other forms of expression – they don't delve, they go in hook, line and sinker.

Isimsiz, 1982, carved plaster/installation, life-size

Sculptors and painters are different animals after all. Painters learn to paint in the painterly, technically laid back, conceptually charged, atmosphere of the art school painting studio. Sculptors necessarily always have to learn more technique upfront – they have to ensure their objects won't fly apart – process and engineering are emphasized. When Schefman first picked up a brush (as a sculptor thinking about making oil paintings) a diligent technical approach was inevitable. Does this make him a painter, or is he a sculptor doing 3D narratives on a 2D surface? Undeniably he is master of his craft, which is another way of saying he can paint realistically *perfectly*. One of the reasons his faultless work seems alienated from the zeitgeist of contemporary painting is that he works in a sort of non-painting style – or rather something we might call the generic impeccable. Approaching painting with sculptural acumen, his meticulous technique is chiefly concerned with volume and structure, particularly the structure of anatomy, but generally he is concerned with the way these structures are affected by light. This structural approach also influences the architectonic manner in which he composes his pictures; his interiors are nothing if not scrupulously engineered spaces built to contain the anatomical structures therein. This technically heavy method is not painterly. In Schefman's work you don't see the paint; you see only the masterful illusion.

In the art world, curators and artists talk about the *civilians* – the folks that don't know much about art but know what they like. It's safe to assume that the civilians would admire Schefman's work because he paints realistically. On the other hand they would undoubtedly be disturbed by the darkness of his narratives – all that nakedness and gravity – for them, flowers bathed in saturated light would be so much more palatable. Regarding his technique, other than approving of it, the civilians would probably not even notice the exacting skillfulness, however, they so see the narrative intemperance.

Conversely, *traditional* though Schefman's work may appear superficially, collectors of contemporary art support his work precisely because of its outré narrative thrust. His technique is the structural engine driving his work, but the formalistic aspect is not what lies at the conceptual heart of his paintings.

The narrative supposition with Schefman's work is of an impending deterioration of circumstances. It is partly the formalistic heaviness of the forms, meaning their sculptural weight, but it is also the chiaroscuro: lighted figures strike passive poses in the black treacle of the surrounding gloom lit by the selectively clever, seductive glow-worm spotlight of calamity (that's not real light by the way, it's celestial light – aka a pastiche of the light of God). All of this resides to some extent in the technical, formalistic realm, but Schefman isn't painting formalistic still-lives. The subjects are mortal beings. Conceptually his figures operate as vessels of tragedy. This is what gives Schefman's paintings their bite.

As Schefman states: *Often I choose to work in verbal terms*. He is a verbal painter, mixing the visual with the linguistic and his approach is metonymic rather than symbolic. The chief signifiers are men and women. His work is a *re-contextualization* of a piece of history or lore, but concurrently his paintings are more in the realm of idealizations. The figures are very close to the paradigm they customize, and this is what makes the game metonymic rather than metaphorical. Paradoxically, in the context of language, Schefman's figures appear silenced by a moment without words. They are, as James Joyce put it, in a state of "aesthetic arrest;" not speaking, they are suspended experiencing the moment.

Often Schefman's paintings create a particular point of view for the onlooker, which lends them a considerable cinematic bent. Artists weaned in the 20th century and thereafter are conditioned by cinematic paradigms. Likewise, the viewer is programmed to regard any image, particularly a large rectangle, with a cinematic eye. Figurative painting is especially susceptible to a cinematic reading. If the onlooker has taken a course in visual culture, the cinematic frisson will be acute. The precursor to cinema is theatre, but theatre is more interactive than film. When watching films we become an audience of one. Similarly, when viewing Schefman's work there is a supposition that the painting is just for us. This cinematic reading runs parallel with Jacques Lacan's theory that a screen functions like a mirror – the viewer has the impression that the narrative is being created exclusively by/for him/her through being so acutely identified with the act of watching. This is especially true in Schefman's works that depict two or more people. It works best if the protagonists in the painting are unaware of the onlooker. In this instance the artist purposely sets up what we could call a subjective position – an ideal vantage point for the voyeur/viewer. In this way the viewer takes subjective possession of the narrative.

When Schefman paints unclothed or partially undressed women, his intent invariably focuses on desire; the female signifies a target. The *Artist Apprentice Series* paintings from 2003-2004 are cases in point. Often he places a barrier between the voyeur and target: clothing, a musical instrument, a curtain. These items are part of the architecture of the painting. Moderately obscured or not, the women are always the point both compositionally and conceptually. These paintings are among Schefman's masterworks. The confluence of form, content and theme reaches perfection. In a sense they require no narrative subtext. Tragic desire may be their *raison d'être*, but something equally important is happening with the relationship between

the three entities which comprise the visual dynamic of these works; there is person viewing the drama, i.e., you or me, the object of desire (the female) and the supporting dramatis personae. Curiously the object of desire is invariably surrounded by indifference. The other figures in these paintings are simply too preoccupied to apprehend/comprehend the target – they too have their subjective position to consider and it does not allow for targeting desire. We, the voyeurs, look on with frustration wanting some engagement, to see a dénouement or at least some action. Since we invariably cannot see the face of the target – and this is incidentally very Lacanian – this creates a fracture between the onlooker and subject. We stand outside the frame with our Freudian scopophilia frustrated. As Freud put it: *“The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilization, keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts.”* Helping to keep this repressive regime intact, Schefman appears to conduct the affairs of these paintings effortlessly with his virtuoso technique and that is perhaps their chief strength. They stay on target and their eccentric sense of sexual repression is always poised and faultless in its execution.



Apprentice at Urbino, 2003, oil/canvas, 60"x 72," From the Collection of Harriett and Fred Rosen

When Schefman paints men, the narrative becomes more ambiguous, but generally the men are doing what men do when not satiating desire: they are fighting or dying or performing absurd acts of heroism, i.e., his men are either struggling with their repression or seeking sainthood. Schefman is asserting that men are definitely not from Venus. He laughs at the pathos of men, but never at the women.

What is outside the frame of Schefman's painting – literally beyond the edge of the pictures – is germane both literally and psychologically. He crops, edits and frames his imagery with a severe cinematic eye. His dioramas are so scrupulously assembled that everything beyond the frame must be chaos. His painting, *Vermeer in Bosnia*, is a prime example. Outside rages internecine warfare, but in the frame the insulated girl plays on mellifluously. Only within the rectangle is Schefman's eccentric logic preserved. Outside people are crashing their cars, gate-crashing parties and getting divorces. In film, the fictional world of the narrative – everything known that is not seen on the screen – is called the diegesis – it's the stuff we don't see but know implicitly. Schefman's compositions are so articulate, so idealized, so hyper-real that the diegesis necessary to get these disparate characters to operate together implies considerable convoluted cunning. One almost wonders if this painted rarified world must exist somewhere holographically or in some parallel universe because the codes of reality used to simulate hyper-reality have little reference in the real world. This disconnects them from us further, but this is the point because Schefman is paradoxically more interested in art than reality. This is particularly true of the *Artist Apprentice Series*; the hyper-reality annexes the activity within the frame as if it is taking place within a hermetically sealed vitrine, not unlike a Damien Hirst diorama.

The codes in Schefman's paintings are also his leitmotifs. Always central in his more grandiose paintings, is the object of desire – or simply the object – the Lacanian nude female, partially obscured. Sticking with Jacques Lacan a moment longer, or rather his psychoanalytic theory of vision, we should remember that before looking at the object we too are being looked at; *the way we look and the way we are looked at* is part of the *dynamic of looks*. The viewer, so intrinsic to Schefman's paintings, exists as a code outside the painting. Therefore the *dynamic of looks* inevitably shifts between the viewer, the object being viewed and a theoretical third party watching the viewer.

Beyond viewer and object are other leitmotifs. There is the implied or literal artist/magus figure; sometimes the back of a canvas is enough to suggest this fatalistic masculine presence. There is the eunuch facilitator sidelined in impotency, perhaps fussing with a curtain or pulling on a rope. Lastly, if somewhat infrequently, there is the fecund girl musician; she's pretty but strictly there for the soundtrack and she also raises the tone. Decode these signs and the message(s) will be unlocked. Is that the point of these paintings? If Schefman's tongue is pressing against his cheek, then what is behind the deception? Perhaps the bigger question is whether Schefman is being earnest or contemptuous? He will not say. Included in the exhibition is a self-portrait by the artist with tape over his mouth, which he says is about censorship, but it could equally be about the artist scorning us with his arch circumspection.

To accept these paintings one has to learn to appreciate them within and without the context of contemporary art. In some ways the confines of contemporary art are too narrow to accommodate Robert Schefman's variant proclivities. However, there are very few contemporary artists who can paint like this. On the other hand, Schefman is more contemporary than one might think. His exacting realism could be regarded as a lure because the power of his paintings lies more in their psychological subversion and irony, both of which are very much at the heart of contemporary art. However, his technical focus is also refreshing; the art world has for some time been awash in a plethora of digitalization, but it is now turning its attention back to figurative painting. Schefman is a master slightly out of sync with his time, but his time is not past and he stands at the threshold of the future of painting.

Dick Goody, August 2005

This catalogue is organized to reflect Robert Schefman's practice of working on particular bodies of work which include his *Iliad and Odyssey Series*, *Censorship Series*, *Dream Series* and *Artist Apprentice Series*. Schefman's interest in these themes is not always chronological and often overlaps.

MYTHS

Through myth, I am able to explore the constancy of human values,
an unchanging connection between past and present.



MYTHS

Death of Scamandrius, 1983, watercolor/paper, 52"x 68," From the Collection of Daniel J. Flaggman



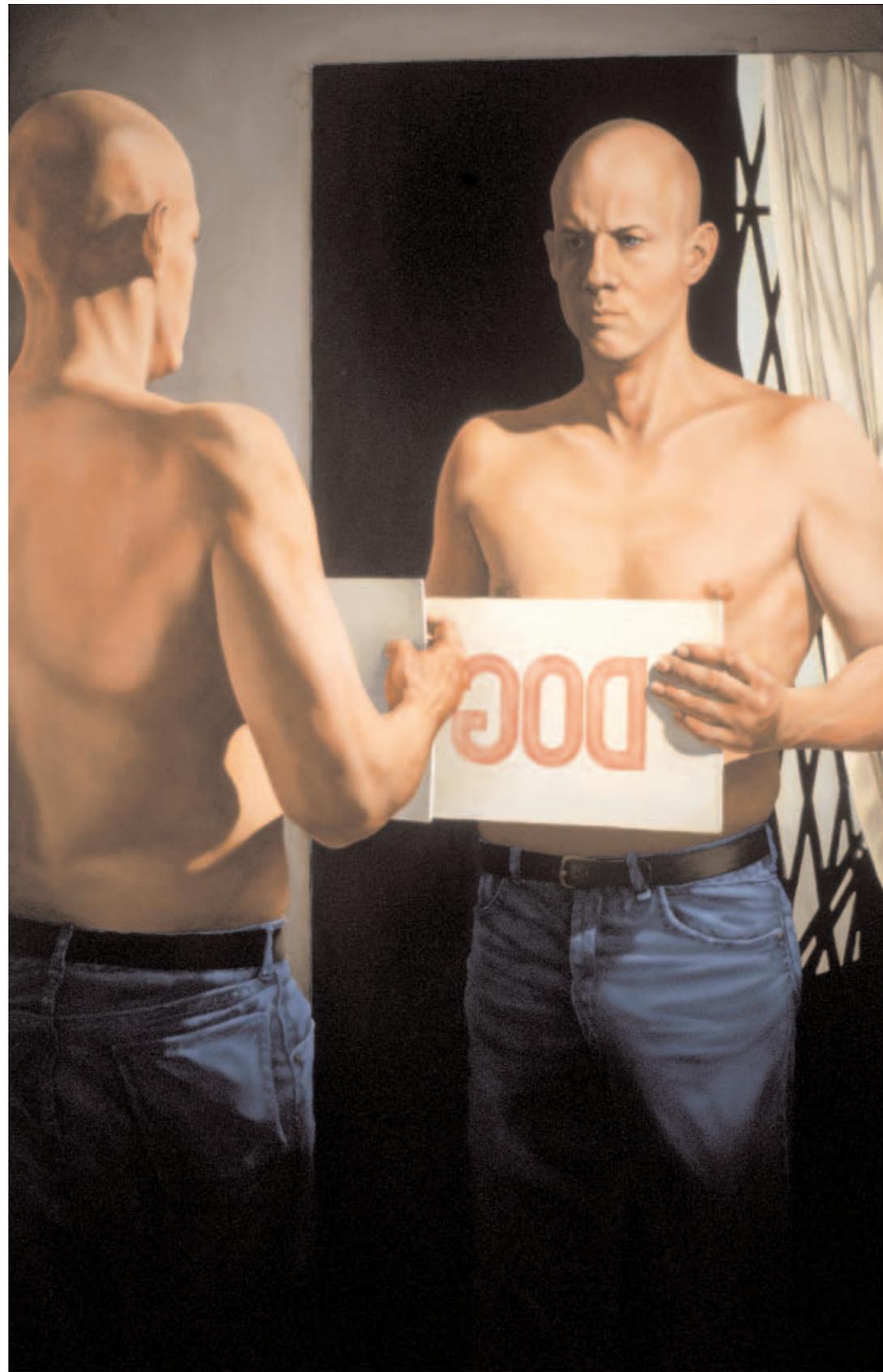
MYTHS

M-M-My Charona, 1989, watercolor/paper, 58" x 48," From the Collection of Frank and Shirley Piku



MYTHS

Cassandra, 1992, watercolor/paper, 56" x 40," From the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Art Freedman



MYTHS

To Hades House, 1994, oil/canvas, 60"x 38," From the Collection of Harvey and Lynn Rubin



MYTHS

Song of the Siren, 1994, watercolor/paper, 72"x 56," From the Collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts



MYTHS

Masquerade, 1995, oil/canvas, 42" x 72," Private Collection



MYTHS

Antigone, 1999, oil/canvas, 102" x 184"



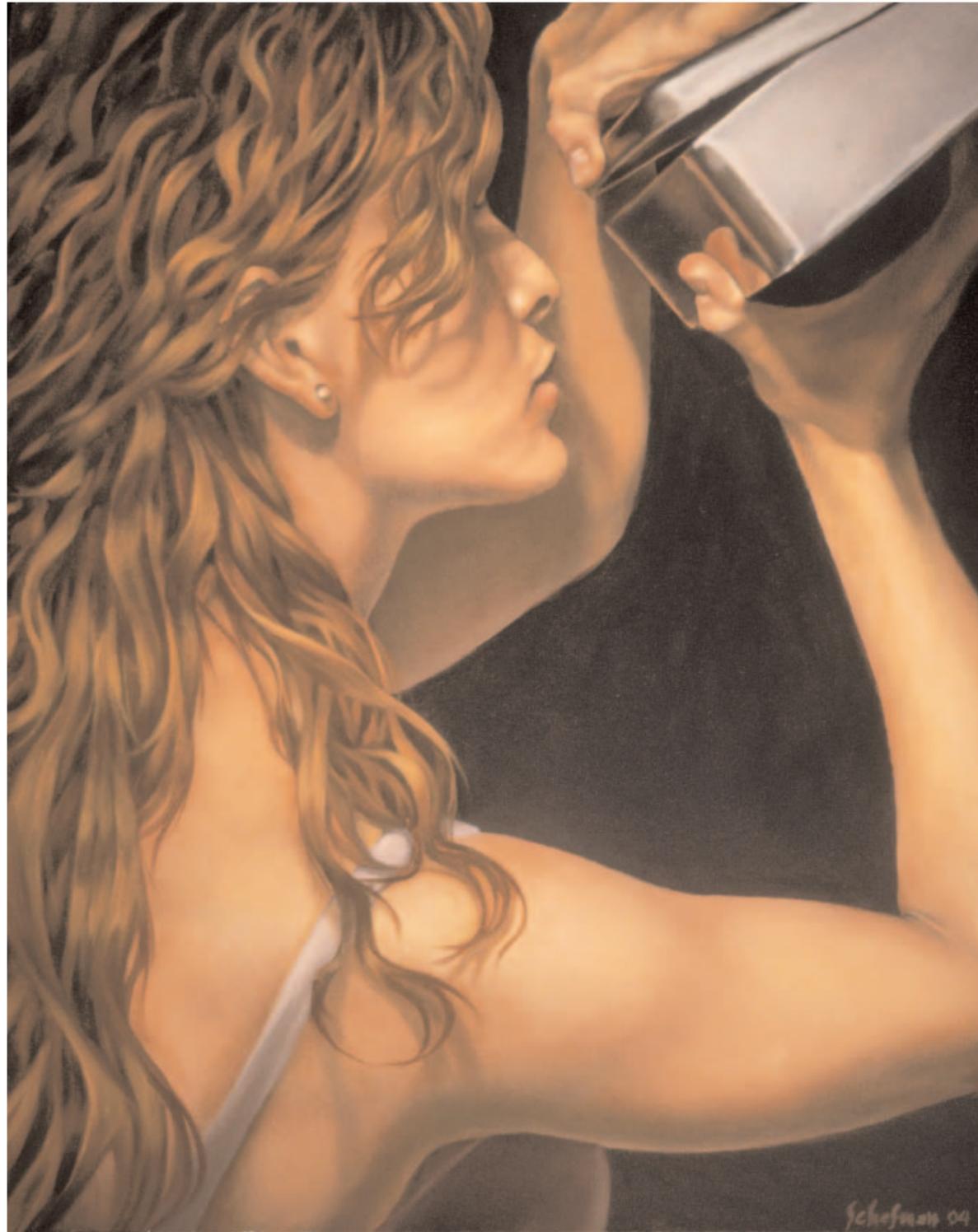
MYTHS

Machiavelli, 1993, oil/canvas, 83" x 107," From the Collection of Robert and Linda Schmier



MYTHS

A Responsibility To Each Other, 1997, oil/mural, 168" x 576," 19th District Court, Dearborn, MI



MYTHS

Psyche, 2004, oil/canvas, 20" x 16," Private Collection



MYTHS

Psyche's Destiny, 2004, oil/canvas, 40" x 52," From the Collection of Gary and Nancy Nester

CENSORSHIP SERIES

Consider censorship; prohibition, double standard,
fear, ignorance and compromise.

Personal experience forced the issue and the paintings
became a way to exorcise the most insidious of these;
self censorship.



CENSORSHIP

Y, 1997, oil/canvas, 50" x 40," From the Collection of David Hall



CENSORSHIP

X, 1997, oil/canvas, 44" x 36"



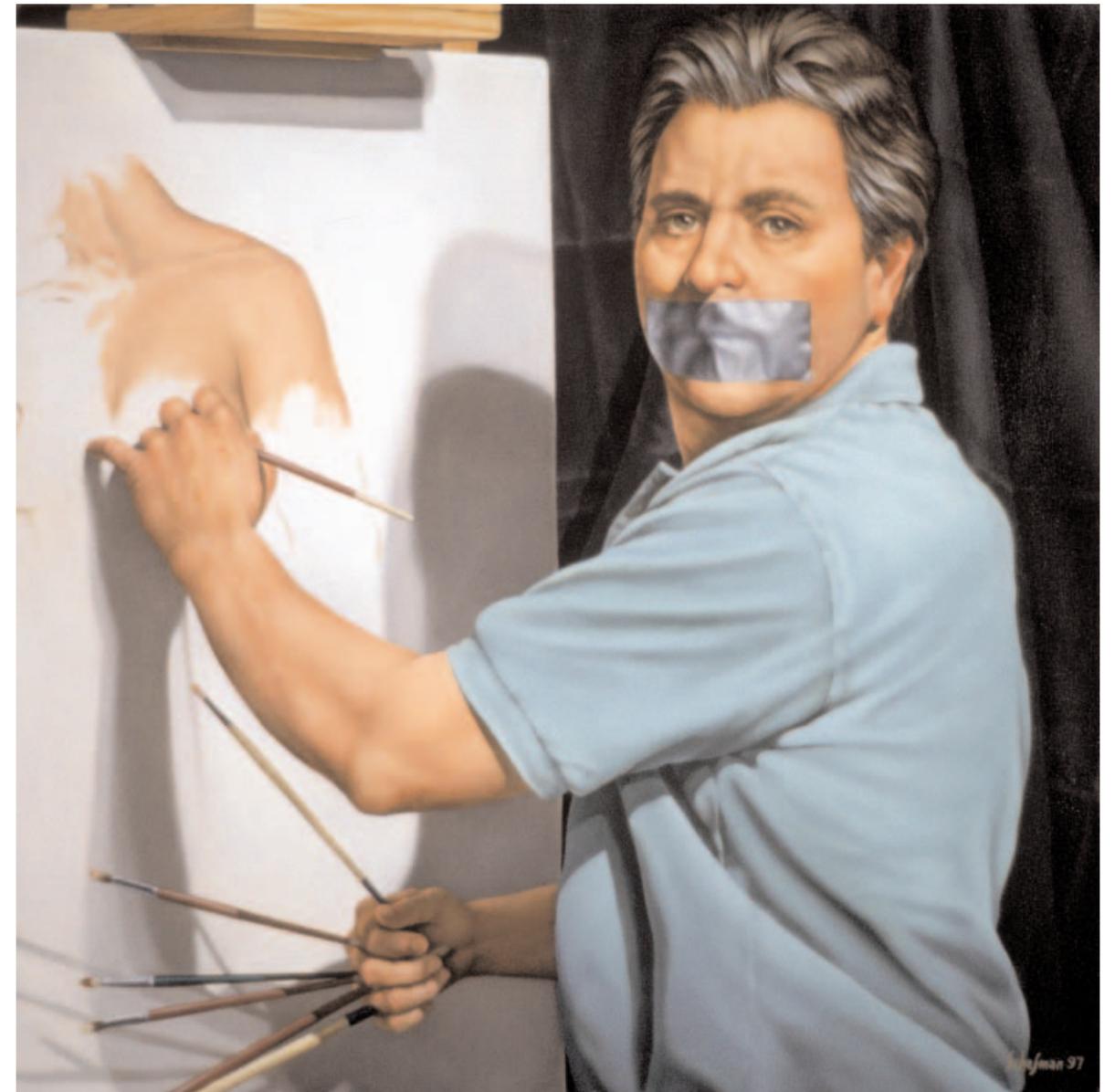
CENSORSHIP

Sex, 1997, oil/canvas, 33" x 47," From the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Rick DeRoven



CENSORSHIP

Censor Strategy, 1997, oil/canvas, 48" x 38"



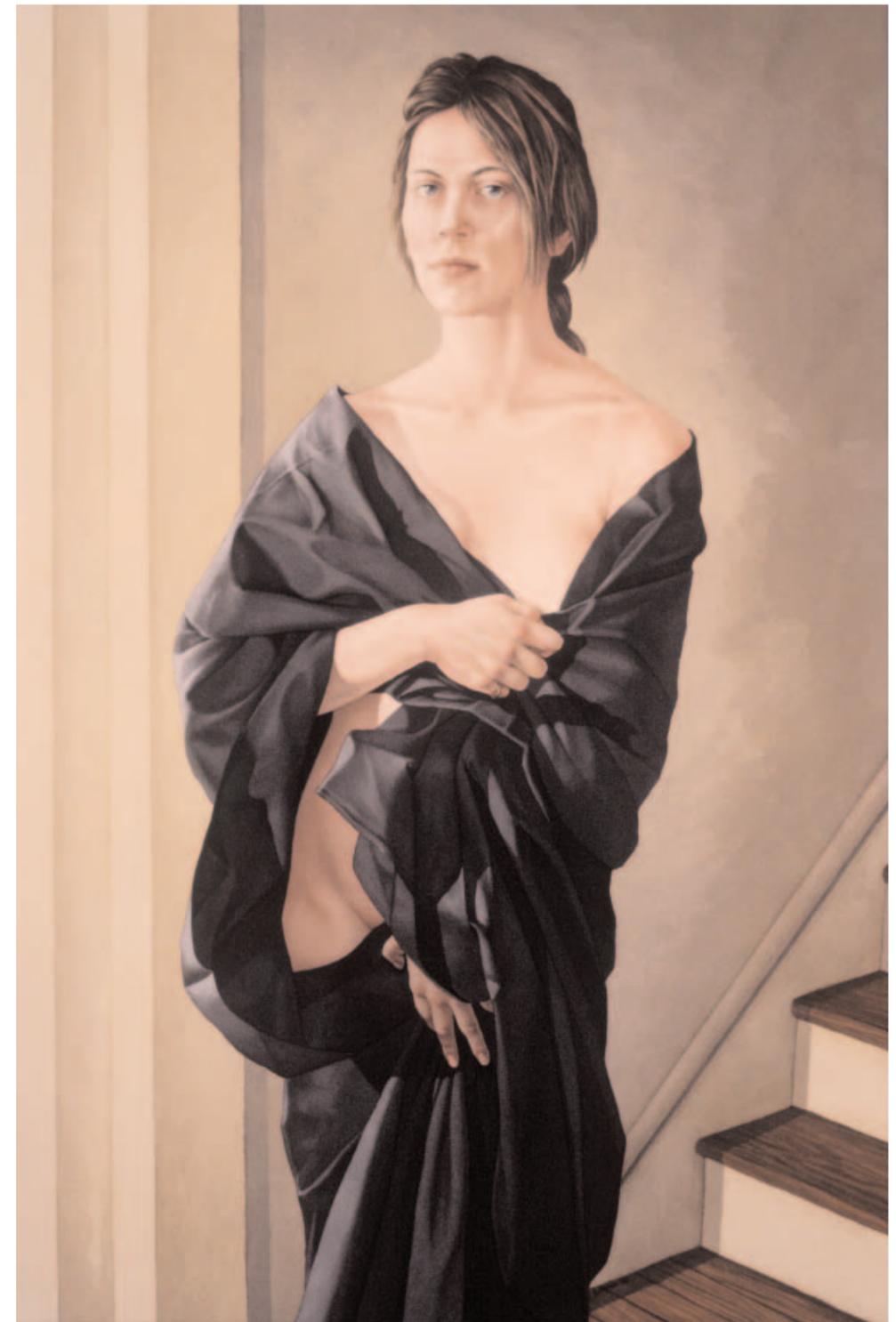
CENSORSHIP

Nothing By Mouth, 1997, oil/canvas, 32" x 32," From the Collection of Amy and Mark Haimann



CENSORSHIP

Personal Baggage, 1997, oil/canvas, 72" x 56," From the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Rick DeRoventi



CENSORSHIP

Without Conviction, 1993, watercolor/paper, 60" x 40," Private Collection

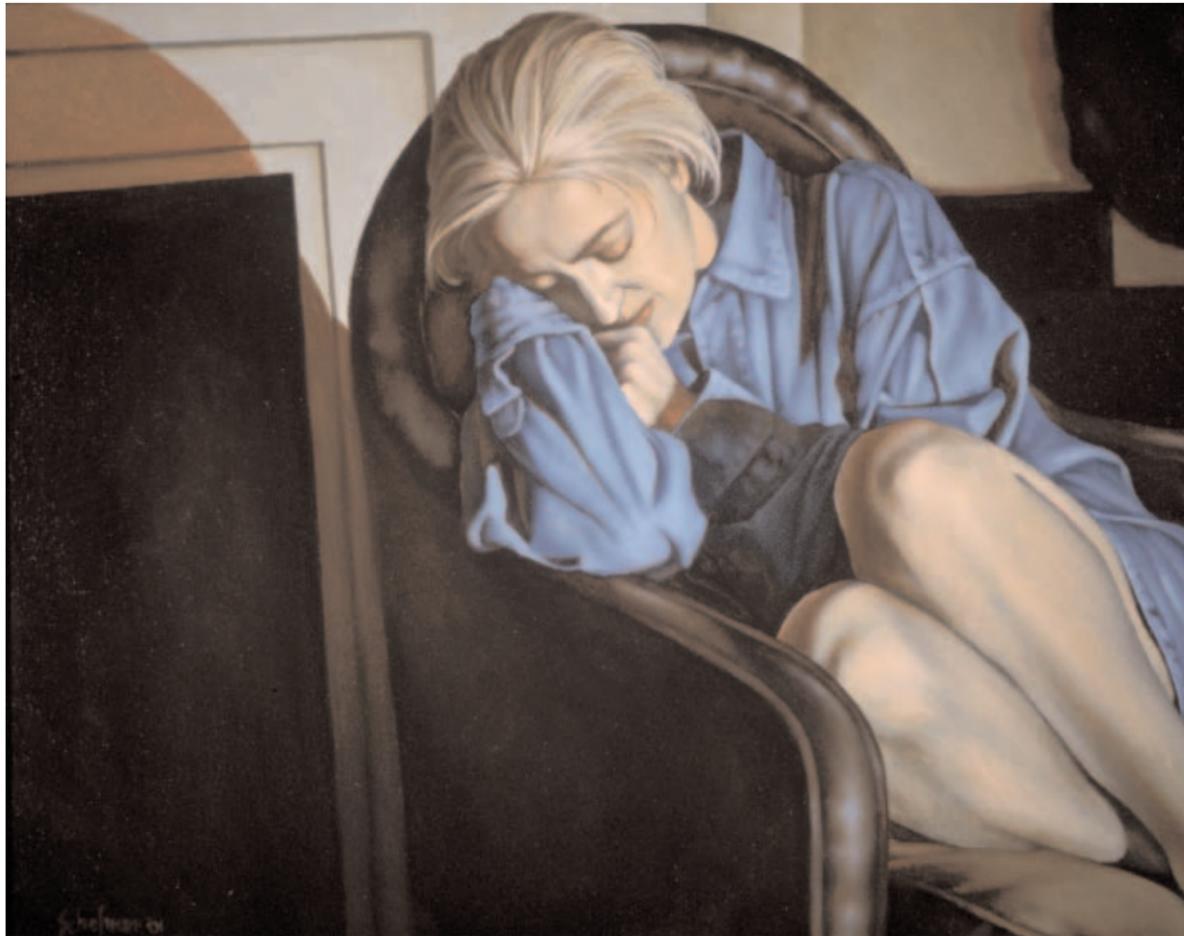
DREAM SERIES

Jung spoke of "archetypal dreams,"
dreams that seem to be carried in our genes.
We continue to experience flying dreams as unfettered soaring,
though we clearly understand
the mechanical requirements and realities of flight.



DREAMS

Dream No. 7, 2001, oil/canvas, 66"x 48," From the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Rick DeRoven



DREAMS

Dreams in the Big Chair, 2001, oil/canvas, 16" x 20," From the Collection of Daniel J. Flaggman



DREAMS

Spilled Milk, 2001, oil/canvas, 56" x 48," From the Collection of Michael A. Leibowitz



DREAMS

Gothic Dream, 2001, oil/canvas, 44" x 56," From the Collection of Mark and Lois Shaevsky



DREAMS

Dreams Of Flight, 2001, oil/canvas, 56" x 42"



DREAMS

Robert's Nightmare, 2001, oil/canvas, 56" x 54"



DREAMS

Dreaming Tree, 2002, oil/canvas, 72" x 48," From the Collection of Edward and Judith Berne



DREAMS

Offer of Help, 2004, oil/canvas, 48" x 64," From the Collection of Michael A. Leibowitz

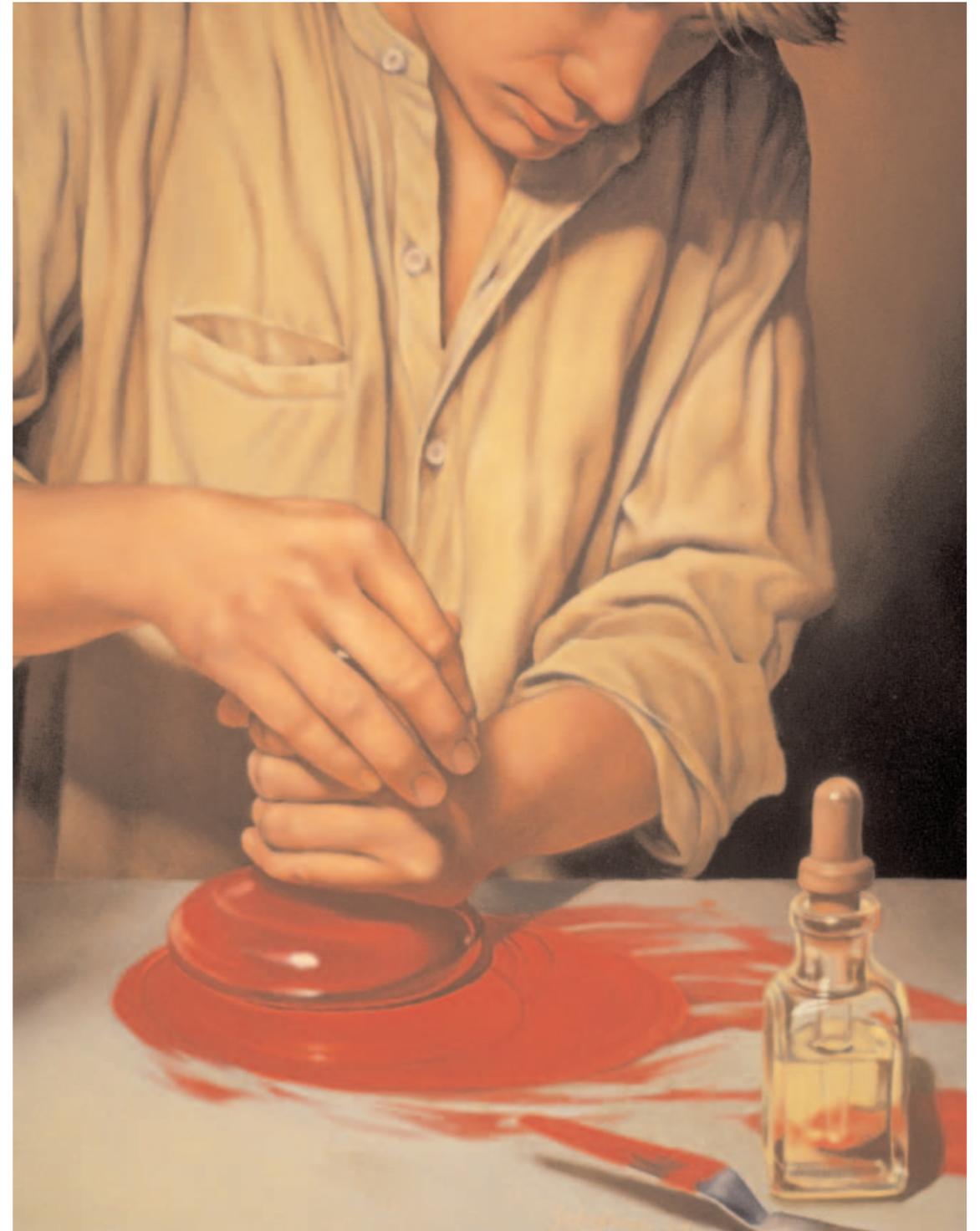


DREAMS

Dinner With Gaia, 2002, oil/canvas, 52" x 52," Private Collection

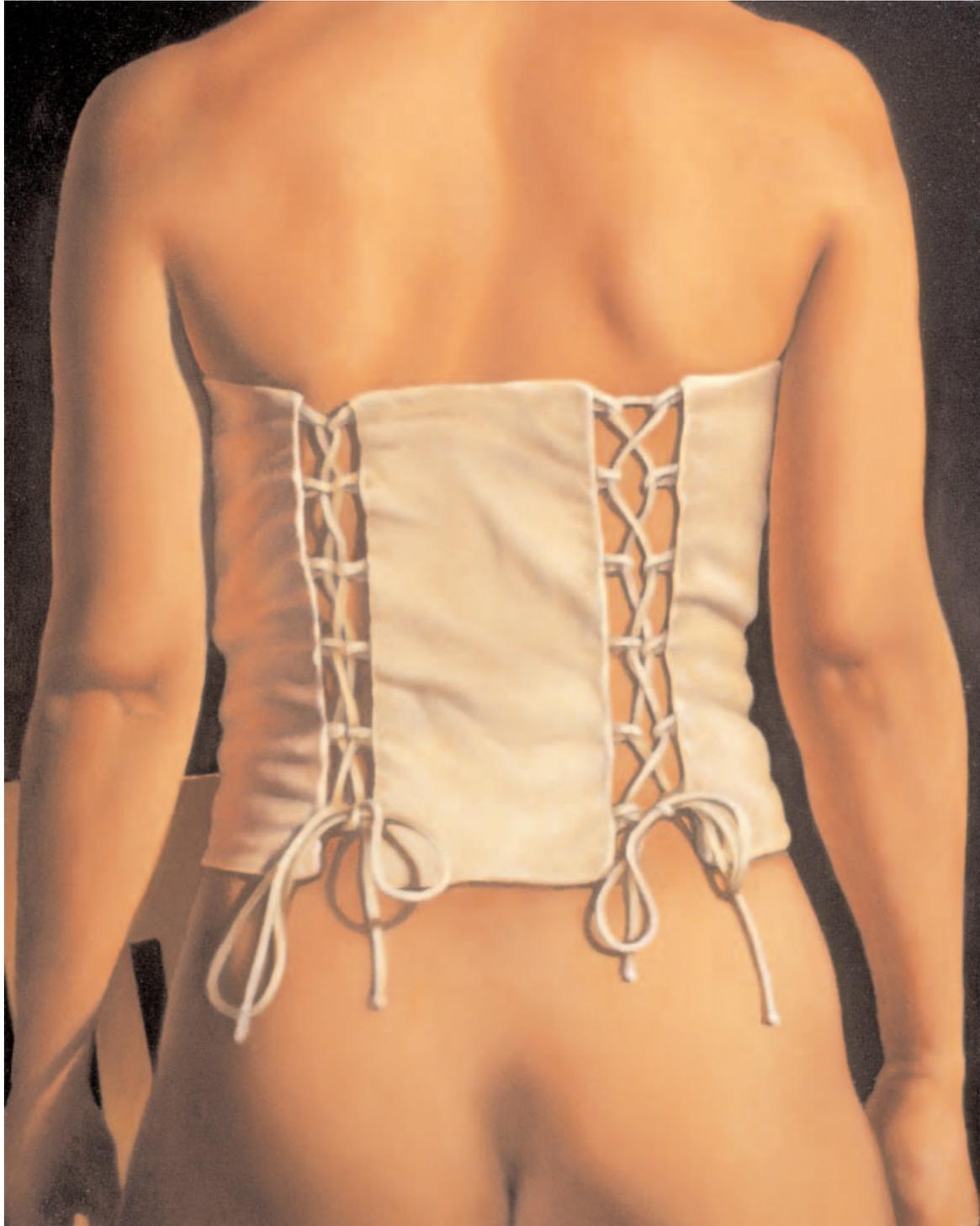
THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

In the Apprentice Series I wanted to focus on perspective,
to take the familiar and turn it inside out.



THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

Apprentice, 2004, oil/canvas, 20" x 16"



THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

Verso, 2004, oil/canvas, 20" x 16," Private Collection



THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

Vermeer in Bosnia, 2004, oil/canvas, 42" x 36," From the Collection of Michael A. Leibowitz



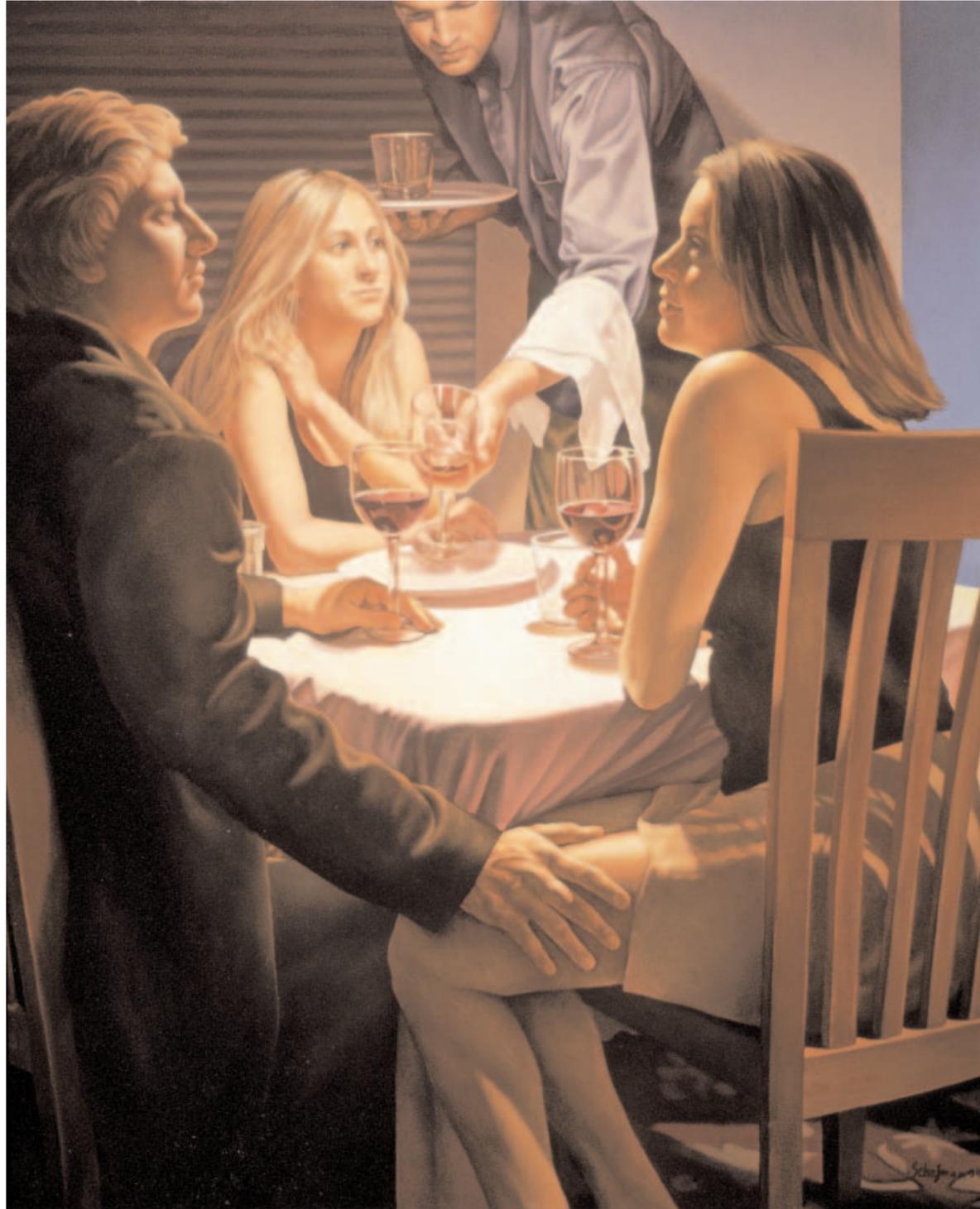
THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

Studio Musician, 2004, oil/canvas, 20" x 16"



THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

Birth of Venus, 2004, oil/canvas, 54" x 72"



THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

Chiaroscuro, 2004, oil/canvas, 48" x 40"



THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICE

Apprentice at Urbino (II), 2004, oil/canvas, 54" x 66"



Robert Schefman Interview

Why do you paint nudes?

I am fascinated with the human machine, with the structure of our bodies, our physical and emotional reality. Life, death, sex and the infinite remain big, inexhaustible issues. More specifically, I always had interest in two careers, medicine and art, and was fortunate to be exposed to both growing up through family and friends. I entered college as pre-med, and spent the summer before college attending surgery and performing autopsies. I was trained as a diener (laboratory assistant who does the actual cutting and dissection). These were intense experiences in my life. This tie to the body and curiosity about the body has never left, and eventually manifested itself in my work.

Can you talk about how you begin to think about a new painting in terms of the theme?

Often I choose to work in verbal terms, listing concerns and goals for an idea. In the extreme, I have let the tail wag the dog, working from a title and creating an image to fit, but my work can develop in any number of ways. Sometimes it begins with a pose from a drawing, or a corner of another painting. The impetus might come from reading or a single word. My sketchbook is a journal for notating ideas and raw information to be processed at another time. Occasionally, idea and image seem to come all at once. No matter how the idea begins, I like to develop variations of the idea as sketches to see as many choices as possible.

You trained at the University of Iowa as a sculptor and had a successful career as a Modernist sculptor in New York, yet in 1982 you quit sculpture to become a painter, why?

I was doing non-objective, large-scale, minimalist work, which grew to explore city squares, plazas, and other public spaces. I also collaborated with dance companies in NYC where my sets (sculptures) defined the space and form for the dance, using the vocabulary I developed. The works defined language and concepts as a metaphor, but I wanted to be more specific. I needed a change in vocabulary. So I went directly to the most content-loaded form, the figure, approaching it as a modular form. My desire was to create illusion as completely as possible while relating it to a specific site, for example, the project for the Ancient Gates of Troy in Turkey. Ultimately I had a problem with the physical reality of figure sculpture; the figures always seemed once-removed, static and other worldly. I have always solved problems through

drawing. I found it was much easier to accept the entire issue of illusion in two dimensions. The conventions of the picture plane gave me the ability to define the world I wanted. Initial efforts were painterly and made too much of the materials. This would always lead to a discussion of style, which got in the way of the content (as poetic language can get in the way of a story). It seemed most appropriate to paint an illusion of reality.

How did you learn to paint?

I learned to paint using watercolor; I began on a small format (22 x 30 inches), but scale has always been an important issue to me. It wasn't long before I set about finding the largest watercolor paper around, but I wanted to work larger so I eventually made the jump to oil paint. The change was not that difficult because I was used to the watercolor method. Oil paint can be removed, or painted over and used opaquely or transparently; in short it is more forgiving. I taught myself oil painting technique through experimentation and reading. Coming from sculpture, it is no surprise that the earliest paintings are less about color, and more concerned with spatial illusion and subject matter. As I continue to paint, I get more involved with color.

How reliant is your technique on glazing?

I am not trying to duplicate some "secret of the old masters," rather I am just creating the image as completely and efficiently as possible, given the rigor of illusionist painting. Coming from watercolor, it is only natural that I would use transparent colors and techniques in my work. I love the light effects of transparent colors – I'm interested in the color of the light; it can intensify the atmosphere. My standard practice is to paint the first layer opaquely, and in a manner that is as close to the finished color as possible – a strange kind of "alla prima for the manic compulsive." Of course, it is rarely the final layer, but usually it comes close 75%, or so. A couple layers of opaque or scumbled paint get it close enough to finish off with final glazing layers that adjust values, temperatures, and intensify the richness of colors. This is, however, a far cry from grisaille technique of the past. This is a much simpler approach, using contemporary materials and the available technology in both film and digital imaging.

Can you talk about your use of photography?

These paintings are fantasy. They use photo, but are not about photography or the photographic image. I love the results obtained by the traditional painting process, but take a faster, modern approach to materials and methods. Photography helps speed the process, helps with model costs, and fixes a 2D image facilitating the translation to painting. The early paintings were done from a combination of life models and photographs – I learned early on how difficult it was to keep models scheduled, paid and entertained during the long process of making a painting. The photos were always done in black and white so they would act as reference drawings. I wanted the colors to develop along with the work. Also, my paintings have a harder edge, a different approach to focus than the camera. Cameras have a depth of field that requires focus on foreground, middle or background. But the eye focuses quickly; it almost never stops on one depth of field, it jumps constantly. I wanted images more akin to seeing, rather than the focus/fuzzy phenomena of photo replication.

What do you think of Balthus's work? There are parallels. Balthus rejected modernism and refused to be in sync with his time.

I never really considered my work in relation to Balthus, possibly because he was just never a big favorite of mine. His handling of imagery and figures is somewhat stylized, and the otherworldly character of his work a product of a pretty specific surrealist critical agenda. I never spent much time on his history either. But I can see the connection you make. My paintings, though not formal surrealism, do share the notions of fantasy and illusion. We were both self-taught, though I think my art training, technically, takes me out of the outsider/self-taught category. It is more a change of media and format for me. A fascination with the figure, the sexual nature of the body, and other subjects are common as well. Am I really so outside of the mainstream? Again, that is hard for me to consider, because it is precisely contemporary value systems that I am exploring or poking fun at. I think my analogies or juxtapositions would be lost outside of this modern context.

Why are you interested in Greek Tragedy?

Greek Tragedy is a fascinating form. We (the audience) are made conscious of many points of view, and yet, left wondering whether the actors can deviate from the script to change the outcome. Each character has one perspective and they make decisions, like so many of us, without considering the many choices arising in every set of circumstances. Also, for Americans, the Greek myths don't have the baggage inherent in active religions. I can take liberties with stories and characters. I don't want to illustrate the myth. I want the core concept or human issue, but I can put a different face on it to make new connections. I can tell the stories with different characters, but use the same plots and personalities. We can put little robots on Mars, yet we still struggle with the same issues psychologically as the ancient Greeks. Machiavelli wrote that these might be inherent values that make us human, and we must take greed, hate, suspicion and jealousy along with the better side of man as a kind of inescapable package.

Your paintings use realism but are set in rarified places: exotic studios, boudoirs, restaurants. What kind of sense of place are you creating?

My idea is to put a contemporary face on the myths I'm exploring, so that they might not be dismissed so easily. The places and settings reflect my desire to explore painting's ability to create a world, rather than just replicate. They often begin by me asking "What if...", and the result is a personal vision. The paintings challenge me to create images that convey content or narrative as completely as possible in a single frame. In the painting *Song of the Siren*, the multiple portraits of Odysseus reference different parts of the psyche; the ship becomes a metaphor, a vessel for self. Work like this is fantasy made real. I do my homework – I try to figure what this world would look like if it existed. In *MMMy Charona*, I studied Atlantic rescue craft as the basis for the ferryman's vessel. Some works have explored the notion of a painting cycle, an old device that suspends time, where characters appear in multiple events in a single canvas. In "Cassandra," I wanted to convey shock – the amazing power the body has to shut down during extreme stress. Cassandra refuses to react to the fall of the world around her. I chose to place her in a demolished interior, an otherworldly obsession to prepare herself at her dressing table though her world was obviously collapsing – it isn't Troy because the environment and objects are my experiences in my time.

Sometimes there's a sense of gallows humor in your work, why is that?

Humor, even very black humor or irony, immediately suggests that there is a second reality, a second point of view in any situation. For example, when Roman victors were honored by parade, they rode a chariot accompanied by a servant holding a wreath over their heads. Even as the crowds cheered, the servant repeated: "We are all mortal, and fame fleeting."

When I was twelve I had a tumor in my leg. I was placed in the x-ray room under a huge machine bombarding me 10 inches from my crotch, without lead shields. The technician left the room for 20 minutes at a time. All I could think about were the effects of radiation in monster movies – I could only laugh about what would happen to me. Humor is a great distraction.

How much do people have to know about the narratives in your paintings?

I don't expect every person to know the narratives, the myth or the references I use. In the final analysis they are paintings, and must stand on visual terms. However, they are more interesting if someone takes the time to investigate, like I investigate when I assemble the works. Maybe this is the most important thread in all the work. They are the result of a creative process, not simply the execution of an image. They can begin for almost any reason. The next phase is discovery, for me the most interesting part, where information is collected, sorted and defined as images that are then assembled into paintings.

Do your paintings objectify women?

I have explored the nude sexual images of both male and female forms. If I objectify women, then I objectify men as well. Can we celebrate our physical existence and sexuality in body images – beautiful, ugly, sensuous or repulsive – without imposing a hierarchy of male/female dominance? I have made issue of the double standards in America concerning the portrayal of the body. For example, the painting *Briseus*

is a work that explores the tradition of double standard, as does *X* and *Y* from the censorship series. *Antigone* is the original independent woman. I have competed on equal footing with women my entire life and hope that I have raised the double standard question in a thoughtful, sensitive manner. Is there a place to use body image without the idea of objectification? Again, as a male it is difficult to be objective, only sensitive to the issue in the work without shying away from dealing with those issues.

Why are you currently painting figures in niches?

I have always found something strong and very appealing in the niche – they imply alters and apses, memorials and crypts, again, spaces of special purpose, set asides, places of honor or special distinction. They have the implication of opening up a special space, an alternate room within the room. It designates a separate reality in a similar psychological way as do frames for three-dimensional works. They are not quite a room, they are spaces once removed. I find this alternate reality fascinating and have begun to explore the possibilities of the niche in a series of paintings. I have no idea where it is going, but I am attracted to exploring the purpose and possibility of a 3D equivalent to the picture frame.

What parallels do you see between your work and Caravaggio in terms of space, light and composition?

Caravaggio interests me greatly now as I use more of the theatrical, mysterious darkness he does so well. His work never fails to suck the viewer into theater. They have such drama and intensity, great narrative, and dynamic poses, but I always want him to include more of the world around the figure. What is going on just outside of the light? They become tableau; figures emerge and disappear into the darkness like a stage – I like the stage, it has a front where the audience has the best seat in the house. I would like to explore a more dynamic narrative view, with no front or back. You might have to squeeze your view between two of the subject figures. I like to make the viewer self-conscious, aware of their perspective.

What's happening in your historical paintings?

In the *Artist Apprentice Series* I wanted to reference established historical works from a different perspective to explore how subjective our perceptions are. The viewer is invited into the work with art historical references; a pose that seems vaguely familiar, dramatic studio lighting (like Caravaggio), the colors and props beg the audience to play a memory game. Also, let me mention the notion of changing the context in narrative, that is to say re-contextualization. I began to see this over and over again in early European painting. Why were characters in ancient or religious narratives in contemporary dress? Was the artist unaware of antiquities? I began to consider the purposeful change in context, to move past into present. Depictions of Christ on the cross covered by plague reinforced the idea that deliberate mixing of images can be used to bring purpose and poignancy to the narrative. These possibilities seemed to be worth exploring in my narrative, and I began painting myth in a modern context.

Do you ever think about kitsch in the context of your work? I ask because there's this literal earnestness sometimes where it looks very serious, almost melodramatic and yet one thinks there's something tongue in cheek in your approach.

The reference to familiar art history, or Jung's archetypal dreams might come close to kitsch. I like the idea of great cultural icons reduced to reality, like Dorothy discovering "the man behind the curtain" in Oz. Here again, I am caught with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek when I think of the overwhelming grandeur (and pomposity) of historic art coupled with the realization that your new lover chews with her mouth open. There is a juxtaposition of seriousness and humor in the work. I am not always consistent here to be sure, but I play with the serious issues in a humorous way in many of the paintings. I have the same habit in conversation (which I inherited from my father) of delivering humor with a straight face.

Robert Schefman

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester, MI
- 2004 Krasl Art Center, Saint Joseph, MI
Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 2002 Midland Center for the Arts, Midland, MI
- 2001 Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 2000 Birmingham/Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI
- 1997 Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1995 Charach/Epstien Museum Gallery, West Bloomfield, MI
- 1994 Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1991 Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1984 Aesthetic Arrest, New York, NY
- 1983 Turkish Mission to the United Nations, UN Plaza, New York, NY
- 1982 Sculpture for the Ancient Gates of Troy, Troy, Turkey
- 1979 Art in Public Places, Saginaw Art Museum, Saginaw, MI
- 1976 Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, IA

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 Group Exhibition, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 2004 Variations on a Violin, Padziewski Gallery, Dearborn, MI
New Realism II, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 2003 Senses of Reality, Starkweather Art and Cultural Center, Romeo, MI
- 2002 Robert Berman Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
Celebrate, Charach/Epstein Museum Gallery, West Bloomfield, MI
- 2001 In Our Midst, Padziewski Gallery, Ford Arts Center, Dearborn, MI
Made in Michigan, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI
- 2000 Sex, Detroit Contemporary, Detroit, MI
Really Big Show, Charach/Epstien Museum Gallery, West Bloomfield, MI
Exhibition 2000, BBAC, Birmingham, MI
- 1999 Body and Soul, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI
- 1998 National Society of Mural Painters, Art Students League, New York, NY
- 1997 Michigan Council for the Arts Exhibition Project, Lansing, MI
Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham, MI

- 1996 Michigan Fine Arts Competition, BBAA, Birmingham, MI
Eva Cohon Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1995 Interventions, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
Carbonari, Michigan Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1995 Romantic Allegory, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 1994 Michigan Fine Art Exhibition, BBAA, Birmingham, MI
Willis Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1993 Friends for Focus, Benefit Exhibition, Farmington Hills, MI
- 1992 First Night Exhibition, Birmingham, MI
Figurative/Narrative, Struve Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1990 Art for Life, Cantor/Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1989 Cantor/Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1988 Figurative Painting in the 80s, Ruggiero/Henis Gallery, New York, NY
- 1984 The Dead Blimpie Show, New York, NY
- 1983 Modern Mythology, Fordham University, Bronx, New York, NY
Terminal New York, Brooklyn Army Terminal, Brooklyn, NY
- 1982 Wards Island, O.I.A., New York, NY
- 1981 Foley Square/Federal Plaza, New York, NY
- 1980 On Wards Island, O.I.A., New York, NY
Sculpture Space at Utica College, Utica, NY

GRANTS

- 2004 Benard L. Maas Prize, Benard L. Maas Foundation, Detroit, MI
- 2001 Artists In The Schools Grant, Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, MI
- 1999 ArtServe Michigan, Creative Artist Grant, State of MI
- 1996 Arts Foundation of Michigan, Detroit, MI
- 1995 Pollack-Krasner Foundation, New York, NY
- 1979 Sculpture Space Inc., Utica, NY
- 1976 Graduate Senate Research Grant, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA (Recipient of the first U of I GSR Grant for a graduate art student)

EDUCATION

- 1976 University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, M.A.
- 1974 Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, B.F.A.

A Retrospective of Painting

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September 10 –
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