

Costa Vavagiakis



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R E C E N T P A I N T I N G S A N D D R A W I N G S

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H A C K E T T - F R E E D M A N G A L L E R Y

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GIOIA IV

13 x 13" oil on panel, 1999

Costa Vavagiakis

RECENT PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

In 1998 when organizing the exhibition “Modern Odysseys: Greek American Painters of the 20th Century,” I first encountered paintings by Costa Vavagiakis. I was astonished by the superrealist meticulous precision of the work, which, at first seemed to resemble cibachrome photographs. But, these portrait busts and semi-nudes are hand-painted, very much so. Why, we may ask, with many modes of photographic media so readily available, would an artist in the early 21st century continue the laborious process of painting in oil to achieve verisimilitude? An examination of Vavagiakis’ realistic paintings provokes renewed questions about the relationship of painting to photography.

Although photographs perform only a minor role in Vavagiakis’ paintings, the artist’s vision, his way of perceiving and painting, cannot escape being conditioned by the all-pervading camera image. Even before the invention of photography the *camera obscura*, and later the *camera lucida* were used by painters to achieve the desired veristic results in the transformation of three-dimensional objects to a two-dimensional surface. The camera, invented in the 1820’s, was able to gain great precision and to catch an image of objects almost instantaneously. By the mid-19th century artists like J.A.D. Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, followed by Manet and Degas, made use of

the camera for the purposes of their pictorial composition. In the early 20th century painters, turning to abstraction, believed that the faithful representation of nature had become the domain of the photographer, thus liberating painting from its previous mimetic tasks and freeing it toward autonomous paths. Portraiture, the genre in which Costa Vavagiakis is engaged, seemed to become subsumed almost entirely by the photographer.

In spite of the great portrait paintings by masters such as Matisse, Picasso, Beckmann and Kokoschka, most 20th century portraits were produced by photographers. Indeed, it is difficult for the painter to compete with the rapid result of fixing a likeness with a snapshot, or, of creating portraits of deep psychological insight, as we find in the photographs of Richard Avedon, Annie Leibovitz or Irving Penn. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the camera in its lack of depth perception is designed differently from human bi-focal vision. More important: mechanical reproduction differs markedly from aesthetic subjectivity. Using photographic vision as an implement, a number of contemporary artists consider the camera as a source, similar to fiction writers like Norman Mailer and E.L. Doctorow, who use newspaper reports and television footage as a mainspring.

The dogma, subscribed to by many artists

and critics, that painting would necessarily evolve toward the ineluctable flatness of the surface, did not hold. Art never moves in a linear direction. Pluralism, hardly new, has become prevalent in recent years. In fact, the Pop artists of the early 1960's leveled the playing field and blurred the boundaries between the fine arts and mass culture, deriving their visual banalities from the world or everyday life and the all-encompassing realm of consumerism. They also paved the way for the illusionists painting, called Sharp-Focus Realism or Photo-Realism. Many painters—especially American painters—based their work directly on photographs as the cultural paradigm of the time. Their subject was the contemporary man-made environment—urban, commercial, industrial, technological, and, above all, the mass of inundating mass media. For some artists emerging in the 1960's the photograph itself became the subject of their work, as it did for Chuck Close, whose grand-scale disembodied heads helped revive the portrait as a legitimate, and indeed powerful, genre for painting. Close, employing the photograph as his structural component, uses a multitude of techniques for his massive portrait heads, calling the viewer's attention to his process before he/she can comprehend the presence of a face.

Unlike Chuck Close, however, Vavagiakis paints portraits which are not engendered by photographs, but which are hand-made, exacting graphite drawings or oil paintings. Born in 1958, Vavagiakis belongs to a generation of artists for whom an academic approach to art was no longer abhorrent, but could be fused with modernist concerns.

Like many incipient artists, Costa, as a child, spent a great deal of his time in museums, looking at the work of the masters, past and present. He decided to study at the National Academy of Design as well as at the Art Students League. At the League he was instructed by distinguished anatomy teacher Robert Beverly Hale at a period when anatomic knowledge, to say nothing of drawing skills and observation of

detail, had pretty well abandoned in the training of artists. Vavagiakis' early efforts were in painting cityscapes, interiors and still lifes. His attention, however, was soon directed towards the depiction of the human figure. Of critical significance was his encounter with a Jacques Lipchitz retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in 1972 when he was fourteen years old. He recalls: "I was just blown away. I remember this is what I wanted to do—to pursue art this way—to give life to that. Art would be a means to an end. It would be a means to God or understanding. So that was why I started getting back to the figure in the late 1980's and 1990's."¹

Among the artists whom he also values are Ingres and Lucien Freud (no surprise), but also Fernand Léger, as well as Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko and Brice Marden. He esteems the classical integrity, the spiritual strength and the human emotion in the work of these artists, even if their work differs so markedly from his own.

The quality Vavagiakis admired in the sculpture by Lipchitz is reflected in his own paintings, which have become more three-dimensional as he continues working from the same specific models. He has painted the same figures—Nina, Alison, Maria, Michael, Ignacio, Craig—for many years, learning more about their anatomy and expressions as he proceeds. Photographs in the form of simple Polaroids, are used only for the study of specific details. The work itself is an exploration of the model, experienced during the process of drawing and painting.

Vavagiakis is very much aware of the importance of scale in his portraits. Unlike traditional portraits, which tend to be smaller than life-size, his likenesses are somewhat larger. The distance between himself and the sitter in the studio is very close. He places the light almost directly over the model's head and usually paints the background in neutral soft-hued monochrome, allowing the model's bust to advance into the viewer's eye with a strong, palpable presence.



ALISON III

12 x 11½" oil on panel, 1999

In most of the paintings the model is in clear frontal position; in others like *Ignacio III*, the head may be turned off-center. The paintings are on panel, which enhances their tactile presence. Most of his oils are preceded by graphite drawings, which are structured on a grid system. Sometimes he will use tracing paper to complete the transfer of the image. Most of the paintings are the results of many layers of paint. The final picture, depending on memory as well as observation, has gone through many transitions and is a result of a long period of gestation.

A powerful image in the present exhibition is *Nina VII*. Nina is a poet, actress and artist and has been Vavagiakis' model for innumerable sessions. In this half-length portrait the elderly woman, hand on chin, is gazing at the viewer with intense concentration and a knowing expression. She seems to be observing the observer. The emphasis on cheekbones, clavicle, wrinkles on forehead and veins in her forearm create vivid patterns and the dark shadows above her left breast and right shoulder make an assertive play of light and dark. *Alison III*, with penetrating eyes, emerges from the background as an almost iconic figure with startling presence. Like *Maria V*, the model is painted in a strictly frontal view, but there is often a slight deviation from strict geometry in Vavagiakis' portraits, as there is in the human body itself. Maria's breasts, for example, are not identical. *Maria IV*, a graphite drawing of the same woman, a professional model of long acquaintance, has an expression of fresh innocence, which is enhanced by her hands, folded modestly over her genital area, a posture we notice again in the drawings or the nude *Gioia I*, *Stephanie II*, and *Gioia V*; Vavagiakis' portraits of women may have a fetishistic quality, but they are not erotic.

Craig II confronts the spectator with a look of startled astonishment. Again the clavicle is greatly pronounced, possibly exaggerated, to give greater sculptural quality to the anatomical structure. *Michael III*, a portrait bust of one of Costa's assistants,

has eyes put in dark shadows by the painter, creating an expression of intensity. The painter also must have enjoyed probing the pattern of the man's body hair, giving it the vivid appearance of an organic tangle.

Costa Vavagiakis speaks about his obsession to paint and he considers his work like a mission to find the visual truth in representing the human form. When Costa was seven years old, his uncle accompanied him to Greece, where the young boy stared for a long time at the *Charioteer of Deiphi*. Aware of his own Greek patrimony, Vavagiakis has dedicated his work to the continuum of depicting the human image which, in the face of all the monumental changes in history, continues substantially unaltered over time.

1. Costa Vavagiakis in Thalia Cheronis Seiz, "Artists' Profiles," Modern Odysseys: Greek American Painters of the 20th Century (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p.88

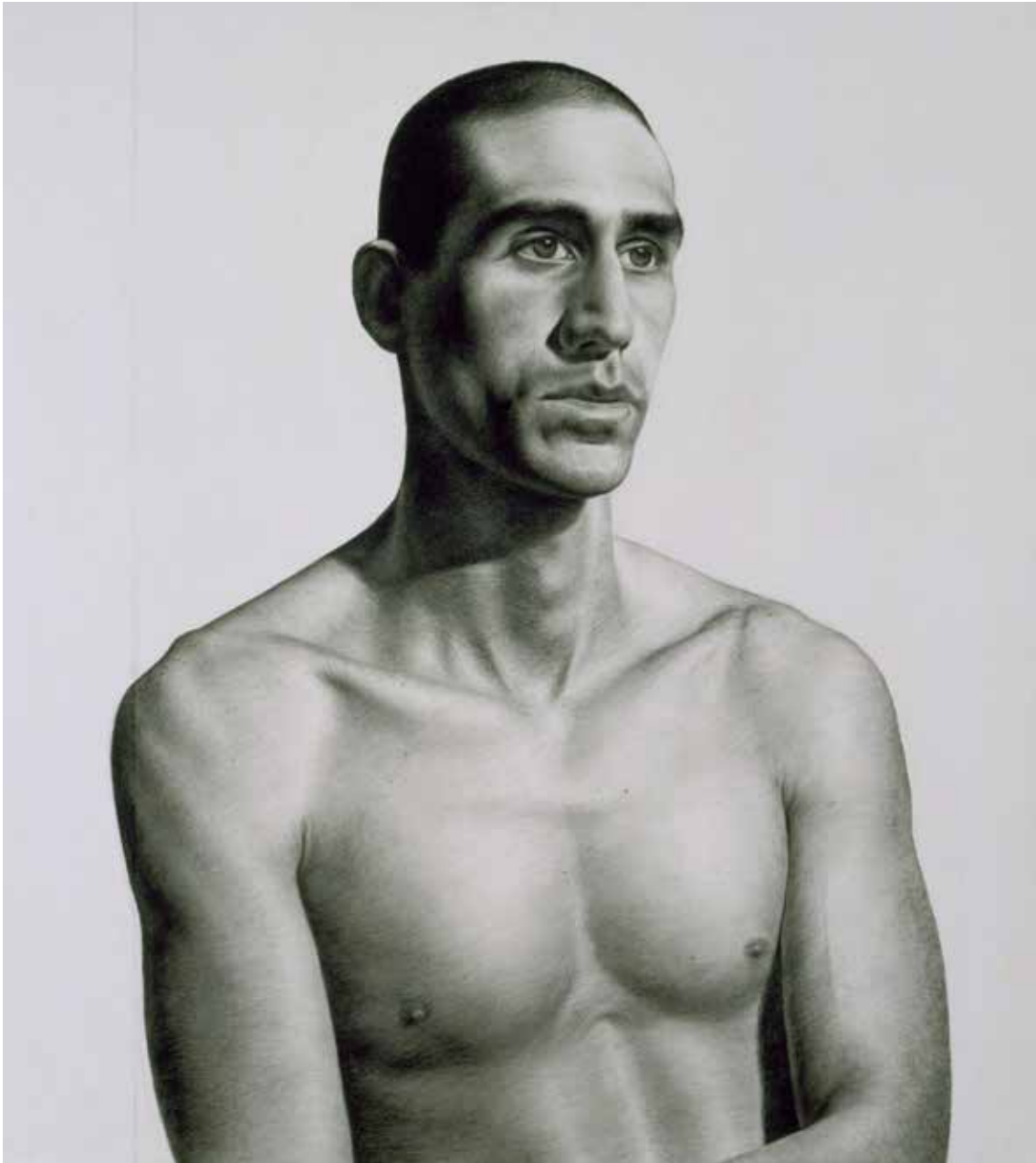
Peter Selz © 2000

Peter Selz is Professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of California, Berkeley. He was Founding Director of the Berkeley Art Museum and formerly Chief Curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



CRAIG II

32 x 25" oil on panel, 2000



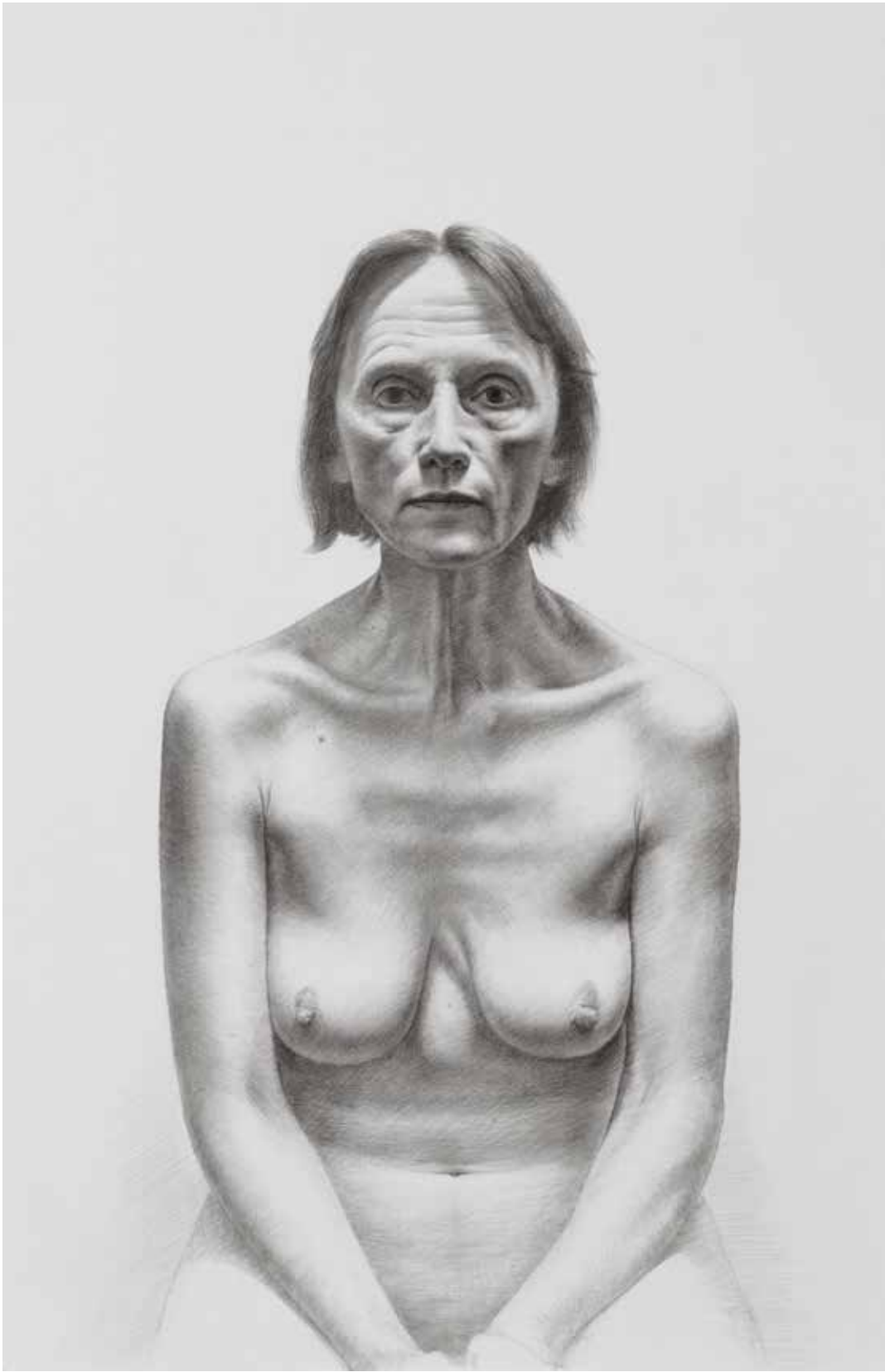
IGNACIO III

29 x 26" graphite on paper, 2000



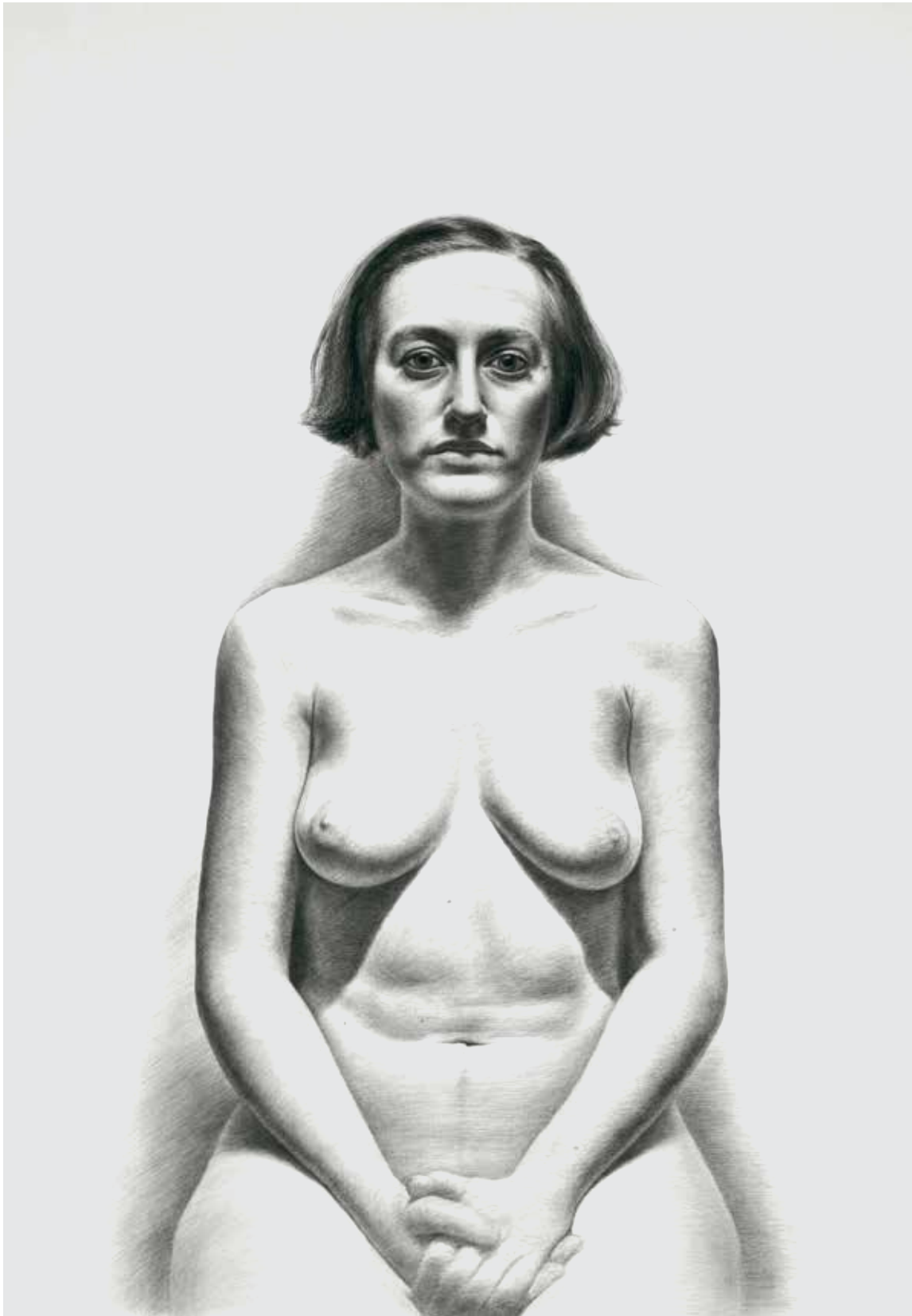
STEPHANIE II

40 x 25½" graphite on paper, 2000



NINA VIII

40 x 25½" graphite on paper, 2000



GIOIA V

39 x 27½" graphite on paper, 2000

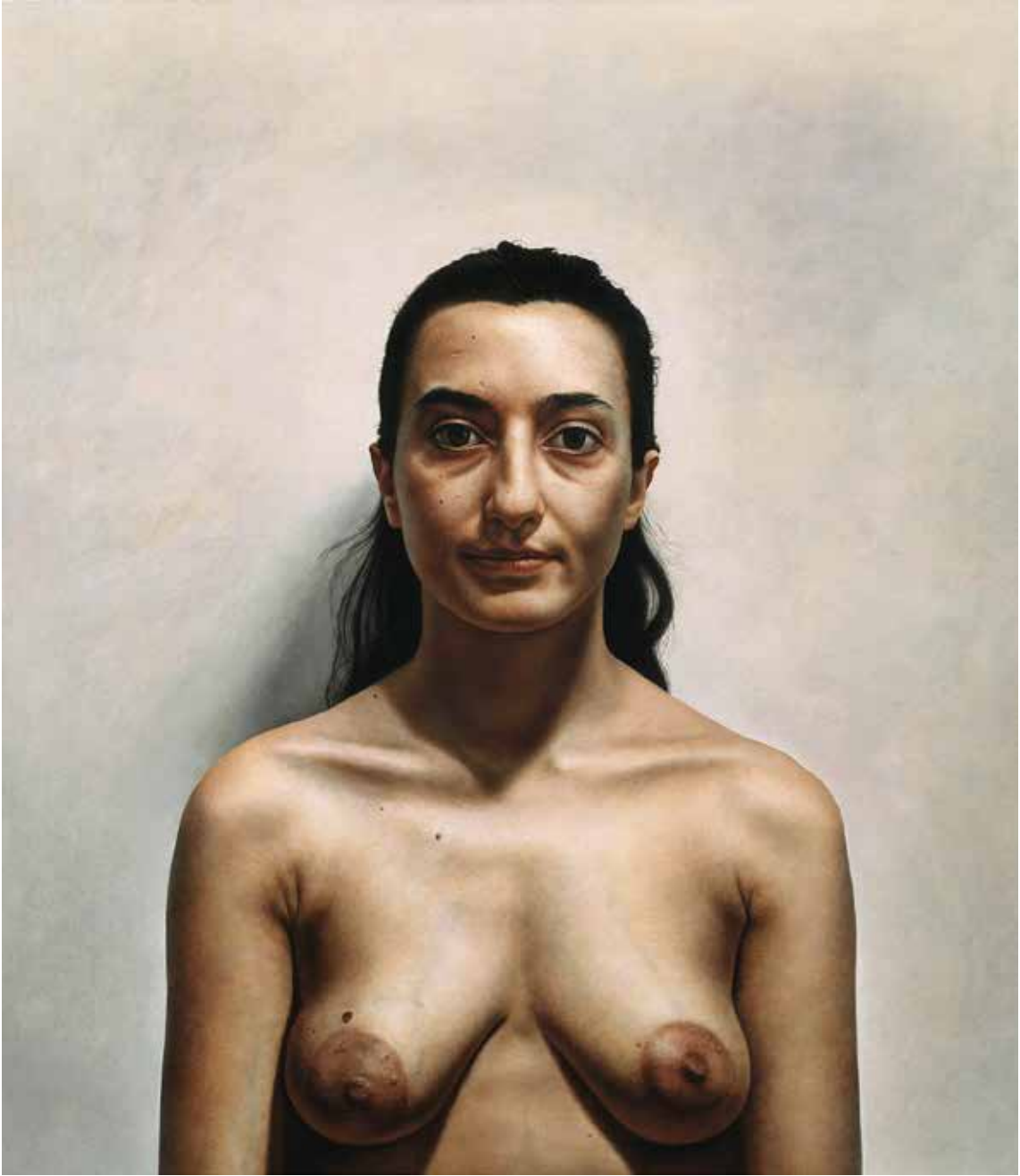
MICHAEL III

31¼ x 27" oil on panel, 2000



M A R I A V

27½ x 24¼" oil on panel, 2000



Costa Vavagiakis

Born: 1958, New York, NY

EDUCATION :

Queens College, Queens, NY
Art Students League, New York, NY
National Academy of Design, School of Fine Arts,
New York, NY

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS :

- 2000 Solo exhibition, Hackett-Freedman Gallery,
San Francisco, CA (also 1998)
"Hackett-Freedman Gallery Artists," Shasta College Gallery,
Redding, CA
"Salon International Cannes-Azur," Cannes, France
"Modern Odysseys: Greek American Artists of the 20th
Century," Queens Museum, New York, NY; National
Gallery Alexandros Soutzos Museum, Athens, Greece
(traveling exhibition)
"Modern Odysseys: New Faces," Foundation for Hellenic
Culture, New York, NY
"Summer Groups Introduction," Tatistcheff & Co.,
New York, NY
- 1999 "Re-Presenting: Representation IV," Arnot Art Museum,
Elmira, NY
- 1997 "10th Anniversary Exhibition," Hackett-Freedman Gallery,
San Francisco, CA
"Drawing from Life," Tatistcheff & Co., New York, NY
"Summer Group Show," Radix Gallery, New York, NY
- 1996 The Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, MA
Union League Club, New York, NY
"New York Now," Museum of the City of New York, NY
"92nd Street Art Center Faculty Exhibition," Weill Art
Gallery, New York, NY
Traumbau, New York, NY
- 1995 "Painting Today," Erector Square Gallery, New Haven, CT
"Emerging from New York," Kliener James Art Center,
Woodstock, NY
"The Matchbook Show," Art in General, New York, NY
"Montclair State University Art Galleries," Upper
Montclair, NJ
Solo exhibition, "What's in a Face," Killian Gallery, Sharon
Arts Center, Peterborough, NH
"Selections," K & E Gallery, New York, NY
"National Small Works Exhibition," Schoharie County Arts
Council, Cobleskill, NY (also 1993, 1992)
The Union League Club, New York, NY
- 1994 "The Box," K & E Gallery, New York, NY
"Recent Acquisitions: Presents of the Past," Museum of the
City of New York, NY
Great Modern Pictures, New York, NY
"Contemporary Portrait Exhibition," Delapaine Visual Arts
Center, Frederick, MD
"Eye to Eye: The Painted Portrait," Montpelier Cultural
Arts Center, Laurel, MD
- "The 169th Annual Exhibition," National Academy of
Design, New York, NY
"Harper College Print and Drawing Exhibitions," William
Rainey Harper College, Palatine, IL
Solo Exhibition, Gallery Three Zero, New York, NY
- 1993 "Drawing," Gallery 303, Brigham Young University, Provo,
UT (also 1991, 1990)
"Art on Paper," Maryland Federation of Art Gallery,
Anapolis, MD
"Realism," Parkersburg Art Center, Parkersburg, WV
"The State of Contemporary American Portraiture," Arts
Quad Contemporary Fine Art, Easton, PA
"The Matchbook Show," CB's Gallery, New York, NY
- 1992 "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Contemporary Self-Portraits,"
The Arts Council of Richmond, Richmond, VA
"City Life," Bridgewater/Lustberg Gallery, New York, NY
Viridian Gallery, New York, NY
"Galex XXVI Exhibition," Galesburg Civic Art Center,
Galesburg, IL
"American Drawing Biennial III," Muscarelle Museum of
Art, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA
- 1991 "New Directions," Barrett House Galleries, Poughkeepsie, NY
Berkshire Art Association, The Berkshire Museum,
Pittsfield, MA
"Art of Northeast USA," Silvermine Guild Arts Center,
New Canaan, UT
- 1990 "54th National MidYear Exhibition," The Butler Institute of
American Art, Youngstown, OH (also 1988, 1985)
"The 165th Annual Exhibition," National Academy of
Design, New York, NY (also 1988, 1984)
- 1989 "Mask: The Alternative Self," The Gallery at Hasting-on-
Hudson, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY
"First Street Selects," First Street Gallery, New York, NY
- 1987 The Research Foundation of the City of New York,
New York, NY
"Nightworks," The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY
"NIGHT LIFE/NIGHT LIFE," Sherry French Gallery,
New York, NY (also 1986)
- 1986 "The Embellishment of the Statue of Liberty," The
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York, NY
"The Expert Eye," Sabbeth Art Gallery, Glen Cove, NY
- 1985 "9th Annual Small Works Exhibition," 80 Washington
Square East Galleries, New York University, NY
(also 1983)
- 1983 Kenny Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS :

Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR
The Museum of the City of New York, New York, NY
Bringham Young University, Provo, UT



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Nina VII
40 x 30" oil on panel, 2000

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