

# CURVE

THE FEMALE NUDE NOW

UNIVERSE

**RIGHT:** *Nina VI* 2000. Oil on panel, 40 x 30 inches. Photograph courtesy Hackett-Freedman Gallery **OPPOSITE:** *Stephanie III* 2000. Oil on panel, 13 x 13 inches. Photograph courtesy Hackett-Freedman Gallery



Like photographers Thomas Struth and Chuck Close, Greek-American Costa Vavagiakis's subject is the human figure, depicted as a bust, unidealized, against a neutral background. Unlike Struth and Close, however, Vavagiakis isn't a photographer; he is a painter who painstakingly creates, in oils, the appearance and expression of his figures. Two things are at work in his oeuvre: an excavation of the portrait tradition, which dates back several millennia, even beyond kouros statues of his native Greece that he cites as an

influence; and the relationship between photography and painting, which has been a fraught one ever since the invention of photography in the 1820s and 1830s.

Unlike nineteenth-century realist—Thomas Eakins, for instance—Vavagiakis doesn't have to hide his interest in photography or its usefulness as a preparatory tool for the painter. Rather, Vavagiakis exposes this interest, plumbing the depths of the relationship to reveal how painting can be more "real" even than photography, since

the mechanical medium's flatness and lack of bifocal vision serve as impediments to reaching an effective, modeled likeness. Seeing a Vavagiakis canvas, in which the portrait has been labored over rather than snapped in an instant, makes us question not just our perception of images and reality, but our reliance on photography, the commonly understood purveyor of verisimilitude and "truth". —MS

