

POWERS WAKE

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

As I return to the muse after a 20-year absence, I am a much older and wiser man in search of answers to age-old questions. I had often looked for those answers in the halcyon days of my youth when I was a Laguna Beach “brother of eternal love” and studied with Wayne Thiebaud, the Master of the “California Palette”. After much reflection, I have now turned back towards the *Orange Sunshine* of my youth, but now I view it from the existential phthalocyanine plane of James Joyce’s chaosmos (life experience) manifesto *Finnegans Wake*. My first artist incarnation was that of Stephen Dadalus in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. My existential artistic journey has left deep furrows in my psyche, but just like a car works on gas, my brain works on chaosmos, empty brain, empty art.

Through my MFA Title Series, I will struggle to answer those age-old questions by drawing upon my life experience. My existential journey has enabled me to finally understand the ever-evolving California Counterculture and how my outside-the-box paintings might help Californians regain their cultural identity, which has been compromised by Orwellian progressivism (“Big Brother”) who uses art as propaganda and as a social engineering tool. “The artist like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (James Joyce).

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2009, I showed the Director of the Terrence Rodgers Gallery one of my pre-LCAD paintings. After looking at it for a moment, he asked me if I was a teacher. I said I am an art professor at Palomar College, and how did he see that in my painting. He said my painting was brimming with academic arrogance and political correctness and was clearly painted by someone who lives in an academic ivory tower. The Director also stated: “that Artists who live a hand-to-mouth existence usually have an edge to their paintings”. He told me to come back and see him when I had made the transition from teacher to artist.

In my first semester at LCAD, I was assigned to a watercolor course. The course was based in part on the 19th Century watercolor techniques as espoused in John Ruskin’s *The Elements of Drawing*. I have been painting watercolors for over 35 years, utilizing my own unique method and process. When the adage: “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” became clear to my professor, he assigned me a watercolor project that would be a nude executed in my own style. At the time, I only had access to a 35-year-old photograph of my girlfriend. The photograph was dark, and I had to raise the contrast quite a bit to define her features. The photograph was so old that there was a black & white television in the room. I took it to class thinking I was going to be “crucified” but instead everyone thought it was “brilliant”. It seems I had, inadvertently, created a film noir environment around a psychologically twisted image of a young woman.

At my MFA Review, I was assigned to do a series of these nudes for my MFA Title Series. Because nude models are concerned that their image might find its way onto the Internet, it has become difficult to obtain new nude photographs of women. Therefore, I had to go back to my file of photographs that were shot 20 years ago. Although I, initially, had some concerns that some of the images would no longer be politically correct, I have been pleasantly surprised by the support my nudes have received, especially from “Baby Boomer” men who were courting their wives at that time. My images seem to engender memories of

their wives as their lovers before they became mothers and when they both were young and winsome. I also believe that because these generational images are from the leisure suit, white-belt era, it adds to the psychological perception that something is not politically correct about these nude images of women, thus giving the painting a “twisted” element. My women models are all “California Girls” (Beach Boys, 1965) encapsulated in their sybaritic aura. Today, chaosmos aesthetics also refers to “deviant art” which was and still is popular in Laguna Beach. Even though the LCAD Fine Arts Program adheres to classicism and realism approaches, I see many of the LCAD programs utilizing these modern chaosmas art forms. After teaching art for 20 years, I know that the average American would much rather own a Vargas than an Ingres. It is my hope that through my paintings, I can expand my patron’s consciousness through using Vargas like imagery but filtering it through Ingres’ chaosmos aesthetic.

When I took these photographs of my girlfriends back in the 1980’s, I was a much different artist than I am today. I was not trying to make any kind of politically incorrect or psychological statement about my paintings. Then, all that changed when I moved back to North Carolina in 1990 and started my teaching career and stopped painting.

In 1994 I initiated an educational project with Harvard University and my attitude and perceptions became arrogant in nature. I no longer wanted to be a North Carolina High School Visual Art teacher, I wanted to be a Harvard Art History Professor. When I lost my funding for my OPEN EYES Project in December of 1999, I returned home to California a changed man. I also discovered California had changed socially and politically. Although my status and means had greatly diminished, I was still trying to maintain my ties to this elitist world. The only problem was it was unrealistic as I no longer had the Harvard-based network or resources to engage in such a lifestyle or career dynamic.

Subsequently, for the last 10 years I have had to face a tremendous amount of rejection and failure. Then when I enrolled in LCAD in 2008, I continued to hold onto my elitist beliefs and tried to produce paintings worthy of hanging in the Louvre. Once again,

I set the bar too high and developed “Masterpiece Syndrome”. Hopefully, through this new series of watercolors, I will regain that passion for painting I possessed 20 years ago. These nudes have been a blessing and reconnected me with a part of me that I thought died a long time ago. My art is now geared towards expanding my consciousness in a positive direction. I also now realize that I can no longer dwell in two worlds, that being the world of art and the world of education. Art exists outside, or at least on the fringe, of our now politically correct world where as the world of education is now dominated by it and has principally become our progressive societies most ardent advocate and inculcator. If I do return to teaching someday I will first establish myself as a professional artist like Margaret Bowland, who teaches at the New York Academy of Art.

Recently, my friend Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at UNC-Asheville, Brian Butler, read my MFA Thesis. After reading his comments, I was encouraged that I was finally overcoming my Harvard academic arrogance and I had escaped from my politically correct *box*.

I read your MFA thesis last night and enjoyed both the content and the combination of what I thought was creative seriousness, irreverence and (moral) outrage. Is this a correct reading? As one professor to another, I am not really sure I would want to offer a *PC* reading because while I generally stay within those lines myself, I don't like pushing others, especially those who are creative, into the same *PC* box. I will admit your thesis, as currently edited, made me want to see your work, though.

(Brian Butler)

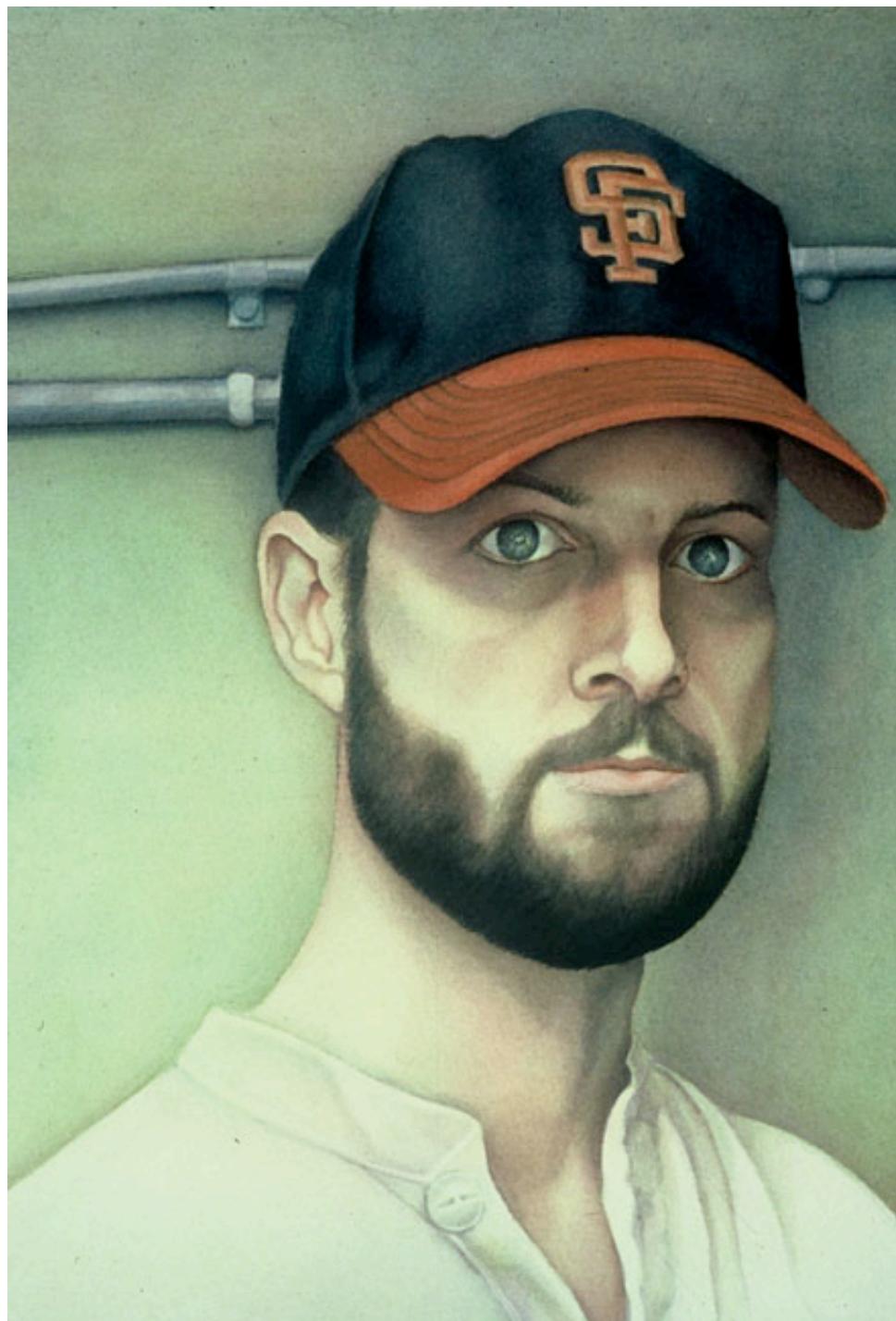


Figure 1. Thomas M. Powers, 15" x 17" Watercolor, *Self Portrait*, 1989

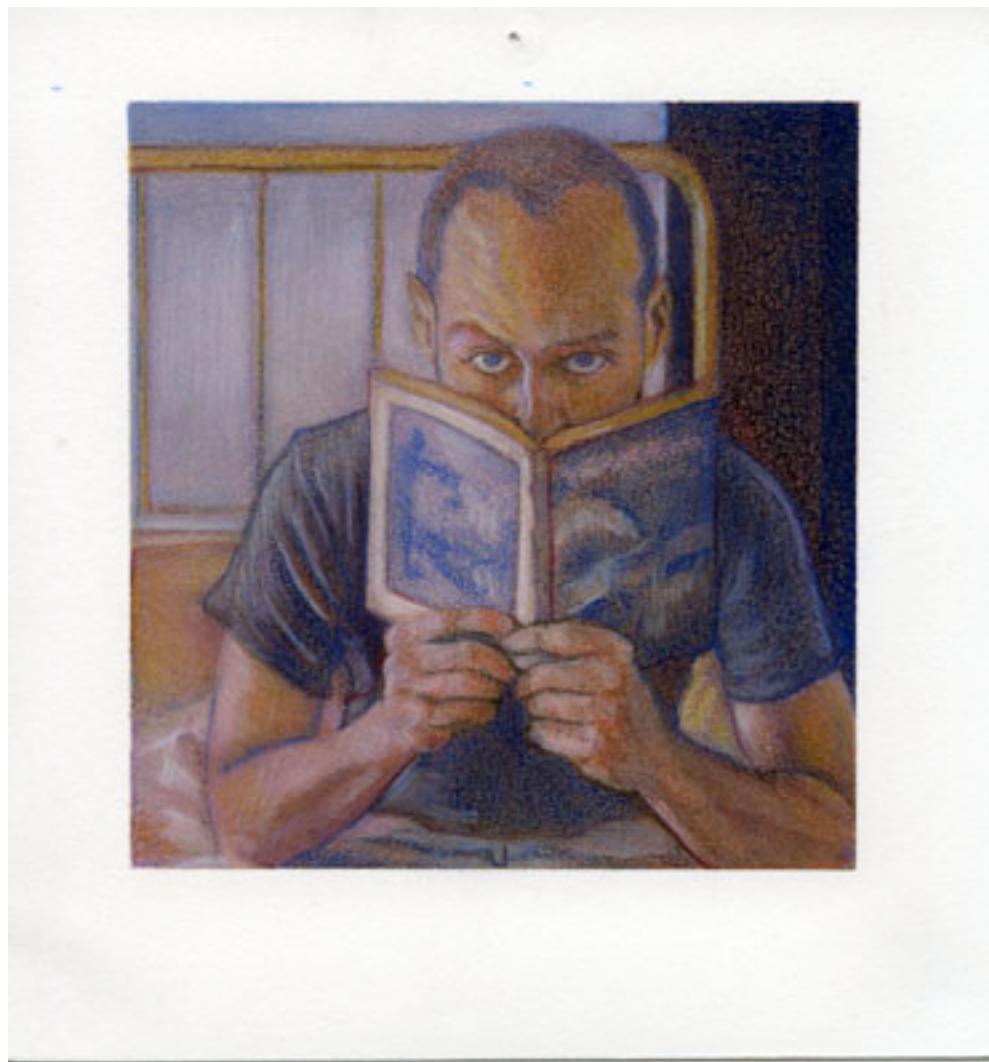


Figure 2. Thomas M. Powers, 5" x 7" Watercolor/Prismacolor Pencil, *Self Portrait*, 2008

METHODOLOGY

My MICA mentor, Grace Hartigan, would say: “that painting was getting up everyday, doing the work, seeing what happens and taking the journey because art is all about the struggle”. Margaret Bowland recently told me that she repainted the face of one of her most successful paintings over 15 times before she got it right. Unfortunately, trying to produce such work on a graduate school timeline is very difficult, especially if you work primarily in watercolor.

The principle focus of my MFA Title Series is the female nude figure in an interior. This is also the principle focus of Margaret Bowland’s paintings and like her nudes I try to create a balanced composition where the nude does not dominate the interior, that every element has equal weight and power. This series of nudes is only the beginning of my journey to becoming a professional painter. I believe it has been a Godsend, because I have had to “struggle” and overcome many barriers; but I now firmly feel the path beneath my feet, and I am ready to follow it wherever it leads me.

Unlike working with oils, watercolors are unforgiving. One only has one chance to get it right. If one makes a mistake, one unfortunately has to throw the watercolor away as there is no fixing it. It is, therefore, necessary to have a finished drawing to transfer onto the watercolor paper. In many ways it takes the joy out of the painting process; but if somehow one can get through the preparation process, one should have a very powerful painting. The “struggle” is such an important part of my artwork. In my most recent watercolors, I tried not to shy away from elements that are difficult to paint like a Japanese kimono, a reflection in a mirror or an African American’s ebony skintone. If I am able to successfully handle such difficult elements, it demonstrates my proficiency and my ability to create a dynamic painting and paint on a graduate level.

My watercolors are based on the “California Palette” that was taught to me by Wayne Thiebaud. It differs from the “European Palette” in primarily two ways. First, instead of

working off a dark ground, one works off a white ground. Secondly instead of working light to dark, one works warm to cool. The white highlights in my watercolors are not opaque but the white showing through thin washes of color. Thiebaud taught me to use the white ground as often as possible. He would often frown on those students who would come to studio with a tube of opaque white watercolor paint. The phthalocynine colors are cornerstones of the California Palette for they do impart elements of California Sunlight. I have never seen anyone who shares my watercolor method and process, which is the construction of numerous thin layers of wash and always using the white of the paper instead of opaque white paint for my light source or highlights. Through this process, one can create maximum tonality and not make the colors muddy. My first offerings in my new series were inhibited and overly controlled; but as I am regaining my watercolor prowess, they are much more flowing and relaxed. I cannot wait to see what they will be like in another year. I believe by then, I will also be painting intuitively or what I term in the zone.

I premised my timeline for painting intuitively from an essay I read on Philip Pearlstein. The essay explains the process by which Pearlstein developed his unique style and the many obstacles he had to overcome to attain that style. His process took six years of “struggle” to develop; and the essay relates how Pearlstein, like Margaret Bowland, worked less from photographs and more from live models. Pearlstein believes the eye is the best camera and that it really brings out an intuitive way to perceive the figure. For example in a recent Bowland painting I saw at the Thomas Paul Gallery, the figure’s hands appeared a little larger or out of scale from the rest of the body. Margaret Bowland told me that she painted the figure’s hand larger or out of scale to draw attention to them and to read like the eye might see them. Pearlstein also likes to work with this out of scale illusion, for example making the legs a little larger than scale so they jut out from the canvas. I am trying this same effect in my most recent watercolor. This is what I mean by painting intuitively.

Currently, I am working off 20-year-old photographs which were inspired by Balthus and French Cinema (circa 1967 to 1969). When I was an art professor at Palomar College,

one of my Art 100 students commented on www.ratemyprofessor.com that: “Professor Powers is an old hippie who is stuck in the 1960’s”, I am “guilty” as charged. I am a devotee of Roger Vadim films who discovered Brigitte Bardot and was married to Jane Fonda (*Barbarella* 1968), and I am seeing the limitations and problems that arise with working from this Roger Vadim French “Sex Kitten” imagery who incorporated Balthus imagery into his film genre. This is a common practice to use artists imagery in films, everyone from Hitchcock (Hopper) to Kurosawa (Utamaro) have incorporated artists imagery into their films.

As I have stated in my *Research*, I want to now be able to communicate both linguistically and spatially where like my nudes in an interior both have equal weight. I have executed all the embedded artworks and, hopefully, they explain “spatially” my life’s journey. The first two images are *self portraits*. In the first one I am a “young artist” and the second is a much older and wiser artist peering intently over a book (*Finnegans Wake*). The second set of artwork is drawing a comparison as to how I painted the nude 27 years ago when I studied with Wayne Thiebaud at UC Davis. I was heavily influenced by Ingres and now Hopper has influenced my recent work. The fifth artwork is a *Homage to Balthus* who was my main influence 20 years ago, and the final artwork is my now infamous *Girl and her TV* which set me on my current path. In all of the paintings, I first filled my brain with the artworks of my influences and then through my subconscious intuitively incorporated it into my paintings.

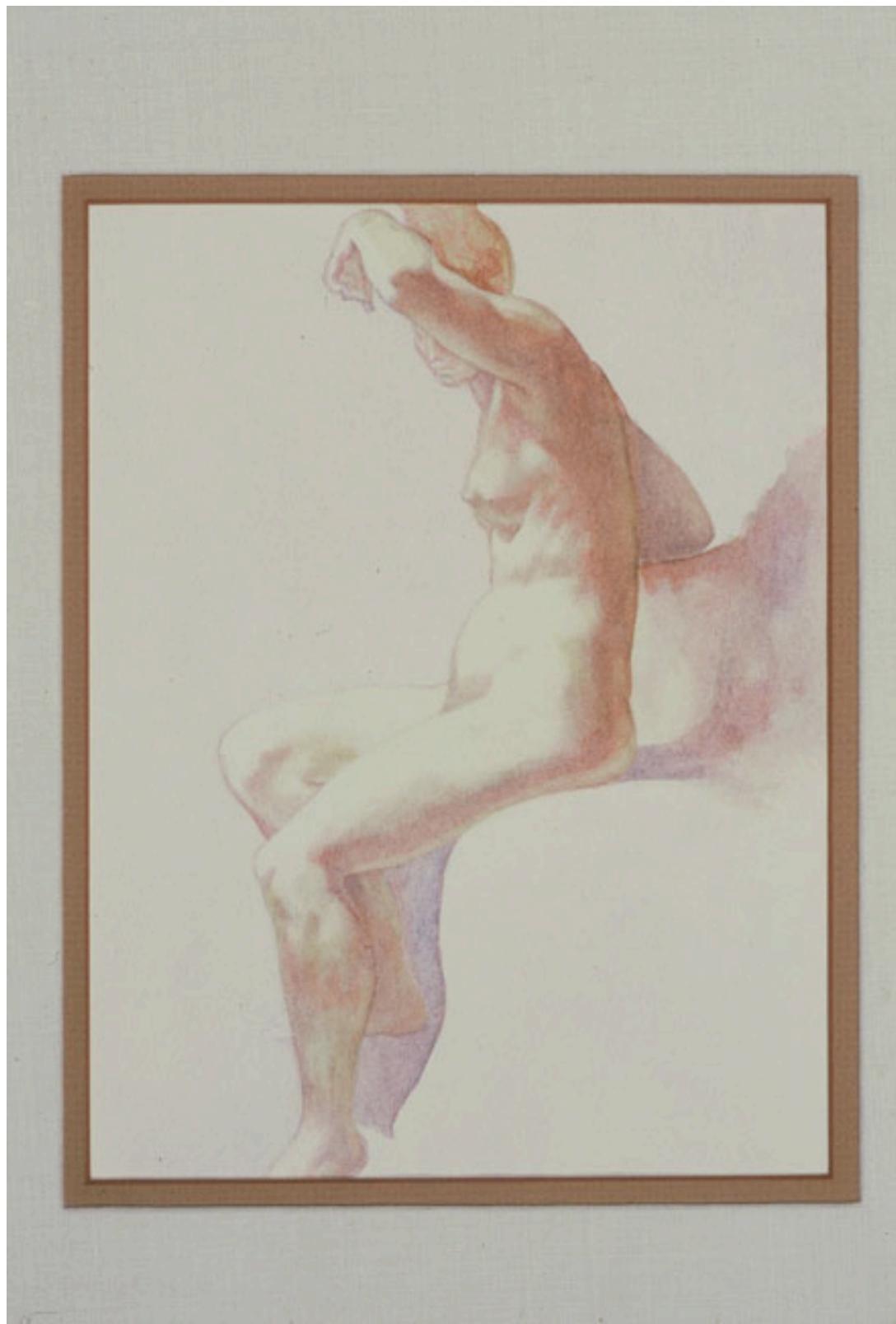


Figure 3. Thomas M. Powers, 14" x 16" Watercolor, *Figure Study*, 1983

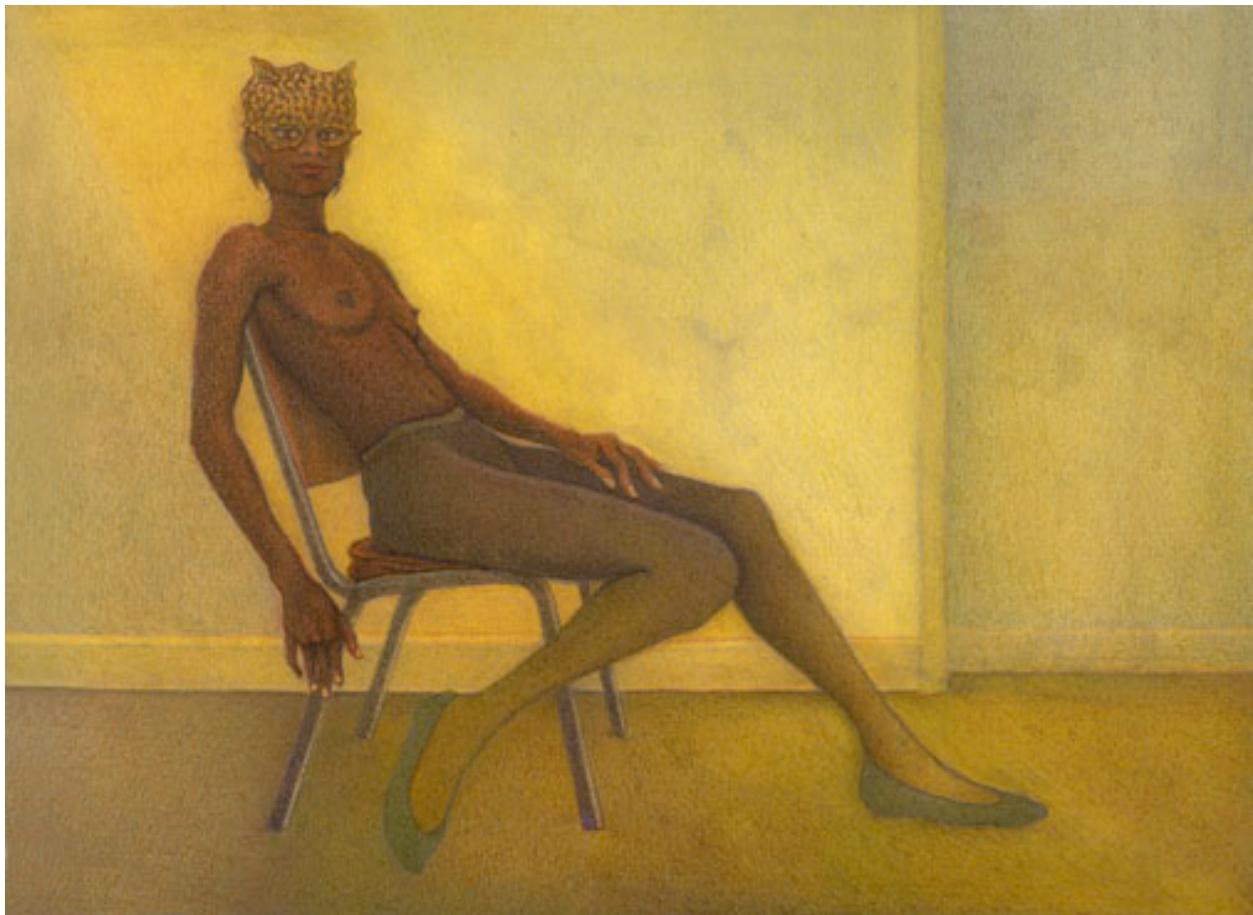


Figure 4. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor/Prismacolor Pencil, 2009

RESEARCH

On March 15th of last year I attended the Roger Kuntz “The Shadow between Representation and Abstraction” Retrospective at the Laguna Art Museum. Just a week before, I had discussed with my adviser about revising the theme of my thesis to redirect the focus away from propaganda art and towards something based more on my personal experiences. Having studied with such legendary California Artists as Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn, my adviser suggested that I try to reconnect with the California influences in my artwork.

This was still very much an abstraction until I walked into the Kuntz Retrospective. As one meandered through the exhibition, one saw the artworks of an adept and accomplished technician. The myriad of styles Kuntz mastered and his subject matter chronicled the evolution of California Art from the early 1940’s to the early 1970’s. Kuntz’s artwork often mirrors the artworks of Diebenkorn and Thiebaud.

What is unique about Kuntz’s artwork is how he combines the various styles into creating something uniquely Californian and not beholden to one master or genre. The new direction for my thesis finally coalesced when I descended down the stairs into the basement gallery and viewed Kuntz’s “Ocean Interiors” series that he painted in the mid 1960’s. Although you clearly see Diebenkorn’s phthalocyanine geometric planes of chromatic color moving through Kuntz’s interiors, his figurative roots clearly take his paintings away from Diebenkorn’s sense of abstraction and into the realm of realism. Kuntz’s subject matter is true California iconography, Kuntz focusing on “plein air” subject matter such as the beach, freeways and the Goodyear blimp. I clearly saw a direction I could take my art and thesis through Kuntz’s artistic journey. My artistic obstacle course compares in many ways to Roger Kuntz’s journey. My artwork has received numerous accolades for its “technical prowess” and my ability to copy any style. Also like Kuntz, I became overly focused on teaching art and not making art. In 1963 Roger Kuntz concluded that “teaching was

diminishing his capacity to paint,” and he resigned his teaching position at Scripps College to devote himself fully to painting. In 2008 my journey led me to the same conclusion Kuntz faced in 1963, and I left my teaching position and enrolled in the MFA/Painting program at LCAD. In 1970 Kuntz re-entered the teaching profession by accepting a position at LCAD. By this time, he had tired of the struggle and his artwork had diminished to nothing more than creating “potboilers” for the local Laguna Beach Art Festivals. This may be the greatest lesson Kuntz’s journey can teach me, that I must truly find a way to thrive as a painter.

When I began the MFA program at LCAD in the Fall of 2008, I had not professionally painted for 20 years; and my teaching experience was primarily in Art History and Art Education. As my thesis adviser pointed out to me, I am a spatially intelligent person. Yet, for 20 years my world of art has existed primarily between the pages of an Art History textbook or pedagogical essay. Although I could write volumes about the similarities and differences between the paintings of Diebenkorn, Thiebaud and Kuntz and create a curricular approach to deliver their vision to linguistically intelligent students, I could not visually communicate my mentors’ California iconography. It was not until I saw the strong phthalocyanine horizontal and vertical “planes” of Kuntz’s “Ocean Interior” series, which is the most significant element that all these legendary California painters share in common, that the lessons I learned from my mentors came rushing back into my consciousness. I could finally see how I was going to execute my own “Ocean Interiors” series. Both Kuntz and Diebenkorn lived at the beach. While their interiors radiate with streams of “California Light”, the women in these “Ocean Interiors” usually are not saying much about the California sybaritic culture. They basically serve as a vertical element to Diebenkorn and Kuntz’s radiant, phthalocyanine planes of color and unlike their influence, Edward Hopper, their women are not the central focus, but only serve as any other compositional interior element.

Viewing the Kuntz Retrospective also clarified everything that happened to me over the course of the last 20 months. Along with re-connecting with Judson Studios, joining the

California Art Club and the help I have received from Peter Frank, I believe I can establish a solid foundation in the California Art Community and, hopefully, become an ambassador like my mentors of the California sybaritic culture.

Currently, I am doing extensive research, filling my brain, into the various genres of California Art. The Kuntz Retrospective covers the 30-year span acknowledged by many Art historians as the “Golden Age of California Art”. Judson Studios’ significant and rare library pertaining to California Impressionism should provide an excellent resource for visually connecting me with the early part of the 20th Century. As for 21st Century California Art, I have as my adviser curator Peter Frank, who is a nationally recognized authority on Contemporary California Art.

Although most of my research has come from art history books and essays, my most important research has been Nicholas Schou’s *Orange Sunshine*. The book chronicles the Laguna Beach “Brotherhood of Eternal Love” which I experienced as a young surfer 40 years ago. When I turned in the book to a photograph taken by surf photographer Jeff Devine in 1972 of three “brothers” at their bungalow in Laguna Canyon, I had an epiphany and was immediately transported back to those halcyon days of my youth. In 1968 the “Brothers” founded LCAD and initially followed a chaosmos aesthetic approach. Chaosmas is an aesthetic theory that distinguishes between what is traditionally “closed” works of art juxtaposed to truly avant-garde or “open” artworks such as Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* or Alexander Calder’s mobiles, the music of John Cage or the choreography of Merce Cunningham. It also pertains to the art of a young artist who lacks the consciousness to venture too far off the beaten path. He, therefore, often adheres to prescribed methods and perceptions which often inhibits the artist’s creativity and generates what Roger Kuntz called “potboiler” paintings. This is clearly expressed by James Joyce’s character Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It is not until *Finnegans Wake* that we see Joyce use the chaosmos aesthetic, when the now older and wiser poet’s art is filtered through individual consciousness in the nature of an epiphany. More than a way of discovering and

understanding the world, the epiphany reveals to the poet “the profound soul of things, and it is he who makes them exist solely through the poetic word”. After reading *Finnegans Wake* and *Orange Sunshine*, I now see a path to bridge the 20-year gap and make those images from my youth relevant in today’s progressive world.

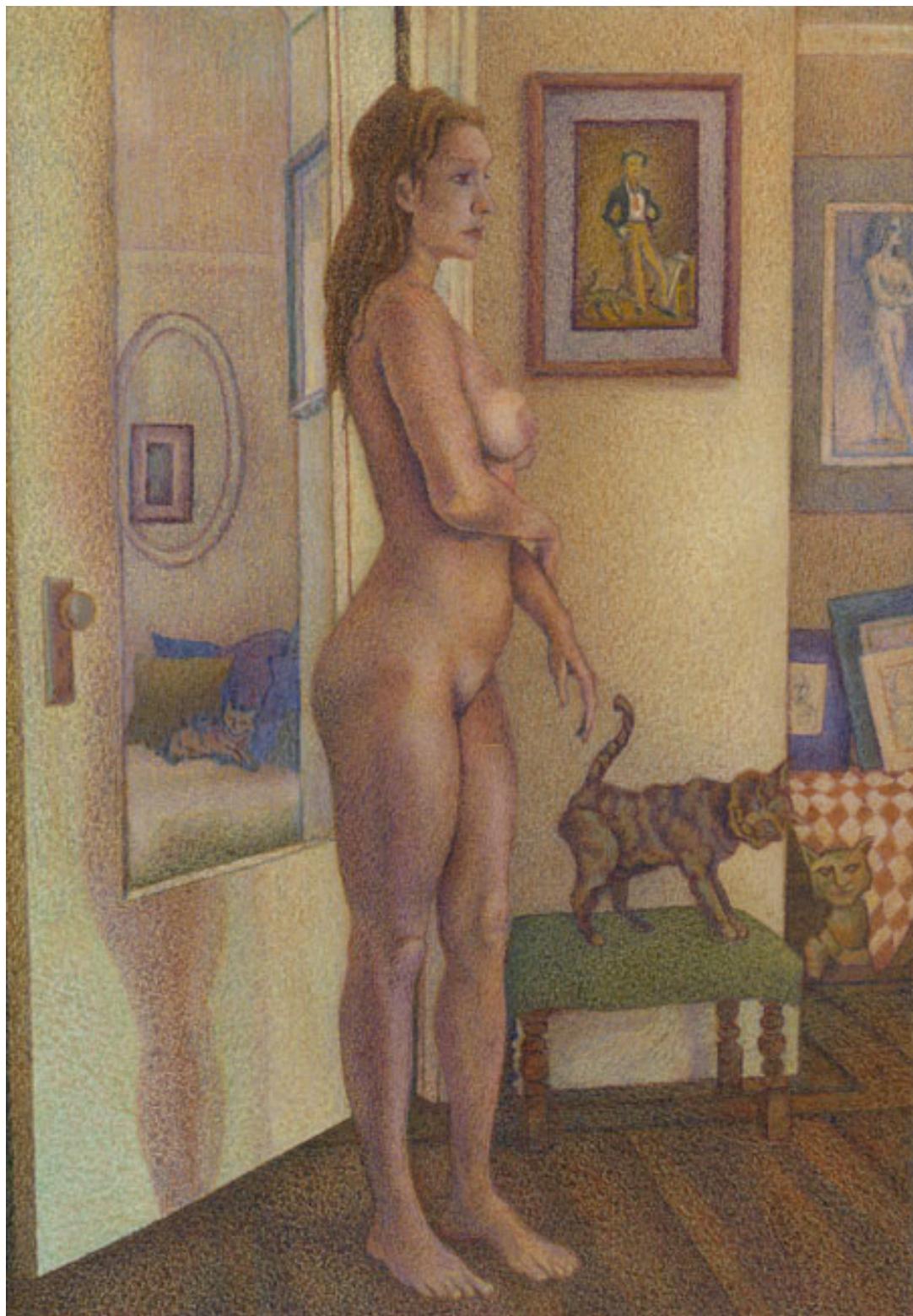


Figure 5. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor/Prismacolor Pencil, 2009

Homage to Balthus

CONCLUSION

When my mentor, Josef Albers, arrived at Black Mountain College in 1933 after fleeing Nazi Germany, a student asked him what he wanted to accomplish during his tenure at the school, Albers replied: “Open Eyes”, which is his chaosmos approach of allowing young artists to garner consciousness through his experience and wisdom. In 2000 my alma-mater, Maryland Institute, College of Art (MICA), did a survey which tried to determine how many of their MICA graduates were still working artists 10 years after graduating. More than 50% of MICA alumni had abandoned the muse. I believe the principle reason most artists fail to ever support themselves through their art is because they too often “close their eyes” before they hit what Dr. Howard Gardner calls the “Wall of Restriction” as I did 20 years ago when I became a full-time teacher. This time, I have the support and the approach to not flinch before “the wall” and to finally have the imagination and insight to overcome the barriers that have kept me from my 35-year quest of being an artist who can communicate and enlighten spatially.

In conclusion, I now see the wisdom that my MFA review panel directed me towards back in May of 2009. They told me to focus on my watercolors. At the time, they felt it was my strongest medium. As I have regained my technical prowess with my watercolors, I see that the technique of using the white of the paper and creating maximum tonality that I developed has created an identifiable characteristic of my paintings. Once I graduate and become established, I will try to start working more from live models. My time at LCAD has been spent overcoming those psychological barriers that caused me to abandon the muse 20 years ago. As I gaze once again into my own Oracle at Delphi’s prophetic waters, I now envision a time when I can thrive as a California artist. I am excited about re-connecting with my muse. Although I have traveled far down the road to recovering my painting prowess in the last 2 years, I still have probably another 3 years of struggle before I will be able to hang in the same galleries as Bowland and Pearlstein. I am looking forward to “the journey”. “Think you’re escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home” James Joyce.

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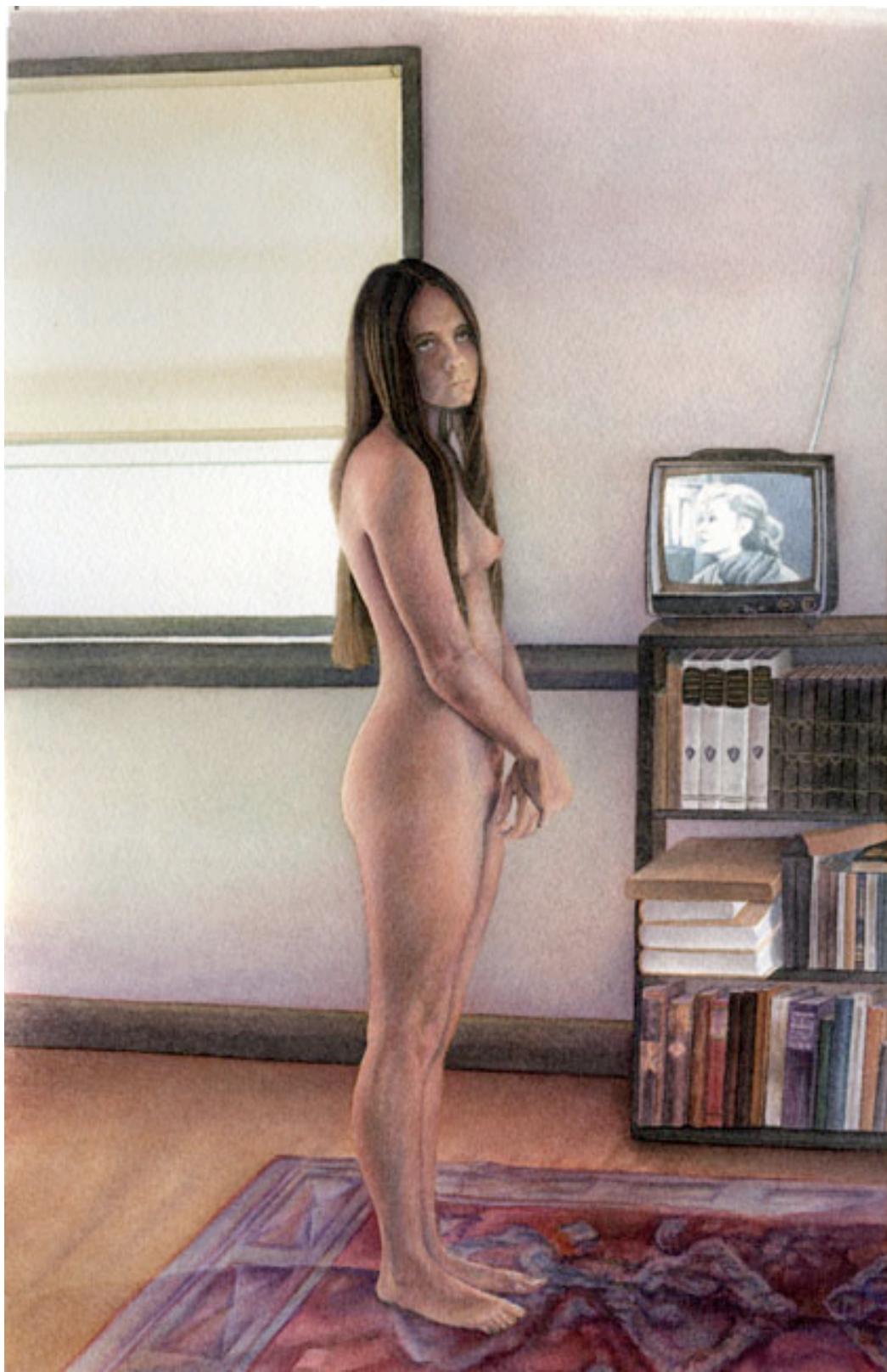


Figure 6. Thomas M. Powers, 12" x 14" Watercolor, 2009

APPENDIX

MFA Thesis

POWERS WAKE

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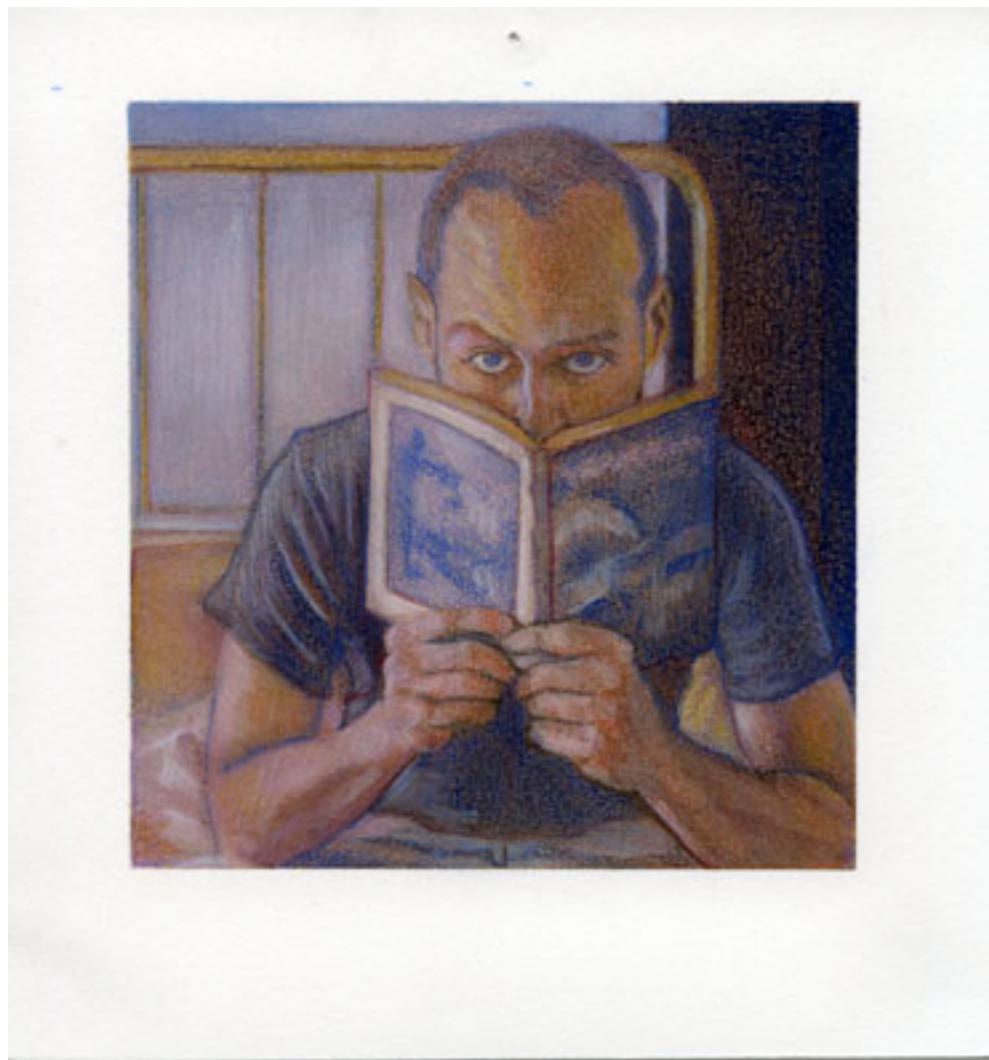


Plate 1. Thomas M. Powers, 5" x 7" Watercolor/Prismacolor Pencil, *Self Portrait* 2008

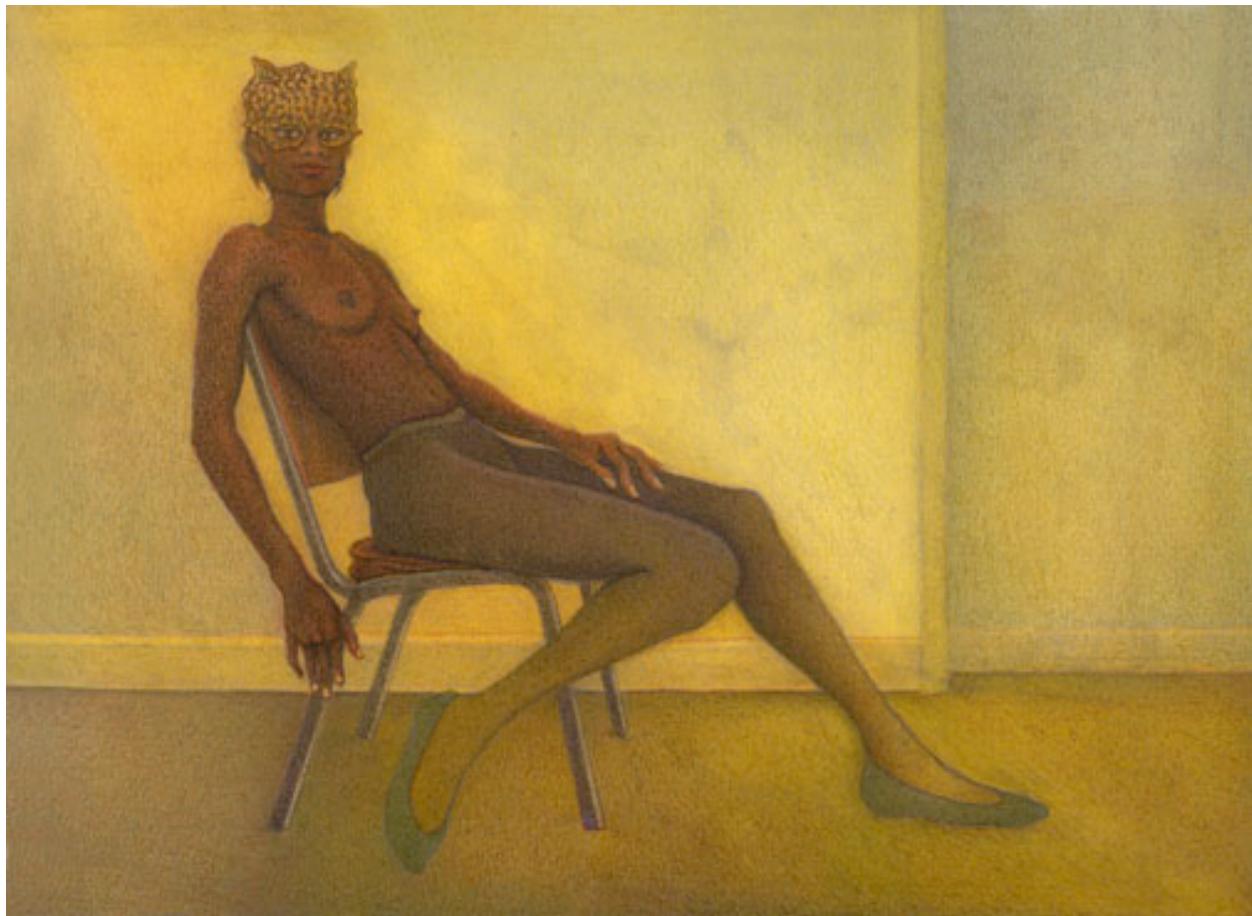


Plate 2. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor/Prismacolor Pencil, 2009

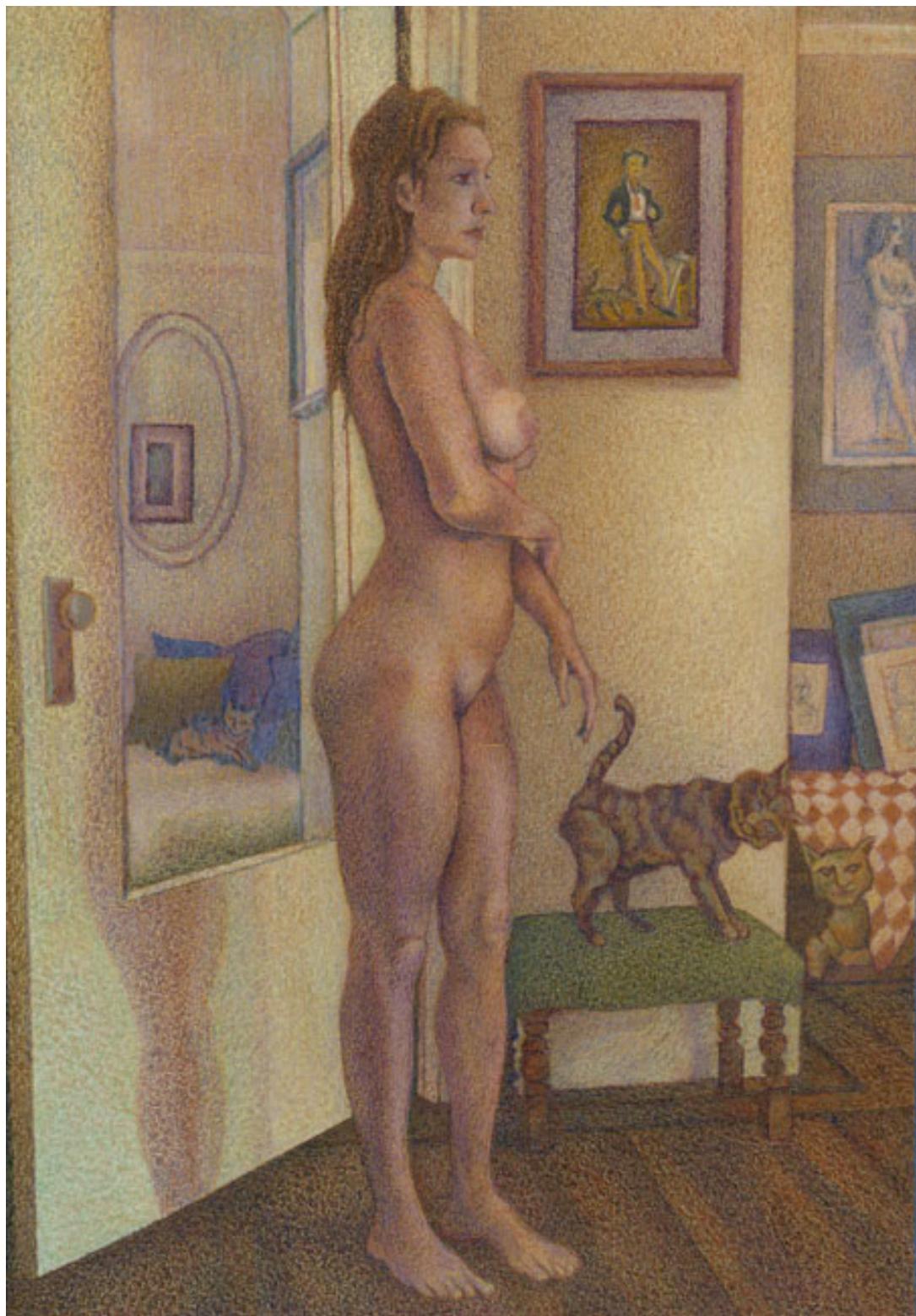


Plate 3. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor/Prismacolor Pencil, 2009

Homage to Balthus

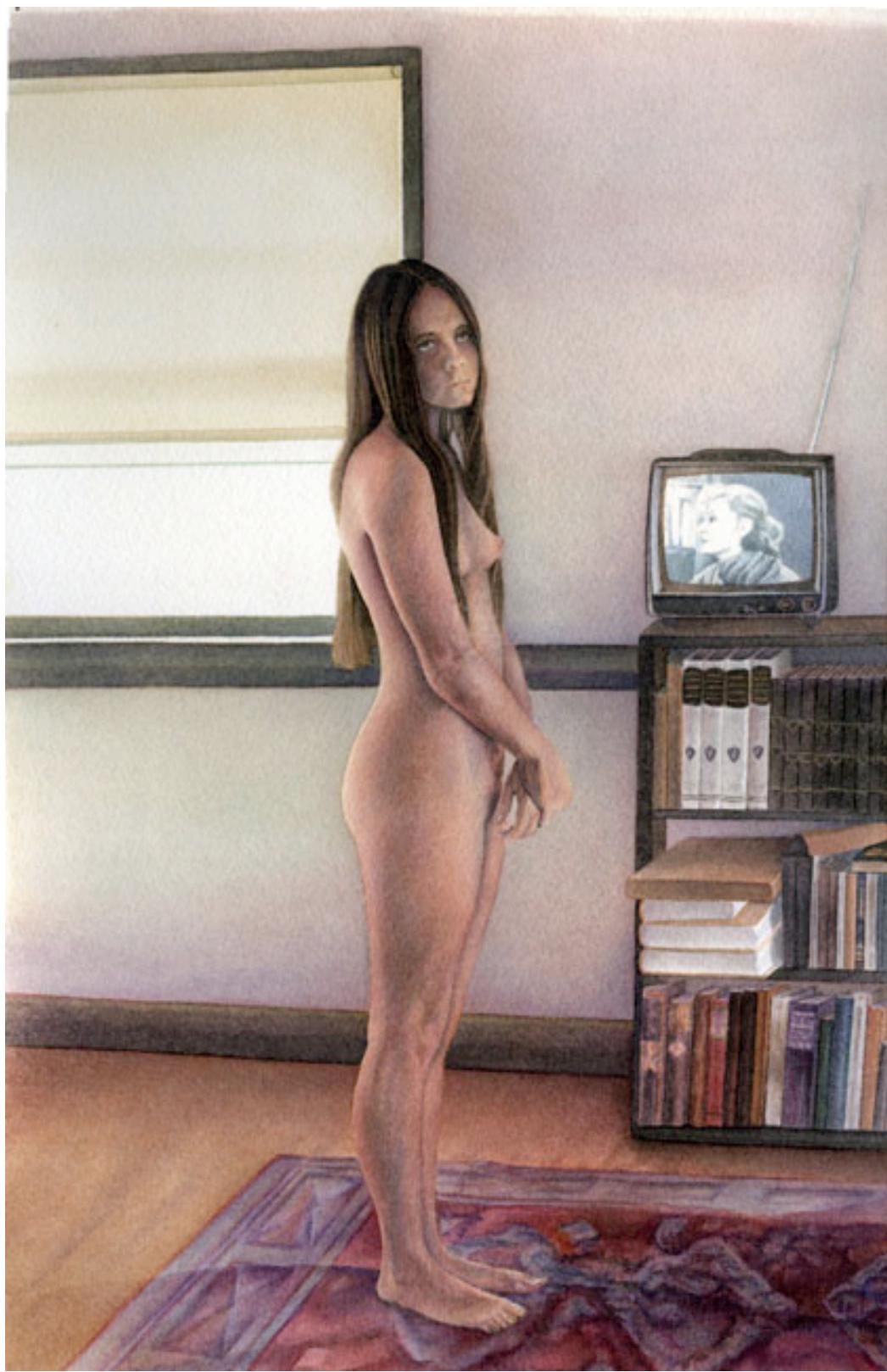


Plate 4. Thomas M. Powers, 12" x 14" Watercolor, 2009



Plate 5. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor, 2009



Plate 6. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor, 2009

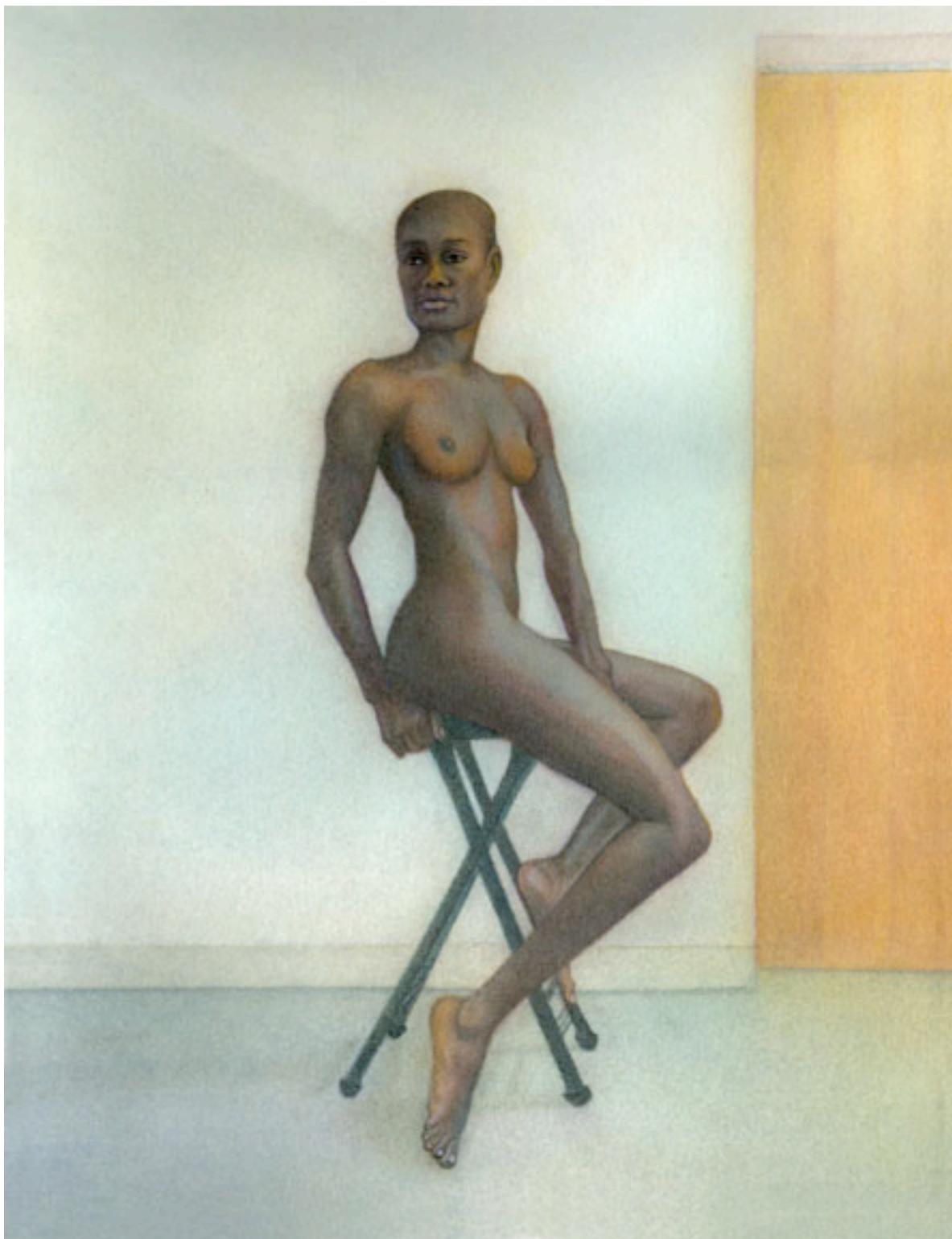


Plate 7. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor, 2010



Plate 8. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor, 2010



Plate 9. Thomas M. Powers, 9" x 12" Watercolor, 2010