



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT

Miranda I

2002, graphite, 16 x 13.

All artwork this article collection the artist unless otherwise indicated.

Miranda V

2003, graphite and white chalk, 11 x 8½.
Collection Frederick Brosen.

Miranda IX

2002, graphite, 22 x 17½.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Miranda XI (in progress)

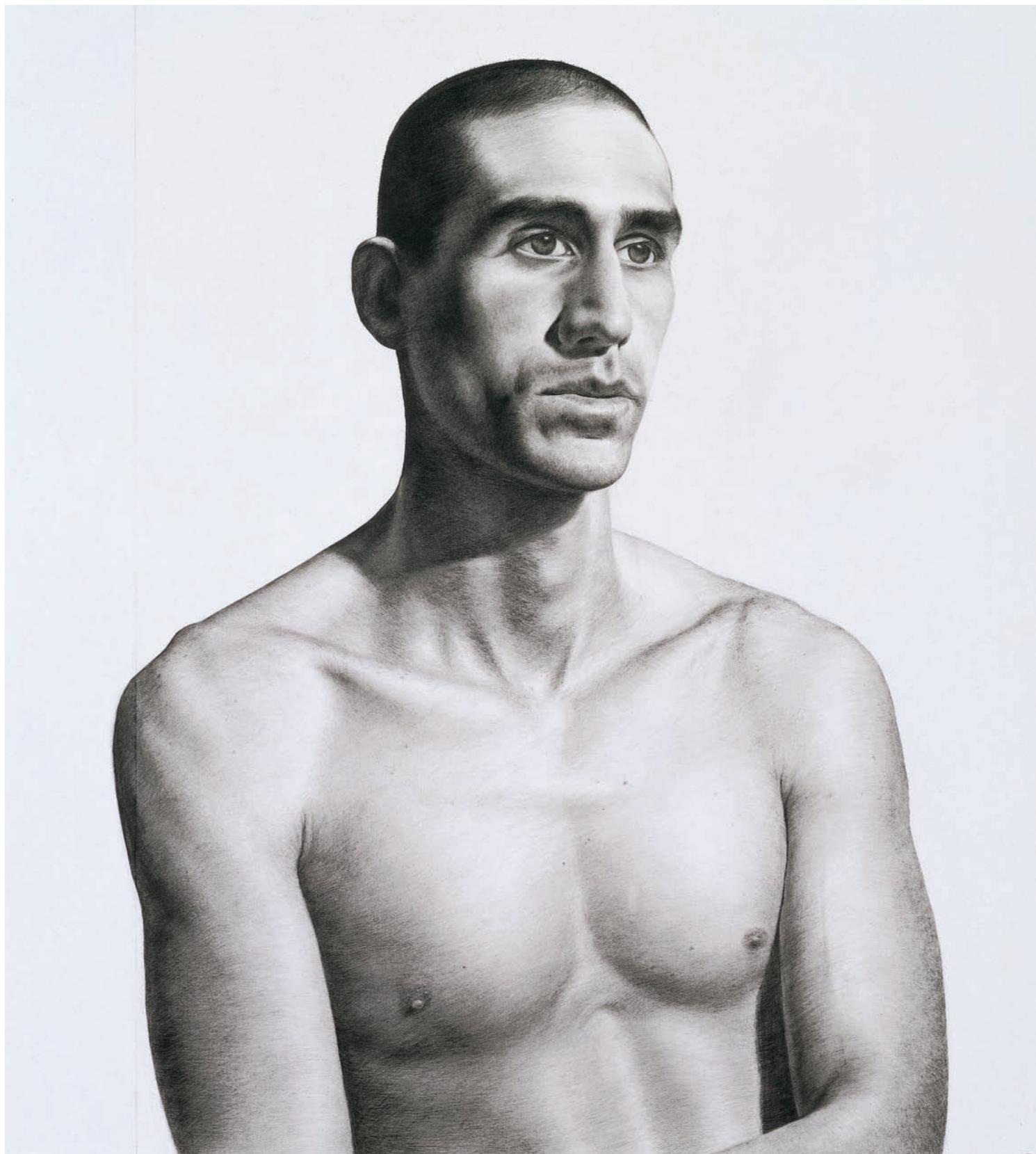
2003, oil on panel, 50 x 42.

Continual Investigations

Employing a slow process of layering and removing his materials, **Costa Vavagiakis** achieves an expressive, sculptural presence in his figure drawings.

by **Ephraim Rubenstein**





For New York figure artist Costa Vavagiakis, drawing is a process of constant search and investigation. Although he often sketches and draws the figure just for the love of drawing, the preponderance of his drawings are part of a lengthy process of planning major life-size oil paintings, most of which he works on for years at a time. “I use drawing as a preparatory tool for an idea,” states Vavagiakis. “I do countless drawings and oil sketches before I set out the concept for a painting. I draw from life—from direct observation and experience. These drawings are a byproduct of each experience, and the eventual concept of the painting is a synthesis of all of these drawing experiences.”

In his studio, three or four major paintings may be in progress on easels in different areas, but one cannot help noticing the hundreds of drawings lining the walls from floor to ceiling, covering every available inch of wall surface. The walls teem with so many intense faces and bodies, asserting their being, that they are overwhelming in their human presence.

There may be six or seven drawings of the same model's head, variants exploring subtle tilts or shifts of axis, all studies for the half-finished painting on the easel. Some of the drawings are swift and gestural; others are painstakingly finished in parts or in the whole. There are so many different types of lines made by a myriad of drawing instruments, and so many different papers and surfaces, that you realize that to enter Vavagiakis' studio is fundamentally to enter the world of drawing.

Vavagiakis' wide variety of models comes from his everyday life; from his pool of friends, neighbors, students, and the professional models he meets in his teaching at the Art Students League of New York and at the National Academy School of Fine Arts, both in New York City. He feels an intuitive pull

toward a person's physical presence, and if things go well, this initial attraction often develops into a working relationship that lasts for many years. “Since I do dozens of drawings of the same sitter, drawing is even more than a preparatory

tool,” he says. “It is a way of vicariously becoming intimate with my sitter. I do drawing after drawing of very similar poses, exploring subtle shifts of axis and mood in the model.” Such careful preparation and planning is necessary because the paintings are major commitments of time and energy—“chunks of my life,” he reflects.

Vavagiakis draws in graphite on either white or toned paper and is very particular about both instrument and surface. “It's all about paper,” he laughs. For initial exploratory studies, he favors a paper with a laid or woven surface, such as Fabriano Tiziano, Arches MBM, or even Cranes' Crest Stationery paper. He is particularly concerned about the paper's internal and external sizing, and its ability to allow for repeated reworkings. As he closes in on a final pose, he makes larger and more finished studies, for which he often switches to a smooth three- or four-ply Bristol board, such as the Strathmore 500 series, a paper that can “really take a pounding.”

Vavagiakis works with graphite so much that he has become extremely sensitive to nuances in pencils. The various types he uses—Tombow, Derwent, Staedtler Mars, Venus—each have distinct recipes for mixing the graphite, clay, and wax and subsequently handle very differently. Making his initial marks with an HB or an F, he wants his first strokes to be open-ended. He uses long preliminary lines to establish the figure's whole shape, or gestalt. The softer pencils help his line slide across the surface of the paper and aid him in searching out the basic geometry and the internal rhythms of the pose. “I'm traveling,” he says, as he moves his hand, isolating surface landmarks, locking in on his subject.

After he indicates the basic pose, he switches to harder



RIGHT

Portrait of Allison III
1998, graphite, 57 x 40.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Ignacio III
2000, graphite, 29 x 26.

Putting It Into Practice

pencils to begin modeling the form. The harder pencils allow him to imaginatively sculpt the volumes, as his hand passes over every inch of the anatomy, defining plane and surface. The final drawings are made up of a dense network of cross and parallel hatches, some of which are so decisive that they are incised into the paper. “The process of slowly building and layering,” says Vavagiakis, “is analogous to penetrating more deeply into what I am seeing. I am constantly researching and investigating the form, the sculptural reality of the figure, and layering is the most powerful approach for that.” An essential part of layering involves not only the graphite but also the eraser. The artist works subtractively as well as additively, re-emphasizing the quality of light, refining plane changes, and specifying ambient and reflected light.



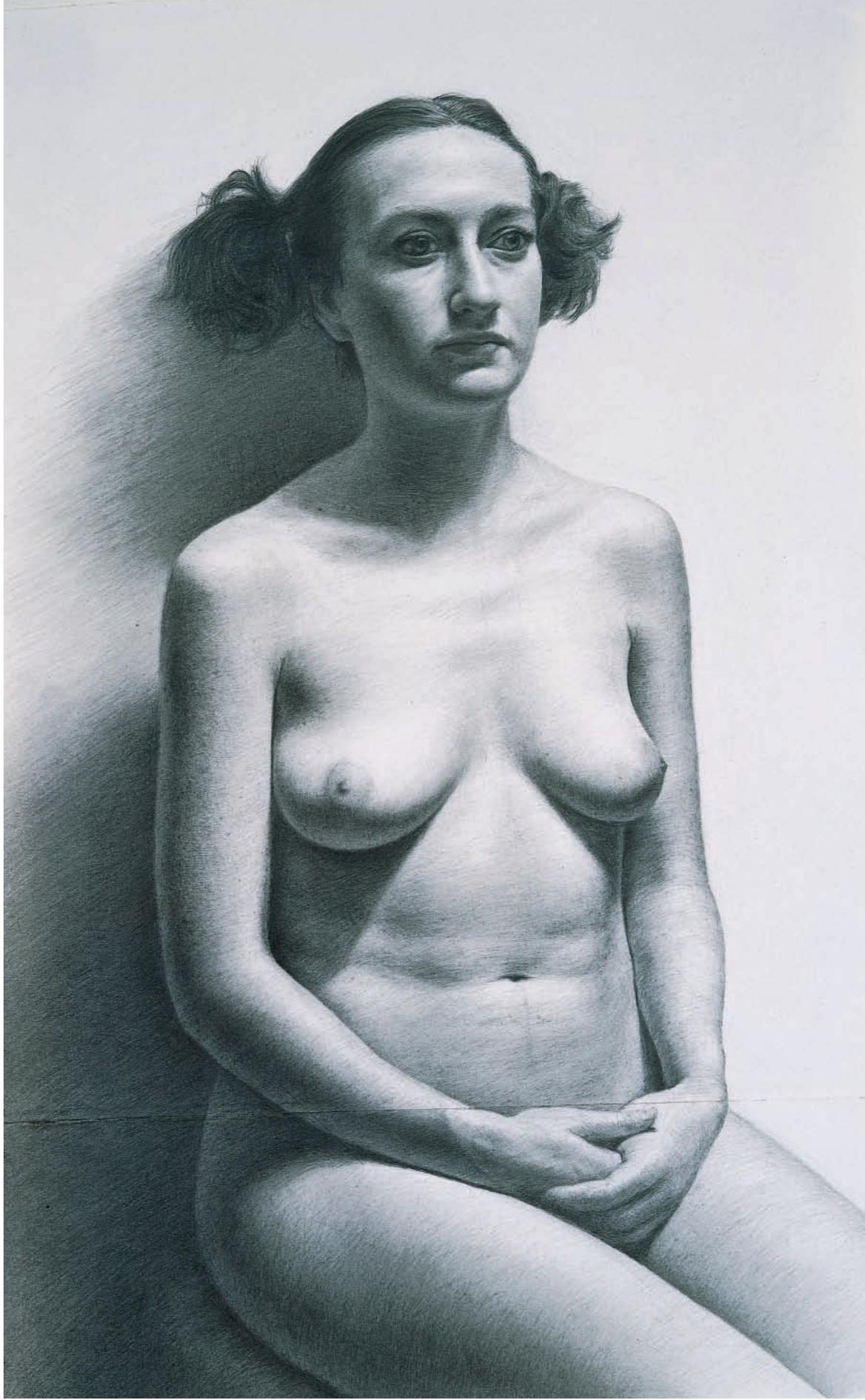
“Drawing involves a continuous debate with the language, constantly applying and removing the materials, until the surface becomes expressive and approximates what I see,” the artist says.

As an accomplished teacher, Vavagiakis is extremely clear about all of his technical information. He is quick to add, however, that his techniques have evolved slowly over time and conform to his personal needs. As he puts it, “Technique is in the service of basic concepts, and the concepts are in the service of the personal vision.” And Vavagiakis’ personal vision is an intense and uncompromising one. “I want the work to be tough, unsentimental, honest—arising from a direct, physical relationship with life.” Indeed, the first impression when looking at Vavagiakis’ nudes is how present they are—not confrontational so much as intent, insistent that you recognize their presence.

To use Vavagiakis’ own language, his

concept for accomplishing this heightened presence is multiple. First, he poses his models against a plain surface, generally devoid of detail or incident. Sometimes there is a slight indication of the wall and floor, but generally, only a gentle shadow indicates the model’s position.

Next, the artist works in close quarters, and his station point is extremely close to the model. This proximity results in a compression of space that helps create Vavagiakis’ feeling of intensity. Furthermore, the artist eschews the soft raking natural sidelight from his north-facing windows in favor of the starkness of fluorescent lights, hung directly above and close to the sitter. “Spotlights are too intense,” he notes. “They can become interrogation lights. But fluorescent light spills out, covers around the form.” This top light is crucial to his posing of the model: It makes for deep shadows in the eye sockets, under the nose and chin, and the shadow that the head



LEFT
Gioia I
1999, graphite,
21½ x 14. Collection
Howard and Judith
Tullman.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE RIGHT
Gioia II
1999, graphite,
23¼ x 22.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW LEFT
Gioia VI
2000, graphite,
52 x 41. Collection
Noah Simmons.

“I do countless drawings and oil sketches before I set out the concept for a painting. I draw from life—from direct observation and experience. These drawings are a byproduct of each experience, and the eventual concept of the painting is a synthesis of all of these drawing experiences.”



casts upon the neck and shoulders—all things that have become a hallmark of Vavagiakis' conception of the figure.

These deep shadows are moody and intense, but more important, fluorescent lighting reveals the basic sculptural aspects of the form better than any other lighting with which he has experimented. And sculptural presence is the paramount goal of his work. In Vavagiakis' studio, the only surfaces that are not covered with his own drawings are covered mostly with postcards and reproductions of Greek sculpture, and the analogies to his own work are obvious. Upon first seeing *Charioteer of Delphi* as a boy, Vavagiakis was “totally in awe,” he says. “My aunt and uncle had to pry me away. It was so real, so palpable—the pleats, the inlaid eyes, the eyelashes. In a way, everything I've done since has been a sort of loop, reliving that experience.”

In Vavagiakis' drawings, as in figure sculpture, the form, gesture, and expression of the body are the most critical elements, not background or details of set-

ting. As in the 4th-century B.C. statues that he so much admires, his own work is based on restraint and composure. Evolving slowly over time, it has made gradual shifts, working within a form

and convention in which small changes feel crucial.

Although some of his concepts hark back to ancient prototypes, Vavagiakis' figures also seem absolutely contemporary. They are real individuals rather than idealizations. The backgrounds are light—unlike the shadowy world of the Old Masters—and this lightness gives his figures a distinctly contemporary air. “Realism is a language with a long history,” the artist says, “but I always try to reflect the present. This present perhaps contains the memory of the past, and these links to the past are the substance of our own life.” ❖



ABOVE

Connie VII

2003, graphite and white chalk,
15½ x 11½.

LEFT

Connie VIII

2003, graphite and white chalk,
16½ x 11¾.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Connie XI

2003, graphite, 25½ x 19½.

