



Sticking With the Figure

In 1994 New York City pastelist **Sam Goodsell** returned to the art world after nine years away, determined to fully explore the challenging and rewarding genre of figure painting. His dedication is paying off.

—
by Bob Bahr

LEFT
Preacher
2004, pastel, 60 x 40.
All artwork this article collection the artist unless otherwise indicated.

OPPOSITE PAGE,
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Past and Present
2006, pastel, 60 x 40.

Connie
2007, pastel, 60 x 34.

Mercedes
2007, pastel, 40 x 32.



ABOVE
Passage
2005, pastel, 60 x 31.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Lost in Thought
2003, pastel, 60 x 40.

Sam Goodsell's manner is soft-spoken and gentle, but he harbors a sizable ambition. One could talk to him for a solid hour and not hear of it, but the idea is there, in everything he says, in each discussion about another aspect of his pastel portraits. Goodsell doggedly pursues a seemingly endless goal, one that is only made apparent when you consider two statements he made about 48 hours apart. "I always paint people, I love painting people," Goodsell told *American Artist* one morning. A couple of days later he avowed, "I think drawing the human figure is one of the hardest things to do on earth."

It may very well be. Accurately and empathetically depicting a human body is a multidimensional problem. In addition to the technical skill with art materials one must have in order to create the piece, an artist must nail down the correct proportions of the figure with extreme accuracy. Even the smallest error will be apparent to a five-year-old—knowledge of the human body is innate.

Also, the figure is arguably the most emotional element an artist can put into a painting. All eyes will go to the person in the painting, and viewers will project themselves into the model's viewpoint. Slight subtleties in the rendering and coloring of the face will consciously and subconsciously be decoded or interpreted by the viewer. And, ironically, because the human figure is so familiar, a fresh approach is almost mandatory if one wishes to produce an arresting image.

Goodsell's career in art has been marked with the kind of determination it takes to tackle such a challenge. When his older sister was a teenager, she would come home from Parsons The New School for Design, in New York City, with large figurative paintings, which would fascinate the then 10-year-old Sam. "Being around her and all her art supplies made so much possible—I was always drawing," recalls Goodsell. "It started so early for me. I really liked what my sister was doing and I wanted to do the same thing."

His sister went on to become a fashion designer; Sam was accepted into Manhattan's High School of Art and Design, a commercial arts school in Midtown, where Goodsell received what he considers "serious art training." The tastes of the time were strongly opposed to figurative work, so upon graduation in the early 1980s, his options for the study of such traditional art were extremely limited. The young artist turned to the Art Students League of New York, opting to take a few classes at the League rather than attend college.

It was here that he truly fell under the spell of the figure. At the urging of his teachers, most notably Dan Gheno, Goodsell focused on capturing the essence of the sitter rather than simply the likeness. "I had painting and drawing instructors who encouraged us not to get hooked on anatomy and have that be all that we see," he says. "The challenge is to draw the individual, to get who they are into the picture." This important distinction is still a part of the





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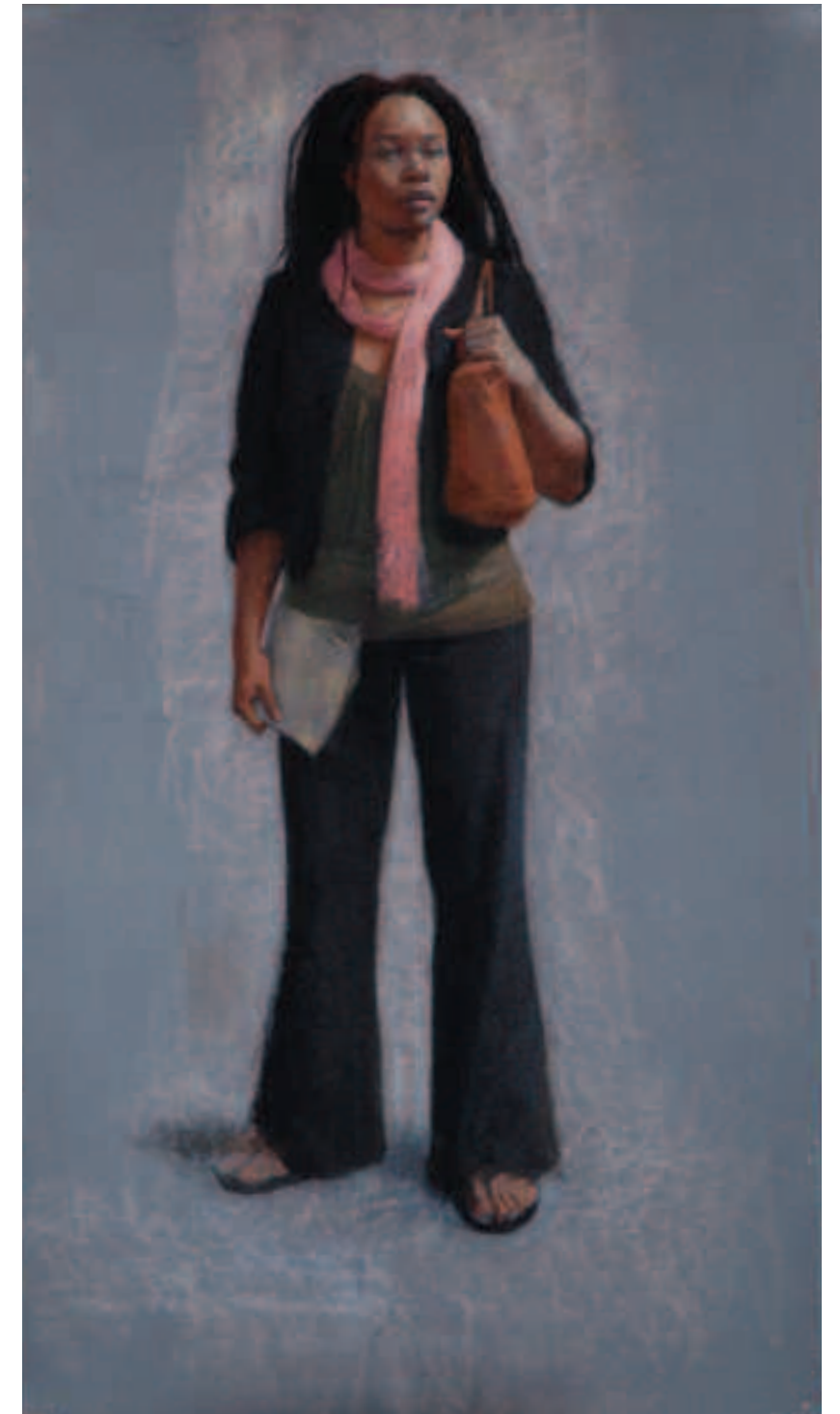
OPPOSITE PAGE
Threshold
2005, pastel, 40 x 30.

RIGHT
Jennifer
(in progress)
2007, pastel, 60 x 40.

artist’s approach—Goodsell says all of his successful paintings capture the essence, but not all necessarily capture the likeness. “Sometimes I grab a part of their likeness but it doesn’t totally look like the person, yet I got the *feeling* of that person, which I think makes up for it. The more you paint, the easier capturing the essence comes. Of course, you can’t just say, ‘OK, I’m going to get the essence now.’ I may get pretty far along and still be searching, still be in the search mode on a painting. And then it comes.”

Before he could settle into his current career, Goodsell had to suffer an interruption. In 1985, financial demands forced him to take a job—temporarily, he thought. “But then a few months of working outside of the art world became a few years, then a few years became several years, until I said, ‘Enough of this!’” he recalls. “I realized I was good at what I do, and I decided to return to the art scene.” But he had spent nine years away from painting. Goodsell felt like he was starting from scratch.

He renewed old connections and trained out-of-practice art muscles, attending sketch classes at Spring Studio, in SoHo “to get a handle on things again.” His favorite teacher at High School of Art and Design, Irwin Greenberg, had recommended that he study with Harvey Dinnerstein at the Art Students League. Goodsell had worked in oil under Dinnerstein’s instruction in his first go-round in the art world; in 1994 he asked his old teacher if he could resume study under him. “Harvey was very encouraging, and



I began attending his classes again,” remembers Goodsell. This decision helped shape his choice of medium—Goodsell admires Dinnerstein’s oil paintings, but the teacher’s pastel work absolutely dazzles him. “I had been fascinated with pastel since high school, but I hadn’t had the chance to work with it because I was so involved with oil,”

Goodsell explains. “But I liked and was impressed with what my classmates were doing with pastel. Then I learned from Harvey how to use pastels at the League. It’s such a fascinating medium. There’s no handle, no brush—nothing between the color and your fingertips. It’s like an extension of your hand. And I love the vibrancy of the color.”

He embraced the medium fully in 1997, and over the last 10 years established a working process that's a synthesis of equal parts traditional methods and individual preference. Goodsell works on museum board that he prepares using a homemade ground consisting of gesso, fine pumice powder, and acrylic paint. Often this ground is mixed to a rich, midtone of Venetian red and black; alternatively, Goodsell applies a blue-gray ground. The choice of color is often suggested by the skin tone of the model.

Goodsell says the switch from oil paint to pastel did not happen fast or come easy, but handling the materials now is second nature. Early on, he would use fixative on specific areas of his work in the middle of the process to restore some tooth to an area, but the artist says this is rarely necessary now that he has greater control over his tools. Goodsell reports that he never applies fixative when a pastel painting is finished because he dislikes how it "kills the color."

The composition for a Goodsell piece begins as a sketch on 25"-x-19" Canson paper using Winsor & Newton vine charcoal. Next, he draws the subject in charcoal on the prepared museum board. The artist applies the pastels according to color and value—not in order of hard to soft, as many pastelists do. Goodsell is not loyal to any particular brand of pastel. "I tear the labels off and just paint what I see," he says. The backgrounds in the artist's paintings are often highly textured, and he builds them up along the way as he is working on the figure. His pieces are generally based on three-week poses.

The phrase "art for art's sake" has taken on numerous connotations since it first began circulating in France in the early 1800s, and in one way it describes the fervent production of the group of figurative artists who currently haunt

RIGHT
Eric
2005, pastel, 96 x 48.

OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT
Master of Space
2006, pastel, 96 x 34.

OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT
Philadelphia
2007, pastel, 96 x 40.





About the Artist

Sam Goodsell was born in the Bronx, New York, where he still resides. He studied at the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan, where he still participates in daily figure-drawing and painting classes. The artist was included in Maggie Price's book *Painting With Pastels: Easy Techniques to Master the Medium* (North Light Books, Cincinnati, Ohio). Goodsell is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the Best of Show award at the *Pastel Journal's* 5th Annual Pastel 100 Competition in 2003 and the 2004 Edward G. McDowell Travel Grant, given by the Art Students League to allow artists to study in

LEFT
Solace
2006, pastel, 40 x 32.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Marcia
2007, pastel, 60 x 40.
Private collection.

the Art Students League. Goodsell, a member of this paint-spattered tribe, is a magnified example of their aesthetic, which fosters a mindset and lifestyle marked by a curiosity and empathy about other humans, a strong interest in continually honing one's craft, and dedication to drawing from life. The above values trump the insistence on creature comforts most Americans exhibit and, accordingly, Goodsell lives frugally in the South Bronx, where he was born. He would prefer to hire models to pose in his home studio but, mostly, he draws from the models who pose at the Art Students League every morning for three hours. This may not be ideal, but one would never know it from the zeal Goodsell expresses regarding these shared sessions. "It's so difficult these days to be a working artist in the city," he remarks. "It's hard to make a living and have the time and money to maintain your art skills in New York. I know a lot of friends who are very good painters but they had to give up art because they started a family and had to more consistently make money. They had to stop painting.

"I have been fortunate to keep going all these years," Goodsell continues. "It's a tough situation; the cost of living is a lot higher here than it used to be. But I feel like there is always a way." As he says this, Goodsell points to an image on his laptop. "This one here I just sold, and it's going to pay the rent this month," he remarks offhandedly. In the past year, the artist has won three major awards, including the Pastel Society of America's Herman Margulies Award for Excellence and Connecticut Pastel Society's Art Spirit Foundation Dianne B. Bernhard Award. Goodsell's goals seem very much in reach. ■

Bob Bahr is the managing editor of American Artist.

