

Like the city itself, New Yorker Sam Goodsell's subjects appear reserved at first, yet a step closer reveals the heart within. Goodsell uses pastels to bring to light his subjects' dignity, vitality and strength. A native of the city, he connects with his models in a personal way. "The people who live here are tough," he explains. "It's a day-to-day struggle and there's an armor that you have to develop to show you aren't a pushover." Goodsell paints actors, singers and other creative types who are immigrants to the big city or native-born—people who make extra money waiting

# Life Studies, Life Size

What people reveal to the world and what they hide are both Sam Goodsell's concern as he paints in pastel from life.

■ By Deborah Secor

tables or modeling. "Most of them are low-income working people. They're struggling. Who isn't? I always try to open myself to my models so that the armor goes away," he explains. "I like to get to know who they are and what they do. That perception helps in painting them."

**These figures stand alone** in close-cropped compositions, singled out of the crowd, allowing us to share Goodsell's inspection of each one's unique, intimate beauty. The scale of his most recent work has increased; he now finds himself working on life-size paintings. "Working this large is challenging. It makes you observe more because the proportions of the figure and the scale of all the elements have to be right, and you can't be afraid of making mistakes." He prefers to paint clothed figures, noting that their clothing expresses their individuality. "In a lot of ways people are what they wear. I've painted nudes over the years, studying at the Art Students League. I think it's



Above; details of *Sitting in Rhythm* (page 53) and *Waiting* (page 56). At right; *Prospects* (pastel, 40x32).

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something you have to do to understand the internal movement, but I like to paint clothed people because what they wear is part of their personalities. There's a challenge in painting a nude—you're dealing with the flesh. It helps you understand how the light falls on skin; it forces you to get that luminosity. Your drawing skills are put to the test, and knowing how to measure is important, but for me the point is to ask what makes the models who they are."

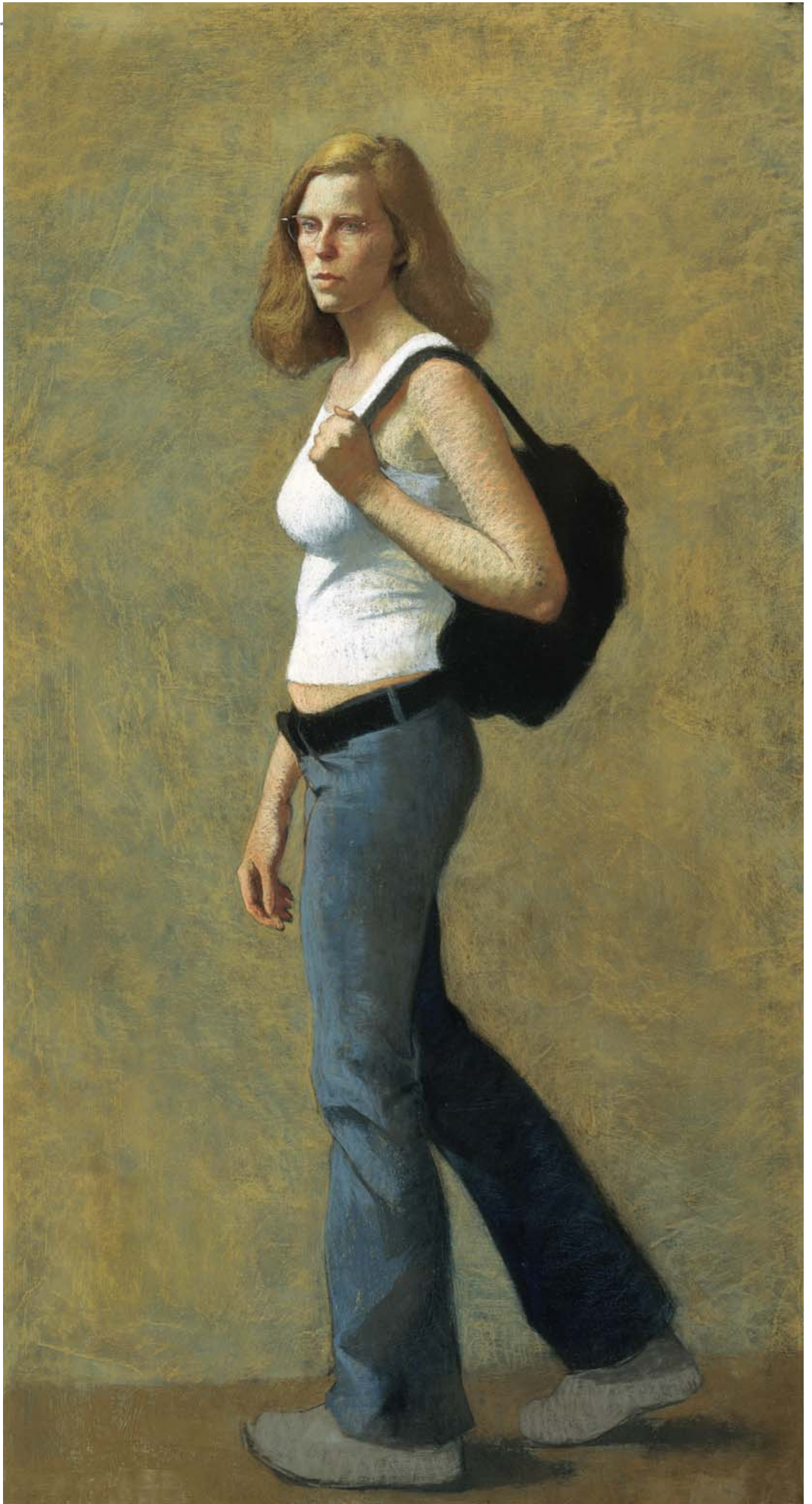
Foresight and planning go into each painting, which helps Goodsell make good use of the time he has with the model. "For a while I concentrated so much on painting that the habit of drawing had fallen off. You really have to draw all the time. I do a sketch in charcoal first, and sometimes a full color sketch on a scrap of board. I figure out the proportions, and that helps me achieve the feeling I want in the painting. I want to get things in place, so I have a clear vision of how I want it to look, but there's always room for changes, too."

**Goodsell uses sturdy**, double-thick hot- or cold-pressed illustration board, which he coats with his own ground, a mixture he makes by combining Utrecht gesso with water in a ratio of two parts gesso to one part water. To this mixture Goodsell adds acrylic paint and 5 even tablespoons of Rainbow pumice stone powder (grade FF, available at lumberyards or hardware stores). He then takes this prepared board and attaches it to a ½-inch foam board.

He lays out the composition while studying the model. "I start with a charcoal underdrawing. I rub charcoal over the board so it has a nice, even tone, and then I look for angles of movement, pulling out the light shapes with a chamois cloth and darkening the shadow tones to make an abstraction of light and shadow shapes. I look at the figure abstractly, squinting all the time. I'm not thinking of the eyes or the lips but of a continuity of shapes. Then I block in the shapes with pastel as broadly and simply as possible. The ultimate impact is much greater when the foundation of the painting is worked out this way. I step back a lot to grab the most important shapes, then work from big to little shapes and from the dark toward the light. For instance, for *Eric* (see page 55) I broadly blocked in all the shadow shapes from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet and then I treated the lighter shapes the same way, maintaining the simplicity. I didn't want



*Gloria* (at left; pastel, 96x28) and *Sitting in Rhythm* (above; pastel, 35x36).

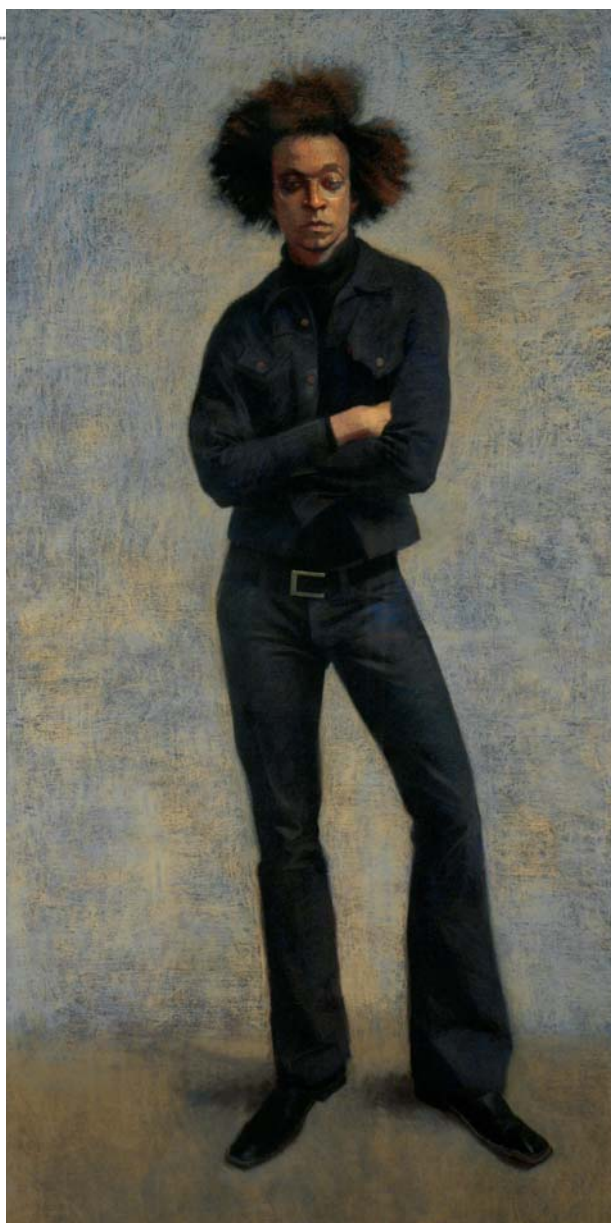


to break up the figure too much.”

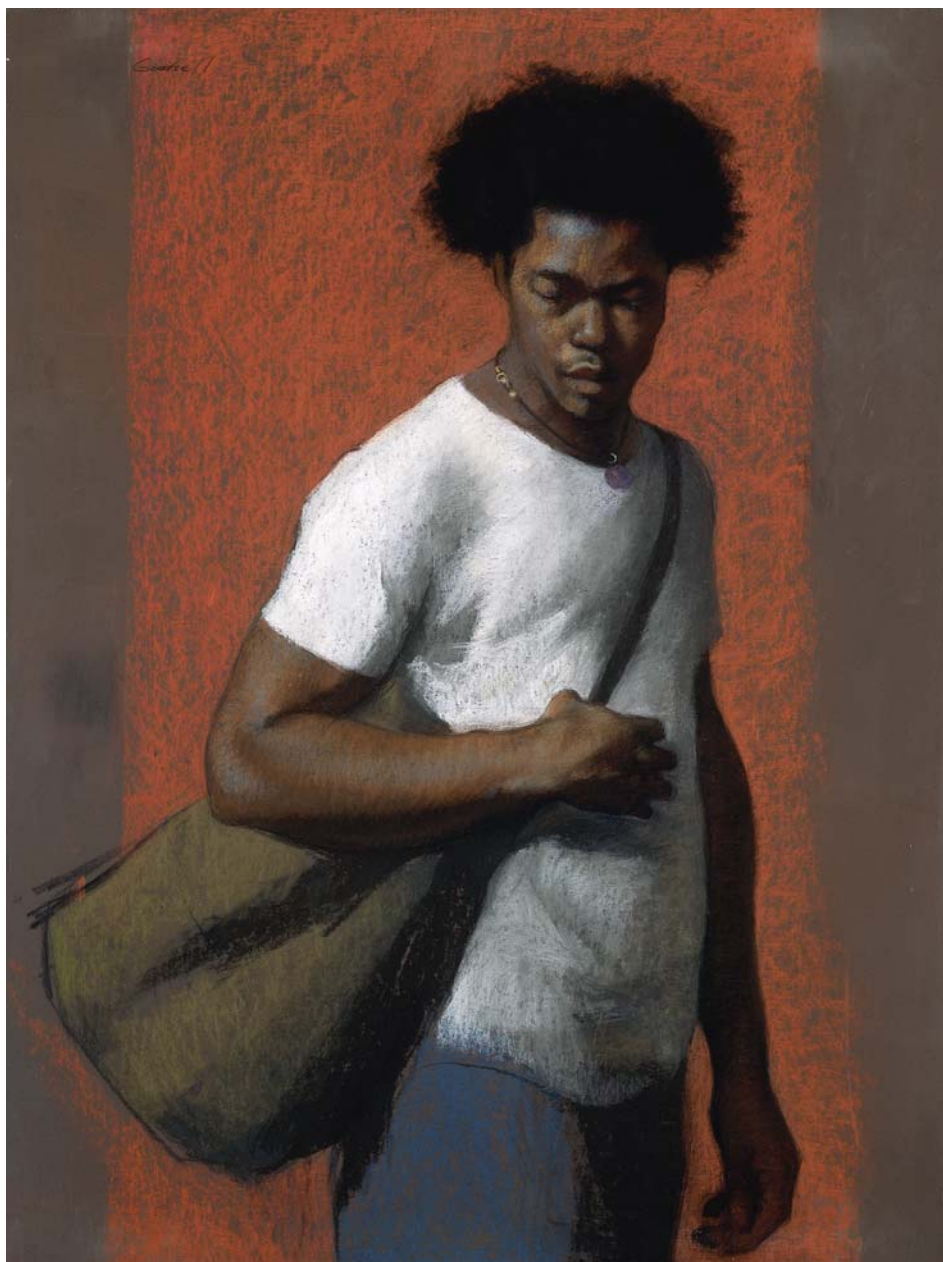
Three-hour model sessions are divided into 20-minute poses. “That’s enough time to get quite a bit done,” he notes. “I work pragmatically, more or less from hard pastels to soft, but I prefer the color to be right. I’m always conscious of getting what I see. I achieve the color by overlapping. The great thing about this medium is that it starts to resonate; it’s a beautiful thing—something you trust more and more. For instance, the gray wall isn’t just coated with gray. There’s more than that going on. There are areas that are warm, and areas that are cool, and some that are intermingled.”

*Eric* (at right, pastel 96x48) was one of those paintings that flowed from start to finish. “I think it was one of the best painting experiences I’ve ever had,” says Goodsell. “The day Eric came into the studio, I had this foresight or vision about what the painting should be: the scale, the pose, everything I had to do. I was in the zone. I could see what it was going to look like. I did a small, maybe foot-long, sketch that right away showed me what to do. I ran out to find a board big enough. I don’t have a car anymore, so a friend and I carried the board home on the subway. You can do that as long as it’s not rush hour,” he chuckles. “I was driven to paint Eric life-size because his presence and his personality told me to. The man is interesting from head to toe: his stance, his clothing, even his shoes. He’s a multitalented, wonderful human being—just a shining star.”

**Disdaining the media vision** of beauty, Goodsell admires the spirit he sees in his models. “Every person has something you can find and emphasize. Beauty comes in all kinds of forms. Gloria (see portrait on page 52) has a strong presence, like a fighter, but she has something to fight for. She’s an actor who came here from Colombia, where she worked in soap operas and movies. Here, she has to prove herself. You can see the determination in her posture and her expression—clear and focused on what she wants.” The painting *Gloria* (pastel, 96x28) is also life-size, on illustration board coated with Goodsell’s gesso mixture. “I fastened the gray board to the easel and took two mahlsticks and screwed them together to make a long one so I could measure the angles I saw. I had to correct the charcoal drawing before I began to apply color” (see photo on page 57).



*Crossing* (at left; pastel, 60x32) and *Eric* (above; pastel, 96x48).



*Waiting* (above; pastel, 54x28½), *Reflections of Autumn* (above right; pastel, 33x40) and *Threshold* (at right; pastel, 40x32).

## Meet Sam Goodsell

Sam Goodsell lives in the Bronx in a space he shares with other artists. As a student at the New York City High School of Art and Design, he studied with Irwin Greenberg, Irv Docktor and Max Ginsburg; from 1994 to 2004, he studied at the Art Students League, and among his teachers was Harvey Dinnerstein. In the 2003 Pastel 100 Competition, sponsored by *The Pastel Journal*, Goodsell won the Jack Richeson/Union Pastels Best of Show award. His work appears in *Pure Color: The Best of Pastel* (North Light Books, 2006). Today Goodsell teaches at the Pastel Society of America in the National Arts Building in Manhattan and also gives private lessons in his studio. You can get in touch with him at [samgoodsell@yahoo.com](mailto:samgoodsell@yahoo.com).



Goodsell undoubtedly understands and respects the struggles of the people he paints, a struggle he has shared as a developing artist. “I know it’s made me a better painter,” he recalls. “I look back and I’m glad I made it this far. I knew when I was a child that I would be an artist, and I knew it would be a struggle. Being an artist takes a lot of time—developing skills, becoming confident. It’s important to be around people who are positive thinkers, people with similar goals who think the way I do. Like Gloria, who came all this way to be an actor. Or like Gregory, the subject in *Threshold*, where I found the pose that would stay with me from the beginning to the end. Often when models are on a break, I’ll see something more natural. I’ve learned to keep an eye on them! The day Gregory walked in with his bag, it was easy to see. We set up the pose right away. The feeling I wanted was that he was about to leave on a journey, and the result was *Threshold* (at left; pastel, 40x32).” Goodsell’s optimism, as well as his obvious empathy for his models, makes his work compelling. He sums it up: “The thrill of painting for me is that there’s always more I can do to be better. I strive for excellence. It’s a matter of being focused.”

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