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The Artist's Model

IN THE FINAL PART OF HIS SERIES
DANIEL MAIDMAN TELLS YOU WHY YOU
 MUST LEARN TO READ THE VISUAL LANGUAGE
 OF THE MODEL SO YOU CAN TRANSLATE
 IT TO THE CANVAS

Photography: Charlotte Sears



Previous articles have covered most of the technical elements of my painting which would be of use to the reader. So I thought I'd do something different this time – try to illustrate what my painting process with a model actually looks like. These pictures were taken during a sitting on the painting *The Lightning*. Puppeteer Kate Brehm is the model.

In previous articles, we have talked about meeting and hiring models, setting up the studio and running a modeling session, and the importance of the preparatory sketch. Now we will discuss a few means of learning to see and depict the life and individuality in your model.

To set the mood, I'd like to share with you one of the most beautiful pieces of writing on art that I have ever encountered. This is Paul Gsell, from his book *Rodin on Art*, pp. 146-7:

"As I was turning away I caught sight of a copy in bronze of the bust of Berthelot. Rodin made it only a year before the death of the great chemist. The great scholar rests in the knowledge of his work accomplished. He meditates. He is alone, face to face with himself; alone, face to face with the crumbling

of ancient faiths; alone before nature, some of whose secrets he has penetrated, but which remains so immensely mysterious; alone at the edge of the infinite abyss of the skies; and his tormented brow, his lowered eyes, are filled with melancholy. This fine head is like the emblem of modern intelligence, which, satiated with knowledge, weary of thought, ends by demanding What is the use?"

Notice that Gsell tackles Rodin's sculpture on three levels here: the material ("his tormented brow, his lowered eyes"), the individual ("the great scholar rests"), and the general ("emblem of modern intelligence"). These are the tremendously ambitious stakes we are discussing here. All art is grounded in the material – all figurative art arises from the individual – and all art necessarily speaks to the general.

So – how do we seek a life-force powerful enough to animate these enormous thematic engines? As usual, I don't have any magic tricks for you. The answer remains "hard work," at least so well as I have managed to find it. But there are a few specific techniques you can adapt which will help you focus your work:

1 Talk to your model

Kathleen Rooney, a model, essayist, and author of *Live Nude Girl: My Life as an Object*, comments: "A good model can work with just about any artist, regardless of how conversational or silent that artist happens to be, but in my experience – and in the stories I've heard from fellow models – the best work is usually achieved



I was not painting Kate's mouth during this sitting. As you can see, we spent the session chatting. Kate is an excellent conversationalist. These pictures were taken during a discussion of technical issues she is facing in an upcoming performance. Having a good time during painting is important – it invigorates the model and adds life to the painting. Don't feel a need to laugh, but don't be afraid to laugh either.



Daniel working on the painting *The Lightning*.

is important to synthesize into your understanding of the expression of the figure, so gather them up when they are offered.

For my part, unless I'm painting the face, and particularly the mouth, I am almost always chatting with the model during the painting process. I am lucky enough to be able to paint and talk simultaneously. This is not true for many artists: they cannot speak while they work. This is completely reasonable. If you must work in silence, take any opportunity available to chat. Before the work begins, during breaks, as the model is leaving, make yourself open to talking, and your model will very likely respond with enthusiasm. Leave time in your schedule after the end of the session in case the model shows an inclination

to stay and talk with you. This is as important as the session itself to achieving a textured understanding of the person you are depicting.

Kathleen Rooney adds:

"Treating the model like a speechless object can sometimes make the model feel no more interesting than a table or chair or plaster cast, which can lead to work that seems equally stilted or flat. Whereas when I'm working with an artist who takes a bit of time to ask me about myself and let me do the same back, thus establishing a sympathy or a rapport, the work seems to reflect a richer subjectivity or depth."

2 Go to your model's performances

If you are following the advice in Part 1 of this series, and have been meeting

models through life drawing workshops, odds are pretty good that your model is involved in some other creative endeavors. Creative people are attracted to modeling, because it brings them into contact with other creative people and their interesting projects. Models I've worked with have included poets, playwrights, painters, directors, actors, dancers, performance artists, and a puppeteer.

People who are producing art seek audiences for their art. Join that audience. Often the work will be good. Sometimes it will be bad. Quality isn't the most important issue for you. The vital point is this: the work cannot help but reveal more about who the model is. So go, and see. Ask yourself how what you're seeing relates to the individuality

of the model. Apply what you learn when you return to the studio – it might inspire an image, a pose, a mood...

By accepting the gift of self-revelation the model is offering the audience, you support the model's work in their own primary field of creativity. The model, in turn, will be glad to be appreciated and will do their best modeling work for you.

Of all the arts that models I know have worked in, the dance performances were the most useful to me. This leads to the next point.

3 Refine your ability to perceive the non-verbal

Speaking with your model is invaluable, but language is only a small part of communication. Other primary channels of communication include tone of voice,

selections in clothing, hair, and make-up, expressions of the face, and placement and motion of the body. All of these channels are non-verbal, and they provide the majority of what you can understand about another person once you learn to observe them minutely. Since the visual arts are primarily non-verbal, it is important for the visual artist to learn to read and depict these non-verbal channels of communication.

Degas was an artist of the entire body: think about the rounded shoulders of his laborers, or the straight spines of his dancers and jockeys. Degas understood the expressive language of posture, and when you look at his work, you will understand his people before a conscious thought passes through your mind. This is the power he found in posture.

Velazquez, contrariwise, is primarily an artist of the face: consider the furrowed brows of his sitters, the tension or relaxation of their eyes and lips. Again, you will understand their vanities and humiliations before your mind has begun to dissect how it knows what it knows. Velazquez made himself master of the tremendous language of facial expression.

Dance performances are most useful to me as an artist because dancers, like painters, must rely on the non-verbal in order to communicate. Dancers have studied and learned to control the movement of the body, from the broad to the microscopic, and they have learned how movement relates to meaning. Let me give you an example: one time, in the context of the narrative

of a performance, a dancer twitched her hips very slightly. This single twitch conveyed an uncertain satisfaction in the dress that she was wearing, and fear that she would somehow embarrass herself in the social situation she was about to enter. That's a lot of meaning for a twitch! But I asked her about it afterward, and in fact, that was exactly what she meant. What an amazing thing: that this dancer could engineer this tiny little twitch, and that it could express so much meaning.

But this is the power of dance, which forces the viewer to focus on the non-verbal and make meaning out of the action of the body. It is the power of figurative art as well, and it is what Paul Gsell was responding to when he looked at Rodin's sculpture of Berthelot.



These are two states of the painting, after the first sitting and after completion. Kate has what I think of as an "expert level face" – its structure is difficult to capture correctly. I worked really hard on it in the first session. In contrast, that sparkly scarf was easy; finicky and time-consuming, but easy.



The Lightning, after the first sitting.



Puppeteer Kate Brehm models for the painting *The Lightning*.



The Lightning, oil on canvas, 20 x 20" (50 x 50cm)



Our Lady of the Five Stars, 72 x 36" (183 x 91cm)

Images of this painting in progress appeared in the first and second articles in this series. I finally finished the enormous background area – I find painting backgrounds much less fun because there is no model to chat with.



Detail

However, before the artist can encode into art, they must decode from life. So it is up to you to learn to read this language before you speak it. Watching dance is wonderful training. But the studio must be the primary learning environment.

When you are in your studio, watching your model, try detaching yourself from the work at hand for a moment. Ask yourself: How does the model feel today? What is the model thinking about?

Look for the evidence where it is lying in plain sight: states of tension or relaxation in the forehead, around the eyes, around the mouth, in the neck, in the shoulders. The curvature of the spine and the degree of protrusion of the belly. The restfulness or restlessness of the hands. Where the eyes drift during the pose. Whether the toes curl or lie flat. Perspiration, flush, nostril motion, rate of breathing, and depth of breathing. All of these factors, and many more, serve to inform you of the state of mind of the model. As you build up a knowledge of characteristic physical states of the model, you will read the model better and learn about their character. And when you



Detail

know something about their character, you can select from your deep knowledge of their physicality those particular traits which will help you to express what you are seeking in your art: who they are, who you are, and what your work means.

Summing it up – talk with your model, attend their performances, and learn to read them non-verbally. These are sufficient tools for learning to depict life itself, but they are not easily or quickly gained. Practice always, and when you are discouraged, remember that it takes many years and much discipline and dedication to become a master of these tools. I will freely tell you right now: I am not a master of these tools. I use them better than I did before, but I am still practicing and learning. Be glad of heart, and hopeful: your project partakes of the richest of the human languages.

That wraps it up for this series. It's been a pleasure and an honor spending a little time with you, and I hope we'll meet up again sometime, somewhere along the way. □



Integrity, oil on canvas, 36 x 36" (91 x 91cm)

This was the painting in progress in the studio pictures in the previous issue. I designed it to contrast Jordan's organic curves and serenity with a cold linear grid.

About the Artist

Daniel Maidman was born in 1975 in Toronto, Canada. He currently lives and works in New York. Since 1998, he has attended life drawing workshops 2-3 times a week. From 2001- 2003, he drew an anatomical atlas based on human cadaver dissections at Santa Monica College, under the guidance of Dr. Margarita Dell. Although he remains primarily self-taught, he first learned discipline as an artist from the director of his high school art program, Susan Vale, and has learned a good deal from conversations with Stephen Wright and Adam Miller. Daniel Maidman's other interests include filmmaking and writing.

Kate Brehm is a puppeteer working primarily in New York, where she runs the performance company imnotlost. Her work can be found at:

www.imnotlost.net



Kathleen Rooney writes and teaches in Chicago. She is the author of several books, including *Live Nude Girl: My Life as an Object* (University of Arkansas Press, 2009). More information is at:

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