

# Taming the Beast

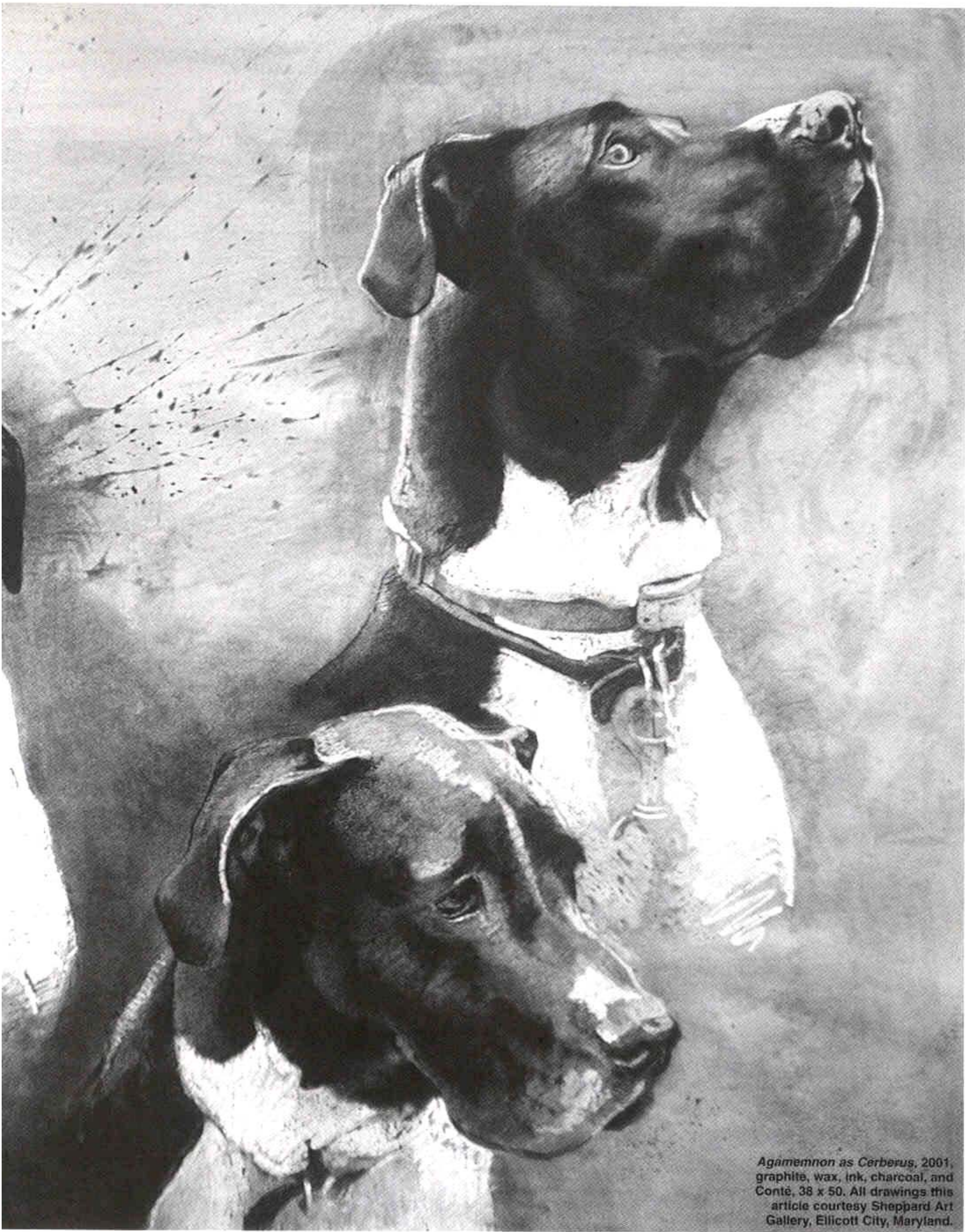
*In drawings of his Great Dane, Ephraim Rubenstein mimicked the epic battle between man and animal, fighting for control of the mixed media as he had struggled to control the subject.*

**BY KATHLEEN BAXTER**

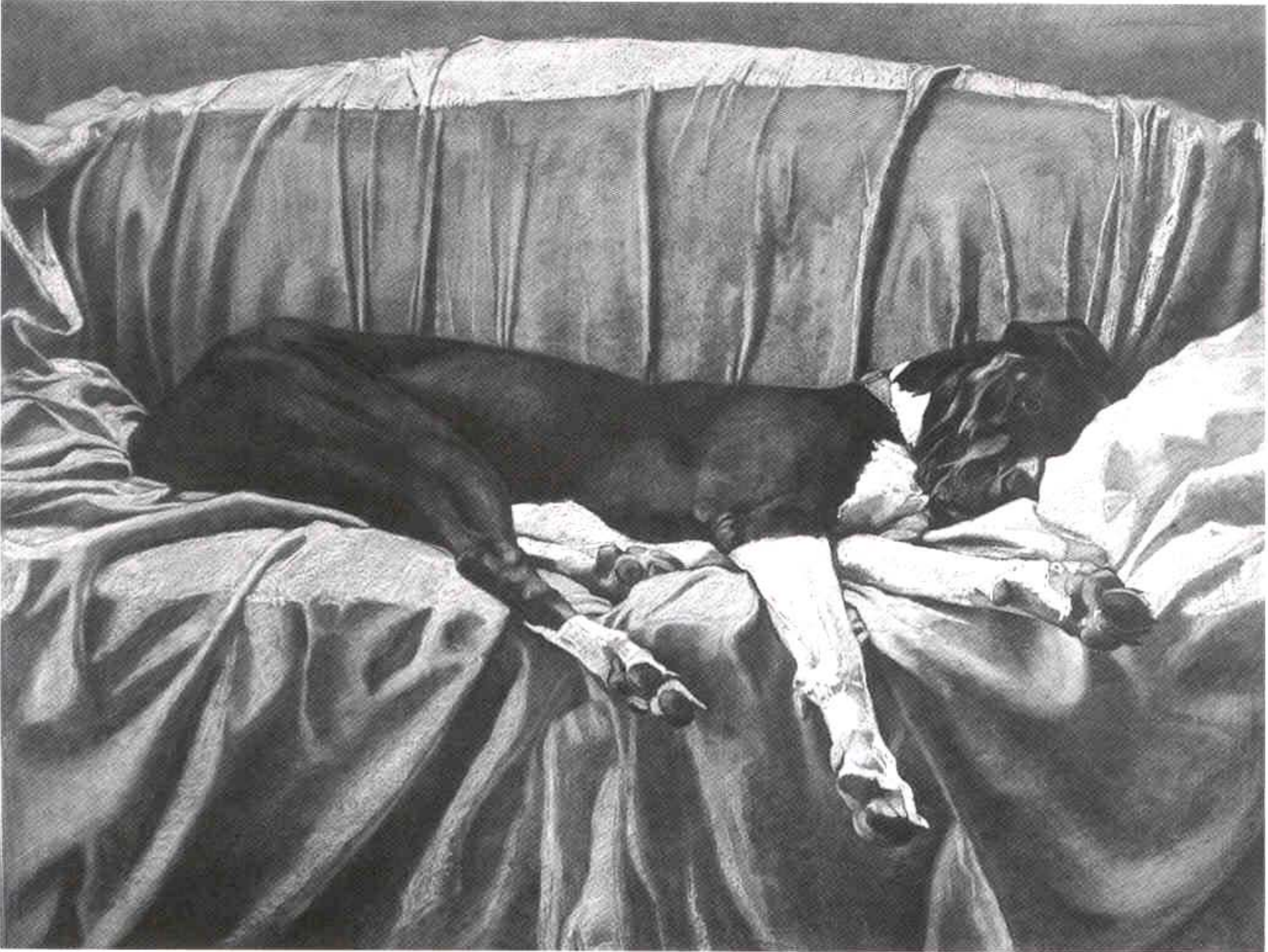
**T**he act of drawing is rarely considered a show of brute force. But the process behind Ephraim Rubenstein's Agamemnon series is as much physical as artistic. Working on a massive scale (up to 42" x 60"), the Ellicott City, Maryland-based artist employed graphite, wax, ink, compressed and vine charcoal, Conté, and pastel to render a textured tribute to the Great Dane that is the subject.

On guard against the sentimentality from which such subjects can suffer, Rubenstein wanted the works to mirror the large, black-and-white animal that possessed the power of his size. "I wanted the drawings to embody and reiterate his physical nature," the artist says. "He was our pet, but he was so strong that if he ran into me, I would have a bruise for weeks. There was some struggle with him, and physically, with the drawings as well. It may get out of hand, and I may not be able to control it." Rubenstein compares this symbiotic pairing of media and subject to onomatopoeia in language, when the sound of the word echoes its meaning. "I feel there needs to be emotion about the subject matter to proceed, and a medium to embody it," he





*Agamemnon as Cerberus*, 2001, graphite, wax, ink, charcoal, and Conté, 38 x 50. All drawings this article courtesy Sheppard Art Gallery, Ellicott City, Maryland.



tends. "If I can do that, I have something that works on a lot of levels."

To achieve levels of meaning, Rubenstein relies on layers of media. For each drawing he travels full circle, beginning with reserving the white of the paper, then building darks, and on to establishing the blackest black, before returning for the lightest light. He starts with a simple 2B graphite outline on a piece of Lenox 100 paper. "It is particularly important to plot my moves when working on this scale," the artist explains. "The outline is a pure linear drawing, and it is never meant to be left in that stage. It functions like a road map, in that it is only meant to tell me where to put my values eventually."

When he has completed the outline, Rubenstein makes a tracing so if the drawing becomes too obscured, he has a template to help with the redefinition. Next, he determines which areas are to remain the white of the paper and marks those with Gulf wax (also called canning wax). "It comes in blocks in the grocery store," he says of the wax, "and I just slice off a piece, like a chalk or a crayon, and go in. It functions as an invisible crayon." The artist uses the wax directly or in a holder, either whittled to a fine point or, for a broad area, in the whole block.

Once satisfied that he has isolated the bright whites with the wax—a process he refers to as "stopping out"—the artist mixes a light gray from Higgins or Pelican black ink. He then wets the paper and floods it with the ink wash. "Wherever I have hit the paper with wax," Rubenstein describes, "it resists the wash, so I have a light-gray paper with some areas of the ghostly white of the wax." Next, in much the same manner as he determines what he wants to be white, the artist asks the same question of the light gray. To those areas, he applies more wax and floods the paper again with a slightly darker wash. He continues this process three or four times, but



rarely more. "The surface of the wax has a beautiful look. It really glows from the inside because it is coming from the paper. But if there is too much wax ..." he trails off. "It is best when used sparingly, as an accent."

At this point, Rubenstein switches from wax to Alphacolor Char-Kole, which is a type of compressed charcoal, to add darker darks. David Dodge Lewis, who introduced Rubenstein to this mixed-media drawing method, determined that since compressed charcoal is

Above: *Agamemnon, Kitchen I*, 2001, graphite, wax, ink, charcoal, and Conté, 50 x 38.

Opposite page, above: *Agamemnon, Porch III*, 2001, graphite, wax, ink, and charcoal, 38 x 50.

Opposite page, below: *Agamemnon, Sofa II*, 2001, graphite, wax, ink, charcoal, Conté, and pastel, 42 x 60.



bound with gum arabic, it is by definition water-soluble, which Rubenstein confesses had never occurred to him. “I immediately search out the darkest darks,” the artist explains. “Then I take a 1½” house-painting brush, dip it in water, and with the loaded brush, introduce water into the charcoal on the drawing. It immediately dissolves and becomes a velvety, black ink.”

This is the stage when in life the dog lurches forward on its leash with its owner tumbling behind and when in drawing, as Rubenstein describes it, “the ink is really flying around the room.” A measure of chance pours onto the drawing along with the water, and the piece he envisioned becomes subjected to uncontrollable variables: how the liquid charcoal

**Above: *Four Studies of Agamemnon: The Artist's Great Dane Sleeping*, 1998, graphite, charcoal, and white charcoal, 22 x 30.**

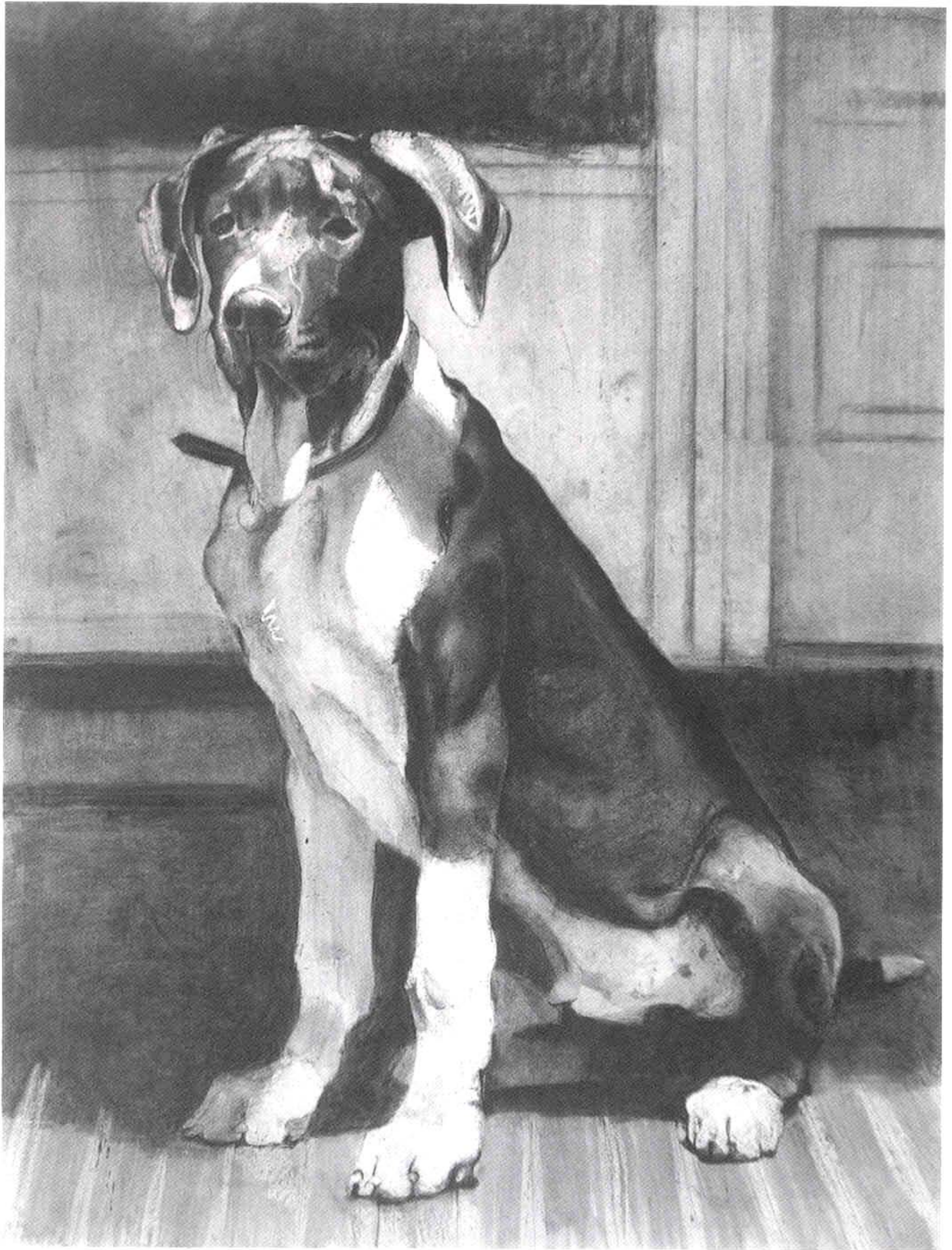
**Opposite page: *Agamemnon, Porch I*, 2001, graphite, wax, ink, and charcoal, 50 x 38.**

moves around the paper, how it reacts to the wax, where it pools, where it spreads. The artist, to some degree, has to relinquish the drawing to the process. “I have to be comfortable working in a messy, chaotic state for a while,” he remarks, “and know that I can bring it around.”

Rubenstein’s first brushstrokes in the wet ink set almost immediately, but as the paper becomes wet overall, he has more time to manipulate—up to an hour, depending on the weather. In that period, he has to

react to a fluid drawing, making instinctive judgments and quick decisions, responding to the movements before the ink sets. “Some of the ink beads up on the wax—an accident that can’t be planned,” he notes. “Sometimes I leave it, or if it is too much, I brush it off while the ink is wet—it sort of rolls away, the way rain washes off a newly waxed car. This method produces such tremendous sculptural effects—surfaces and texture that there is no other way to achieve—but I have to let the accidents, the splash marks, and the drips happen.” The artist points to *Agamemnon as Cerberus* as an example of where some unplanned drops behind the left dog’s right ear fit in the finished

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Factory. \$7000 in awards. All watercolor works on paper are eligible for entry. Dates: Oct. 18-Nov. 20. Juror of Selection: Arne Westerman, AWS, Juror of Awards: Janet Walsh, AWS. Send #10 SASE to: PWS, P.O. Box 626, Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-0626.

◆**PENNSYLVANIA, HAZELTON.**\* Hazelton Art League 45th Juried Art Exhibition, May 11-24. Open to all artists in PA DE MD NJ NY. Paintings, drawings, graphics, sculpture. Jurors: Richard Poink, Gary Sussman. Hand delivery Apr. 27-28. Fee: \$20/1 entry, \$25/2 entries. Cash awards at least \$3300. Best of Show \$1000. 25% commission. Prospectus: #10 SASE to Ruth Howe, 416 W. Broad St., Hazelton, PA 18201, or call (570) 454-5333.

◆**PENNSYLVANIA, PHILADELPHIA.**\* Philadelphia Sketch Club 139th Annual Exhibition of Small Oil Paintings, Max. 20" x 20" (excl. frame). Juried from actual work. Jurors: Jerry Herdman, Susan Howard & Bruce Samuelson. Hand delivery only Mar. 1 & 2. Entry fee \$12/1 painting and \$20/2 paintings. \$1500 in Cash prizes. Exhibition Mar. 17-Apr. 21. For prospectus, write: Philadelphia Sketch Club, 235 S. Camac St., Philadelphia, PA 19107-5608, or call William C. Patterson, (610) 705-8506.

◆**PENNSYLVANIA, PITTSBURGH.** 8th Annual Juried Pastel Competition, La Fond Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA. Exhibition: May 10, 2002. Open to all pastel painters, no oil pastels. Fee: \$25/1 slide, \$35/2 slides. Entry deadline: Mar. 22, 2002. Juror Maggie Price, member PSA, PSNM, PSAPOW, editor of The Pastel Journal. Send SASE for prospectus to: La Fond Galleries, 1711 E. Carson St., Pittsburgh, PA 15203, c/o Pastel Competition.

◆◆**PENNSYLVANIA, PITTSBURGH.** Pittsburgh Watercolor Society's Aqueous 2002. 56th Annual Int'l Exhibit, at John Stobart's Three Rivers Gallery, downtown Pittsburgh, PA. Sept. 12-Oct. 12. Awards: \$4500. Juror: Judi Betts, AWS. Slide deadline: May 30, 2002. Entry fee: \$30/non-members, \$25/members. For prospectus, send SASE to Pat Babcock, 3410 Brookdale Dr., Pittsburgh, PA 15241.

◆**TENNESSEE, MEMPHIS.**\* Memphis/Germantown Art League 7th Nat'l Juried. May 1-31, 2002. Cash awards. 2/\$25 slide. Deadline: Mar. 24. Prospectus #10 SASE: Wayne Newsome, 523 Malcolm St., Memphis, TN 38112-3122.

◆**TENNESSEE, NASHVILLE.** 37th Annual Central South Art Exhibition & Juried Competition, Christopher M. Still, Juror. Sponsored by Friends of The Tennessee Art League, Nashville. Open to artists of all neighboring states, SC and FL. Slide deadline: Apr. 1. Over \$8000 in cash awards. For prospectus, send SASE to: CSAE, Tennessee Art League, 3011 Poston Ave., Nashville, TN 37203.

◆◆**TEXAS, DALLAS/FORT WORTH.** Colored Pencil Society of America 10th Annual Int'l Juried Exhibition, Aug. 2002. Atrium Gallery. Juror: Dr. Edmund Pillsbury. Co-owner Pillsbury and Peters Gallery, Dallas. 100% colored pencil. Cash awards \$7500. Deadline: Mar. 30. #10 SASE: CPSA, 9374 Canabridge Dr., Lakeland, TN 38002; or download from: www.cpsa.org.

◆**TEXAS, CLIFTON.**\* The 17th Annual Bosque Nat'l Art Competition - Exhibit and Sale call for entries. Deadline July 2. Open to representational art only. \$5000 Jones Award. Total awards given over \$12,000. For more info or a prospectus, send a #10 SASE to: Bosque Conservatory Art Council, Box 502, Clifton, TX 76634, or E-mail: bosqueart@htcomp.net. Visit Web site at www.centratx.com/theconseratory.

◆**WASHINGTON, KIRKLAND.**\* Northwest Pastel Society's 16th Int'l Exhibition, slide deadline Mar.20. Prizes exceeding \$3000 awarded at Kirkland Gallery, Kirkland, WA, just outside of Seattle. Juror: Anne Heywood. For prospectus, SASE to: Donna Trent, NPS, 4224 83rd Ave. Ct. N.W., Gig Harbor, WA 98335, or www.nwps.org.

## FAIRS AND FESTIVALS

◆**ILLINOIS, SKOKIE.** Skokie Art Guild's 41st Annual Art Fair, 5211 W. Oakton Ave., on the Village Green, Skokie, IL. July 13 & 14, 2002. Fine art, paintings, sculpture, photography, pottery, fine jewelry, glass, etc. \$70 entry fee. Contact Skokie Art Guild, Encl. SASE, 6704 N. Trumbull Ave., Lincolnwood, IL 60712 for application and information. E-mail: skokieart@aol.com. Tel/Fax: (847) 677-8163.

◆**MICHIGAN, WARREN.** 22nd Annual Art in the Park, Halmich Park, July 13-14, 2002. Juried fine art, paintings, sculpture, photography, pottery, fine jewelry, glass, etc. Cash awards, entertainment. \$100 entry fee, \$10 jury fee. SASE. Deadline 5/10/02. For application or info, contact: Paula Wild, 8707 Forest Ct., Warren, MI 48093, Ph. (586) 795-5471, E-mail: pwild@provide.net or Jeanne Zaroukian (586) 977-1837.

◆**OHIO, CUYAHOGA FALLS.** Stretching Boundaries for Creative People V International Seminar, Apr. 17-20, 2002. Trade show included. Bringing 23 nat'l and int'l artists to share ideas on creativity through lectures, hands-on workshops, critiques, discussions. Write: Ohio Watercolor Society, P.O. Box 307354, Columbus, OH 43230.

◆**TENNESSEE, TULLAHOMA.**\* 34th Annual Tullahoma Fine Arts and Crafts Festival, May 18-19, 2002. Sponsored by Tullahoma Fine Arts Center, 401 S. Jackson St., Tullahoma, TN 37388. (931) 455-1234. Web site: www.tullahomafinearts.org. Juried competition. Original fine arts and crafts only. 100 exhibitors. Cash, product, and purchase awards. Grumbacher Award. \$75 booth fee. Registration deadline: Apr. 15, 2002. ■

## CAPTURING SUN AND SEA

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teaching," he says, which is why he encourages his students to visit him even after a workshop has ended. "I often have people in my studio, from bag ladies to young kids. People did that for me when I was a kid. I feel like I have to give it back. My heart is somewhere between being a painter and being a teacher."

His heart is also near the water, whether it be the fresh water of the Margaree or the salty ocean that laps at the shores of Nantucket; whether he's standing in it in hip-waders, or painting it with blue and green pastels that are worn quickly to the nub. "Sky, shadow, and the transparency and reflection of water are among my concerns," the artist concludes. "These are the visual elements that excite me." ■

*Madelyn Rosenberg is a Boston-based freelance writer. She spent most of her career as a features reporter for the Roanoke Times in Virginia and has been published in Watercolor, CMJ, Bluegrass Unlimited, American Journalism Review, and the Boston Herald.*

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piece. "It looked just like when a dog is wet, and he shakes his head, and water goes all over the place," the artist comments. "I can get a poetic effect with this technique, where the brushstrokes mirror my goal. But it doesn't always work out that well, and ultimately, if I need to, I can cover up a problem."

Until this time, Rubenstein has primarily worked the drawing wet. After manipulating the liquid compressed charcoal, he only applies dry media, although he may undertake some recovery first. "When the work dries, I have big areas of dark and light, but it is messy and I may have lost the linear drawing," he admits. "I may have to trace the template to re-establish the original drawing, and then I go in with vine charcoal, compressed charcoal, and Conté and, in a more traditional fashion, render where I want details to read or to

establish a sculptural quality." Often, the artist also has to eliminate a veil from the ink washes, using a pencil knife to scrape into the wax. Where the wax isn't adequate or where he neglected to protect the paper, Rubenstein adds light accents. For instance, he touched up *Agamemnon, Sofa II* with white pastel. Since white pastel has a bluish cast, and the white of the paper and the wax are a little warmer, to get the same color quality, he chose citrus yellow. He explains, "It's something I wouldn't have realized until I put the white down, so I bought a range of whites and creams and experimented until one matched."

Rubenstein records discoveries such as the citrus yellow pastel in a studio journal, which includes other observations, such as that wax is effective for depicting fur but not for backgrounds or smoother surfaces. By monitoring his experimentation, he refines his practice of a process he has been playing with for nearly a decade, since Lewis demonstrated the technique for one of Rubenstein's classes. "It wasn't until this series that I felt I had completely assimilated what David did and made it my own technique," the artist states.

Although he paints in oil as well, Rubenstein thinks of "drawing as the basis of what I do. A drawing is so intimately involved with one's thinking process. There is a lot I can hide behind a painting that I can't hide in a drawing. This technique, however, blurs the distinction between painting and drawing: half is done dry, half is done wet; the scale is like a painting; the calculated washes are like a painting. I call them drawings, and I feel they are drawings, but the series pulls in many things that one thinks of as painterly."

Rubenstein teaches at the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan, and the Maryland Institute, College of Art, in Baltimore. He is represented by Ottinger Gallery in Chicago and Sheppard Art Gallery in Ellicott City, Maryland, where the *Agamemnon* series was exhibited in the fall of 2001. For more information, visit the artist's Web site: [www.EphraimRubenstein.com](http://www.EphraimRubenstein.com). ■

*Katleen Baxter is an associate editor of American Artist.*