

Mark Gonzales working on a silverpoint drawing.

The Fine Line:  
A Close Look  
at Five  
Contemporary  
**Silverpoint**  
Drawers

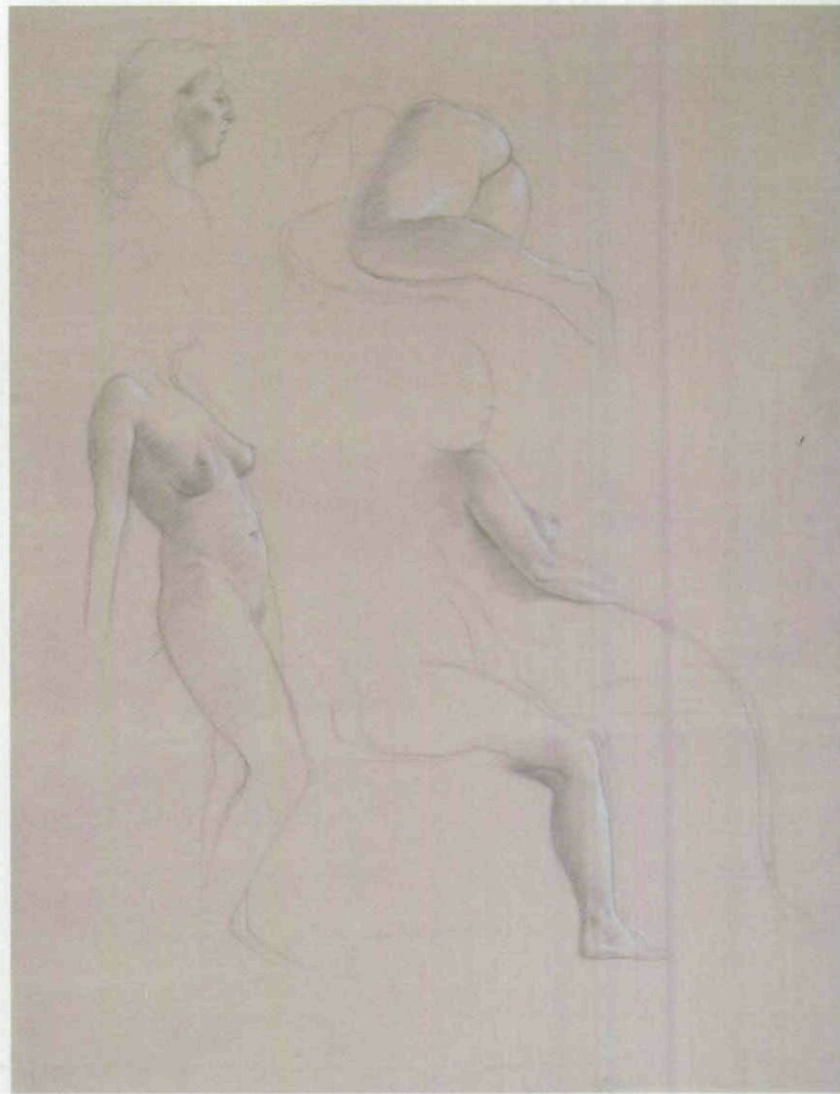
Because silverpoint drawings invite us to come close  
and examine them carefully, here is a close-up look  
at several masterful contemporary silverpoint drawings.

—  
by **Ephraim Rubenstein**

BELOW

**Maria XXI**

by Costa Vavagiakis, 2007, silverpoint on clay-coated paper, 11½ x 9½. All artwork this article collection the artist unless otherwise indicated.



ABOVE

**Figure Studies  
No. 12**

by Mark Gonzales,  
2004, silverpoint,  
17 x 14.

LEFT

**Reclining Nude**

by August Mosca,  
1966, silverpoint,  
9 x 14¼. Collection  
the Mosca family.



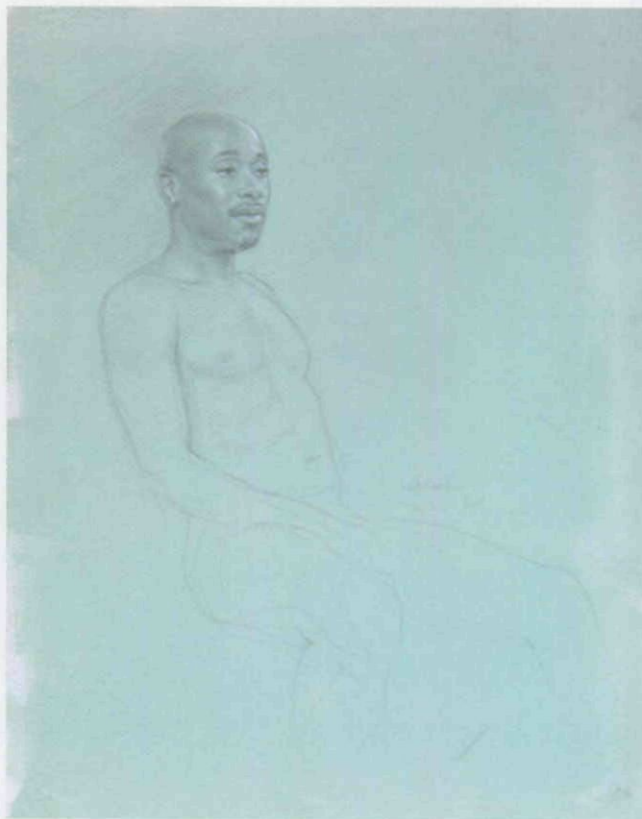
There is an ancient Chinese musical instrument called the *ch'in* whose sound is so delicate that you cannot hear it unless you are sitting right beside it. Rather than a defect, it is seen as one of the instrument's virtues; the delicacy of the sound demands an intimacy with the listener. You have to get very close to the player—its sound is designed for the *ch'in* player himself and perhaps for several good friends.

A silverpoint drawing is like a *ch'in*. Delicate and refined, it must be viewed close-up. It has no trumpet-like darks or large tonal passages that can carry across the room—it reveals itself only through proximity. There is a great pleasure and privilege in this intimacy, as if someone had whispered something important to you and you alone. Although silverpoint drawings are generally associated with the early Renaissance, there are a growing number of contemporary artists who have rediscovered this most delicate of media, and who find great pleasure in its subtleties.

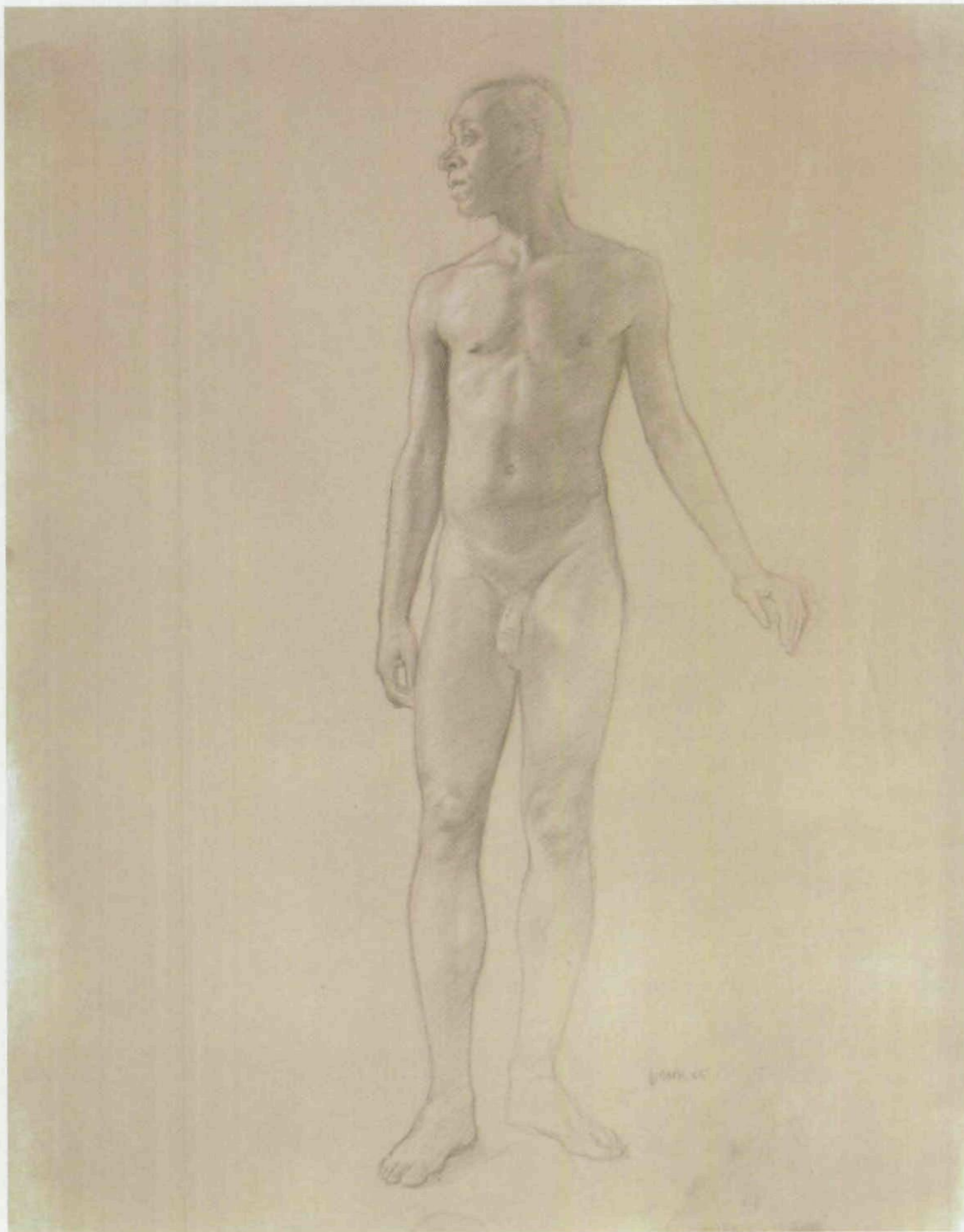
### History

The earliest silverpoint drawings date from the Middle Ages, although their use in writing goes back to antiquity. The now ubiquitous graphite pencil did not exist in any marked quantities before the late 17th century, so artists drew in charcoal, chalk, ink, or silverpoint to work out studies, cartoons, and underdrawings for paintings. In underdrawings for tempera paintings in particular silverpoint had a conspicuous advantage. Unlike charcoal or chalk, it did not rub off either onto your hands or into the paint. And unlike ink, it did not show through the lighter or thinner layers of paint.

Because it allowed a great deal of precision, silverpoint became the favored medium for executing figure, portrait, and drapery studies for larger paintings. And



ABOVE  
**Portrait of Sky**  
by Mark Gonzales, 2005,  
silverpoint, 14 x 11.



**LEFT**  
**Eric**

by Mark Gonzales,  
2005, silverpoint,  
17 x 14.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

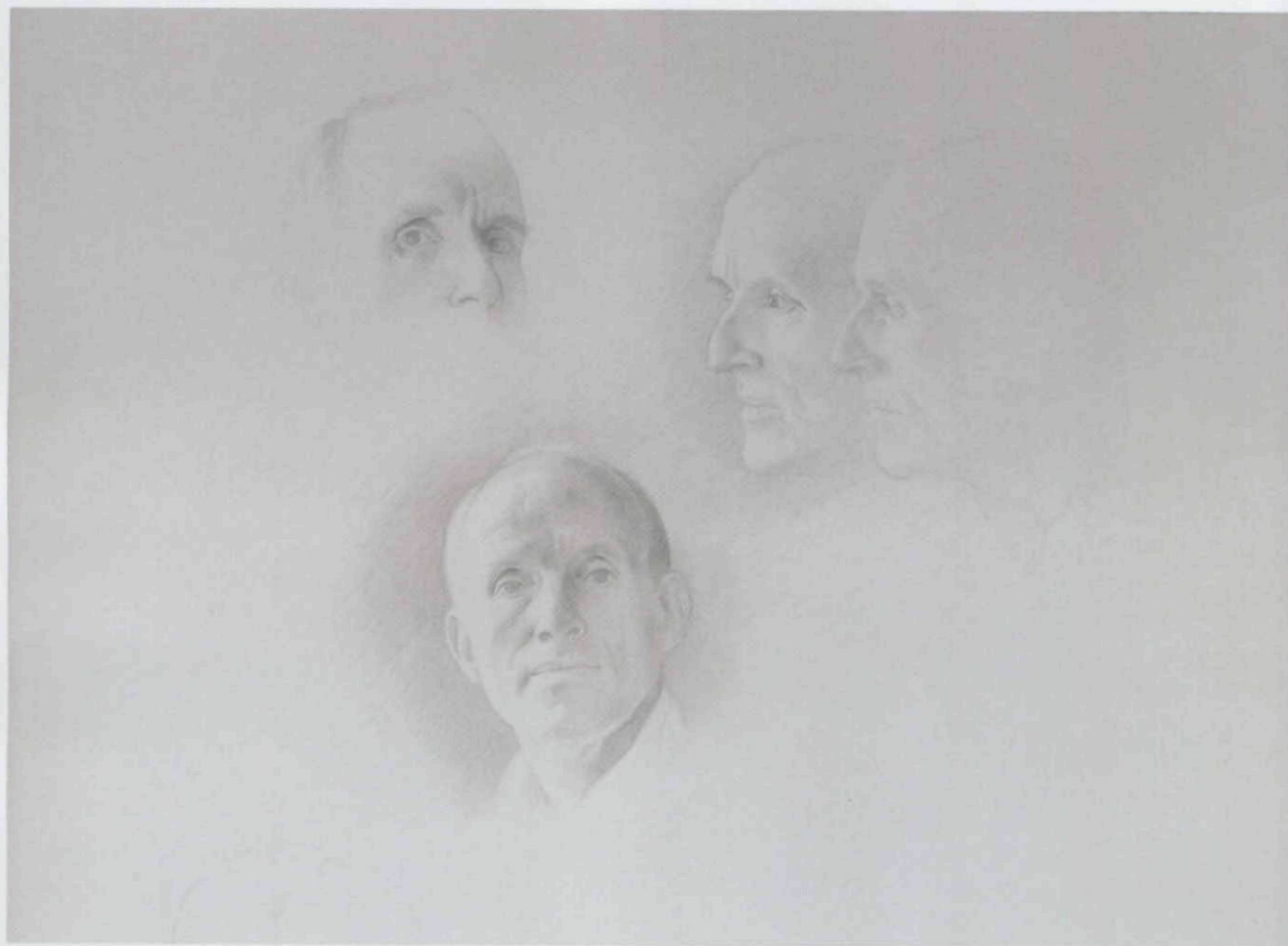
**David Lewis**

by Ephraim  
Rubenstein, 2007,  
silverpoint,  
15 x 22½.

because it was such a direct way of drawing, artists such as Dürer and Holbein had silverpoint paper bound up in sketchbooks so they could make their studies from life anywhere they went. Silverpoint, incidentally, is just one of many different kinds of metalpoints that have been used successfully over the centuries to make similarly delicate lines. Gold, bronze, brass, copper, lead, tin, and even a steel paperclip will make beautiful lines. But artists have tended to return to silverpoint because of its beautiful tonality and because upon oxidation, the cooler-gray line turns a warmer brown with a unique, mellow luster.

The major technical drawback with using silverpoint is that it has to be used on a prepared surface. The silverpoint stylus will not leave a mark on an untreated piece of paper. It needs a receptive ground to attract and retain the silver particles. In this age, in which papers of every type and quality are available for the asking, we can only imagine a time in which artists found it easier to use animal hides, such as parchment and vellum, as drawing surfaces. Consider how difficult it was to produce paper early on, if removing, cleaning, drying, and stretching an animal skin was seen as an easier way to prepare a surface! An animal hide is a hard

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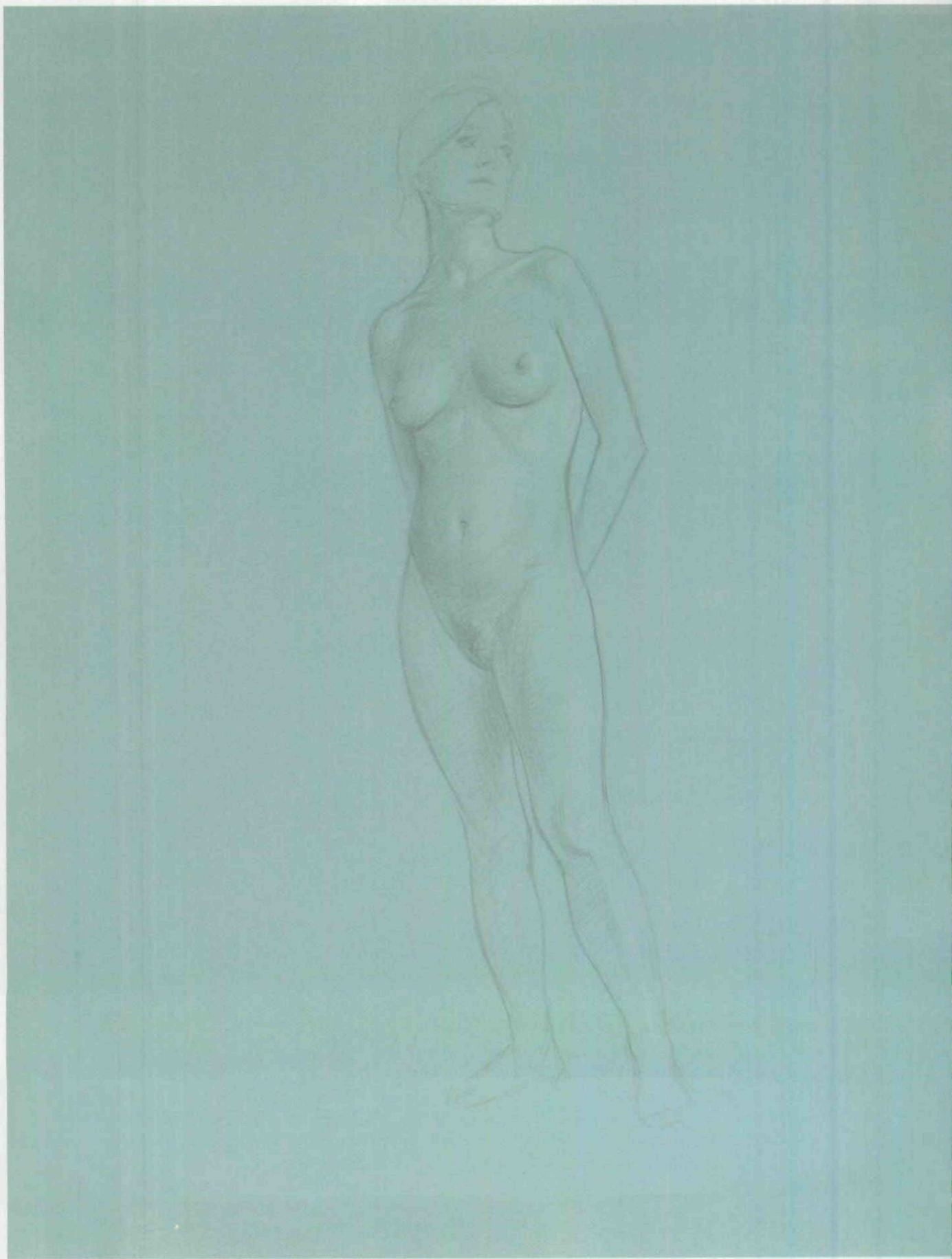


surface, and this quality of hardness has continued to seem advantageous for silverpoint drawing. Contemporary artists still use very thin pieces of wood or Masonite, and within the world of paper, they prefer smooth surfaces such as hot-pressed watercolor paper, Bristol board, or clay-coated paper.

Although the materials for executing silverpoint drawings are relatively easy to obtain, they are nevertheless harder to come by than a graphite pencil and paper. So in a time when its use in underdrawing for tempera paintings is rarely an issue, what are the specific qualities of silverpoint that continue to attract contemporary drawers?

### Tradition and Continuity

For many artists, there is great emotional appeal in knowing that you are working in a time-honored medium. Just as there is an excitement in the feeling that you are breaking new ground, there is an analogous pleasure in knowing that you have a living tie to the past. It's a thrill for me to know that my materials are basically the same as Leonardo's or Perugino's, and that they might have held an instrument similar to mine in their hands. You cannot feel this way holding a digital camera and working in Photoshop. So in this regard, silverpoint drawing is more than just a set of



materials and procedures; it is a *form* of drawing, and a form that has a lineage and a history. When I do a silverpoint drawing, I feel the challenge of working in this particular form, with all its beauties and restrictions, much as when a contemporary composer tries to write a fugue, or a poet a sonnet.

Artist Mark Gonzales speaks similarly about his ties to tradition, and he continues to copy the silverpoint drawings of Leonardo and Raphael. His copying work is not mere tribute, either. He's been able to develop a similar kind of grace and economy from what he has learned from those artists. In his portrait of the model Sky, for instance, observe the decisiveness with which he blocks in the sitting figure. Gonzales demonstrates all of the linear confidence demanded of the silverpoint drawer. With a handful of sure strokes, he establishes

the barrel shape of the rib cage—not only its roundness but also its rotated position. He then firmly unites the thighs to the pelvis, extending the back leg out horizontally, while the front leg projects directly out at us. With swift, sure lines, he places the mass of the quadriceps on top of this foreshortened leg, the relative sag of the biceps underneath, and the boney structure of the knee joint in front. Because marks in silverpoint are much harder to erase, you have to be very accurate from the start, or the image quickly becomes unreadable.

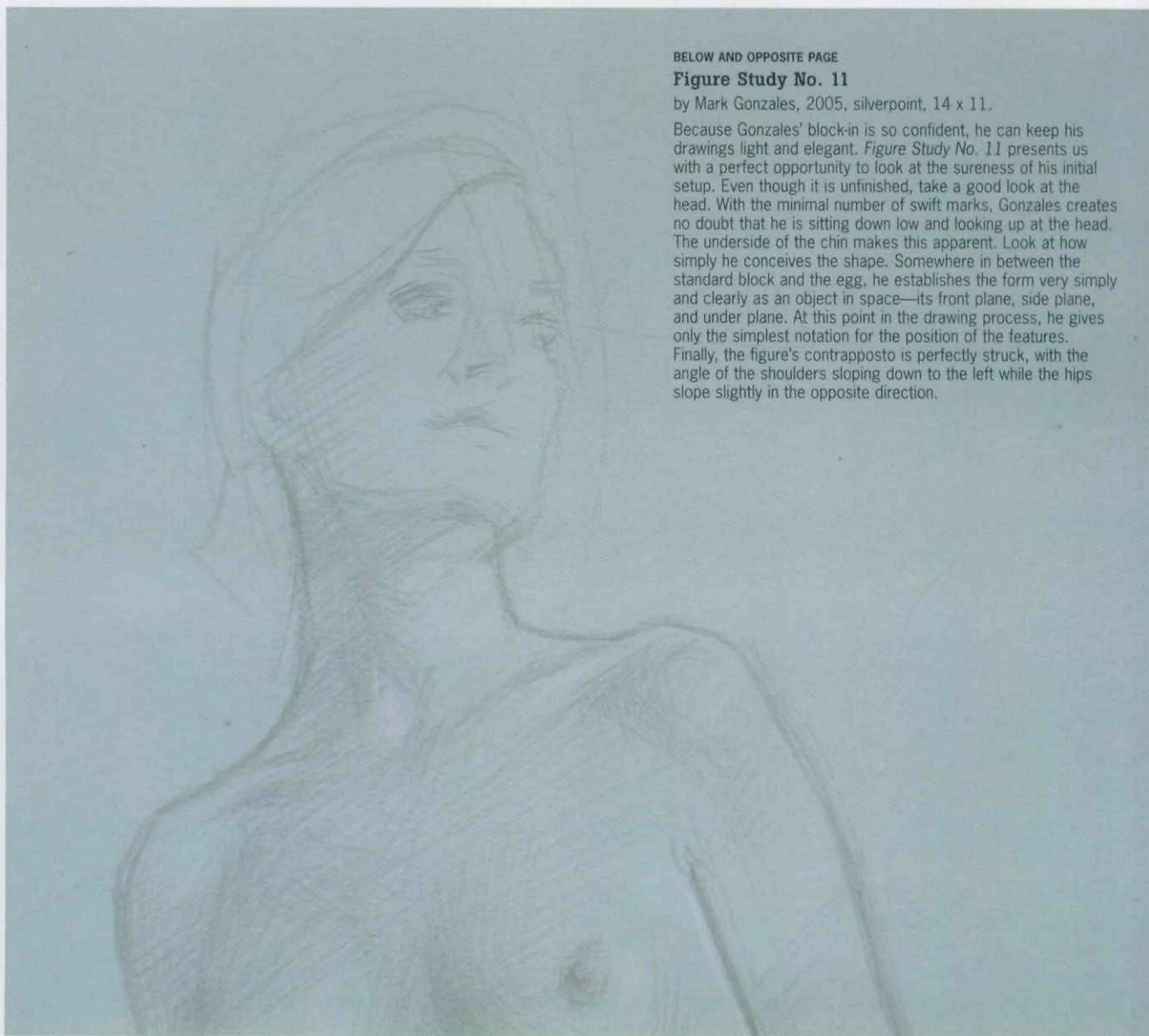
The drawing demonstrates a beautiful succession of development as well. The artist leads us from the deftly notated contours of the legs and arm, up through the more developed sense of structure in the chest, and finally to the remarkable sense of reality in the head—a dead-on likeness with great character and feeling for the particular model.

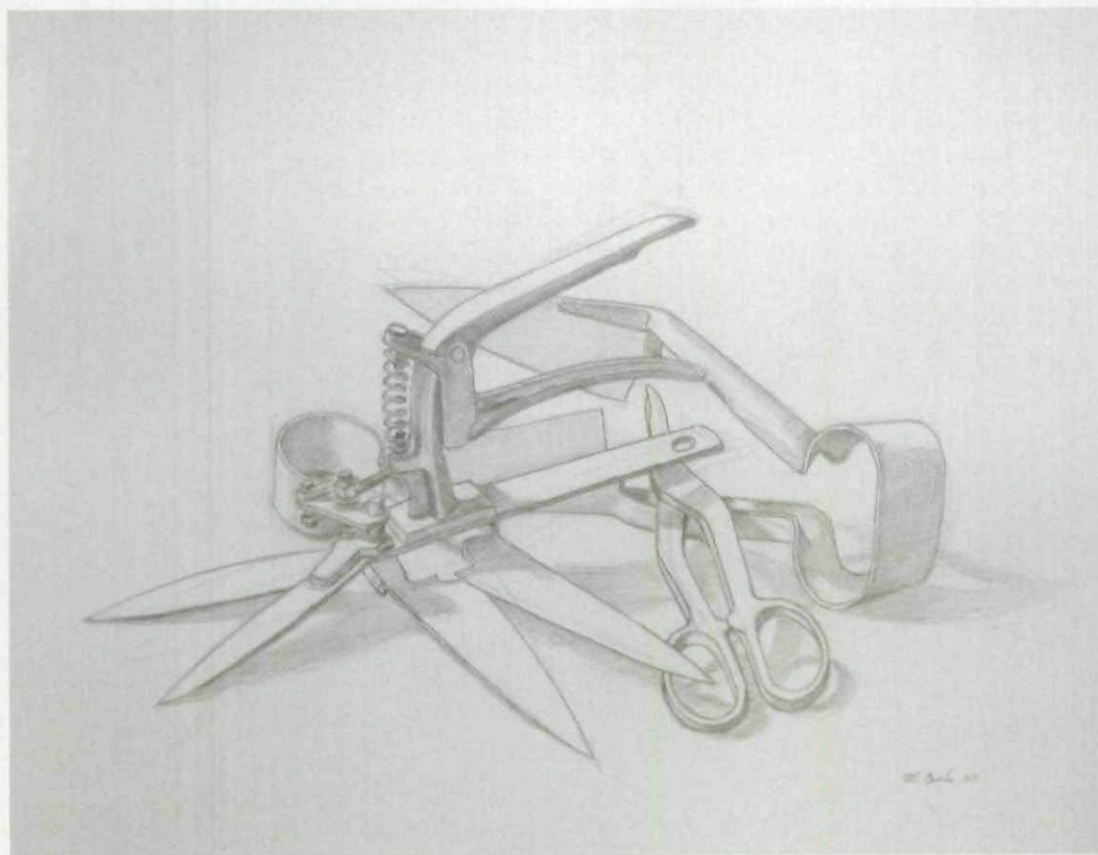
BELOW AND OPPOSITE PAGE

**Figure Study No. 11**

by Mark Gonzales, 2005, silverpoint, 14 x 11.

Because Gonzales' block-in is so confident, he can keep his drawings light and elegant. *Figure Study No. 11* presents us with a perfect opportunity to look at the sureness of his initial setup. Even though it is unfinished, take a good look at the head. With the minimal number of swift marks, Gonzales creates no doubt that he is sitting down low and looking up at the head. The underside of the chin makes this apparent. Look at how simply he conceives the shape. Somewhere in between the standard block and the egg, he establishes the form very simply and clearly as an object in space—its front plane, side plane, and under plane. At this point in the drawing process, he gives only the simplest notation for the position of the features. Finally, the figure's contrapposto is perfectly struck, with the angle of the shoulders sloping down to the left while the hips slope slightly in the opposite direction.





LEFT  
**Still Life With  
Trimmer and  
Shears**

by Michael Burke,  
2007, silverpoint on  
clay-coated paper,  
14 x 18.

## Silverpoint's Distinctive Qualities

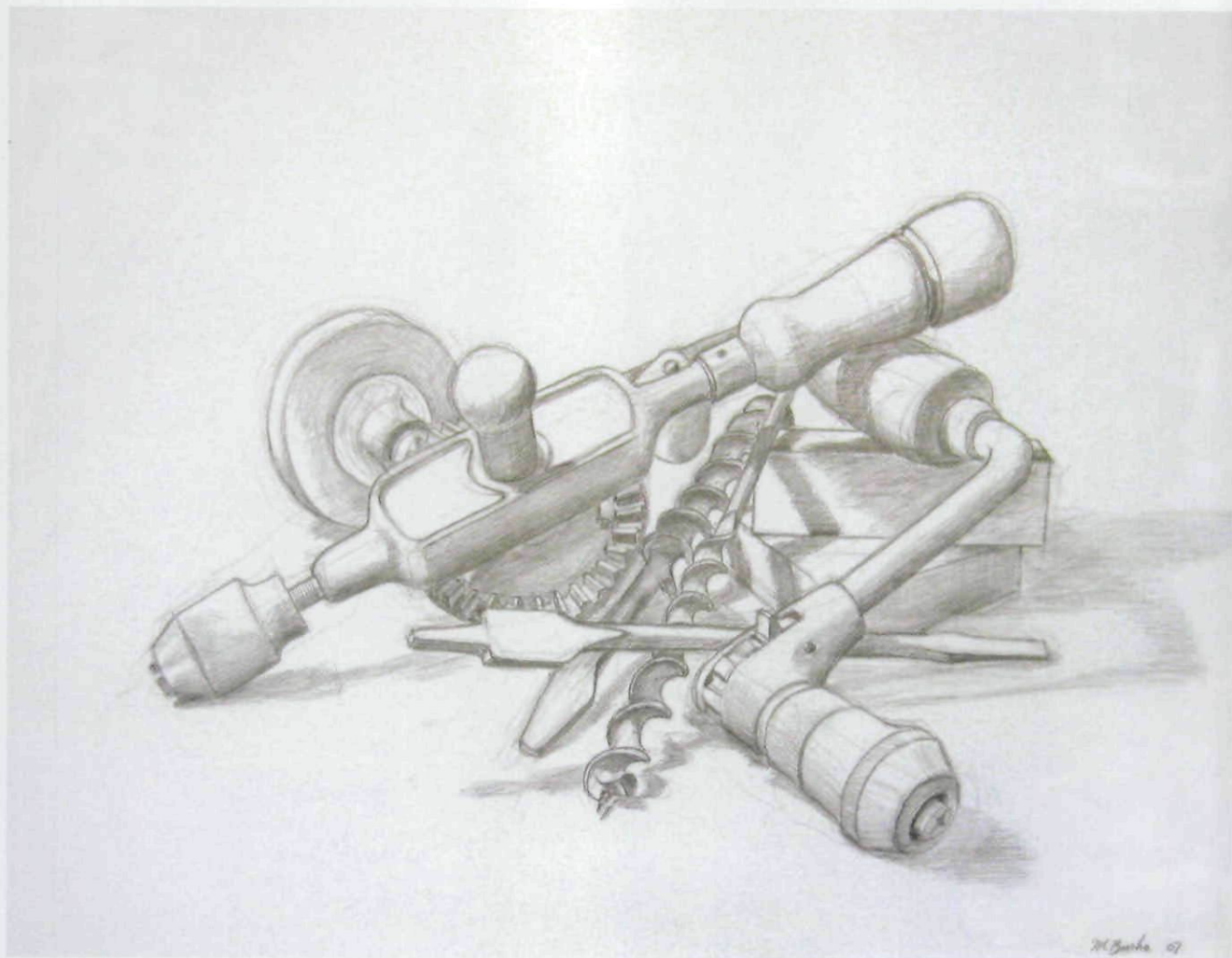
**Enforced Linearity.** Even though a silverpoint line may look similar to that of a hard pencil, it is not the same, just as an oboe and a clarinet are both reed instruments but ultimately have a different sound quality. Graphite and silverpoint lines are both shiny, but the silverpoint line is lustrous, while the graphite shine is brassier. More important, they handle differently. Silverpoint is an expressly linear medium. The silverpoint stylus lays down lines and lines alone, allowing almost no margin to blur or smudge these lines into tones. As in line etching or engraving, the only way to build up tonal areas is through an increasingly dense network of hatching.

This enforced linear clarity is a compelling quality for many artists. Gonzales notes how using even the hardest of pencils is more “comfortable,” because he knows he can always go back in and blend and erase. He admits that with a pencil he is probably going to start blending and rubbing in places, no matter how purely linear he wants to keep the drawing. The silverpoint line is implacable. It does not generate loose dust particles. It refuses to be mollified and continually asserts its own absolute linear nature.

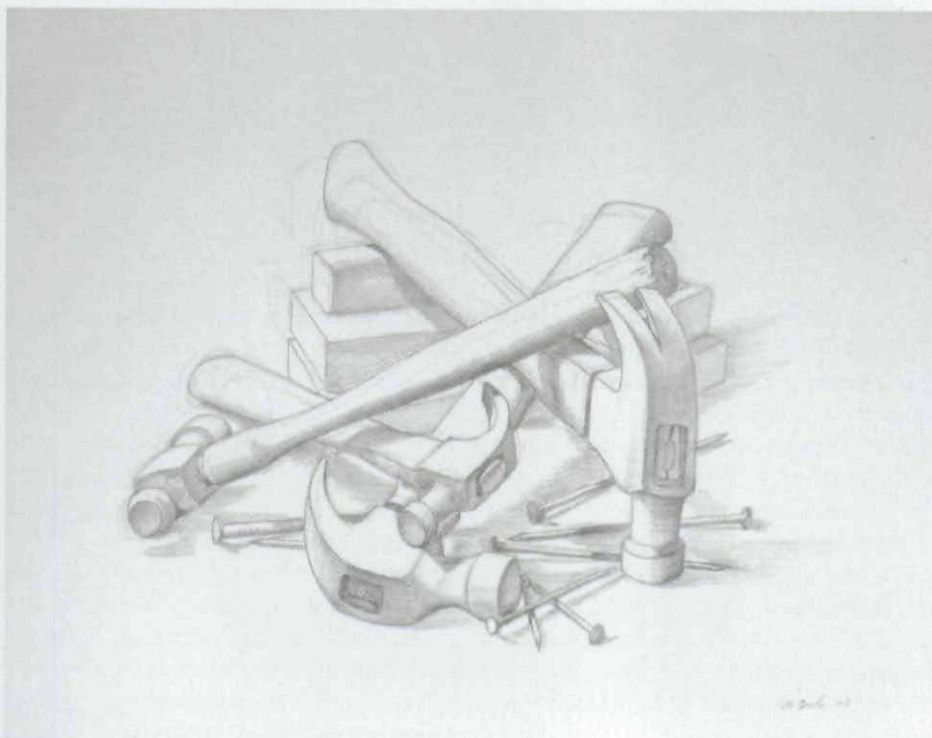
Silverpoint is more like working in pen-and-ink, concurs artist Costa Vavagiakis, in that “there is no going back, only

forward.” Vavagiakis talks eloquently about “the permanence of the mark,” and of having to develop “a love for and an acceptance of the mark.” Vavagiakis feels this is a challenge rather than a limitation. “Because there is no going back,” he says, “it teaches you an enforced restraint, a super-consciousness about pressure.” As a matter of fact, Vavagiakis feels that his earlier silverpoint drawings were not as successful as his later ones, primarily because he started out treating the stylus as if it were a hard pencil, and not as an inherently different instrument. “If you think you are using a pencil,” he warns, “you will be likely to overwork the drawing, clog up the hatching, and attempt to overstretch silverpoint’s tonal limitations.”

An additional working advantage to the permanence of the silverpoint line is that you don’t have to worry about inadvertently smudging the drawing. Because I will often turn a drawing on different sides and attack it from various angles when trying to model forms, I love the fact that I do not have to be overly careful about where I can and cannot put down my hand, as I do, say, in charcoal, where an inadvertent sweep of the cuff can erase an hour’s worth of work. There remains in silverpoint drawing a subtle sense that you are working with metal—a feeling that you are



M. Burke 07



ABOVE

**Still Life With Braces and Bits**

by Michael Burke, 2007, silverpoint on clay-coated paper, 14 x 18.

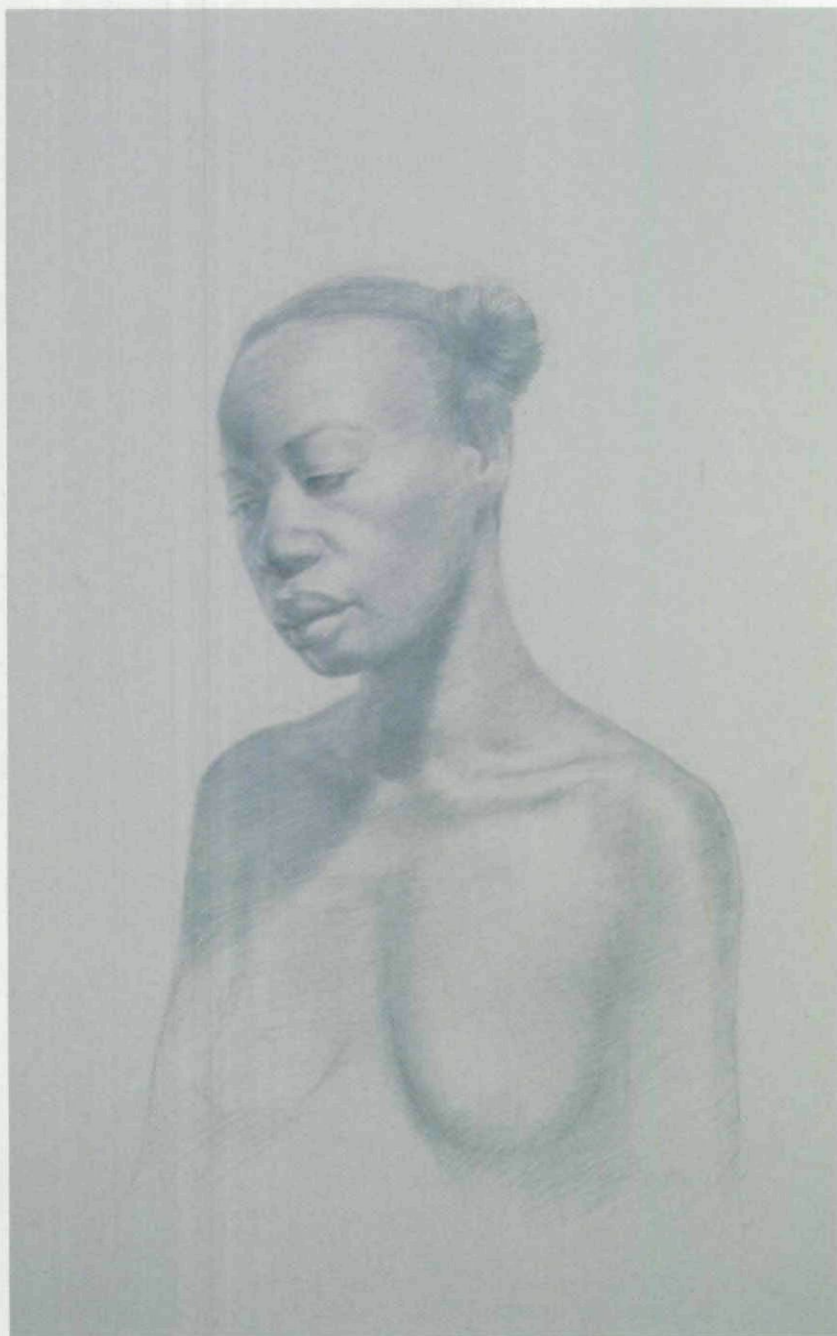
Burke handles a multitude of extremely complicated ellipses and spirals with the greatest aplomb. He is able to not only put the various bits into perfect foreshortening but to also thread them so they look truly functional. The ellipses in the drills are similarly well aligned, so we feel that we could just pick one up and begin using it.

This mountain of tools has beautiful abstract rhythms as well, with numerous thrusts and vortices spiraling out from the center. In addition to the pieces of metal themselves, the cast shadows similarly form beautiful abstract rhythms on the blocks of wood and on the ground plane. Burke's choice of delicate silverpoint is in fascinating counterpoint to the hefty weightiness of the tools themselves.

LEFT

**Still Life With Hammers and Nails**

by Michael Burke, 2007, silverpoint on clay-coated paper, 14 x 18.



LEFT

**Connie XXV**

by Costa Vavagiakis, 2007, silverpoint on clay-coated paper, 11½ x 9½.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Connie XXIV**

by Costa Vavagiakis, 2007, silverpoint on clay-coated paper, 11½ x 9½.

Vavagiakis has made a sensual landscape of his model's back in this gorgeous anatomical study. Even though her back is turned to us, she speaks to us with the greatest eloquence. Vavagiakis has exploited the gentle radiance of silverpoint to maximum advantage in constructing this shimmering torso, replete with light gleaming off the model's skin.

Even though silverpoint is an expressly linear medium, tones can be created by eliding the strokes into denser and denser patches. But the artist must take care not to overwork the hatching, causing the tones to clog up and go dead. Vavagiakis very masterfully creates what are as close to tonal passages as silverpoint can go. By slightly varying the angle of the subsequent hatches, he allows light to shine through the darks and to remain radiant.

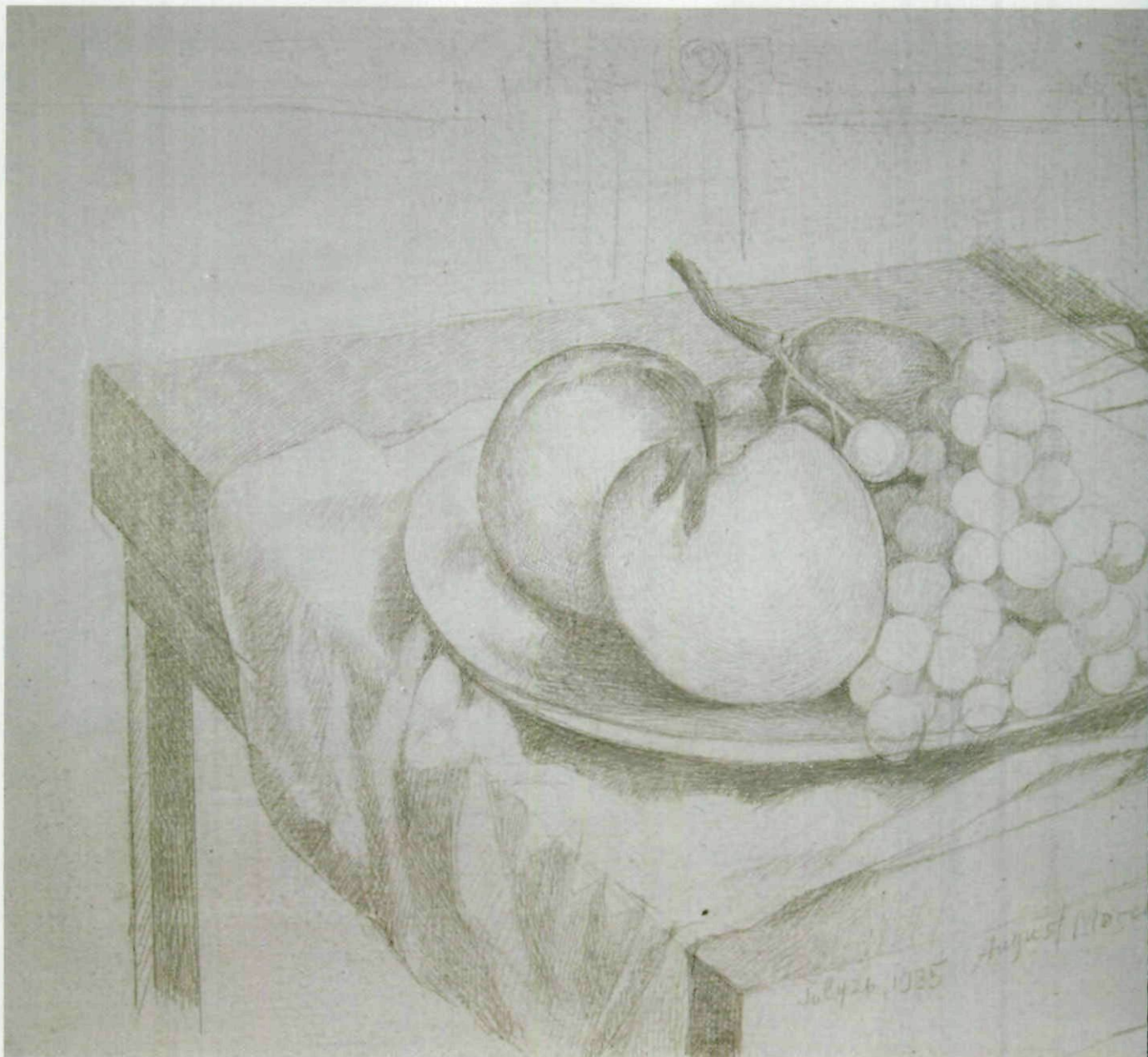
carving away at something resistant to casual change.

**Limited Range and Feel.** Silverpoint's tonal limitations are another crucial quality with which to reckon. Graphite pencils, for instance, have a tremendous range from black to white, and they come in varying degrees of hardness and softness that make it easier to control this huge range. We feel this immediately when we move in sequence from a 9H to a 9B pencil. Silverpoint styli do not come in hard, medium, and soft; there is only one grade, and this one grade has a narrow range. Silverpoint is incapable of making powerful darks, even when great pressure is exerted. It operates most beautifully in the upper register—in the very light to middle grays. That being said, it should be noted that some grounds will allow you to make darker darks than

others. Acrylic-gesso grounds are the most limited—darks are truly minimal and drawings made on them will be extremely delicate. Clay-coated papers will give you slightly greater darks, while zinc-white gouache grounds will extend the range even more. I have found that the old-fashioned glue grounds will give you the most in the way of darks, but even at their best, none of them will come close to making a dark like a B pencil, no less a piece of soft vine charcoal.

Silverpoint is also exceedingly limited in terms of the width of the line it is capable of making. Most drawing instruments can produce either thicker or thinner lines depending on how you hold the instrument and how you approach the paper. The line of the silverpoint stylus, however, is relatively uniform. As James Watrous writes in his





ABOVE

**Still Life With Fruit**

by August Mosca, 1985, silverpoint, 10 x 13%.

Unlike Vavagiakis, who uses the silverpoint strokes to create subtle tones, Mosca's use of hatching is more traditionally graphic. His lines always hold up as lines and never—no matter how dense the hatching—lose their essentially linear character. Mosca's lines are related to the type of mark-making found in old-fashioned etching and engraving. In *Still Life With Fruit*, he employs a classic type of crosshatching that sits on the surface of the shape like a second skin. The circularity of the marks echoes the fullness of the volumes they describe. More important, there is a spiritual quality in Mosca's work, born from a love of and feeling for his subject. In a delightful constellation of spheres, Mosca's apples, peaches, and grapes radiate light like some of Van Gogh's stars, with the forms taking shape in ever-widening spirals.

RIGHT

**Tulip Magnolias**

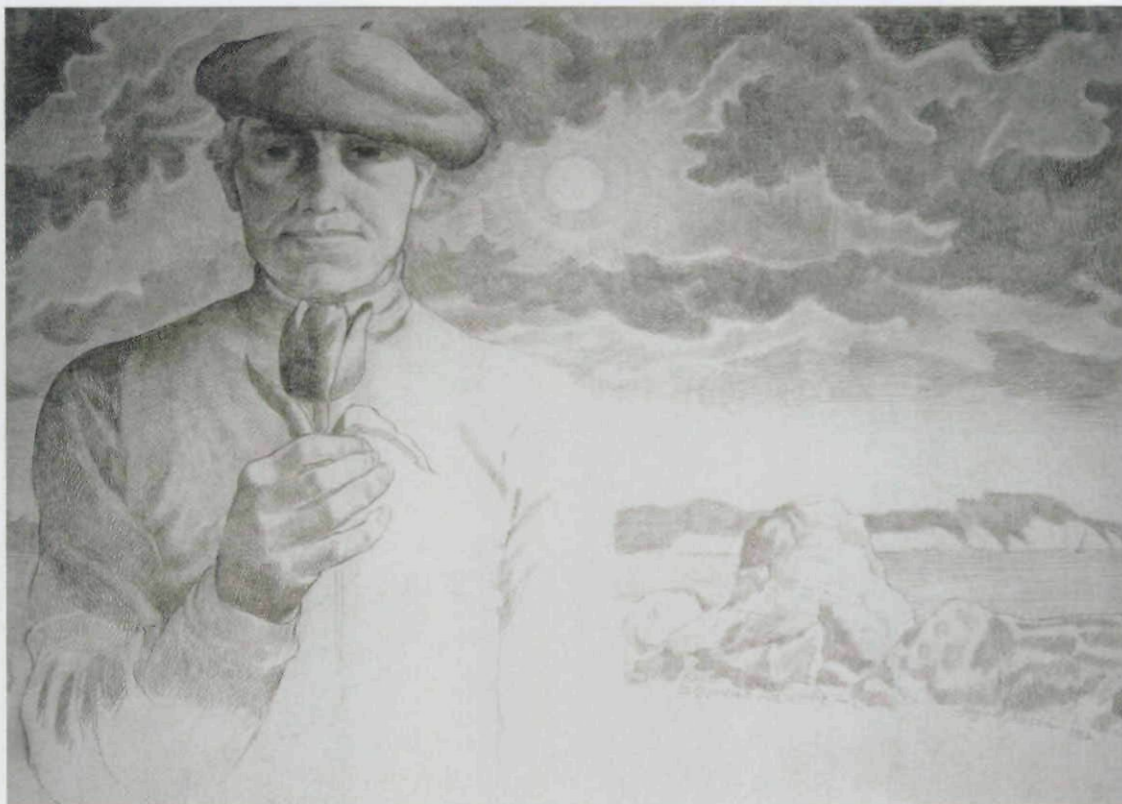
by August Mosca, 1973, silverpoint and colored pencil on prepared paper, 17 x 22%. Collection the Mosca family.



To look at Mosca's *Self-Portrait With Tulip No. 2* is to enter a world of lines—pure, short strokes that create both objects and dazzling abstract rhythms. These dense hatches vibrate before your eyes, creating an undulating graphic texture.

**Self-Portrait  
With Tulip No. 2**

by August Mosca,  
1982, silverpoint,  
16½ x 23. Collection  
the Mosca family.



classic *The Craft of Old-Master Drawings* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin), "Probably no group of drawing media provides less flexibility within lines where contrasting variations of thickness and thinness may be sought. Although minor differences in the width of a stroke may be achieved through pressure on the stylus, they are negligible when compared to those possible with many other drawing tools." But again, this limitation need not be seen as a liability. Watrous also realizes that this lack of variation affords the drawer a beautiful sense of consistency that can be of true aesthetic value. He concludes, "On the other hand, the constancy of the metalpoint lines, and the preciseness and lightness of the strokes, provide the artist with means of creating an impression of great linear purity."

Nowhere is this sense of "great linear purity" more apparent than in August Mosca's silverpoint drawings. To

look at his *Self-Portrait With Tulip No. 2* is to enter a world of lines—pure, short strokes that create both objects and dazzling abstract rhythms. These dense hatches vibrate before your eyes, creating an undulating graphic texture. Everything in the drawing—whether man, flower, sky, or land—is forged from the same simple vocabulary. Because of this, the drawing can ultimately be read either in terms of its overt subject—a self-portrait seen in front of places and things that the artist loved, or in terms of its means—as a glorious web of silverpoint lines.

**Hardness and Softness.** Despite the fact that they are drawing with a piece of metal, many artists immediately feel the softness of the silverpoint line. Artist Michael Burke comments on the exquisite graininess of the line, and the immense pleasure in knowing that something so hard will release something so soft and delicate. The precise quality of

Because the flowers of the narcissus are white and the roots are pale, the tonal range of silverpoint seemed perfect to try and capture this subject.



the line, however, will have much to do with the thickness of the wire. A thinner gauge wire will produce a finer, harder line. But the hardness and softness of the line will also have much to do with how you sharpen the instrument. If you rotate even a well-rounded point in your fingers, some of the angles will present slightly sharper facets than others. The sharper facets will produce a crisper line, while the duller angles will be coarser in texture.

So while Burke sees the softness of the silverpoint line, Joseph Stella, the great American master of silverpoint, describes it as “unbending,” “inflexible,” and “inexorable.” In a beautiful combination of both of silverpoint’s qualities—hardness and softness—Burke has limned massive, metal tools out of ethereal, metal lines. In doing so, he reminds us of silverpoint’s essential quality as a metal, with all of the beauties and limitations that come with it. ❖

ABOVE

#### **Maddie Sleeping**

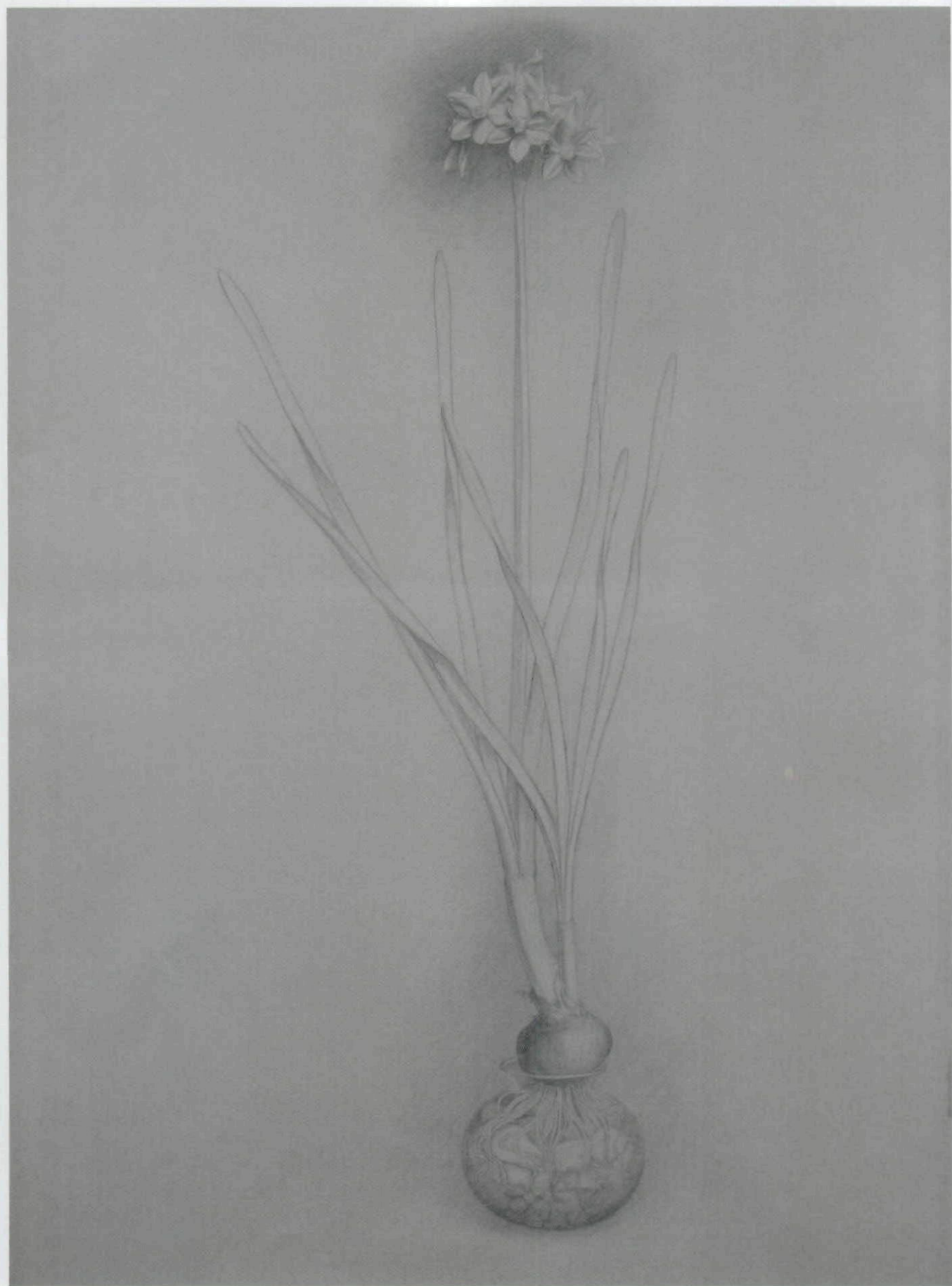
by Ephraim Rubenstein, 1990, silverpoint, 11 x 15.  
Collection Sherry Camly.

OPPOSITE PAGE

#### **Narcissus**

by Ephraim Rubenstein, 2006, silverpoint, 30 x 22½.

I have always been delighted to see the narcissus bulbs that grow in the kitchen at the end of winter, when one most needs to see something beautiful and growing. I am particularly intrigued by how the narcissus plant has two very distinct worlds—the world of the ball root and that of the bunch of flowers. The flowers are small and extremely delicate, while the ball root—itsself like a fecund onion—sends out wiry, twisted, pale roots that wind their way among the rocks for support. The two worlds are connected by extremely long, thin leaves and a frighteningly thin stem. It was the stem and leaves that first suggested silverpoint lines to me, because of their elegant length and sure contours. Because the flowers are white and the roots are pale, the tonal range of silverpoint seemed perfect to try and capture this subject.



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