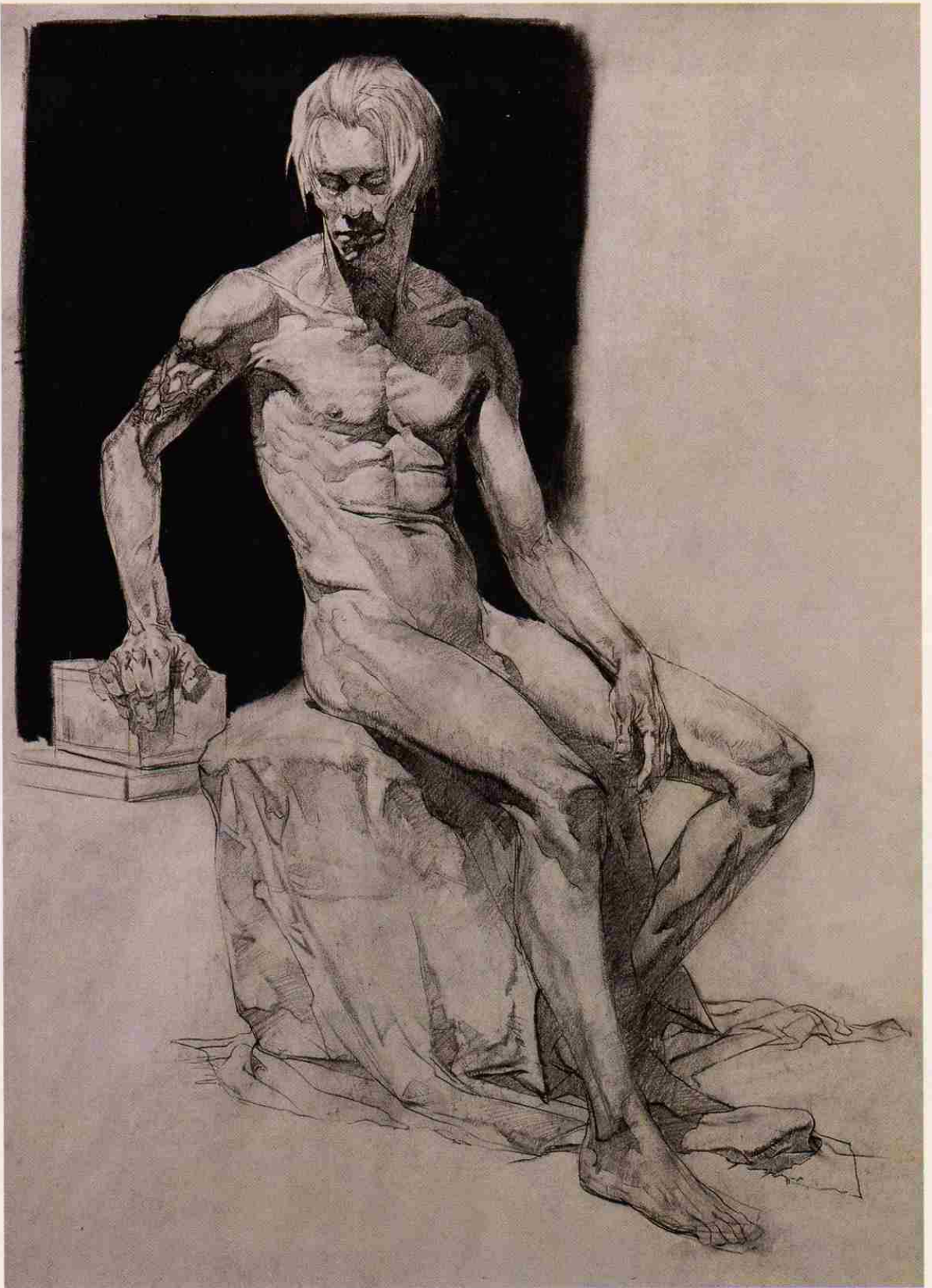


# Growing Up Together at the Watts Atelier

It's not big, it's not short, but the program at this Encinitas, California, art school turns out artists primed for success in any of several visual-arts fields. | **by Bob Bahr**

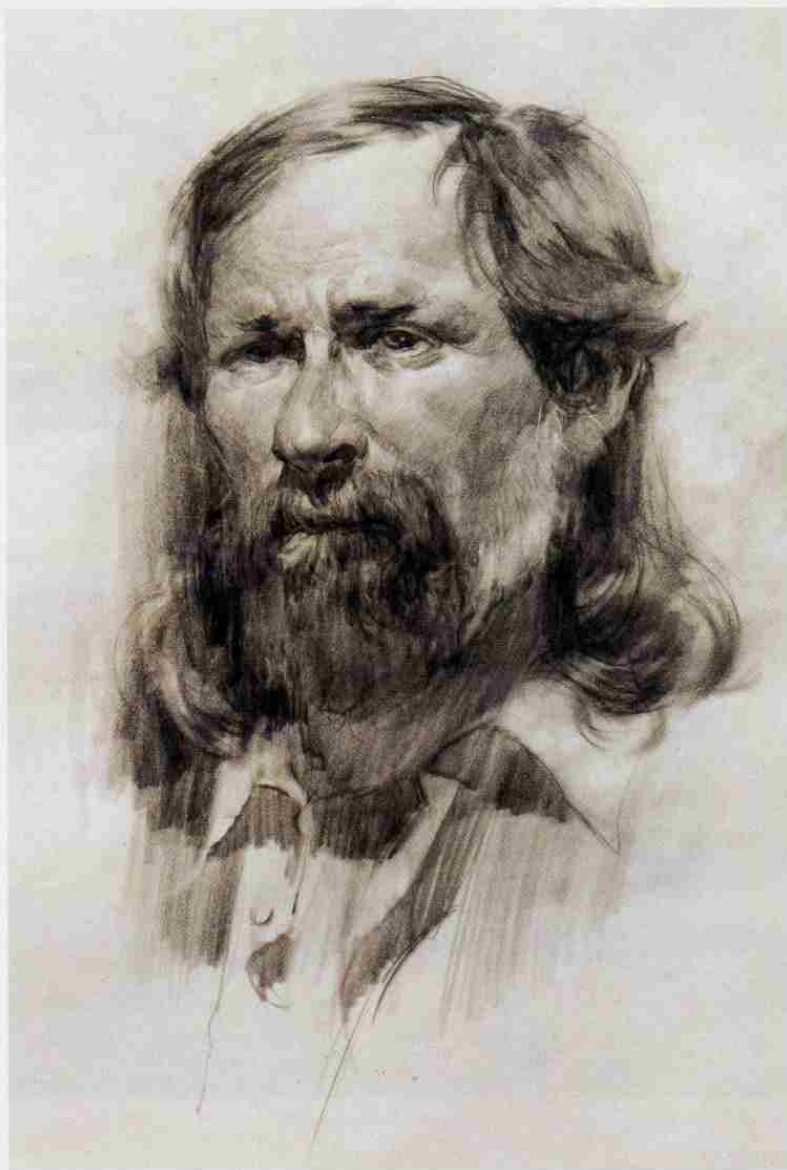
**JEFFREY R. WATTS** does not promise prospective students that they will emerge from his Watts Atelier in four years and immediately get a job. He suggests a different plan for a more assured success: Become part of the Watts Atelier family, grow some foundational skills slowly and thoroughly, stay as long as you possibly can, and emerge with a portfolio that could put you among the more elite candidates for gallery representation, a top illustration job, or a well-paying gig in the entertainment industry. With much bigger art schools promising to educate students in as little as two years, the Watts method could seem extreme to outsiders. It's not. "People spend a ton of money in bigger schools and then come to us to learn the skills they need to succeed," says Watts, the 38-year-old founder of the school. "They say they wish they had found us before. I reply, 'At least you found us.' The fact is you can't go out and compete for a great job after only four years of art training. It takes years to put an eye in place as an artist. Unless you are Michelangelo you aren't going to develop these foundational skills after one semester."

The school began 17 years ago out of Watts' need to work from live models. It evolved from informal drawing group sessions, to workshops, and then into more formal classes. Along the way



**Figure Drawing**  
by Jeffrey R. Watts,  
charcoal, 24 x 18.





**LEFT**  
**Head Drawing**  
 by Erik M. Gist,  
 charcoal, 24 x 18.

**BELOW**  
**Head Quicksketch**  
 by Lucas Graciano,  
 charcoal, 24 x 18.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Figure Drawing**  
 by Ben Young, charcoal,  
 24 x 18.



A full five years into study at the Watts Atelier, a solid foundation is firmly in place. The students then learn more advanced concepts such as composition, conceptual thinking, and imagining scenes. They begin to tailor their courses to focus on a particular interest, creating a specialized program that Watts likens to a graduate-degree program—quickly adding that foundational classes stay in the mix for the maintenance of key skills. Any class is likely to have relative beginners, advanced students, and even full teachers working side by side, nurturing their skills. “If you have multiple skill

levels represented in a class, it buffers everybody and keeps them in check,” asserts Watts. “Too many advanced students and it gets competitive. Having a blend makes it fun and healthy.”

Watts is proud that all of the teachers at the atelier make their living in the visual arts and teach on the side. “They are working professionals, and therefore they teach from a different perspective,” says Watts. “Our teachers are not career teachers; they simply have respect for the atelier’s method and want to keep it alive. They teach because they want to. And in turn this shows students that it’s possible to

make a good living in the arts. It will be hard, like any kind of living, but it will be a passionate way to live.”

The Watts Atelier definitely pays attention to the practical matter of making a living, and the word “illustration” is not a profanity in its halls. Watts even goes so far as to proclaim that Norman Rockwell was “as good a painter as Velázquez or Sargent.” Frank Reilly, James Bama, and George B. Bridgman are Watts’ guiding lights—he confirms that the school’s method is based on their teachings with some modifications. The artists of illustration’s golden era were skilled draftsmen who knew

RIGHT

**Female Figure Drawing**

by Jeffrey R. Watts,  
graphite, 24 x 18.

BELOW

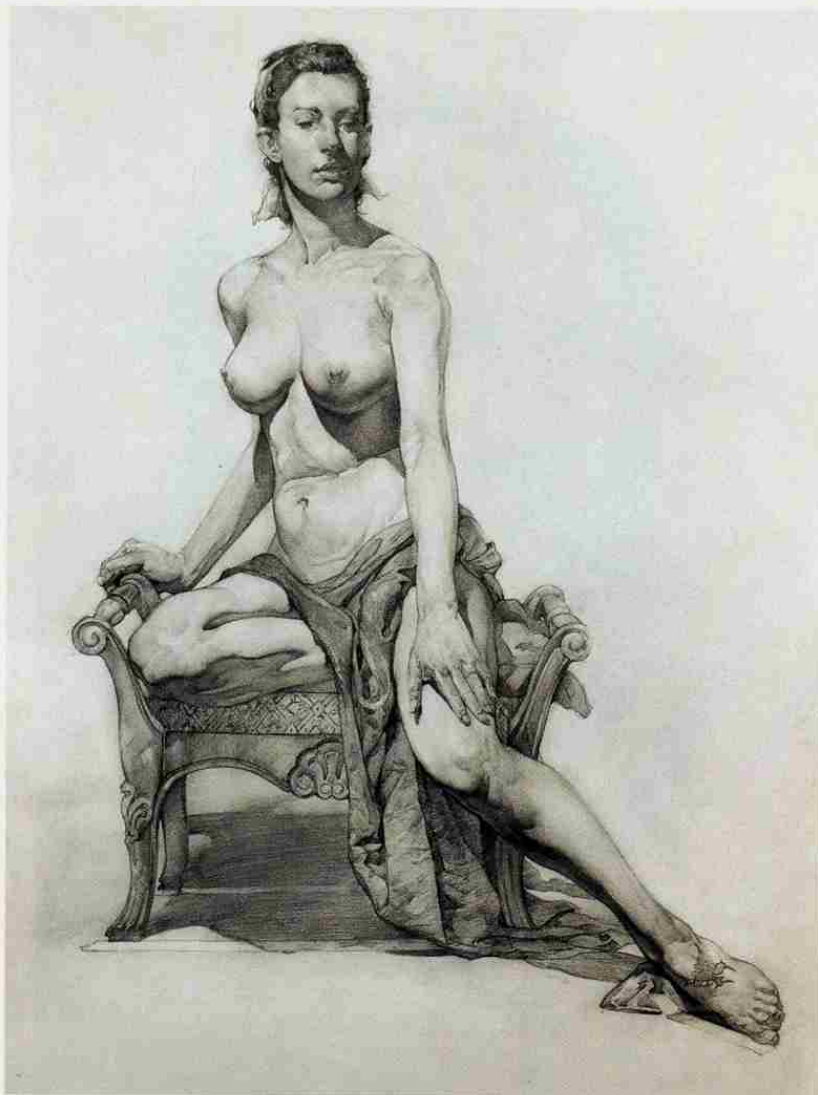
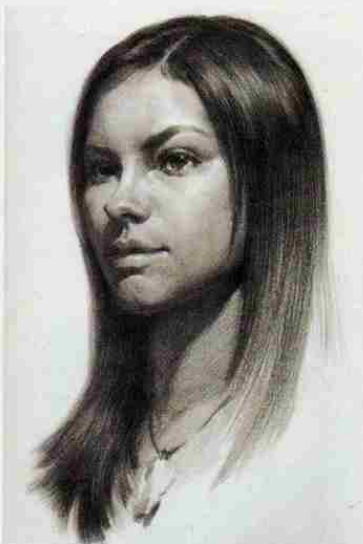
**Head Drawing**

by Lucas Graciano,  
graphite, 14 x 11.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Male Figure Drawing**

by Jeffrey R. Watts,  
charcoal, 24 x 18.

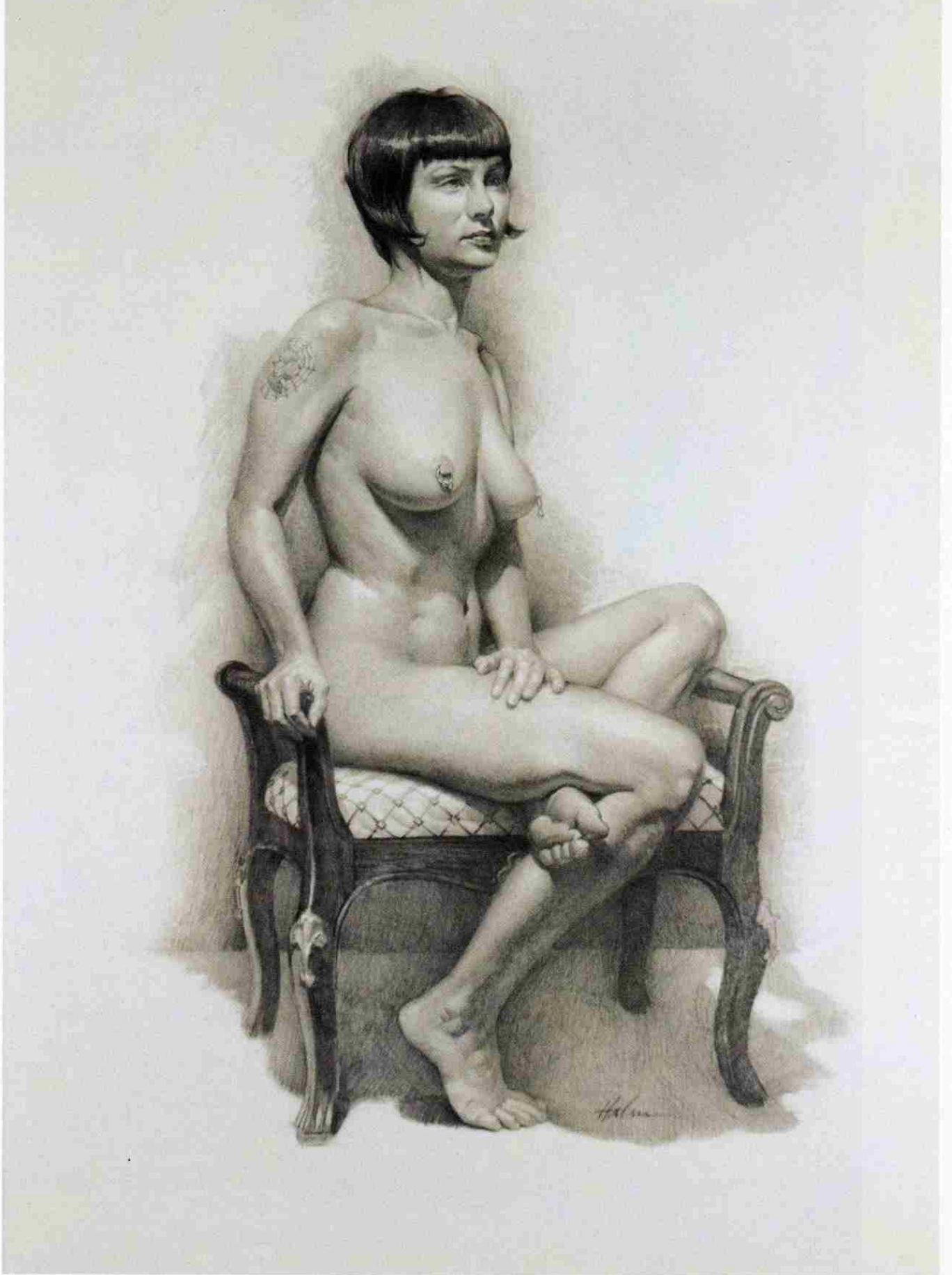


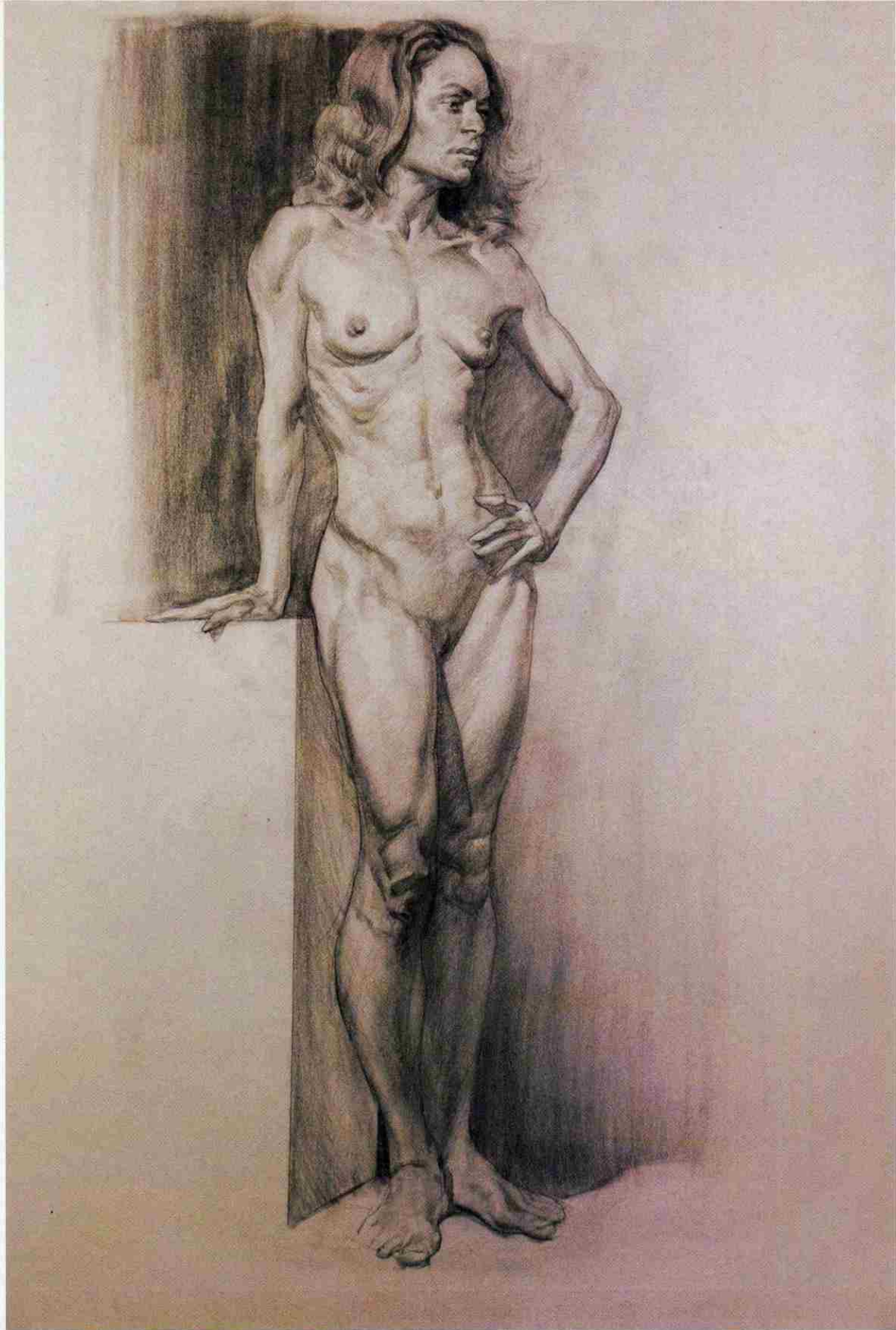
Watts discovered he was a natural teacher, and today some of his students have never left him, instead advancing to become monitors, associate teachers, and full teachers in his homegrown atelier. "The continuity of the school is strong because the training is cohesive," he explains. "Our staff came up through the school. The teachers are culled from the students—it's sort of a family environment, with everyone embracing a method they learned at the school, a method they now teach at the school and also hopefully use in the creation of their own art. We have a few people who have been around almost since the beginning. It's difficult to keep a group of artists together, but we've done it by

starting as young kids and growing up together in mutual respect."

The Watts method is built on drawing. The first two years focus on foundational classes in drawing, including working from casts and the study of fundamental anatomy in general. Next comes very thorough figure- and head-drawing classes. Watts says even the most advanced students and some teachers repeatedly take these courses to keep their skills up. "It's just like how Tiger Woods keeps going back to the driving range to work on his fundamentals," he comments. "We aim to hook people, get them excited about doing repetitive training." After this comprehensive grounding in essential

drawing skills, the proportion of drawing classes to painting classes begins to slowly shift, from a 70/30 split between drawing and painting at the start to a 50/50 split in the later years of study. The preferred painting medium at the beginning of painting study is gouache because it is forgiving and can be reactivated by water. Students work on "tiling painting"—building pieces out of little tiles of color notes. With these tiles, they learn to turn the form, using shape and design to do so. "It's not just copying the subject, but interpreting it in small notes of color using temperature and value, softening the edges later in the painting process," says Watts.





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**RIGHT**  
**Head Drawing**  
by Jim Hahn, graphite,  
24 x 18.



**FAR RIGHT**  
**Head Drawing**  
by Stan Prokopenko,  
graphite, 7 x 5.



**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Figure Drawing**  
by Jim Hahn, 24 x 18.

their tools and their craft very well. Watts values this at his atelier as well. Proportional drawing is stressed; inking of work is mandatory in one class. Repetition and many aspects of the academic approach are emphasized. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, this is the kind of background that ably prepares students for work in very modern jobs in animation, the film industry, and even portraiture. “Having people sit for you for three weeks is unheard of unless you are Nelson Shanks,” Watts points out. “To be a portraitist today you need to learn repetition, memorization—that’s

the reality of being an artist in the 21st century. And the entertainment industry is like the church of the past in terms of patronage. A lot of young artists will likely work in the entertainment industry for a few years on their way to achieving the level where one can do one’s own fine art.” The Watts Atelier works with advanced students to help them develop the kind of portfolio that could get them a job in character design at Disney or video-game design at Rockstar Games—or a show at John Pence Gallery. “If you are trained as an artist of the highest caliber, you can do

anything you want with it,” says Watts.

In order for the Watts Atelier to offer this kind of intense instruction and career guidance, it must remain relatively small, and that is the plan. The school has a 1-to-10 teacher-student ratio, and Watts is trying to hold the enrollment steady at about 175 people. If you call the atelier’s telephone number, there’s a good chance that Watts will answer, and his wife is his partner in running the school. “It’s not a multimillion-dollar facility,” admits Watts. “But look at the skills people have when they come out of here.” ❖