BY JERRY N. WEISS

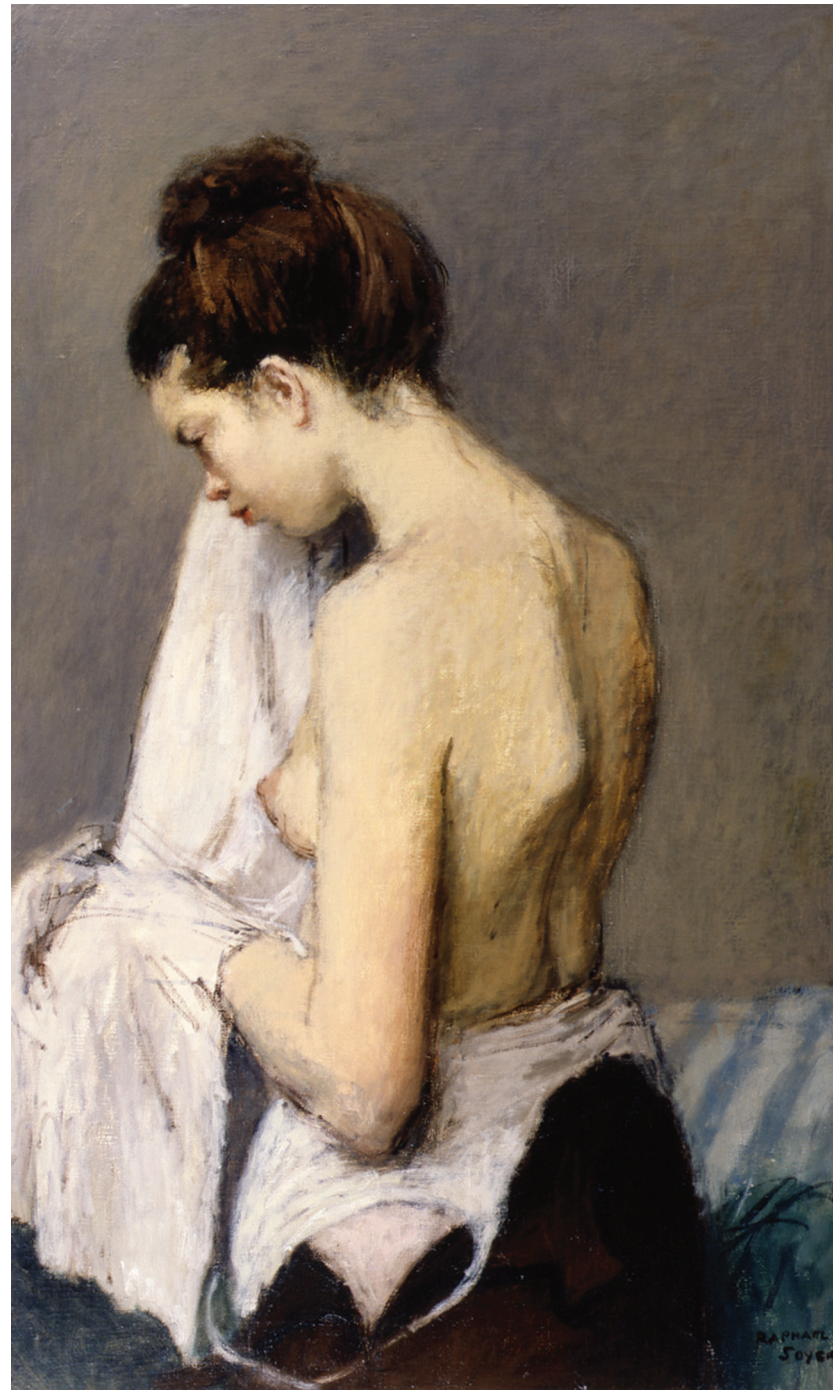
"I Paint the Way I Like to"

Raphael Soyer's art was the subtle expression of an unwavering vision.

WHEN THE ENMITY BETWEEN followers of abstract expressionism and representational art was strongest, Raphael Soyer was a philosophical point man for realism. "Soyer," Jackson Pollock once asked him, "why do you paint like you do? There are planes flying, and you still paint realistically. You don't belong to our time."

For its emblematic presentation of opposing camps, the incident still makes for thoughtful reading, though the cascade of subsequent developments renders it quaint. An artist whose first major works chronicled the effects of the Great Depression, Soyer is often categorized as a social realist. My guess is that despite the renewed interest in representational art, he probably wouldn't think much of the current marketplace. Rather than concern himself with packaging and promotion, he painted what he knew, the life around him.

As resolute as he was in vision, Soyer was equally discreet in execution. His work doesn't call attention to itself. I've taught figure painting classes where none of the students had heard of him. A few years ago I attended a small retrospective of his work, expecting the melancholic tenor of his interiors to have worn thin with time. To the contrary, they retained their subtle power and confirmed that by midcentury he was perhaps the finest figure painter in this country. More specifically, while painting models, artists and actors—the city's Bohemian infrastructure—Soyer left an invaluable record of the era's zeitgeist. Moreover, he was a receptive enough chronicler to follow urban culture for five decades without losing his relevance, because



Montclair Art Museum: Museum purchase; Blanche R. Pleasants Fund © Estate of Raphael Soyer, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

ABOVE: ***After the Bath*** (1946; oil on canvas, 36¼x22) by Raphael Soyer

he wasn't straining to be relevant.

After the Bath was painted when Soyer was shifting from overtly "social" subjects to those of the studio milieu. That the painting is reminiscent of Degas is no accident; Soyer had well absorbed the lessons of the museum. The over-the-shoulder vantage point and the woman's slender frame echo Degas's dancers, yet the image is so true to a specific place and time that one can't imagine its having been painted anywhere but in a 1940s New York City studio. Soyer's voyeurism was not as trenchant as Degas's, nor could Soyer be accused of misogyny, as Degas often is; his personality was more akin to that of Corot's.

After the Bath is an essay in intimacy, though one need not buy the premise that this is a woman at her bath. The picture and the pose are an excuse to paint the nude. The tones are the familiar muted colors of natural light (when I visited Soyer in the 1980s, the windows were covered with opaque plastic). The brushwork betrays a controlled nervous energy, with lights scumbled over darks and shadow accents laid over lights.

There is beautiful drawing in the woman's contours, at her hairline and in the tension between the back of her shoulder and her breast—the rightness of that angle alone makes the painting. The canvas is a typical example of Soyer's mastery of fine color harmonies. In the model's glowing skin tones, as well as the nondescript plane behind her, are numerous delicate transitions from warm to cool. These modulations are so understated as to be easily missed, and they work because the values and color intensity are consistent—if an artist alters color temperature and intensity simultaneously the impression of atmospheric coherency dissolves. Soyer made this sort of fine control look effortless.

Soyer formed a political alliance with his realistic colleagues in the 1950s in a battle that, like most in the art world, seemed to be pitched against a fear of annihilation. Much of that anecdotal history now falls by the wayside, and what remains is the modest genius of an artist who worked with great personal integrity. Years later he recalled his response to Pollock: "I merely said that I paint the way I like to." In the end that's all that matters. n

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