

recombinant perfections

The current works of Joseph Gerges can be seen as engaging two major themes: icons of individuals and narratives of interaction within the social sphere. Both suites of drawings depict the individual and the group in settings that are intentionally without specificity or reference. This open, even abstract, space creates a timelessness that is at once forever and precisely *now*. For the artist, his subjects are known-*must* be known-in order to allow him and us a way to enter (or at least entertain) their subjectivity. We come to know these individuals and their configurations within a pairing or a group through Joseph's long-time knowing, through his deep familiarity with the faces, poses and relationships established by the bodies of his subjects.

As viewers, we are skilled at reading other humans, and the artist relies on our knowledge to discern the subtleties of character and the unique beauty of his models. Joseph's iconic portraits offer us a chance to experience the intimacy of the individual at a moment in time, as well as a chance to extrapolate eternity-the ultimate aesthetic achievement of great draughtsmanship. In *Isabella*, both the full body drawing and the waist up "afterstudy" (the artist's term), we see the figure in a moment that is both protective and possessive, modest and assertive. We witness an almost Surreal fusion of hands and breasts, and the roundness of hands as breasts. In *Sisters*, we return to that primary condition of childhood: simultaneous boredom and fascination with just doing *nothing*. In this exquisite work, we remember the casual silence between siblings who have no need to keep talking when there is nothing to say. Why do we forget this as adults-the stillness between us?

The narrative works, such as *The Conversation* and *A Penny For Your Thoughts*, depict interactions of individuals in "uncomfortable" spaces (the artist's term). These compositions are created in multiple levels of space and time, in that the artist's process involves the use of photographs which are digitally remastered for reference. These carefully constructed tableaux push us to wonder where do we belong within these spaces: inside the story or outside of it? This is one of the most enduring questions the figurative artist can ask. Joseph Gerges's narrative scenes recall Caravaggio's dark huddles or John Nava's paintings of the LA riots, or even Odd Nerdrum's weird historical epics-stagings that leave us in a similar position, questioning our complicity-or lack of thereof.

Perhaps we replicate the position of the artist himself, who stands apart from the work, while present within it. Find that one figure in each drawing who looks directly back and you will find the artist-the one who sees being seen. In *A Penny For Your Thoughts*, we want to know what's happening inside the circle, but our vision is blocked. However, one figure watches us; it's *his* access to the action that allows us to share the secret of what's in the center. The circle of bodies tells the rest of this ancient story. The break in the frame is itself fascinating, serving as both barrier and resting point. The artist has made these breaks with deliberation-his nontraditional use of the frame is more than a *conchetto*, as the Italians say: an ingenious idea. Rather, it interrupts the intensity of the moment, providing visual passage from one segment to the next-a diptych that uses *space* as the hinge.

Under the hand of Joseph Gerges, charcoal as medium achieves an annihilation of form and the simultaneous fullness of it. It is appropriate that these drawings come to be in part through erasures that are themselves marks, given that the artist's "signature" is to transport us to realms of abstraction *through* realism.