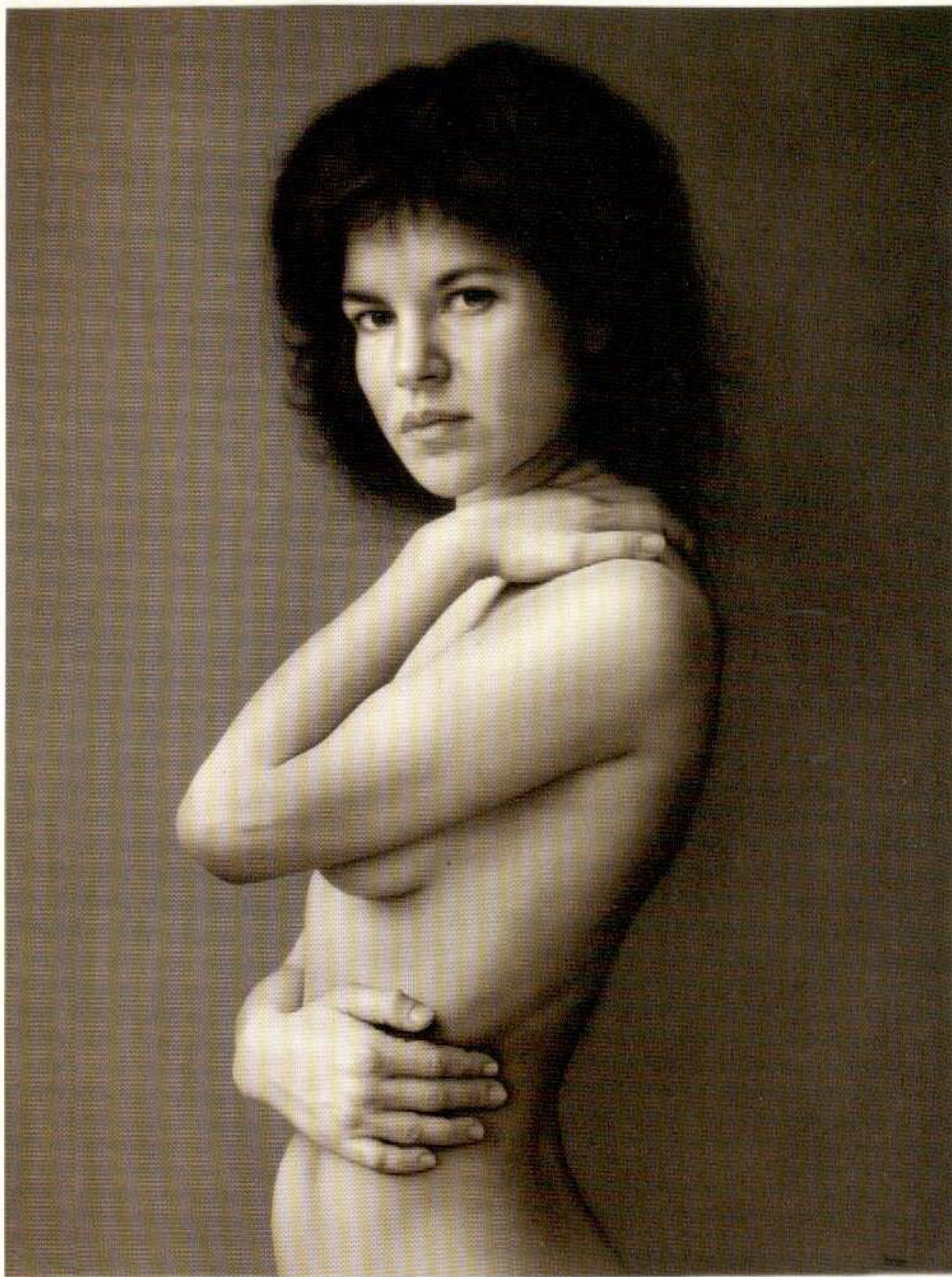


American Arts

Q U A R T E R L Y

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International Arts and Crafts

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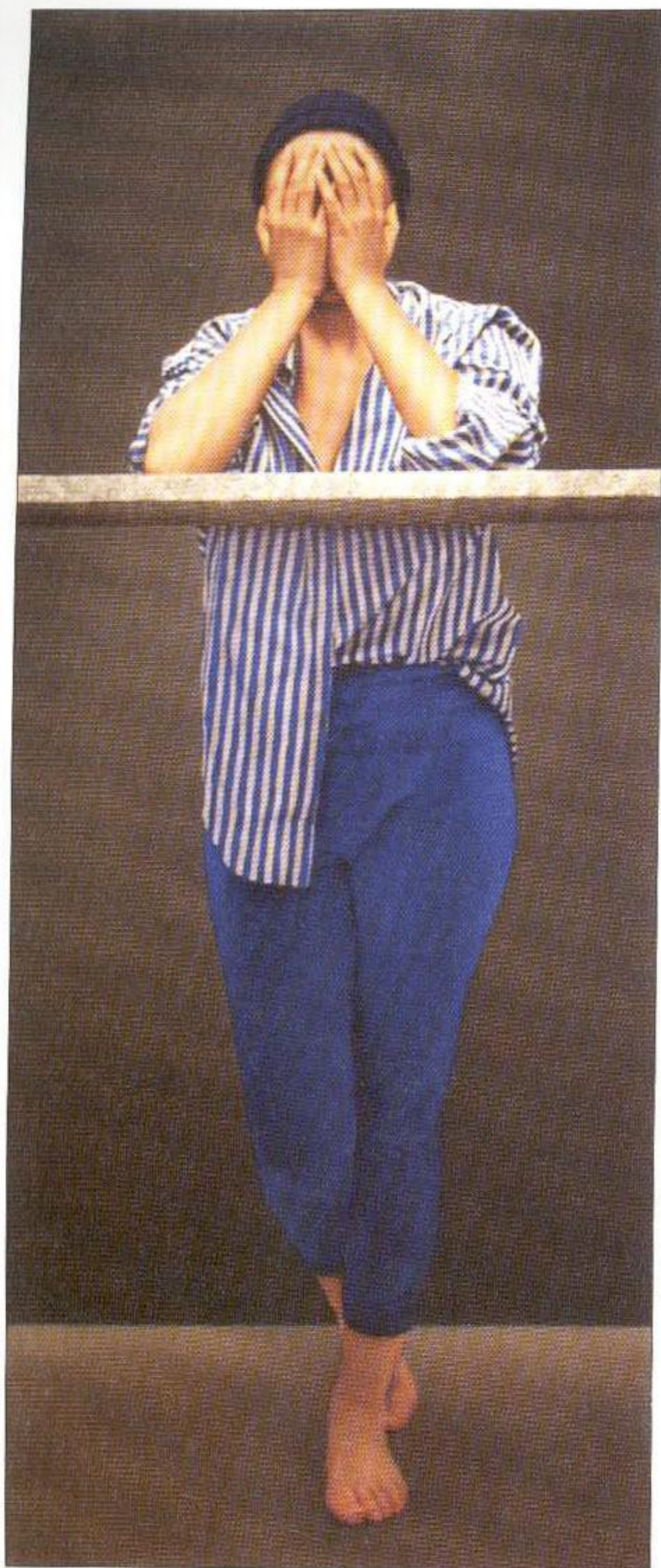
Disaster and the Arts

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Writing with the Full Palette

Bernardo Torrens

Contemporary Spanish painters are doing some of the most interesting work of the current realist revival. In October Bernarducci Meisel Gallery in New York City showcased recent paintings by Bernardo Torrens (b. 1957), a native of Madrid who taught himself to draw and paint while studying medicine. His mastery of anatomy and humane engagement with his sitters are everywhere evident in these accomplished acrylic-on-wood works. Torrens's favorite subject is the female nude, a genre he pushes out of the realm of the academic figure study in the direction of portraiture. These women are beautiful, both



Bernardo Torrens, *Blues Time*, 2004

COURTESY BERNARDUCCI MEISEL GALLERY,
NEW YORK CITY

as individuals and as formal compositions, but they are not overly idealized or airbrushed. The artist meticulously records freckles and signs of strain; he seems attuned to the moods and idiosyncrasies of his models. His skill at depicting the luminosity of skin and articulating the architecture of muscle and bone brings to mind such diverse old masters as Pierre Paul Prud'hon and Torrens's countryman Velázquez. Because he favors subtle explorations of monochrome, his work figures into the ongoing dialogue—now well over a century old—between painting and photography. Unlike medieval grisaille painting, frequently used for trompe l'oeil sculptural groups, Torrens's monochromatic works convincingly capture the play of light on human flesh, along a continuum of grays from cool to warm.

Torrens's studies have the specificity of portraits. *Monique I* (2003) is a deceptively simple bust-length study of a young woman, body turned to the picture plane, head in profile. Strong light from the left catches the gleam in

her eye, while her ponytail falls into shadow to make a striking silhouette shape. The sepia and platinum tones of the figure look vibrant against the cool gray of the background. The same model appears in *Monique III* (2003), in reverse, so to speak, her back to us and facing left, her hair pushed up under a raffish cap. A similar cap is used to striking effect in *La Gorra de Deyanira* (2004), its backwards off-center tilt balancing the choreography of dynamically crossed arms. Another model characteristically embodies a kind of interior drama. She seems tired and restless in *Lourdes VIII* (2003), introspective in *Lourdes XII* (2005) and tranced out, with a balletically yearning arm, in *Lourdes V* (2003). *Cubiculum V* (2003) has an allegorical cast, as the same protagonist sits cross-legged in a blank box, pushing against the confines of its walls.

Torrens is, despite his agility with tonality, interested in color. In the Ingres-like image of a seated woman's back, *Alli te Espero* (2003), warm skin tones gleam against a deep blue-violet background. Typically, the artist's backgrounds are an indeterminate space of color or tone. A shift in background from charcoal to lighter gray sometimes delineates wall from floor. This is his strategy in *Blues Time* (2004), where a barefoot figure in cobalt pants and striped shirt stands, face buried in hands, and *Subalterno* (2002), a portrait of an aging bullfighter startlingly enlivened by his costume of pink, crimson and purple. An unusual multi-figure composition, again in the artist's monochromatic palette, is *Paternity con Spiderman* (2003). The neutral background is still there, but it surrounds a comfortable striped sofa, occupied by a dozing father and his relaxed yet alert child. A jointed humanoid toy perches on the back of the sofa, and the scale of the juxtaposition adds a surreal touch to this domestic, intimate scene. In this abstracted, fictive painter's space, a real-world relationship of tenderness and charm has materialized. Bernarducci Meisel Gallery, 37 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019. Telephone (212)593-3757. On the Web at www.bernarduccimeisel.com