

Michelangelo said that he didn't so much sculpt as release the forms that already existed in the potentiality of the stone. Although it might be hard to see what he meant by looking at his completed work, anyone who has seen his half-completed statues of slaves would know exactly what he was talking about. Each figure seems engaged in a life-and-death struggle to break free of the marble that confines him; the energy is palpable.

San Francisco artist and teacher Michael Markowitz's approach to drawing is similar—so much so that

ing another human being, particularly another human being naked, creates a much more intense experience than looking at an object."

The artist usually works quickly, with his drawings taking less than 10 minutes to finish. Exceptions include portraits, which might take an hour, and hand studies, which can take as long as 20 minutes. The short time frame usually corresponds to how long the model is holding the pose. "It's rare that I go on beyond that," he says. "Though occasionally, a drawing will interest me for other possibilities, and I'll extend the pose and take it in another direction entirely."

rience of drawing combine with your unique capabilities and experiences. When the end defines the means, you're not in the creative process."

The experience of being in the creative process is so central to the way Markowitz works that several years ago, he handpicked nine people who had drawn in his studio to participate with him in a show called "Not For Sale," at San Francisco's SoMar Gallery. "We wanted to show the work that artists hold back and don't want to part with, and to make the point that selling art is a by-product of the process, not the point," he explains.

Getting students to focus on the present, moment to moment, rather than on technique doesn't mean that Markowitz's approach to teaching encourages self-indulgence. "In fact it's about getting past the inclination

Surrendering Control

BY ELIZABETH FORST

he frequently quotes Michelangelo's statement to his students.

"Michelangelo actually said that he was guided by the hand of God," Markowitz explains. "Although I wouldn't put it exactly that way, I would say that by not trying to control the situation directly, you are directed by forces outside yourself—the model, the room, your personal history, and so on. It's about letting the drawing happen rather than making it happen; learning to get out of the way, and trusting that in doing so, something meaningful will happen. It's a very different process from technique-oriented image-making."

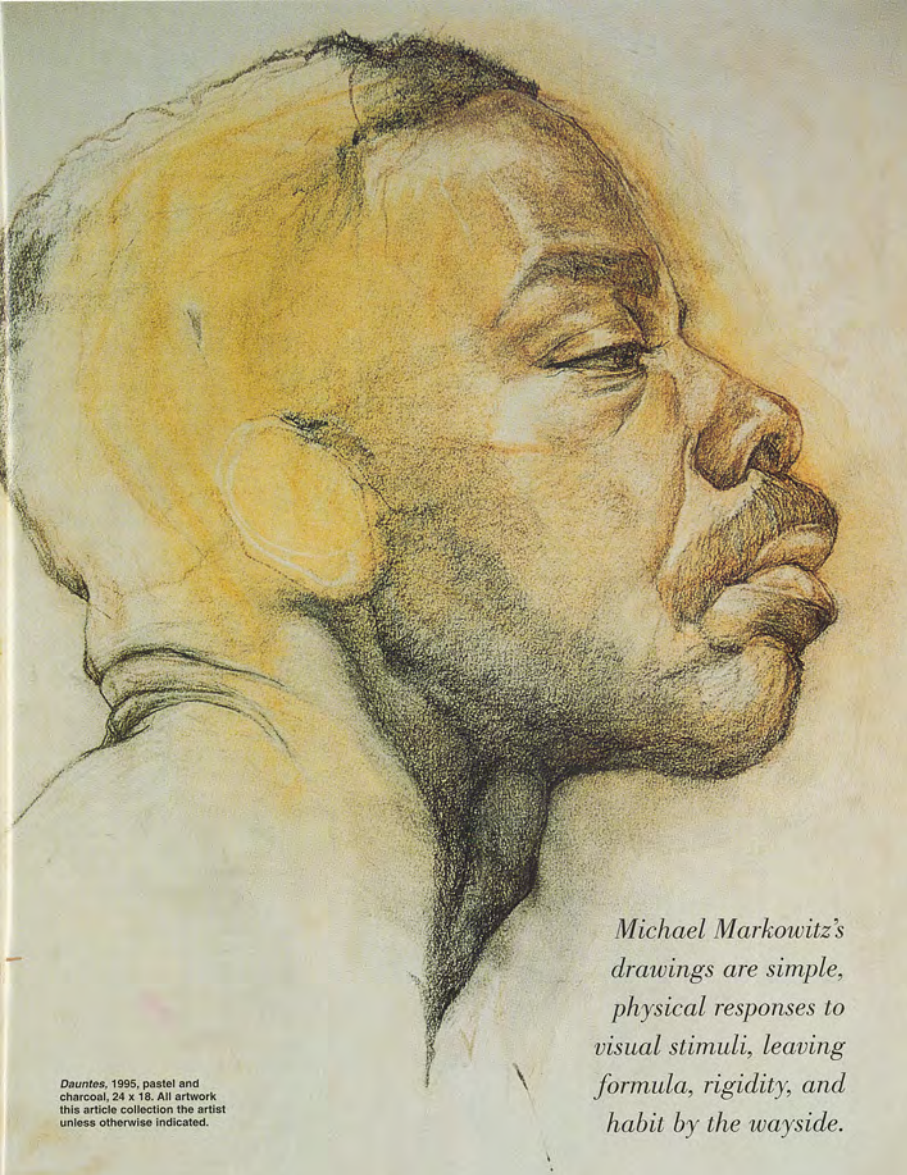
Although Markowitz paints, sculpts, and makes monotypes, he spends most of his time drawing with charcoals, pastels, and powdered pigment. Drawing—particularly from life—has always been his first love. "I love drawing because it is very direct and immediate," he says. "There's almost nothing between you and the act. With everything else, you're using a tool that requires a method or technique. Life drawing is particularly compelling because looking at and draw-

All of Markowitz's choices—which paper to use, which medium, how to put the first mark on paper—are based on his intuitive response to the moment, not on a conscious analysis. For his few demonstrations in the classroom, he says that he has "more drawing material stretched out in front of me than anyone in the room," referring to the students in the classes he teaches several times a week at his spacious studio in San Francisco's Noe Valley. This choiceless choosing is the essence of his teaching as well.

"I don't teach anatomy or composition or foreshortening," he explains. "I explore drawing as a creative process. I think it's important to learn how to react when you're drawing in a way that's connected and responsive to what you're seeing, to remain open and let the expe-

to do what you want to do and instead doing what you are compelled to do," explains the artist. "These are often in conflict with each other. What you want to do usually results from a fixed sense of self and a corresponding sense of limitation, which is usually untrue. This is often constrained by an indulgence of the familiar, the expected, and what you are comfortable with. It rarely risks failure and, consequently, doesn't invite meaningful growth and change. There is something beyond what you want to do that I believe is the source of creative activity. It's about reacting out of a state of deep connection, in a way that is free of inhibition, intention, preconception, or pattern."

Learning how to allow this state of intense connection to take place, and learning how to respond to it in



Dauntee, 1995, pastel and charcoal, 24 x 18. All artwork this article collection the artist unless otherwise indicated.

Michael Markowitz's drawings are simple, physical responses to visual stimuli, leaving formula, rigidity, and habit by the wayside.



a way that is open-ended, is the core of Markowitz's instruction. "In the 10 years I've been teaching I've probably developed 200 or so exercises to help students get to that point," he says. "Artists throughout time have talked about that 'magical' state of the creative experience, where time seems to stop, where there is a heightened sense of presence and aliveness, where what happens seems inevitable and effortless and totally joyful. My class uses drawing to explore that state and how to allow it to happen."

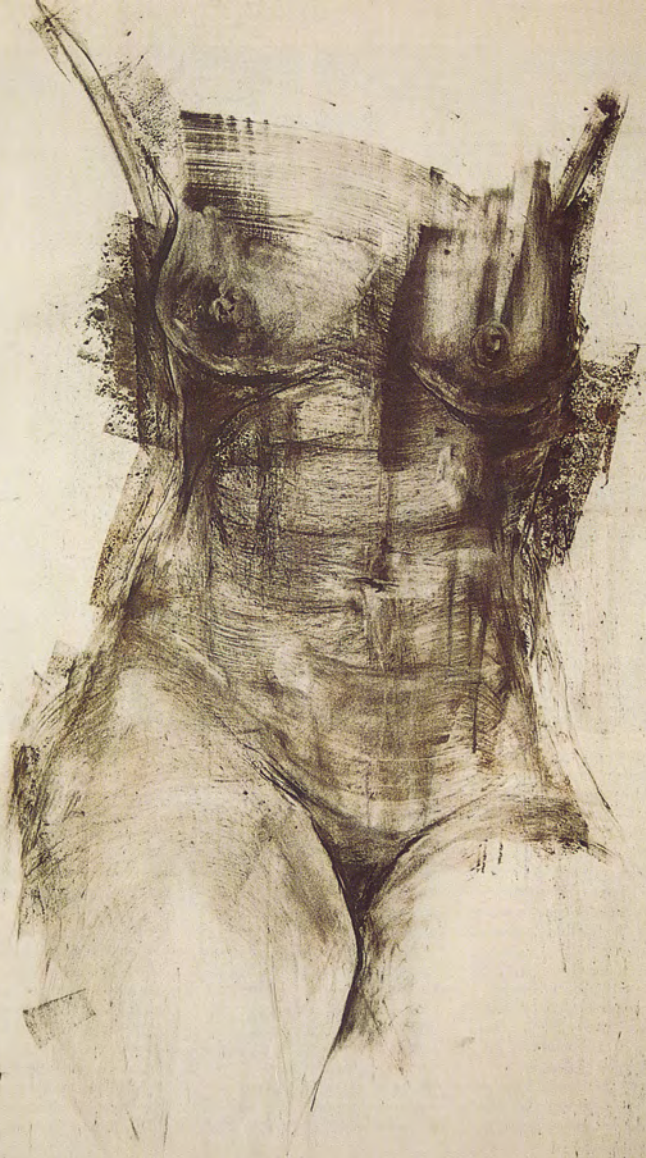
Markowitz's studio space, friendly and informal, is about 560 square feet, with an adjoining dressing room for the models. To make students feel more at home, he serves tea, lemonade, and homemade pastries every day from his large kitchen. But the classes, he says, are intense and, from the student's perspective, quite structured. He offers three levels of study: beginning, intermediate, and advanced—22 classes each. "It's essentially a 66-week course," he says. "Some people don't make it all the way through, and most people take the beginning classes four or five times."

Beginning students focus primarily on gesture. For the first eight weeks of classes, they don't draw a single pose more than two minutes long. "It's about learning how to wake up your body's ability to experience sight on an experiential level, and letting it resonate on that level," explains Markowitz. "I want them to open up to the creative impulse that we're all born with—but gets suffocated by growing up and learning to come from the head rather than from the heart or the gut."

Markowitz has been earning a living from his drawing and teaching for the past 10 years, and his approach to these two elements of his life stem from his own journey through it. Born in New York City, he studied literature at the University of California at Santa Barbara, then moved to San Francisco in 1982, ostensibly to be a writer, but

Untitled, 1995,
charcoal and
pigment, 36 x 26.

Untitled, 1996,
charcoal and
pigment, 36 x 26.





instead, earned a living for many years as a cabdriver. One day on the job, he had an epiphany of sorts. "I was telling a woman passenger about my dreams of being a writer," he recalls, "when a voice in my head said, 'Michael, you may not mean to, but you're lying to this woman. You'll go home today and do what you always do—anything you can do to avoid writing.'"

He was completely startled because, he exclaims, "I literally heard this voice—it wasn't a thought, and I couldn't ignore it." Nor could he discount it. "I realized I would write 20 opening paragraphs and then get stuck, because all I was trying to do was impress people—which is not a good place to come from as a

writer," Markowitz concludes.

But if he wasn't going to write, what would he do? His brother pointed out that the one thing that had always made Markowitz happy was drawing. Then an architect friend nudged him along further by suggesting he try his hand at architectural rendering, as there was plenty of work available.

Markowitz signed up for a year-long course at San Francisco City College, but before he completed the course, work in the field had dried up. Fate stepped in again, this time in the form of an art teacher who had befriended him. "He was in charge of the gallery schedule at school, and someone had canceled at the last minute," Markowitz recalls.

"He offered me a show, provided I could put it together quickly." In just three weeks, Markowitz, with a help of a friend, framed 56 of his works in time for the opening, which proved to be a huge success. "About 90 people showed up, I sold a ton of work, and I started to be recognized," says the artist.

It took another confluence of events to steer Markowitz into his other love: teaching. First, he injured his neck and back, which meant he could no longer make money from driving a cab. Next, he stumbled across what is still today his studio/gallery/home—a vacant storefront on a side street. He liked the place, but didn't think he could afford it, until the same teacher who

Foot Study, 1994,
charcoal and
pastel, 36 x 26.

Opposite page, left:
Hand, 1995, charcoal
and pigment, 24 x 18.

Opposite page, right:
Oteano, 1996, charcoal,
pastel, and pigment, 24 x 18.



by Kenneth



Untitled, 1999,
charcoal, pastel, and
pigment, 36 x 26.

prompted his first show offered to sublet the studio space for classes he planned to teach. Markowitz signed the lease, but the teacher's plans changed. Two days later, the budding artist decided to take over the classes himself.

However, Markowitz had never taught before—in fact, he had taken very few art classes himself. “Whenever I thought of taking a class, I’d immediately decide that if I couldn’t draw by now, no one was ever going to teach me—which is obnoxious in a way, but central to how I developed as an artist,” he says. “I’m pretty much self-taught.” So when he held his first class, he talked mostly about materials—but his instruction soon broadened and his exercises continued to evolve from that simple beginning. Today, in addition to teaching and creating drawings, interestingly enough, he has begun to write again: He is working on a book about his teaching methods.

Markowitz believes that as children, we are all naturally creative, but the world inhibits that creativity as we get older. “In adulthood, we get fixed on a single sense of self,” he says. “We get locked into it. I don’t think life has to be lived like that.”

The artist also believes that in surrendering control—whether in art or in life—we open up to our real potential. “Everything that is meaningful in my life has not been something that I desired, pursued, and got,” he avers. “These came upon me and became available to me. The creative process is ongoing, opening up to the moment so it has the power to transform you. The whole value of doing art is to learn to engage in that process.”

For more information on the artist or his classes, call: (415) 824-3408; E-mail: mcm@dnai.com; or visit his Web site: www.dnai.com/~mcm. ■

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Untitled, 1999, charcoal, pastel, and pigment, 36 x 26. Private collection.

