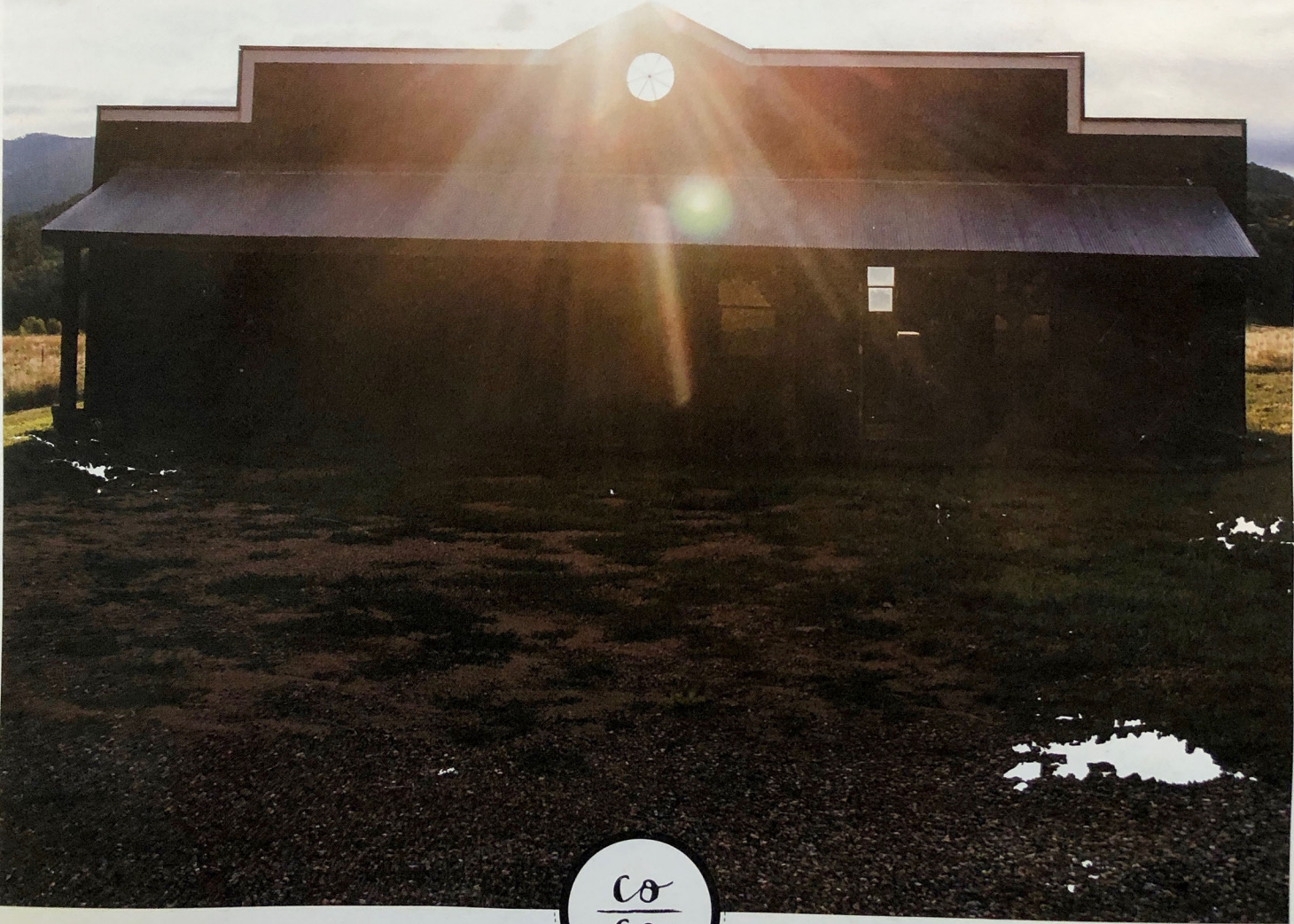


COLORADO COLLECTIVE

VOLUME THREE





Deliberate with Medium. Effective with Form

ARTIST RAPHAEL SASSI

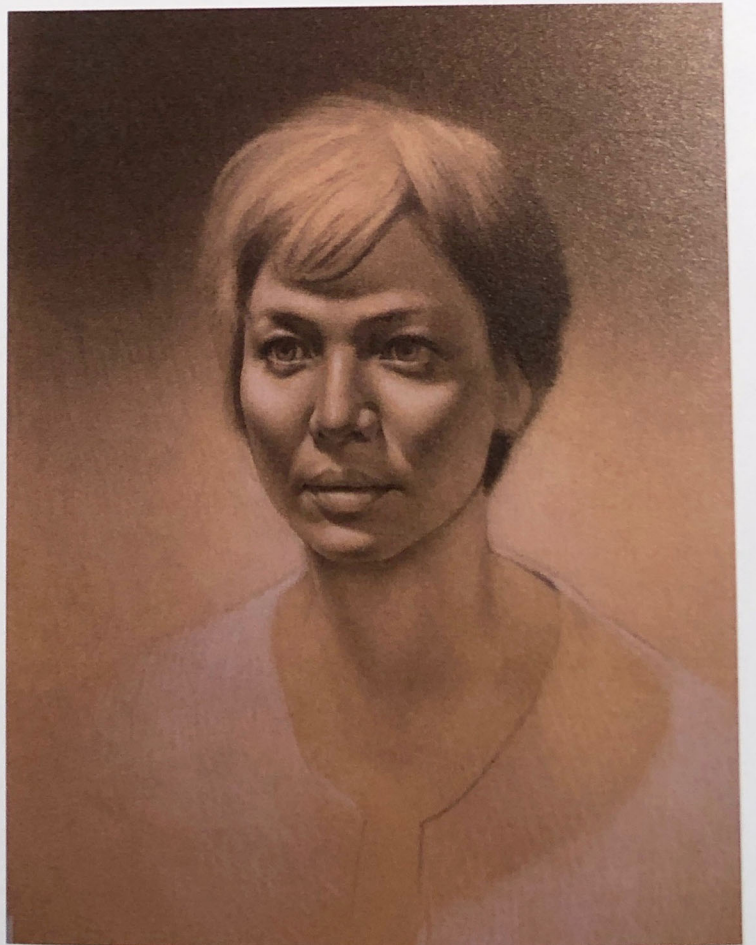
Words by: Susan Fletcher | Photos by: Devin Richter

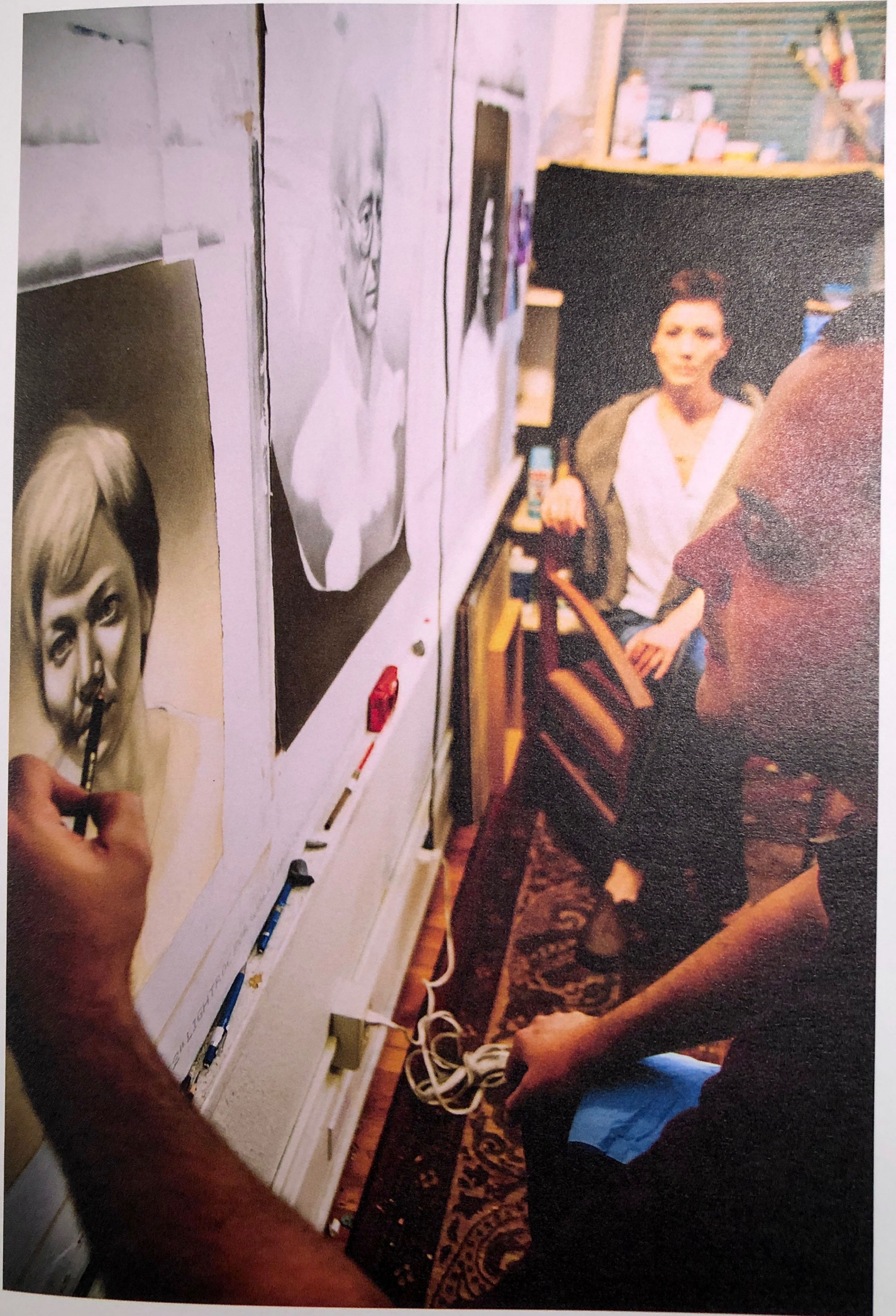
As a child, Raphael Sassi discovered drawing in Maryland and was immediately hooked. “Being an artist was the best thing that I could do,” he recalled. “I knew I loved making pictures.” After declaring this intention to his art teacher father, his father encouraged Raphael to build a strong portfolio featuring his varied interests of drawing, sculpture, and painting.

Raphael’s hard work paid off. He received a grant from the Maryland Artists Equity Scholar Award to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art. During his time at MICA, he focused on the observation of the figure. After graduation, he spent time working in New York and Puerto Rico before attending the New York Academy of Art for his Masters in Fine Arts, when he then earned a postgraduate residency. His final exhibition for the residency, entitled “The Girlfriends,” featured thirty-six portraits of friends and models that he recruited to the project through then-brand-new social media avenues.

Raphael taught art at colleges and universities until the economic crash of 2008 eliminated many adjunct and instructor positions all over the country. A friend in Denver invited Sassi to visit, which gave him that irresistible “taste of Colorado.” In the fall of 2012, he completed a sabbatical replacement teaching position in Maryland and then decided to join his brother and sister-in-law who had just moved to Colorado Springs.

Currently working in Colorado Springs in a downtown studio near Palmer High School, Raphael specializes in fine portrait drawing and painting and has exhibited his work all over the country. He invited Colorado Collective to visit his studio as he worked on a portrait study of his friend Sabrena Soong, the owner of STIR Coffee Shop. While he worked, he was able to engage in a fascinating dialogue about the art of drawing.







How did you choose to make drawing your primary focus?

There's something about drawing that separates it from other disciplines in its directness and honesty. The act of drawing and sculpture is the direct, immediate exhibition of the intellect and their capacities for observation and abstract thought. That's always turned me on intellectually—the challenge of drawing itself. I find it's common that people can hide their drawing skills or lack of drawing skills in their painting because painting is about a whole other thing. Painting can become about another set of formal issues: your color decisions, how you use the paint, and what period of history you're in conversation with. Drawing can get neglected. I just never wanted to neglect drawing.

You do paint, too. Do you approach those two things differently or the same?

Very much the same. I'm concerned with the rendering of form as a necessary vehicle of concept. My approach to painting is the same way. I try to remain faithful to what was intended in the engineering of oil paint itself, which I believe should be applied over time to achieve transparency, to attain the representation and physics of light, and the nature of form and flesh. These physical truths of matter, mass, light, air, atmosphere, and human flesh—that's why we have oil paint. I employ it very deliberately with respect to its original design principles.

Can you tell me about this recent self-portrait? [Pictured on the left]

The thing that inspired that drawing, that ghostly self-portrait, was lying in bed and listening to a plane flying overhead. There's something about the Doppler effect that inspires a sense of nostalgia. That's where the color scheme came from, that's where the passage from left to right in a linear sense came from. I was wondering what happens to people, ideas, and culture over the passage of time.

How did you choose to use ballpoint pen in your self-portrait?

The same things attract me to both ballpoint and silverpoint in that the mediums are relatively unforgiving compared to graphite or charcoal. They not only require a high degree of skill to use effectively, but the skill itself is used in a deliberate manner. They are very demanding, deliberate, and specific in their application to effectively depict form, which I'm generally concerned with. All of those things are what attract me to drawing. I think if you're going to be an effective communicator of anything—whether it's someone's likeness or something more conceptual—you have to respond to the demands

of the medium and employ it in an educated fashion, not from a place of ignorance. It requires you to work hard and to be very deliberate and hard on yourself; there's no way to extract that drawing as an exhibition of the intellect from the work.

What kinds of ideas are driving you right now?

The nature of memory and nostalgia and the phenomenon of culture. I like the way that the Midwestern Regionalists were dealing with it: very straightforward, matter-of-fact imagery that discusses the inherent conundrum of being in the middle of America. I'm kind of going in that way. That's what that portraiture is about: what happens to ideas and culture over the passage of time. Until I figure that out in a more specific way, I'm going to keep drawing people because the challenge of placing people in their environments immediately comes up.

What guidance do you have for people who are serious about improving as artists, especially in the field of drawing?

The first and most obvious thing is that you have to seek out and put yourself in the vicinity of people you think are great and who are doing what you envision doing someday. That was at the heart of me moving to New York. There's something called the Optimism Bias, which describes the assumption of the required capacity, skills, and intellect to do what you need to do no matter the reality. No matter where you are, maintain a sense of optimism enough so that you can stay on the path. You will occasionally be confronted by a huge gap between your skills and capacities versus people who have achieved more and have been working longer. Take that and use it as motivation rather than as something that shuts you down. Try to nurture that within yourself and react to that in a positive way rather than letting it halt you in your tracks. Convince yourself that it's worthwhile and the journey is long. Do whatever you have to do to keep going and be motivated.

Are you teaching classes in Colorado Springs?

I'm always willing to do private lessons, but my interest in being an adjunct or instructor is waning. I'm not as actively seeking teaching positions as I was when I left graduate school. But I love talking about drawing and I do love teaching drawing and painting, I'm always happy to be available for private lessons. My studio has a pretty good amount of space, so I'm happy to have people come over here and draw with me. ●

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