

# ARCADIA SERIES

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JOHN COTTER

**Nature begs attention.** Turn away from its current and strand yourself. Take the Philadelphia Academy: as late as 1880 and they're still teaching figure-study with Roman casts, as though you'd learn more about the body and its movement—its breathing and shifting—by ignoring the flesh around you. And what does a single pose avail when it's the figure in the round that must be taken whole?

“What shall I do with my clothes, Tom?”

“Pile them, we're not painting them.”

You can't go in knowing what to expect. You have to see each body new. Get at your highest light, then your shadows; don't go at it by putting a little here and a little there and hoping to sweep it tidy at the finish. Outlines will restrain you: start with color.

“Have the Academy rules been waved?”

“Gab and I'll ruin your mouth.”

This isn't a scull boat on the Schuylkill, it's a face in a room. What is water doing in those eyes? How are the knuckles set? Where does color touch the buttocks? Look, I'll show you.

And so the students strip. Their professor strips. The camera pops and brushes swish and dab.

## COURTING

Thomas Eakins, new director as of 1882, was as hard on the girls as he was on the boys, everyone said so. In her early academy classes, Susan was ready to be corrected and was tensing for it. They had moodily exchanged a few hellos—they'd met socially here and there—but he hadn't yet approached her when she had her brush in hand. It was thrilling to wait for it, like when you smell the rain and you know it's coming.

And then all at once it was coming down on her, there in Life Drawing for Young Women II.

“What *is* that?” he said from behind, pointing at the head she was coloring. It was her friend Ben’s turn to model. She’d been trying to really *see* a face that she already knew too well.

“It’s a painting,” she said.

“Yes but *what* are you painting?” He wasn’t flirting. Or if he was, then he didn’t flirt any differently than he taught the boys.

“I’m painting the model.”

“*Which* model?” The other girls were staring now.

“That one,” she said, pointing at Ben. She spoke more quietly than she’d wanted to.

He made as if to look around the room. “I don’t see a model here that in any way resembles this.”

She could feel her face warming. She’d be flushing on her neck, and brightly. As if it wasn’t a little compromising as it stood, to be drawing a picture of her old friend, him in only a loincloth, an expressionless passenger.

“It’s Ben,” she says softly.

“This isn’t,” he says, touching the canvas with his thumb. “It doesn’t look like what I’m seeing anywhere.”

Where did it come from? She was rising from her stool and she was walking in Ben’s direction. Her head was light and in a rush she found herself slapping his thigh. “*This* is what I’m painting.”

And Tom started laughing. She loved it.

## AVONDALE

“Where are you?” Tom calls, lugging the big Scoville camera and its sack of glass plates across the yard. Susan has made herself invisible. Usually it’s Tom’s own absorption in his work that vanishes her but now, when he needs her, she is lost.

Then he catches a giggle behind his back—not a sound she makes—and he turns to find her already naked, a couple of leaf clusters in either hand, Avondale’s Botticelli.

“It feels good to be naked out here,” he said, “doesn’t it?” Susan has never posed nude for a photograph, though she’s shot Tom’s face and phallus a dozen times. Yesterday he pretended to play the pan flute like an off-duty shepherd in Arcadia. But it hadn’t worked—at forty years old, he was too grown-up and solid-looking for the part, though he was still enormously proud of his own shape. Susan, her young face lined and ruddy, also wouldn’t work. But he’d shoot her from the back, and her round hips and her narrow shoulders would be just right, would suggest just a touch of the voluptuous paired with innocence. He’d paint the photo of Will’s youngest boy beside her. And then he’d get one of the younger students, Johnny say, to take up the pipes and delight them. His chest won’t be right if he isn’t puffing out the tunes.

Susan’s still holding her leaf pose. It’s *exactly* like the Druer etch in her books. Now her eyebrow’s up and she’s pivoting, giving him backside.

So he sets up the tripod and screws on the lens he likes, tugging his sleeves down too and unlatching his belt. He never misses the chance to strip down in the outdoors, not when there’s an audience. And isn’t the nakedness of a man and his wife unassailable? The board of the Academy couldn’t judge it, wouldn’t dare. Except they’re not quite married yet.

He crosses to where she’s laid a sheet down in last year’s leaves and touches the sole of her foot to angle her legs the way he likes them. “I want to see your footsole. Nobody paints them and they’re wonderful.” He props her on her arm and places her face in her own thin hand. “Disappear your knee beneath your upper leg. Good work.” He kisses her and retreats to the Scoville.

## **WORKSHOP**

1. Walk the yard, measure Susan’s pose and the trees.
2. Sketch in a draft. It won’t be right. Beat out the light.
3. Pushups. Strip down jump in the shock. The children hear the splash and involuntary shout and run out. They’re bright and red in the air.
4. Sketch in the retreating grid. Confirm by eye.
5. Pin the shots: naked Susan, John piping, Ella finally tired.

6. Start with figures: no medicine ball pectorals or sharp hip lines. The body hauls itself in place, smooth lines.
7. Look. Make certain it doesn't change.

## STEPHENS

Edison's built an electric plant, time zones are official, and thousands of feet and carts pass over the Brooklyn Bridge from dawn to night. Man is past the big war, all are free or safe in the ground of a piece with the grass Walt Whitman loved, and Susan has not felt better. More weeks like this would be fine: Will and Fanny's children and the garden; Ella rushing on her sorrel, barely big enough to sit astride its back. The other children naked, beautiful, much more than poured Ganymedes would pose for him and play inbetween times.

"You and Muybridge did some work in the week before we left, yes?" she asks Tom, reading beside him as he crops and mounts a picture from that week: a vaulting man, thirty shades of him in motion.

"We did." He cuts some stray limbs from the shot.

"And you modeled."

"Yes." He smiles. "And Johnny too."

"And who else?" She keeps her book up to seem casual.

"Why?" He turns to look at her now, bad events taking place behind his eyes.

"Tom, you don't need me to tell you it's fine. I think it's indelicate to talk about, but I think you're like no one. And. . ."

But his face is stone. There's a nightingale outside the window, and when it quits trilling, silence falls. She's talking about a thing that is nothing, that had taken place with Stephens in the studio after Muybridge and Johnny had gone home to supper.

Stephens starts it, always. He's the only one bold enough to come at Tom as though he wants to fight. Then they're on the rough ground and dusty. Tom's stiff and hot. It happens then. And Tom, who started this kind of thing in Paris and was nearly found out for it by his fiancée, washes over with regret for it and thinks of Susan. Then he's angry and he works.

She's not a fool and she must say something about this before they're married and it may as well be now. "Tom, you're not the only one who doesn't care about this. We're all bodies and we do what we do and that's all there is to it."

They say nothing more to one another. He comes to bed late and he falls asleep with his arm warm on her chest. Next afternoon, he tells her the story of the famous sapphite he knew in Paris, Rose l'Bouheur, and how he tried to impress her by drawing his Smith & Wesson.

"I'm holding it in my palm, not aiming it, so she can take it and look at it. And she says, 'Show me a draw, Tom,' and so I put it into my pocket and produce it forthwith—listen, no sooner do I draw than she has her hand in her purse and a matching one, a matching pistol, right in her little hand aiming back at me."

## **COMMISSION**

Edward Coates, academy chairman, finds Tom in the hall between classes, showing a mixed group of young people how he can raise and lower himself on the door ledge with one arm, the other behind his back.

"Tom, am I right to assume you've an hour free?"

"You mean no more tricks?" Tom wonders, eyeing the students' eyes. "You mean I don't get to show off my handstand?"

Student Johnny laughs and pats Tom's shoulder hard on the walkaway. The girls blush. Stephens keeps his eyes fixed to Tom's back as the older man walks with Coates down the hall and into the parlor and reception room. These were the paintings, the collection. There hangs Cabanel's *Birth of Venus*, Peele's portraits, some Roman studies from G r me that Tom had been instrumental in acquiring.

"You could do one like this," Coates says. "I'd like you to do to one for me, and we'll put it up here. I'll take care of it." Coates meant for it to sound casual and believes he's succeeded, but it is nonetheless a commission, a serious thing.

"Honored," Tom says, understanding.

"You did an Arcadian relief. Are you still in Arcadia?" Coates sends out a smile of indulgence.

"I'm interested in naked figures, yes. It's one way to go about it."

Coates fixes a monocle in place to take Tom in.

“I like to talk to the students sometimes, Tom, but they don’t like to talk to me.”

Tom waits.

“You know the rules, Tom?”

“I know the rules.”

“Outside the Academy’s walls—that’s another thing—but we can’t have indelicate behavior inside, in class.”

“Edward,” Tom uses his first name. As head of academics, it’s his privilege. “What would you like me to paint for you?”

## **SWIMMING**

“All right lads, let’s go to it as nature wants we should. Or does the mixed company set you wrong?” Tom meant Susan and the camera but he was pointing at Harry the setter as he spoke, and so he got the laugh he wanted. They were anxious.

Georgie stripped down first and had already splashed feet first into the cold pond off the rocks. He was splashing around now, several feet from where the others still fumbled with their watches and the latches of their boots. Johnny tested the water with his feet, leaving his shirt in a rumple by the lake’s edge.

It was happening fast, this dream waking up. Talcott wanders slow to the rocky edge, shadowing with Benjamin, who’d kept his hat in place.

Tom didn’t stop to explain about the shots he wanted—Susan could guess at them—as he pulled up at his shirt and down with his britches and ran toward them in big strides. He wanted to tire their muscles, wanted them languorous for the pictures, worn and healthy.

“Ready!” he shouts. “We’re swimming to the shore with that field in back. Come on, who’s racing me? I’ll get you a head start.”

Harry was in the water too, alongside Tom. Susan knew she was lucky. Among the shy, haughty boys who’d wooed her or tried there wasn’t a heart like Tom’s. Yes, he was a gentleman, and that was fine too. He was locally in demand, and what world mattered outside Philadelphia? He painted the president last year (“wouldn’t hold in

place, eyebrows like a pair of leaches loving”) and he could turn down portraits. He didn’t need the money, what he needed was . . . what?

The boys and her, family, the school. She checks the plates again to ensure they hadn’t cracked on the way to the pond. Of course her presence here is a secret for the company to keep. A woman can’t look at men this way, it would sear her eyes. No, he-painters should draw the horses and bulls and she-painters only mares and cows, *n’est-ce pas?*

Harry the setter runs up to her and stops to shake the wet off. She turns to dodge the splash and nearly unsets the Scoville and it soaks the charcoal she’s been sketching of the mob in the water. But there is no time to mourn it because Tom is gathering all of the boys back onto the rocks. She ducks her head under the dark cloth and waits as he set them up. He wanted profiles and backsides—this isn’t a group portrait, it is a place and a feeling.

Shot: George Rutledge bends to jump and hangs there.

Shot: Talcott settles back onto the rocks, dying Gaul.

Shot: Johnny arches his back, faces front, his pelvis holds the picture.

Shot: Tom still hanging on the rocks, talking them into place.

She knows how he feels. She feels it too.

## **AT TABLE**

Tall glass and a pitcher of milk to his hand, Tom takes in the table. Stephens is here with his new bride—God save them—she’s Tom’s own sister Caddie! Their old friend Adeline’s there, Will and Tom’s father Ben.

Why on earth do all the men look so strong and proud, and the women so full of care? Tom loves men, all of them, but he’s starting to feel the stirring of something, another way of looking at women. The lines of Adeline’s face seem to press centripetally, each indentation a separate slight. She has a hard life.

And what of Susan? She’s always had eyes like something wild that’s been tamed, a fox who skips up to your hand. And she’s ruddy. But what’s that tightness in her lips? Is it new? What’s that shadow that circles her eyes?

“Coates took me aside today, Tom,” Stephens said, pouring ale for himself and some for Caddie, who kept her eyes on her growing middle. “He had some questions. You should talk to him. I said I hadn’t seen you alone, meaning I didn’t know your mind, I mean I said I hadn’t seen you alone in a long time. Anyway it’s about *Swimming* I think, and, I expect, some additional concerns. . . .”

### **DOVE LAKE**

The meadow in the left corner beckons, a plain of Arcadia, bare, then the ground disappears to drink. So, the head of the diver blends with the water as his toes touch the shore.

The boy with his back turned is a David, small but strong enough for giants. But there are no giants here, save for the giant dark of the tight trees behind him. It makes their bodies brighter, gives them something to bare themselves against.

The water’s done with strips of darkness too, reflecting in a blur the rocks and the trees on top. Everything here pulls the bodies up.

Tom’s swimming back and Johnny’s climbing up, as though they’re diving on a circuit, a circular career. They’re a pediment.

And Harry, of course, puffs and chugs at the gap in the center, making the circuit complete.

That bit was for her, Sue is sure of it.

### **SINGLE SCULL**

Tom pulls his arms against the Schuykill. All he can think is to get back into a scull and row it out, but Max is out of town and his father is old. The schoolboys are useless at this, and beside that they shouldn’t be with him. He can’t talk to them. Seventy chanted his name beneath his window last night and urged him outside. Why? To act things back to all right? They’re not all right.

He hasn’t rowed since Arcadia I. He’s stiff and alone on the river.



Clayhorn and Stephens and Coates. A concern to tar. They all knew enough to make it sound like something it wasn't, or like something it shouldn't be. First they published that letter—how dare he! a naked figure! in a drawing class! Then Stephens intimates of darker dealings, though nothing he knows at all about firsthand, and he hides himself behind his wife's swelling belly. Coates is as changing as Sue is constant. And so Tom won't teach.

If you're lonely the water is lonely. The scull is stiff as well, but he pulls and sweats in the hope of feeling right.

Horatio has been over to talk. Horatio is a psychiatrist. Yes, but this don't mean he can't whistle up an idea worth trying. He owns land in the Dakota territory, a ranch and real cowboys. No, this won't be goodbye to Philadelphia, not with Will here and Johnny and Susan. But he knows about those lines in a woman's face, and about his mother's face before she fell.

Let them see what they lost.

Was I too early or too late?