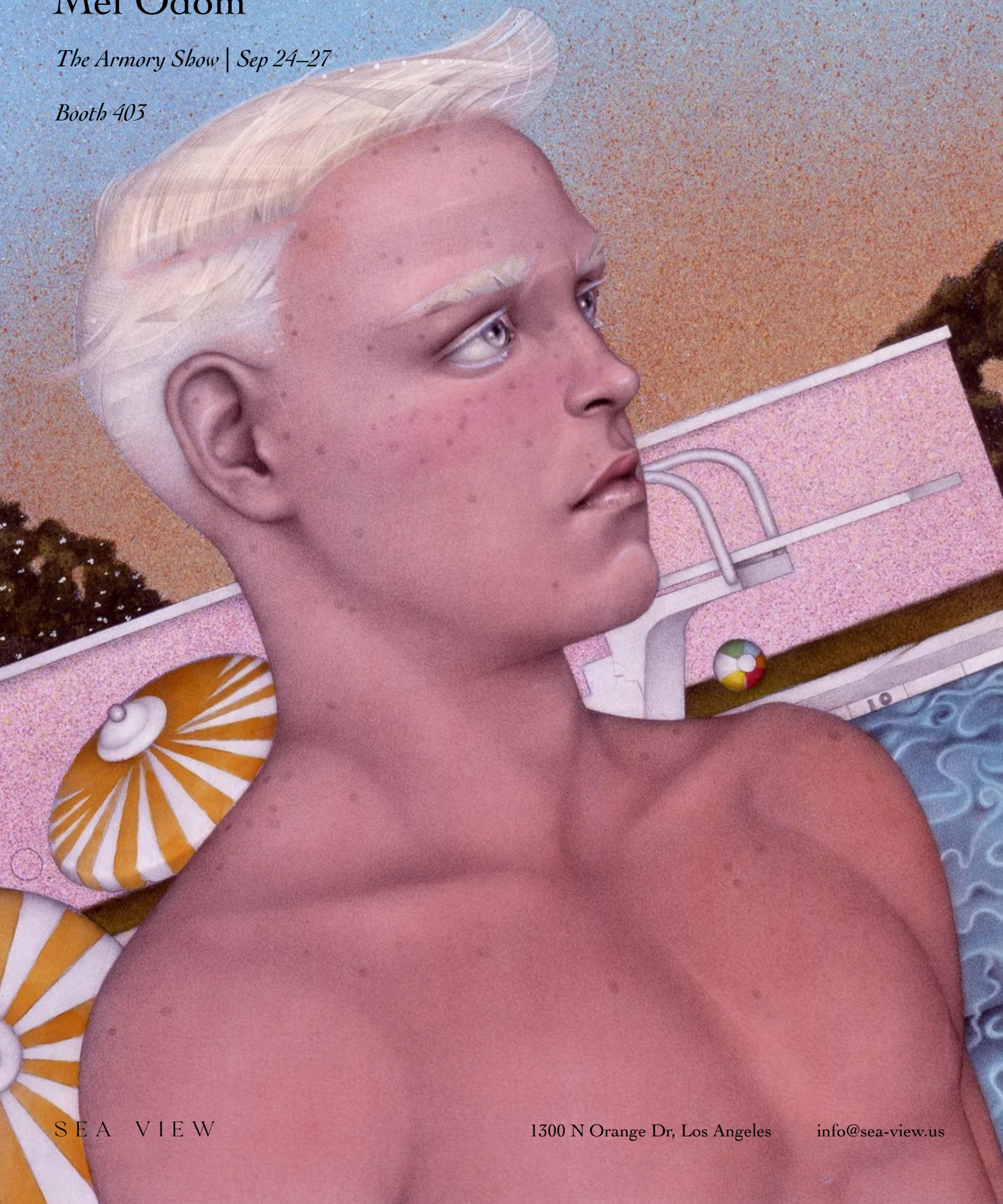


Mel Odom

The Armory Show | Sep 24–27

Booth 403



SEA VIEW

1300 N Orange Dr, Los Angeles

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Press Release

Sea View is pleased to debut the first solo art fair presentation of the New York-based artist Mel Odom (b. 1950, Richmond, VA).

After moving to New York in 1975, Odom became quickly immersed in a Downtown cultural milieu defined by nightlife, performance, publishing, and queer culture— conditions that would shape his sustained pursuit of beauty amidst the backdrop of loss, reinvention, hope, and disease.

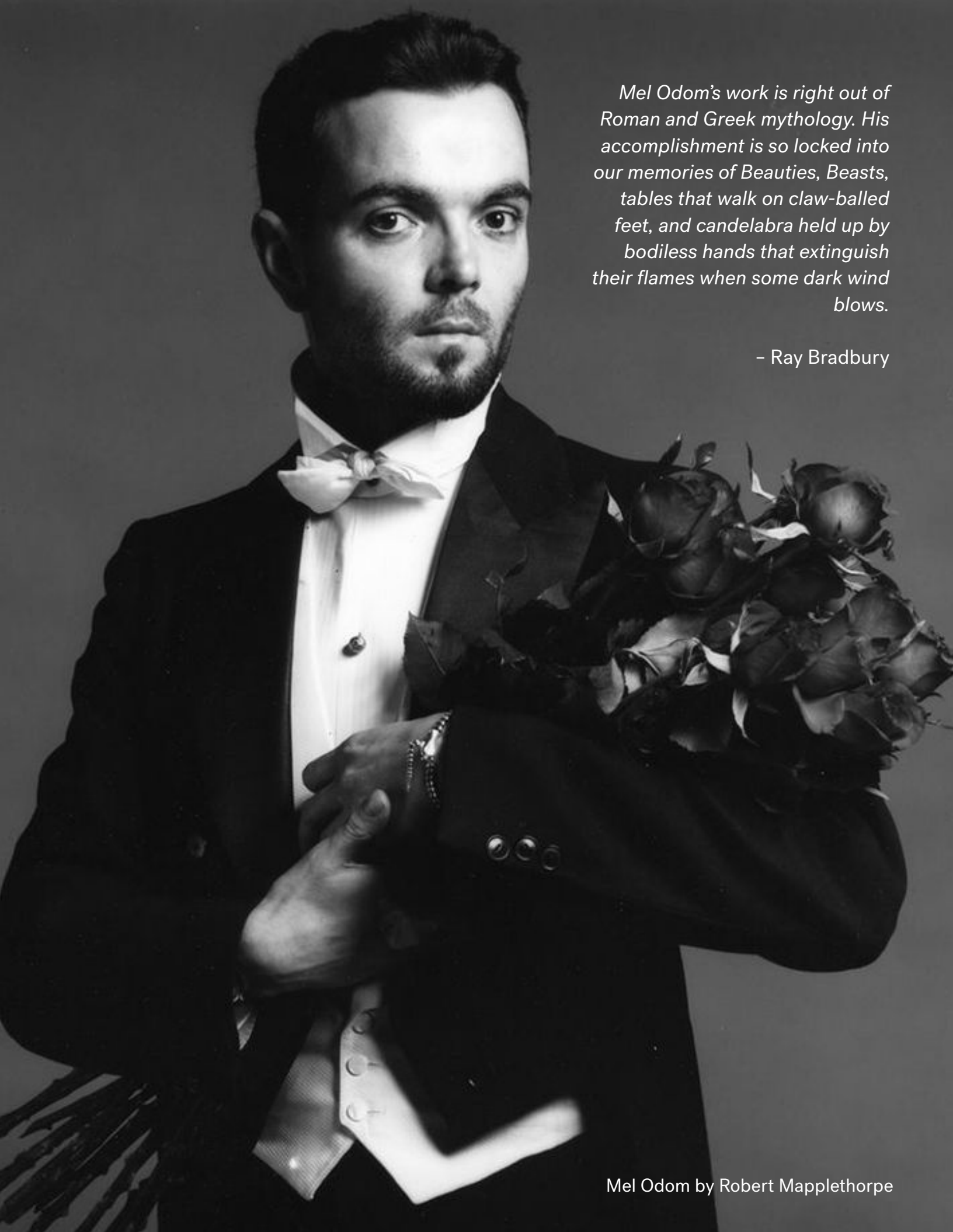
Early in his career, Odom rose to prominence for his singular commercial drawings for publications such as *TIME*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, *Interview*, and *Blueboy*, while illustrating for writers such as Ray Bradbury, Edmund White, Tom Robbins and Roald Dahl. In 1995, shortly before Odom's boyfriend, Gene Bagnato, passed away from AIDS, Odom invented the collectible fashion doll, *Gene Marshall*— whose elaborate world of old Hollywood nostalgia reflected not only Odom's interest in fantasy and identity construction, but also his desire to commemorate those he lost through fictional retellings. Like his drawings and paintings, the Gene Marshall narrative was elaborate and emotionally complex, assembling a complete cinematic universe of rivals, lovers, costumes, and lore. "Gene was a huge gift to me not just in a financial or creative sense, it gave me something beautiful to focus on when I lost Gene," Odom recalls.

Although Odom has been widely celebrated for his commercial work and collectible design, his art practice has increasingly been understood for its distinctly tender contributions to queer image-making and storytelling in contemporary art. Working across graphite, watercolor, gouache, pastel, and oil, but never airbrush, Odom has crafted a visual universe through exceptionally precise drawings and paintings that combine a baroque sensuality with a poignant meditation on mortality.

Odom belongs to a unique generation of gay men that experienced the halcyon decade of post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS New York City. This glittering epoch, and the devastation of what came next, manages to coexist within Odom's spectral portraits of larger-than-life characters. Referencing everything from Art Deco to the pre-Raphaelites, Aubrey Beardsley to Old Hollywood, Odom has cultivated an aesthetic that resists the dominant visual codes of the masculine and homoerotic that are associated with gay representation. Instead, his work embraces fragility, romance, and artifice as anchors of emotional truth.

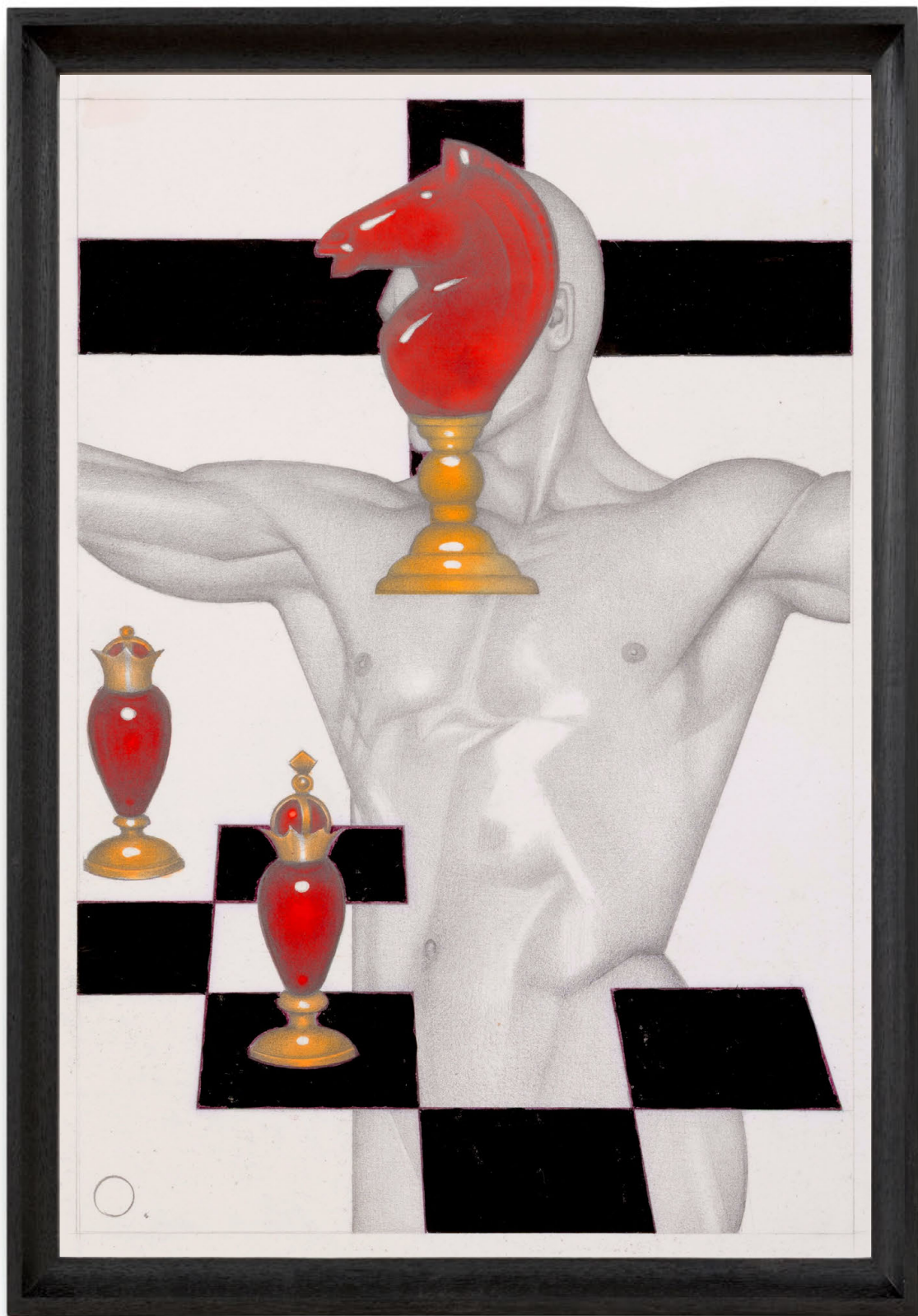
Following Odom's debut solo exhibition in Los Angeles, the Armory presentation similarly offers viewers the opportunity to encounter never-before-seen works. The series presented was created in 1978 for *Rayford*, a pocket-sized, unpublished erotic picture book. With a focus on Odom's historic homoerotic drawings and vellum studies, this presentation foregrounds Odom position as a significant chronicler of queer life since the mid-70s.





Mel Odom's work is right out of Roman and Greek mythology. His accomplishment is so locked into our memories of Beauties, Beasts, tables that walk on claw-balled feet, and candelabra held up by bodiless hands that extinguish their flames when some dark wind blows.

– Ray Bradbury



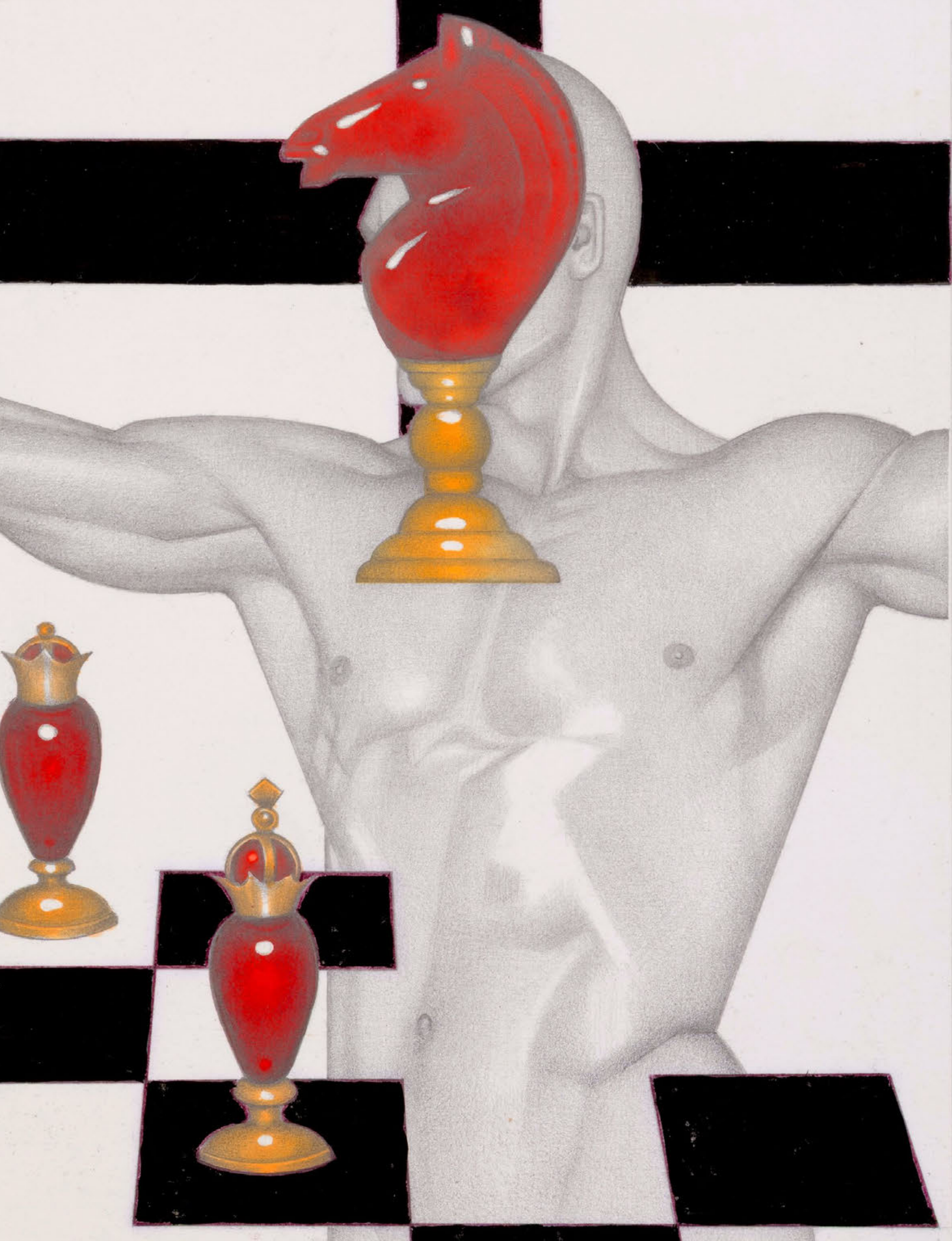
Mel Odom

Chess Men, 1995

Graphite, color pencil, dye, and gouache on board

9 1/4 x 6 1/2 in (17 x 23 1/2 cm) framed

\$ 15,000.00





Mel Odom

Tilt, 1984

Graphite, color pencil, dye, and gouache on board

17 3/8 x 14 5/8 in (43 x 36 cm) framed

\$ 15,000.00



Detail of *Tilt*, 1984

Published in *Playboy Magazine* as an illustration for Ray
Bradbury's short story "By the Numbers"



Mel Odom

Hello I Lied, 1997

Color pencil, dye, and gouache on board

13 3/4 x 11 1/2 in (35 x 29 cm) framed

\$ 15,000.00



Detail of *Hello I Lied*, 1997



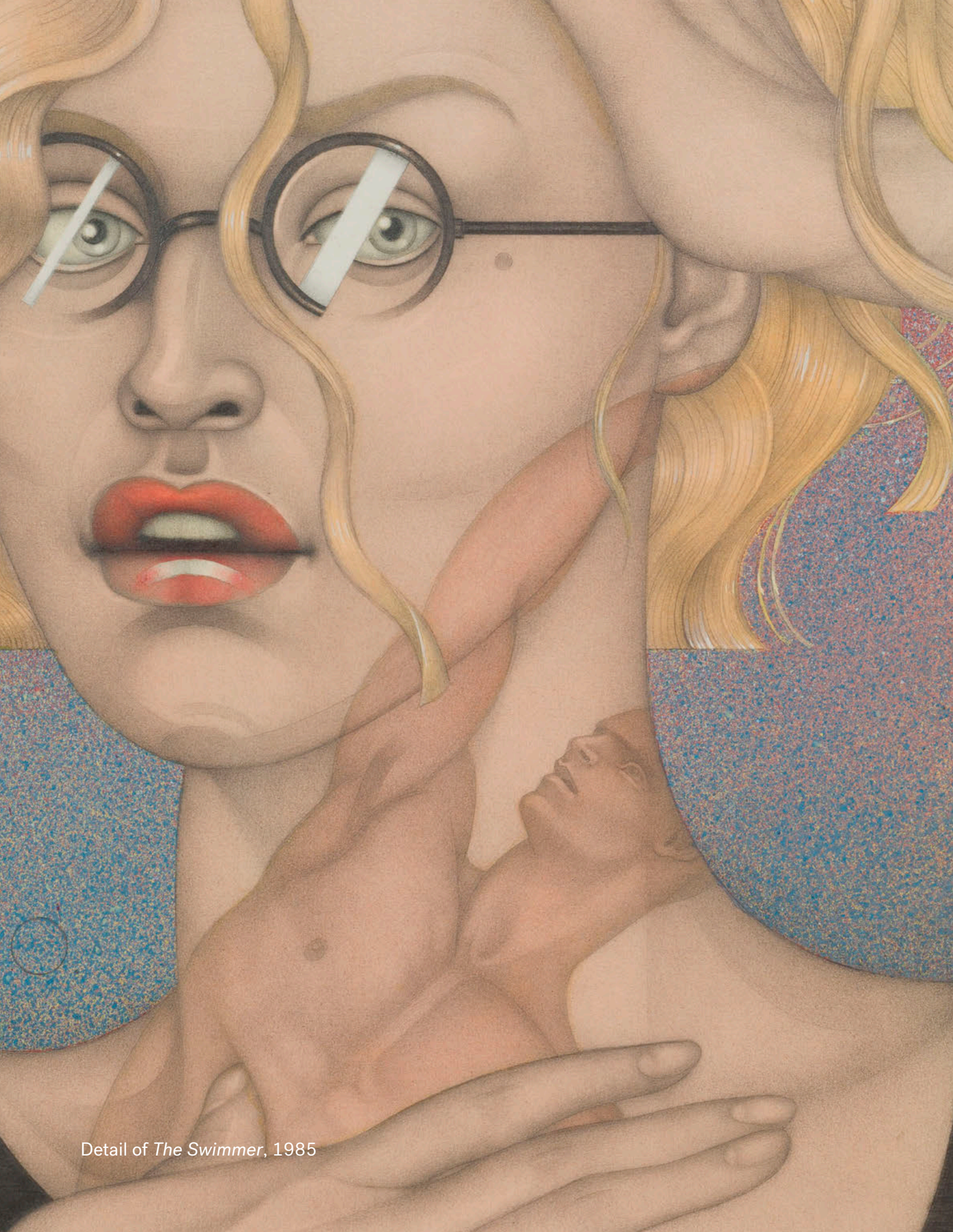
Mel Odom

The Swimmer, 1985

Graphite, color pencil, dye, and gouache on board

17 3/8 x 14 5/8 in (43 x 36 cm) framed

\$ 15,000.00



Detail of *The Swimmer*, 1985



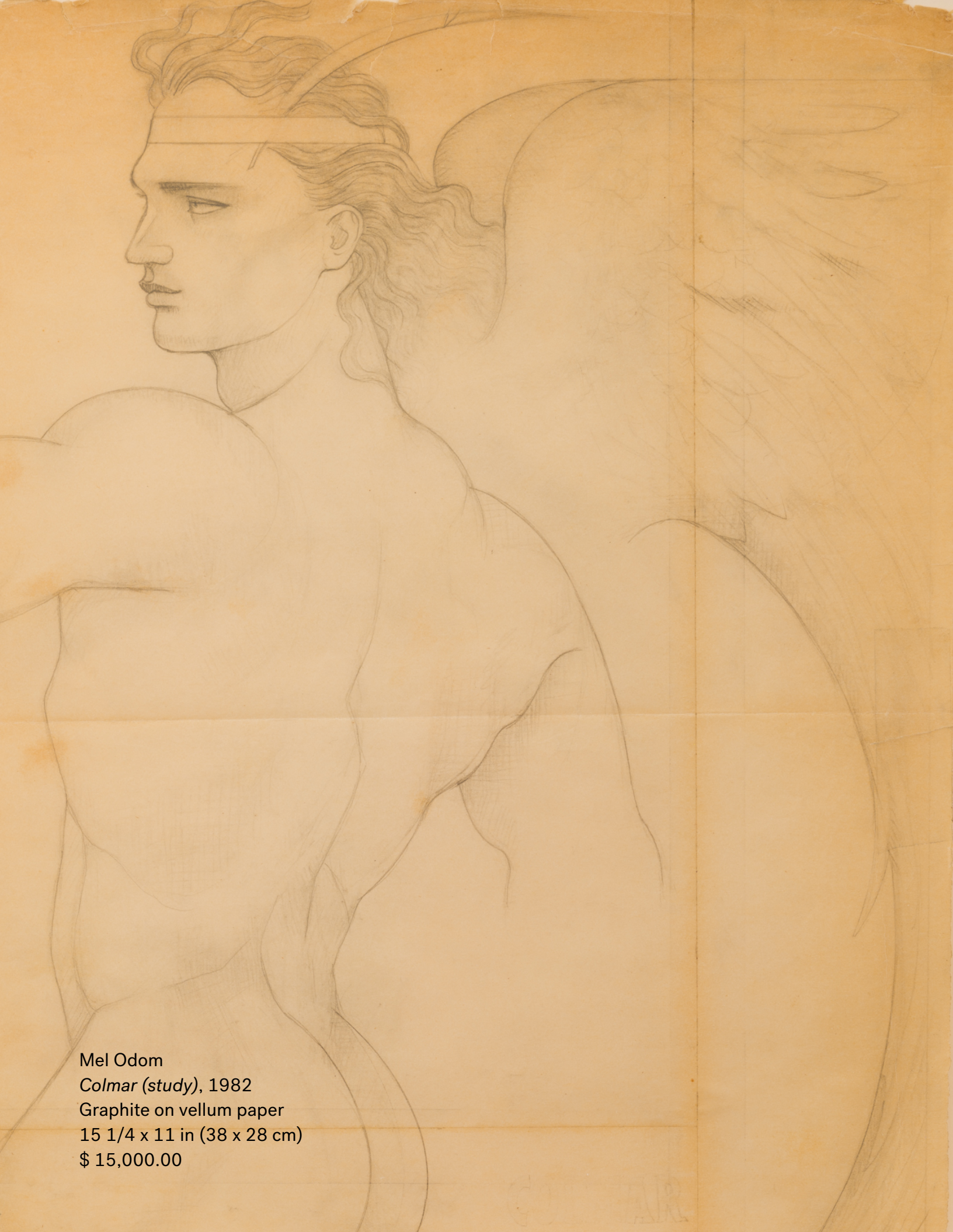
Mel Odom

Colmar (study), 1982

Graphite on vellum paper

16 x 12 in (40 1/2 x 30 1/2 cm)

\$ 15,000.00



Mel Odom
Colmar (study), 1982
Graphite on vellum paper
15 1/4 x 11 in (38 x 28 cm)
\$ 15,000.00



Mel Odom
Tortured Man with Lempicka Hand, 2024
Color pencil on inkjet print on paper
20 x 16 in (51 x 41 cm)
SOLD



Mel Odom

Rayford (Study IV & V) 1978

Graphite on vellum

9 1/4 x 12 3/4 in (23.50 x 32.38 cm) framed

\$ 7,000.00



Detail of *Rayford (Study V)*, 1978



Mel Odom

Rayford (Study III), 1978

Graphite on vellum

9 x 11 in (22.86 x 27.94 cm) framed

\$ 7,000.00



Detail of *Rayford (Study III)*, 1978



Mel Odom

Rayford (Study VII & VIII), 1978

Graphite on vellum

9 1/4 x 12 3/4 in (24 x 32 cm) framed

\$ 7,000.00



Detail of *Rayford* (Study VII & VIII), 1978



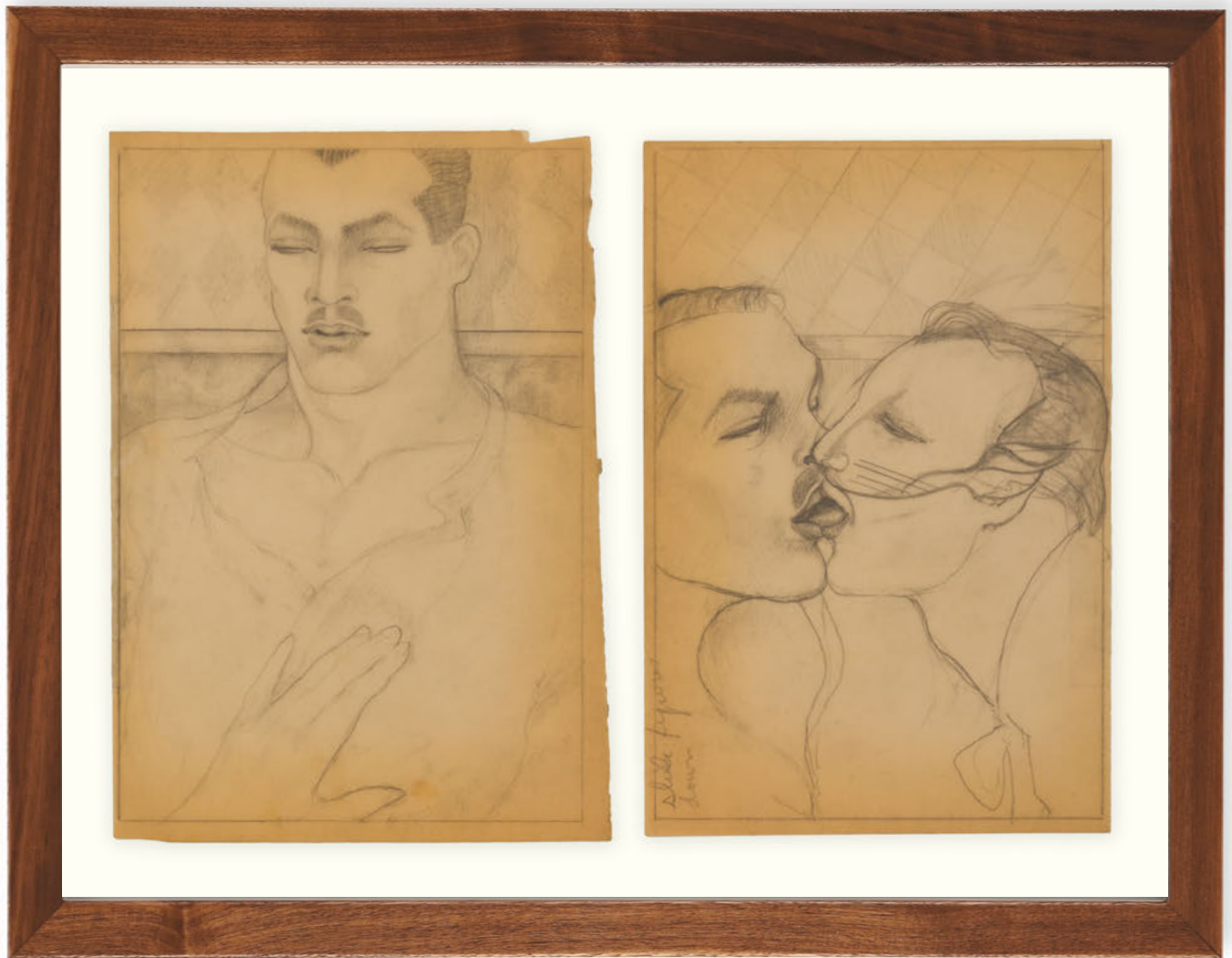
Mel Odom

Rayford (Study I & II), 1978

Graphite on vellum

9 1/2 x 13 in (24.13 x 33.02 cm) framed

\$ 7,000.00



Mel Odom

Rayford (Study IX & X), 1978

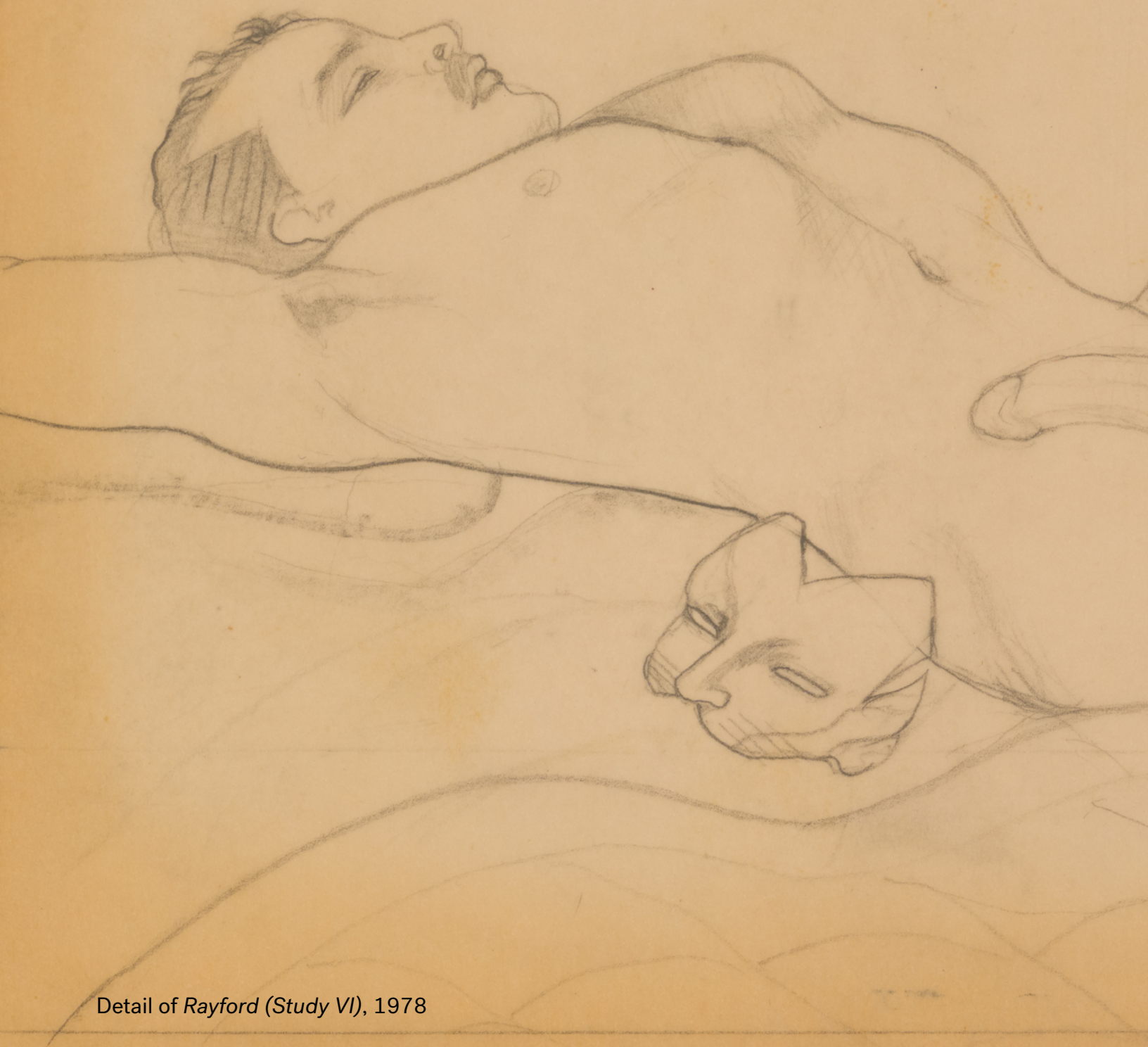
Graphite on vellum

6 1/2 x 4 1/2 in (17 x 10 cm) each (diptych)

\$ 7,000.00



Mel Odom
Rayford (Study VI), 1978
Graphite on vellum paper
9 3/8 x 11 3/8 in (23 x 28 cm)
\$ 7,000.00



Detail of *Rayford (Study VI)*, 1978



Mel Odom

Lady with Stars, 1990

Graphite, color pencil, dye, and gouache on paper

16 3/4 x 13 5/8 in (43 x 33 cm) framed

\$ 15,000.00



Detail of *Lady with Stars*, 1990



Mel Odom

The Red Orchid, 2021

Oil on board

24 x 20 in (61 x 51 cm) framed

\$ 18,000.00



Detail of *The Red Orchid*, 2021



Mel Odom

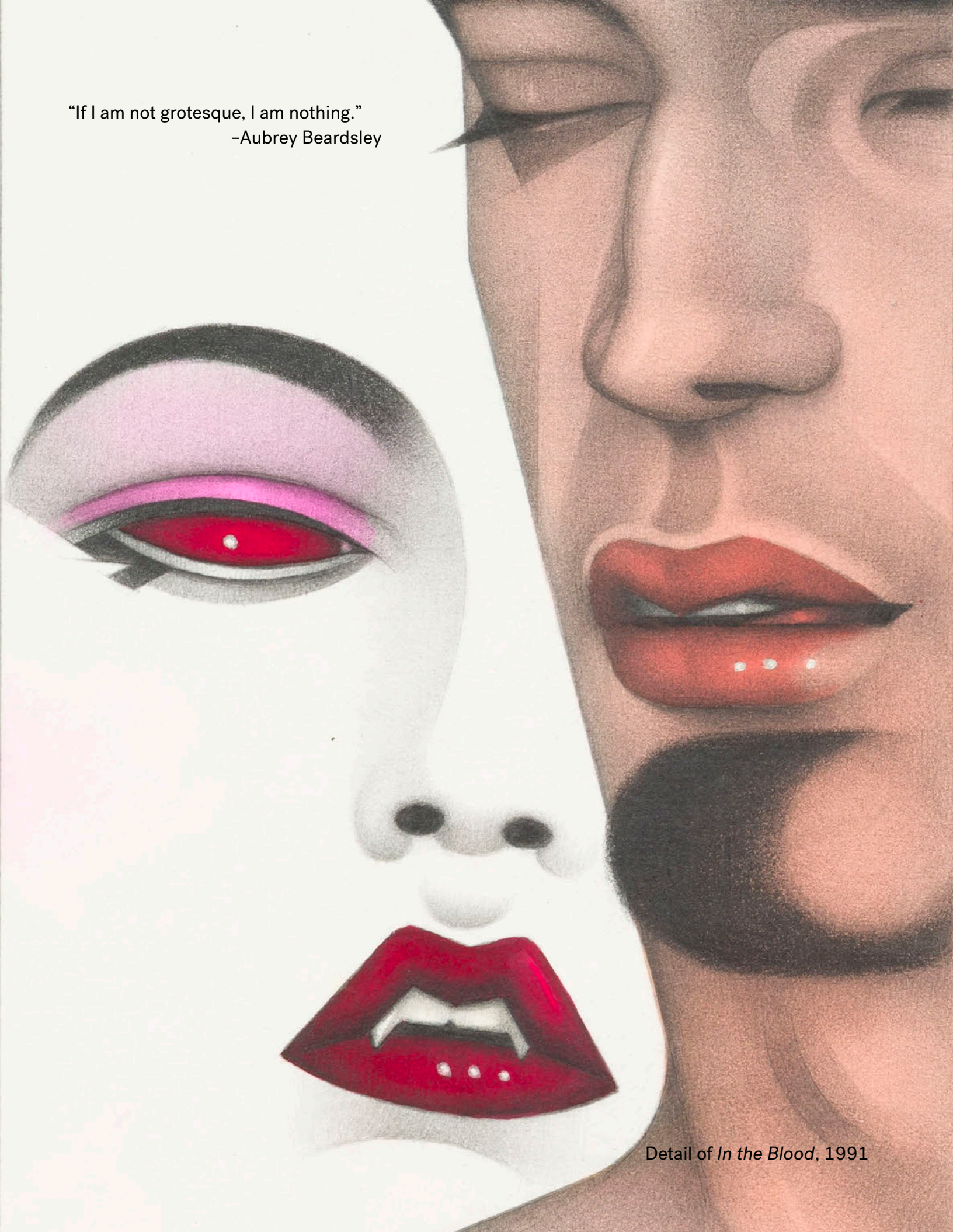
In the Blood, 1991

Graphite, color pencil, dye and gouache on board

17 3/4 x 15 1/2 in (45 x 40 cm) framed

\$ 15,000.00

"If I am not grotesque, I am nothing."
-Aubrey Beardsley



Detail of *In the Blood*, 1991



Mel Odom
Charlie's Madonna, 1987
Oil on masonite
19 3/4 x 16 in (50 x 41 cm) framed
\$ 15,000.00



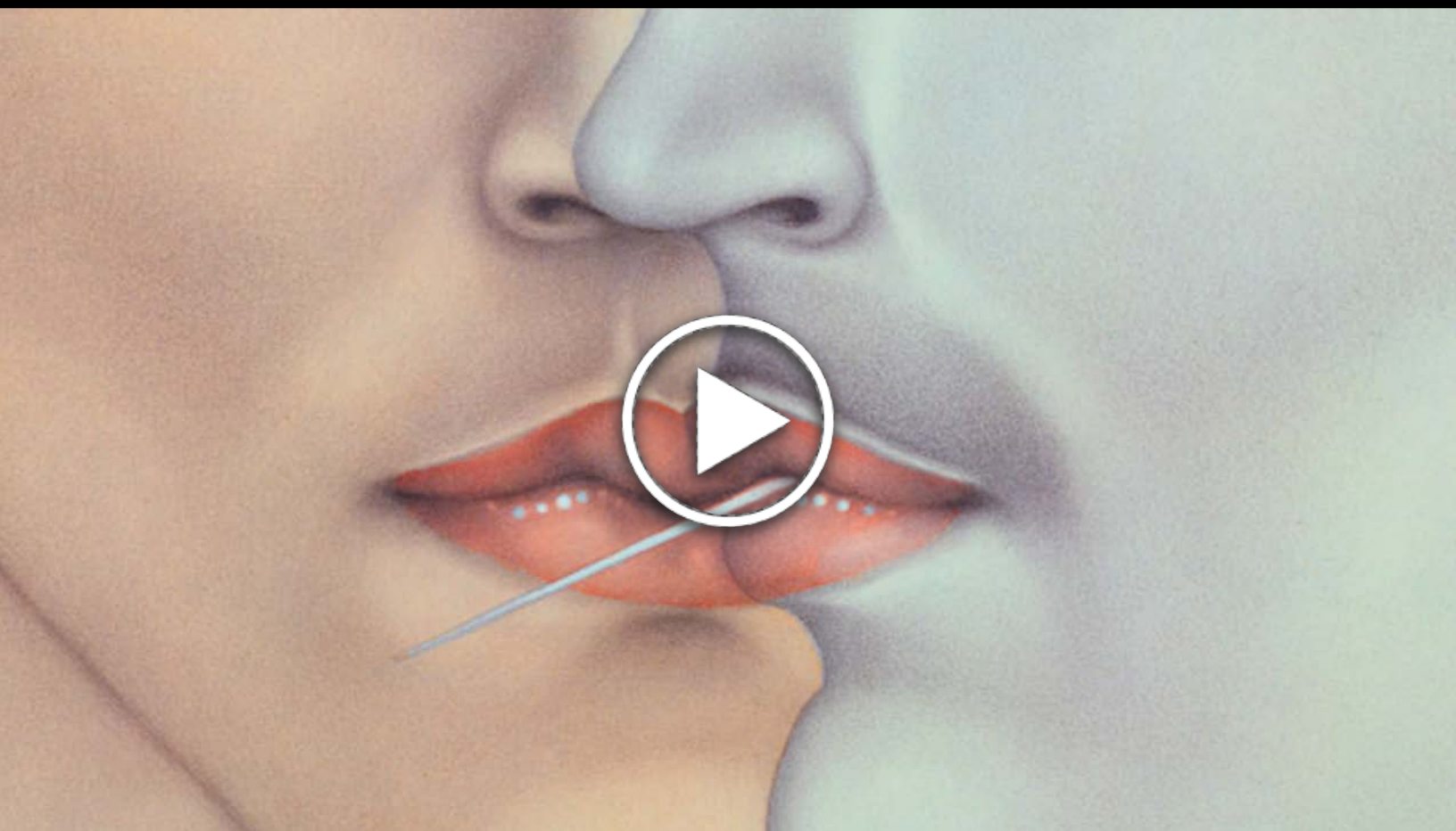
Detail of *Charlie's Madonna*, 1987

Biography

Mel Odom (b. 1950, Richmond, VA) lives and works in New York City. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include *DREAMS FOR SALE*, Sea View, Los Angeles, CA (2026); *Nothing Vast Without a Curse*, Sans Titre, Paris, FR (2026); *Blind Tongue*, David Lewis, New York, NY (2023) and *Gorgeous*, Daniel Cooney, New York, NY (2019). Recent group exhibitions include *L'âge du trait*, Sans Titre, Paris, FR (2026); *Cupid's Bow*, curated by Milano Chow, Bel Ami, Los Angeles, CA (2023) *Works on Paper: 100 Years*, Amanita, New York, NY (2023), *Neo Rising*, Polansky Gallery, Prague, Czech Republic (2022) and *Idols of Perversity*, Bellwether, Brooklyn, NY (2005). His drawings have been published in the monographs *First Eyes* (1982), *Dreamer* (1984), and *Mel Odom: Gorgeous!* (2024).

Odom is in the public collection of the Leslie Lohman Museum of Art, New York.





Trailer for “Eyes of Mel Odom”

Forthcoming documentary directed by Jorg Fockele and Michael Economy

FIELD NOTES

JUNE DOOM: BRYAN BARCENA TOURS LOS ANGELES GALLERIES

By Bryan Barcena

June 30, 2026 11:50 am

Further west, a show of drawings by Mel Odom at Sea View was delivering glamour right where it belongs. The gallery recently relocated from the Jorge Pardo-designed “domestic concept space” in Mount. Washington, from which it takes its name, to this most charming 1930s restored house in Hollywood. Odom is a long-time New York illustrator with credits that span the reputable (Time, the New York Times, Rolling Stone) and less reputable (Playboy, Blueboy), and his Art Deco fantasies seem right at home here.

Perusing the selection of portraits spread across two bedroom-size galleries almost felt like encountering portraits of the family who once lived in the house. With crisp lines and soft shading, the drawings are sexy without sex, queer in every sense without being bawdy. There are deliciously hammy moments, such as in Devil and the Dice, 1984, where a red bust of a Rudolph Valentino type emerges from a black plane and sits alongside a set of dice and a disembodied hand, which rises to meet a bouquet of roses that populate the background.

Other times, the high-key camp left me giggling, such as in The Swimmer, 1985, where a bespectacled lady clutches her chest and tussles with her wavy blonde bob as a ghostly impression of a male figure glides across her décolletage—the desire is palpable. The selection here is less beefcake-y and thus more female-leaning than the rest of Odom’s oeuvre, but when men do appear, it showcases the artist’s talent as a gifted portraitist. In The Red Orchid, 2021, a silver-fox daddy with oversize icy-blue eyes holds the titular fuchsia flower, with his crisp white-on-white suit-and-tie combo echoing his white hair.

The show could almost be described as site-specific, placed as it is in these galleries bathed in the light bouncing off the fading silver-screen glamour of the Hollywood Hills. It is most definitely a delight.

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Mel Odom

Daniel Cooney Fine Art

By Alex Jovanovich

“An addict of beauty” is what the novelist Edmund White dubbed Mel Odom during a public conversation only days after the artist’s solo exhibition, aptly titled “Gorgeous,” opened. White would know, because he’s an expert on the subject. And so is Odom, a maker of ethereal images that depict splendidly chiseled men and glamorous women who appear as though they’ve been tenderly reinforced with light. Thirty-five of his modestly sized drawings (the largest of which are only fourteen inches high), produced between 1975 and 2018, made up this show.

Odom came to fame in the 1970s as a commercial illustrator and retired from the business in 1996. His stunning portraits—many of them rendered in a combination of gouache, pencil, and Peerless-brand dyes—have graced the book covers of mystery writer Ruth Rendell, vampire queen Anne Rice, and White himself. They’ve also materialized in an array of magazines, such as the gay beefcake rag *Blueboy*, the sci-fi periodical *Omni*, *Playboy*, and *Rolling Stone*.—for-hire and doll designer—he is unequivocally an artist, and a mighty fine one at that.

He later went on to create a best-selling collectors’ doll named Gene Marshall, an old Hollywood-type bombshell—*far* more sophisticated than Barbie—who looks like she just stepped out of a George Hurrell photograph. (She even has a fictitious biography, published in 2000 and titled—say it breathlessly—*Gene Marshall: Girl Star*.) Although Odom avoided calling himself an artist for years—and was likely discouraged from doing so by an art world that undoubtedly looked askance at his career as a brush-for-hire and doll designer—he is unequivocally an artist, and a mighty fine one at that.

If you were a child of the 1970s and ’80s, seeing the show brought on a certain déjà vu. With their sateen complexions, high-contrast blushes, full lips, Pre-Raphaelite contours, and Masaccio coloring, Odom’s people seemed very familiar, putting the viewer in mind of Boy George’s commedia dell’arte makeup; the music video for Visage’s 1980 synth-pop hit, “Fade to Grey”; Serge Lutens’s mescaline-tinged ads for Shiseido cosmetics; or Joan Collins as Alexis Colby, *Dynasty*’s heavily shoulder-padded and mascaraed villainess.

Continued

Viva Couple, 1976—featuring a lantern-jawed man and a sphinxlike woman shrouded in discotheque darkness—is a striking example of the nascent Odom look. He’s a bare-chested stud who wears a yellow hard hat and silvery wraparound sunglasses; she, a dead ringer for Anjelica Huston, has a metallic bob and heart-shaped lunettes, à la Lolita, propped just above her empty, fathomless gaze. They could have been denizens of New York’s Studio 54, Xenon—or, judging by the red tubing loosely draped around them, the filthy gay party boîte Crisco Disco. *Two Women*, 1987, a jewel of a drawing that’s three inches square, gives us a pair of ghostly white harlequin masks bound by a length of ribbon that snakes through their hollow sockets. The duo hovers above a background that appears to be engulfed by flames.

Alas, where there’s sex, there’s death, and Odom’s sleek pictures contain more than a trace of the funereal. The majority of these works were made in the midst of the AIDS crisis, during which the artist saw too many of his friends and loved ones vanish.

The surfaces of his exquisite portraits are marmoreal, possessing the quiet sheen of a headstone, or a face washed by tears. *Crown of Wings*, 1988, is a moving depiction of a Christlike figure, bathed in dour greens and haloed by phantom butterflies that flit perilously close to a strand of thorns. *Hard Kiss*, ca. 1980, features a couple of handsome men engaged in the titular act. One of them, however, has a flayed neck, revealing a disturbing arrangement of scrupulously drawn sinews and muscles. Perhaps the saddest piece in the show—and, by extension, the most infuriating—was a graphite sketch, ca. 1980, of two men enmeshed in a sensuous kiss. The word THEM! is emblazoned in jagged letters across the top of the image, as if the drawing were a rough layout of a poster for a 1950s creature feature. But the real monstrosity of the thing lies in the conditions of its making: a time of unrepentant ignorance and rabid homophobia.

Another Man

THE ANTI-TOM OF FINLAND: MEET THE ARTIST WHO REDEFINED THE QUEER AESTHETIC

TEXT Hynam Kendall

Ahead of his upcoming New York show, Hynam Kendall meets Mel Odom – one of queer art's most intriguing figures

Where would queer art be without Mel Odom? Bear with me, this is not didacticism as means of clickbait.

Before Odom, the queer aesthetic was denoted in essentially one way: men were chiselled, defined to balloon proportions in hypermasculine guise. Muscles were superlative and angular, Tom of Finland being the best example of this. The art made readily available seemed only to want to promote homosexual desire as one thing: heterosexual-passing. Men were exaggerated men with an added dose of manliness.

When Odom's soft, seemingly airbrushed male figures reached peak mainstream during his award-winning and still lauded tenure at *Playboy*, where his delicate and dreamy men accompanied stories by the likes of Joyce Carol Oats – the viewing public were finally seeing male figures of lust depicted lovingly, softly. Men were presented in the commercial sphere as only women had been before. It is a seemingly small act, but the repercussions

were widespread. Homosexuality was rapidly opened out to a spectrum of portrayal: hard, soft and everything in between.

This month, Daniel Cooney Fine Art gallery assembles decades of the American artist's work in a retrospective aptly titled *Gorgeous*. The exhibition features a vast selection from Odom's own private collection, as well as iconic pieces from his time at *Playboy*, and even, for the avid fan, never-before-seen drawings. In anticipation of the show, Odom talks to *Another Man* about his dark, dreamy aesthetic and what it means to be a successful queer artist whose work spans five decades.

Your show is called *Gorgeous*. I wanted to discuss your relationship with that word and why it best describes your work.

Mel Odom: It's much less used than 'beautiful'. It's kind of archaic. And as though it has a little something extra. There's also a sense of camp to the word!

The narrative of the show is essentially a biography, are some pieces more personal than others?

Mel Odom: There's a drawing that I did called *Crown of Wings*. It was done during the [AIDS] epidemic and I was so sad about having so many of my friends dying. Valentino was coming out with a men's fragrance and they had set me an assignment for it, but it never happened. I had done a drawing of a statue head for them and just felt like the broken face was so beautiful and so poignant, so I did this second drawing for myself. As I said, my friends were all dying and it was not something I was able to put into words so this was my way to say it – that I was missing them.

Another Man

You had quite a small town upbringing in North Carolina. Growing up, what art did you have access to?

Mel Odom: Really, very little. It was a tobacco farming community and my dad had a tobacco farm with his sisters, so it wasn't an 'arty' environment. About the time I turned seven my parents paid for me to have drawing lessons after school with a lady in town and she had art books I could look at, but I suppose the art I saw was predominantly illustrations in magazines. Beautiful drawings of Jell-O and women's make-up and hats in the adverts. That was what I saw and that was what I thought was beautiful. There were no galleries to go to but lots of magazines.

So your parents didn't have an interest in art?

Mel Odom: No, no. As well as having the farm, my father was a mailman and my mother was what they would call 'a simple housewife' back then. I'm sure she was just thrilled that I would have something to do that would keep me quiet and out of the way. Locally I became pretty exotic, teachers would come to me and request drawings. I was known as the little artist of the town!

Once you discovered art, which artists and artworks helped guide your visual identity?

Mel Odom: Aubrey Beardsley. He was and is

my favourite artist. When I was 15, Life magazine did a fashion layout of black and white fashions against huge blow-ups of Beardsley drawings. I had never seen his work until then and I just went crazy. I started drawing in pen and ink to copy him. Also, I grew up watching a lot of cartoons and, oh gosh, that informed me too. Very much. Popeye – I still watch Popeye every Saturday morning – and Disney's silly symphonies... Disney actually probably is one of my earliest and most important influences.

What denotes a Mel Odom?

Mel Odom: Usually there's a degree of sensuality and a poetry about it. This sounds quite pretentious and I don't usually say this, But I think of my artworks as visual poems. I was an illustrator for 20 years so there's also a technical and meticulous element to it. Drawings can take weeks on end. And it's pencil, it's not airbrush — people think it's airbrush but it's not. It's never been airbrush, I'm such a puritan. I feel like now there aren't a lot of people who can do what I do. It's the process of doing it that is so exciting to me: I'm alone, smoking weed, and it's just me and the piece of paper for weeks. I also think there's a precision in my drawings that happened because when I first moved to New York in 1975 it was pretty wild, I was as big a hick as was possible and I couldn't control what was going on around me, so I put the control into my art.

Your works have been described as queer, do you agree with those allusions?

Mel Odom: The first book cover I ever did was for a book called *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* by Edmund White and it was a very, very successful book. It was a picture of a guy

Another Man

but I drew him as a love object not as a lust object. I drew him the way people generally depict women – I made him very sensual. I was doing the anti-Tom of Finland, and depicting men and male love in a dreamy way. I think I helped change or add to the queer aesthetic in this way: with softness. With no hardness at all.

I've read interviews in which you refer to yourself as an illustrator — do 'illustrator' and 'artist' exist independently?

Mel Odom: I generally don't believe that there is a difference. You know, the Sistine Chapel was illustration. I mean it was Michelangelo depicting what the church was selling. Once I started thinking about what paintings had been all along and what they were used for, I think I realised that art becomes illustration from a distance. I've been lucky enough to be commercial in my career, and if it's done commercially it's considered illustration. But I'm a little squeamish calling myself an artist because I feel that's for other people to say.

Some of your most iconic illustrations came during your time with *Playboy*.

Mel Odom: Thank you! They approached me. They had seen my work in Blueboy magazine. They were known for their quality back then, so I was illustrating for people like Joyce Carol Oates and Tom Robbins. I was doing enviable assignments and I was 27! It was a dream. They would enter all my drawings in illustration competitions, and off the back of it I was winning all kinds of awards! I worked for *Playboy* magazine for 17 years. And these

drawings of mine would go all over the world, literally; Spanish editions, French editions... my images sold farther and wider than I could ever have imagined.

It was thanks to working with publications like *Playboy* that you gained a huge international commercial success. Was this ever a burden?

Mel Odom: You know the thing about being an artist is that somebody still has to pay the bills. And regarding commerciality: I wanted people to look.

But were there downsides to your commerciality?

Mel Odom: There were galleries who wouldn't even look at my work because I was a successful illustrator and that bothered me. I felt that my work was heartfelt enough to stand on its own without whatever article it had accompanied. It hurt. It still hurts. But you know what, then you see your drawing on the cover of Time magazine and you think, 'Fuck you!' I'm on the cover of Time magazine you fuckers!