

## The Moment of Poetry

# Stanley Goldstein's Domestic Scenes

By DAVID MASELLO



It was a rainy summer day in the Point O'Woods section of New York's Fire Island. The artist Stanley Goldstein (b. 1954) had been flown there from his home in San Francisco to paint a commissioned portrait of an extended family. After four days of steady showers, the youngsters were getting restless. When the weather finally cleared sufficiently, some of the kids starting jumping off a pier into the bay.

"During my stay with the family, I observed this stream of children doing things, involved in the world; they were together, but acting separately," Goldstein recalls. "What I was looking for was a moment when they were all doing something fun. Then, it happened. *That* was the moment of the portrait. For days, I had been taking video footage of them, and suddenly, one of the boys, Billy, turned and looked right at the camera, at me. Here was someone breaking that fourth wall, someone who turns and looks at you."

The finished work (*Point O'Woods*) is a massive oil on linen (91 inches wide) that epitomizes one of Goldstein's favorite tenets: "I like to remind viewers that they're being watched, too. You're not expecting to be regarded by the painting. You're regarding it and it's regarding you back." Here Billy, whose expression is as boyish as it is pensive, assesses us, just as we notice him. Most of Goldstein's paintings include several figures, but there is often one who emerges as both a visual and thematic focus, even if that person is positioned in a more ancillary way. That lack of a traditional visual balance is just one of the many arresting details in a Goldstein work.

**POINT O'WOODS**  
 2000, OIL ON LINEN, 48 X 91 IN.  
 PRIVATE COLLECTION





**THE VISIT**  
2007, OIL ON LINEN, 58 x 76 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

chiefly done by Bay Area artists, including three significant canvases by Goldstein. “Stan’s figures are never static. They are people in action.”

In 1999 Glass commissioned Goldstein to paint a scene of a favorite San Francisco locale, as a surprise for his wife. “I knew, generally, the area I wanted Stan to capture,” says Glass, “I wanted some of the ocean, and the feel of the Sea Cliff neighborhood, but I left it up to him to do what he wanted with the setting.” Goldstein showed Glass two preparatory renderings, and after Glass chose the one he preferred, Goldstein produced the work known as *Baker Beach Conversation*. “There’s something about the way Stan builds up color,” says Glass. “With him, black is not black but, rather, a combination of colors that become a different kind of black.”

Over the decades that he has been making his mostly figurative works on canvas, panel, and paper, Goldstein has always coveted what he calls that “moment of poetry that feels right — the poetry of the ‘it’ that compels me to paint.” In *The Visit*, that ‘it’ is the woman, viewed through half-opened shutters, who is about to take a seat. It’s the bodily torque of the naked woman dancing in the light cast by a television (*Dancing by the TV, Dark*). That precise moment when a girl has released herself from a swing, her long hair jetting upward (*On the Swings*). Or it’s the infant crawling away from a roiling ocean and encountering adult-size footprints that serve as a metaphorical and actual measure of his scale and place in the world (*Water*).

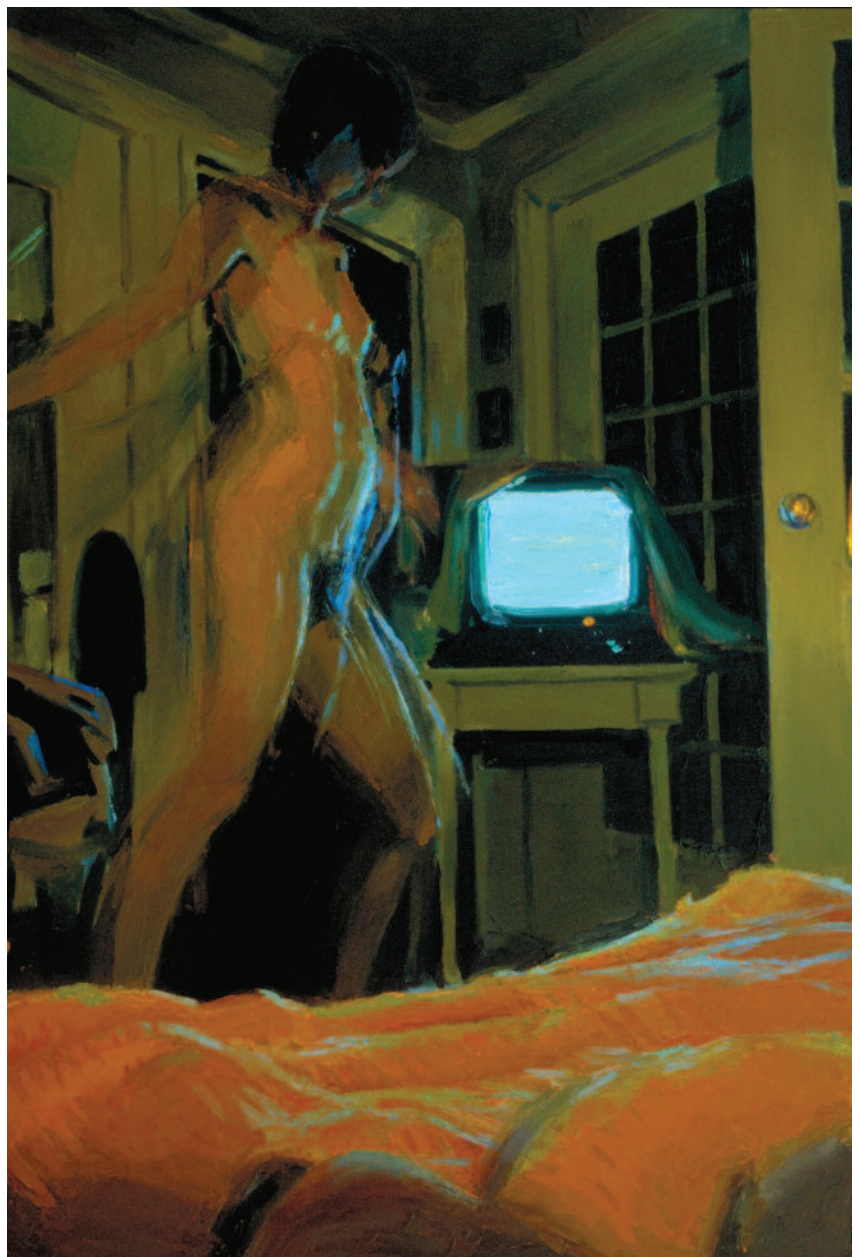
“Would I call my paintings narrative?” Goldstein asks rhetorically. “I don’t think so. They’re their own genre. They are scenes of domestic life. There’s no actual *story* being told, but a part of the figure’s, or figures’ story is being depicted.”

Given Goldstein’s passion for populating his canvases with expressive, well-articulated adults and children whose movements, poses, or facial expressions reveal a ruminative quality, his works have echoes of Edward Hopper, Fairfield Porter, Alice Neel, George Bellows, and the Bay Area artist David Park. “Even Hopper’s famous painting of the woman usher in a theater doesn’t really tell a story,” Goldstein notes, “but he inspires the viewer to start asking questions about her.”

And like many of the figures seen in the canvases of Porter and Park, Goldstein’s people are often beautiful, ethereally spotlit by early-day or on-the-cusp-of-dusk sunlight. A young man cradled in a translucent pink raft in *Four in the Pool* evinces a subtle, chaste beauty that feels mythological in import, while the naked young woman in Goldstein’s daytime version of *Dancing by the TV* is decidedly provocative and seductive.

“What appeals to me so much about Stan’s work is that his figures are alive and expressive,” says Bob Glass, a San Francisco-based corporate executive, who, along with his wife, Katy, own an extensive collection of figurative art, works

**DANCING BY THE TV, DARK**  
1997, OIL ON PANEL, 66 x 45 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION





**WATER**

2004, ACRYLIC ON PAPER, 45 x 62 IN.  
 GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, LOS ANGELES



Indeed, George Billis, Goldstein's longtime gallery representative, is emphatic in describing him as a "colorist." "Stanley knows how to use fluid brushstrokes to create paintings that are endearing, nostalgic, and, sometimes, voyeuristic," says Billis, who, between his New York and Los Angeles galleries, has mounted six solo shows of Goldstein's works. "What attracted me to Stanley is that he is a confident painter, not only with his compositions and technique, but in his subject matter. He paints vignettes of everyday life. He captures both the emotional *and* physical qualities of the scene."

Although Goldstein is constantly wandering his city of San Francisco, digital or video camera in hand, recording its life for possible subject matter, he is also a highly disciplined and structured working artist. From his 450-square-foot space in a former naval barracks at the Hunters Point Shipyard, now a warren of artists' studios, Goldstein looks out to a mixed landscape of pine trees and parking lots and abandoned buildings. "There's an aura to this place,"

**FOUR IN THE POOL**

2008, OIL ON LINEN, 48 x 70 IN.  
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

**BAKER BEACH CONVERSATION**  
1999, OIL ON CANVAS, 11 x 14 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

he says, “even though it’s fast being developed. But I can be as alone here as I want every day, or I can step into the hallway to see and meet other working artists.”

Goldstein, who has occupied this space since 1987, observes a rigorous daily routine that begins with dropping off his son, Leo, at school and then continuing on to his studio, where he works until mid afternoon. When it is time to pick up Leo, Goldstein puts down his brushes and palette. “To make a living as a full-time artist certainly does not provide much security, and I often feel like I’m about two minutes away from going back to waiting tables,” says Goldstein. “But it’s an astonishingly wonderful thing that I can go to a studio and paint all day long. That’s not to say that I don’t sometimes miss my ‘career’ as a waiter, which culminated with four years at San Francisco’s Zuni Café. All the while, though, I was doing freelance illustrating, cartooning, and sign and house painting. I even did a diorama and mural for Santa Barbara’s Museum of Natural History, but those works were destroyed during a recent remodeling. Such is life.”

Despite his stints as a waiter and a dancer, Goldstein has always been a painter, beginning as a teenager. After finishing high school in his native Los Angeles, he lived in London for several months, studying privately with the American artist Martin Lubner (b. 1929). “He had a big influence on my painting as well as my aesthetic and critical thinking,” says Goldstein. Upon returning to the U.S., Goldstein



enrolled at the University of California Santa Barbara, where he earned a degree in art from its College of Creative Studies. Following his participation in a successful 1990 group show at San Francisco’s Jeremy Stone Gallery, he embarked on a life as a full-time artist.

Whereas Goldstein once sought out strangers for his paintings, often capturing them at work or at play as glimpsed through windows or in parks, at beaches or fairs, he now often finds the members of his own family to be the “heroes” of his works. Yet his use of them is not an exercise in parochialism or vanity, for they become exemplars of far broader themes and passions, ones relevant to everyone. In one of his most enigmatic works, *Discovery Park*, the viewer sees the back of a young boy negotiating a scrubby patch of park, defined by a tower of tires. The boy is Goldstein’s son and he is playing in Berkeley’s Adventure Playground, an interactive, hands-on venue for children. “Leo is walking up a hill, and it occurred to me that he was at that early point in life where he is beginning to move away from me and my wife, Laura. Something every parent understands. What that moment was all about for me was watching Leo venturing out into a world that’s not the one he knows. The other people visible are not his family. He’s walking off into it. He was just about to enter kindergarten when I painted it and so it’s about him going away and into the system of schooling. Leo’s entering this other world. And that gets me all choked up.”

In *The Hike*, which Goldstein says is a complement to *Discovery Park*, a group of male and female figures head off into an open, decidedly Western landscape, one that is both enchanting and daunting. Again, although the figures include Goldstein’s wife, mother, and son, the scene is not one



**DISCOVERY PARK**  
2008, OIL ON LINEN, 45 x 60 IN.  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



of personal reference. “Every figure is connected by the landscape and the road they’re on,” explains Goldstein. “But each one is going into the distance, off on their own, and what I’m showing is a paused moment in each of their lives.”

As for finding such moments of pause, Goldstein often shoots video footage, which he replays backward and forward, freeze-framing certain moments. Increasingly, he uses a digital camera to take numerous, concurrent shots of a scene he observes. He often combines elements from one frame onto another until the composition emerges. But it’s not just about finding the right scene or the proper figures to paint. “Each painting has a code that needs to be cracked, for me to pursue it to its proper conclusion,” he says. “There is some abstract underpinning that drives it — something like orange versus blue or deep shadows against raking light or cool light versus warm shadows. It’s not always oppositional, but it is usually a color or compositional architecture I need to find that’s subliminal to whatever the subject is. That is what I look for that makes it exciting and fun and even *worthwhile* to paint.”

For a forthcoming solo show at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, California, Goldstein is essentially curating himself, choosing some 30 works — many of them new, others borrowed from private collections. Preston Metcalf, chief curator of the Triton, a venue he defines as a showcase for the art of California, past and present, decided to mount the exhibition after a visit to New York several years ago. “I saw Goldstein’s work at George Billis Gallery and then came across other Bay Area artists being celebrated in other New York galleries. When I

returned to California, I realized that no one was properly paying attention to these artists here. So George Rivera, the museum’s executive director and senior curator, and I decided that our mission was to find the best working artists that we could. Stanley is one of the absolute finest. Stanley doesn’t need curating. He has a very strong, unified voice. He’ll be giving us his vision.”

That vision is about capturing figures in moments that not only reveal much of their character, but inspire the viewer to want to know more. Whether it’s a girl selling corn dogs at a fair or a young woman at the barre in a ballet class, a harried man on his way out of the house or a couple paused on a rain-slickened pathway with their dogs, the viewer is compelled to want to know more about the lives shown. “I want people to ask questions,” says Goldstein, “but they’re ones with no ultimate answers.” ■

DAVID MASELLO is a New York-based writer on culture.

**Information:** Stanley Goldstein’s retrospective is scheduled to run March 5-May 8 at the Triton Museum of Art, 1505 Warburton Avenue, Santa Clara, CA, 408.247.3754, [tritonmuseum.org](http://tritonmuseum.org).

All photos courtesy George Billis Gallery, Los Angeles

**THE HIKE**

2010, OIL ON LINEN, 24 X 35 IN.

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST