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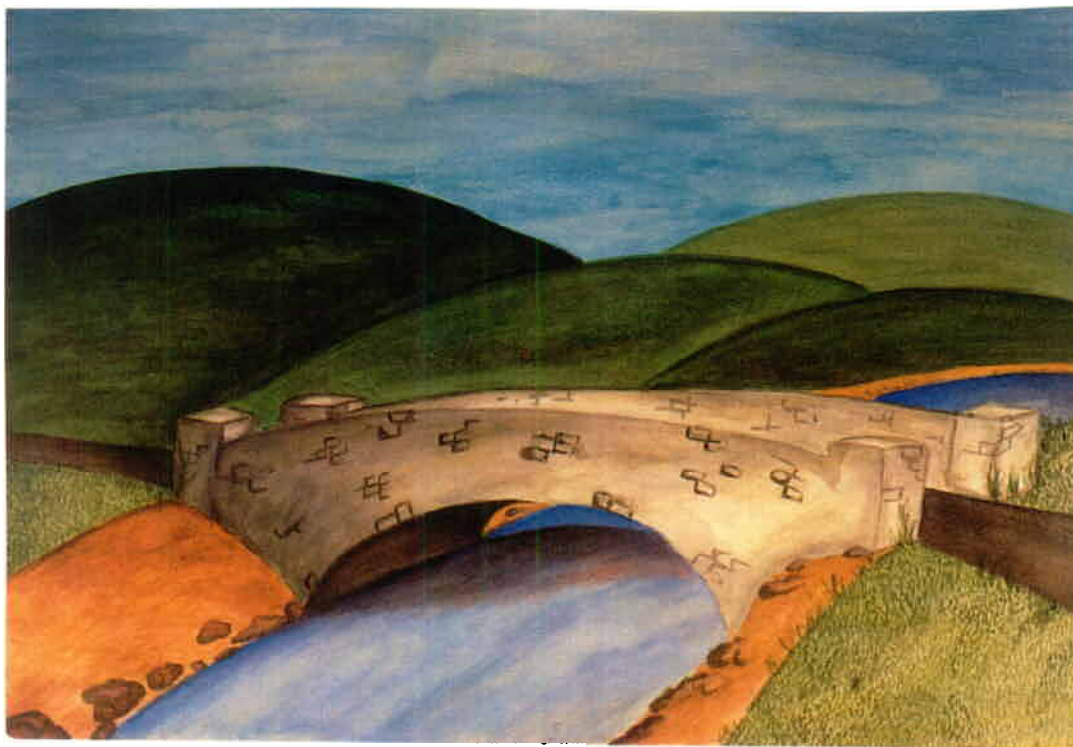
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Katherine Skowron. Spring 1998

Portraits of My Students as Young Artists: Studio Art Reflection Papers

MICHAEL F. TUNNEY, S.J.

Of course you can't paint. Nobody can paint. You just go ahead and do it anyway. It is the marvel of the enterprise that you set out to do something utterly impossible You stand there putting it on and scraping it off until you achieve the impossible. That's how it works.

—Richard Diebenkorn

Michael F. Tunney, S.J., founded and directs the studio art program and is chair of the department of fine arts at Canisius College, Buffalo, New York.

Someday I should actually run Diebenkorn's statement as the catalogue course description for a studio art course. I can hear him saying it to his studio students. These are the words of a modern master explaining the art dynamic (specifically painting) both plainly and with great inspiration. Diebenkorn's comments would certainly be a more telling summary of what prospective students would find in an art studio course than the one I typically use:

Two-Dimensional Foundations Introduction to the formal and material fundamentals of an art studio. Exercises will follow a progression through the traditional subject matters using the elements of line, two-dimensional shading, composition, and basic color theory.

Of course, in addition to this course description there's also the studio art program rationale that is worth mentioning here:

The studio art program introduces students to the aesthetic dimension of human experience through the appreciation and practice of two- and three-dimensional artmaking. The courses promote the individual's visual sensibilities through hands-on experiences with a variety of materials and techniques. The goal is to help students sharpen their critical capacities for observation, description, evaluation, and judgment, and thereby help them find a fresh perspective to enrich their lives.

Together, these two statements offer an initial response to anyone looking for an answer to the question, "Aside from making some nice pictures to hang in a room, what do you think you're doing in these studio art courses?" By way of offering a more engaging if still incomplete response, I would like to guide readers here through some musings that Canisius College art students themselves have offered in their end-of-semester reflection papers.

I have gathered these reflections over the three years since the program began. The particular course I focus on here is the introductory, two-dimensional foundations course in drawing and painting. Though the course always includes a few relatively experienced and some very talented students, most come to the class with little to no experience at artmaking. It is also worth noting here that none of these students is an art studio major. The program at Canisius, begun in the fall semester of 1995, currently serves students' core

curriculum needs. A minor in the program appears to be a few semesters away. A major has not yet even made the pages of a strategic, long-term, departmental plan.

I find four significant themes emerging from the student reflections: student-centered learning, a dawning appreciation of a larger art world, a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being, and the possibility that art can build some bridges to the rest of one's life.

Two Thumbs Up on Student-Centered Learning

The first studio class always includes the requisite reading of the course syllabus. As I outline my policy on attendance, grading, papers, critiques, and the like, I always make a point of encouraging students to "cheat." In other courses it is utterly taboo to look over at a fellow student's work or ask another student for advice in the middle of a class. In the studio classes, however, it is perfectly natural and expected. The sooner a student catches on to this, the further along he or she will be to seeing the other students as aides instead of adversaries:

When the course began, I assumed I would enjoy the drawing classes much more than the painting classes. It was to my surprise that I eventually came to love the wet media much more. During the architecture segment I watched what the other students in the class were doing. Many were using the ink pen, and I decided to use this as well. After I created a wash I took the ink pen and added detail. It was exhilarating. I merged the control and planning that the contour drawings taught me with a quirkiness, a freedom, and a smoothness that the wash medium allowed. It was funny how when I loosened up I actually felt more in control of my work than when I was tense. This is the work of mine that received the most comments at the mid-semester critique.

Studio critiques are another vital way to help students learn from one another. A portion of the first hour in every session is devoted to looking at their previous week's works and discussing them. The initial embarrassment at seeing their art hanging on the wall every class soon turns into anticipation when they walk into

the studio each Tuesday and Thursday and find their efforts ready for scrutiny. Over the years I have come to appreciate that most of their shared learning happens via this dynamic. I introduce and review terminology and lessons; they take a good, close look at one another's work in a critically supportive conversation. Operative questions include, "What do you like about this work? How was it done? How can it help your work? What would you do differently if it were your work?"

Many of the other students had very fine works. Listening to them in the critiques I began to see how I could "plan" my works instead of just hoping that a piece would develop by itself and be captivating.

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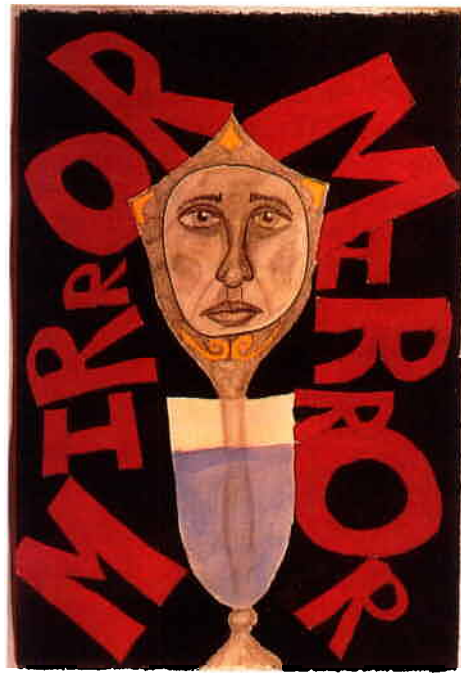
I enjoyed examining others' works as well as my own during the class critiques. I learned to become more conscious of how I look at things, to examine different points of view, and to appreciate a variety of art techniques.

* * *

As I study my early works, I can see discomfort writ all over them. I was more concerned with the outcome than with the process One thing I noted for certain was that when we critiqued, the works that received the most accolades were those where the artists had worked uninhibitedly, separated from the emotional burden of "the result."

This last comment raises an issue that I find echoes through a number of papers across the years. The end result, the finished artwork, is all one is left to look at. It has obvious importance. But it is the process of making the artwork that holds the lesson. One particularly dedicated student discovers and describes her working process this way:

Painting this semester was a tremendous learning experience. Mixing the colors was so hard, especially because as the paint dried it became impossible to blend new tones into the previous ones. So I learned how to mix a base flesh tone and then blend it into every other color to create unity in the face. I also discovered colors by accident



David Henning, *Spring 1998*

and went crazy trying to duplicate them after they ran out. Eventually I could make them at will.

The best discovery was when I mistakenly mixed forest green into red instead of purple. I ended up with a warm shadow color. After that I had a lot of success using complementary colors instead of black to create neutral tones. If the flesh tone was too red, adding green made the color fade back in space. If it was too yellow, mixing in a touch of purple mellowed the hue. Putting straight black or white on the canvas was a disaster every time.

For students, novice or veteran, the artmaking process rather than the finished result is the fastest avenue for growth. This is the point from which each student strikes out on his and her own. It is the place where patience and experience meet and get down to the discipline of making art.

Ever Go Gallery Hopping?

In addition to a number of commercial and cooperative galleries that display a variety of works in a gamut of styles, Buffalo boasts the international-class Albright-Knox Art Gallery specializing in modern and contem-

porary art. A quick survey at the start of each semester usually shows that many students have never been to the Albright-Knox and that the vast majority has never even heard of the other galleries in town. I take great delight in altering this reality in short order. With beginning students it is usually wise to give them a few weeks to appreciate some of the course's materials and techniques. But by the fourth week of class they are ripe for a trip. The Albright-Knox is not just a perfect destination, it's a downright revelation for them. Students rarely betray it in their faces and footsteps moving through the collection. But their comments in succeeding classes and the changes in some of their works are proof that they are learning a lesson or two from some of the masters of western art. Often enough their insights find expression in their reflection papers too.

When I look back on our trip to the Albright-Knox, I can still vividly picture Picasso's "La Toilette." His talent at creating both an introspective figure and an extroverted figure standing next to one another using the contrasts of cool and warm colors truly impressed and inspired me. Picasso is one of several artists I admire who really caught my attention that day. The atmosphere inspired me to feel more confident about my own work. Several weeks following the trip, I began to experiment with a variety of colors. I had grown to realize that I wanted to expand beyond just the basic black and white. I now felt inspired to experiment with a broader range of warm and cool colors, as well as to emphasize a thicker paint texture in my works. I appreciate an artist's work not just because it is beautiful or unique, but because I know I can learn from it. And I do.

When I see students making connections between their early experiments and the professional works, I know the course is on track.

One thing about my painting that I noticed: there is always a strong emphasis on complementary colors, particularly yellow and purple. When we were at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, every painting I really liked contained strong, bright colors. Henri Matisse is one of my favorite artists, and I am fascinated by the way he uses color. My preferences in art are to the visually appealing. I would never deny the brilliance of Picasso's cubism, but I like his rose period much better. It is so much nicer to look at. I have never been attracted to the grotesque.

Even more satisfying is finding a student who looks beyond a work's superficial finish to its underlying layers to appreciate the artist's working method. It's a response to the challenge I make to them: Figure out how one work is done so you can try the process yourself.

It wasn't until the trip to the Albright-Knox that I began to think differently. In examining the famous paintings, I began to break down compositions into the elements of color, stroke, and style. It dawned on me that these "masterpieces" had all undergone periods of revision and mistakes, that these final images were the products of intense labor and focus and change. I consciously decided to let myself draw, paint, or create not according to optical exactness or realistic merit, but to my own perceptions.

Whether they are aware of it or not, students are also shaping a personal aesthetic with the critical comments they make. The major masterpieces on a gallery wall have become fair game to even the novice critic's eye! Given these initial and positive gallery experiences, future visits to galleries and museums will continue to be experiences of learning and of deepening respect for cultures both familiar and foreign.

Caution: Live Models Ahead

The introductory course roughly follows the traditional, academic hierarchy of subject matters. Students work in two-week segments dealing with studio set-ups and on-site sessions in still life, landscape, architecture, portraiture, the human figure, and abstraction. I have a bias in foundations classes towards the concrete. Since much of the students' successes early on come from being able to see clearly and perceptively, it helps to have real objects before them. (One noteworthy exception is the time spent with abstraction. Still, these sessions come at the end of the course, when many students are ready for more imaginative compositions.)

A highlight of the course is when we welcome the models who will pose in the nude. Given the sensitive dynamics at work here, I make sure to announce this late-semester event on the first day of class. At different points during the semester many students voice familiar anxieties concerning the human body and sexuality that need to be voiced. There are, however, also some students who have been victims of abuse and who

anticipate great difficulties working with unclothed models. As a result, more than one student has either dropped the course or arranged to work outside of the studio during these classes. For the rest, once they are past the initial moments of seeing someone posing in the nude, they settle into some of their most productive, if not always proportional, drawing and painting of the semester.

Though I don't hear about it until the end of the course in the final critique and in their reflection papers, the students are doing more than applying the formal elements and principles of design in these hours with the models. Once again, some of their words say it best:

My favorite aspect of this course was the human figures. I admit, at first I was a little nervous about the live nudes. Oddly, I was more apprehensive about the female model. It may sound strange, but I never looked at a woman so intently before. I had never stopped to appreciate the beauty of the female body. I was much more comfortable looking at males. After all, I've done that my whole life. Until they were actually there in front of me, I had no idea what to expect. The experience was such a positive one. It was not at all sexual, but I have to say it was certainly sensual. I hope my work reflected this. It was very relaxing and peaceful to draw a naked person. I have to be completely honest and admit the older male model shocked me. I have never seen a naked old person before. I was totally overwhelmed by him, and I hope I don't seem childish when I tell you it was *hard* for me to look at him. It was interesting to witness the frailty of the human body, though. Someday, my husband will look like that. I probably will too, because I've noticed old people tend to lose most of the characteristics that identify them as male or female. I thought that out of everything we did, the human figures were the most beautiful and powerful. Does it seem weird to say that doing this made me love my own body more?

Another student compares her appreciation of the human body across two disciplines:

Painting and drawing the human figure were some of the most exciting experiences I have ever had. As an athletic trainer I have been exposed to the human body many times with respect to the skeleton, tendons, and muscles. I believed I had

an advantage over my other class mates who had not studied human anatomy. However, I did not realize that my knowledge of the human figure was so limited. I had mainly learned about physiology and the wonders of its mechanics. Painting and drawing nudes exposed me to an entirely different perspective. I now had to examine the human body as a subject and began to see the wonders of its appearance.

Yet another student describes the human figure in the language of aesthetic experience:

I must say that I was thrilled to work from life. Looking at slides of statues (lovely as they are) doesn't come close to the immediacy of a real human body whose shoulders or knees or buttocks catch the light, whose hair sticks out, whose face, cast in sharp relief, becomes heroic. Studying the models carefully made me realize (again, differently) that human bodies are amazing.

To be sure, not all students find that working from life leads them to the depth of personal insight and integration reflected above. There are those who are left decidedly indifferent to the experience. There are others who are defeated by the sheer complexity of the subject matter. And there are some who wonder "why do we spend so much time with naked people?" The best response I can offer the latter is that apparently not all two-week segments are experienced equally in time. And after that, it's time to move on.

All Together Now!

Most of the pages in students' reflection papers are devoted to commentary on their specific works. Their thoughts are often revelatory of processes and emphases not always apparent in the art. Equally engaging are their closing synthetic remarks. Here they start to articulate connections between the brief studio art experience and their own expanding life experiences. Whether or not students ever pick up a pencil or paint brush again is quite secondary. What is of lasting value is the integrative experience they have fashioned for themselves through a semester's exposure to twice-weekly rendezvous in an art studio. A sampling of their insights follow.

This class has taught me to appreciate the beauty even in such things as a paper bag. It has taught me to appreciate the beauty in architecture,



Joseph Cannon, Spring 1998

landscape, the human face, and the human figure. It has taught me to appreciate the talents of others. And although it has been difficult, I have finally begun to appreciate the talent in me.

* * *

Finally, I learned how wonderful it is to make art a discipline, to do it often and with others. Even though I feel worn out at the end of class, simply from concentrating, I feel invigorated at the same time. From the very first day when we walked in and you said, "Let's draw," I've been happily absorbed and satisfied. I think I've gotten better, and that makes me think I can get better still. I'd like to remember that hope and gratitude—Diebenkorn's perseverance and Matisse's awe at his luck—are inherent in the creative act. I'd like to cultivate a style that is loose and yet controlled (Sargeant may be a model), a vision that is personal and still surprising, a work ethic that is both consistent and forgiving. All this may well be impossible to reconcile, but at least I hope to have fun in the attempt.

* * *

One more major thing I've learned in this course is that progress is more important than perfection. At the beginning of the semester I remember questioning why this course was so difficult and stressful for me. The frustration of not being able to meet my personal expectations was weighing heavily on my mind. It was when I reminded myself that the whole point of taking this course was to LEARN that I started to relax. This is something I have to remind myself: progress may feel slow, but it's encouraging. By allowing myself room for mistakes and failure, I think I also make room for small advances and success. I guess in some subtle, underlying way this course has forced me to confront a lot of internal things like self-confidence, determination, and the reality of my capabilities. This whole course has reinforced my perception of myself as a STUDENT, as a person who is still in the process of learning from others.



Heidi MacKenzie, Spring 1998

Another student offers this insight after taking both this studio course and a United States art history course in the same semester:

I have never been a huge fan of contemporary art, but these two classes helped me appreciate it, even favor it. Prior to this I was under the impression art had to be complicated to be good. I could not understand the value of certain modern pieces. I questioned their authenticity when the works were so large and seemingly empty of subject matter. Now I really like modern art, and I love the fact it is so open to interpretation.

Regardless of what the artist intended, the viewer brings his or her own feelings, prejudices, and conceptions into the interpretation. Modern art provides the opportunity to think and evaluate one's perceptions. It challenges the viewer.

And one last remark:

By examining other peoples' works and the little worlds they created on paper and canvas, I believe I learned more about their personalities as well as my own.

An appreciation of beauty in all its daily ordinariness and human complexity; a discipline that breeds hope, gratitude, and forgiveness; progress measured in learning rather than by perfection; a clarification of prejudices and an appreciation for the limitedness of one human being's perceptions; a simple appreciation for the idiosyncratic human personalities we all have; and repeated references too numerous to quote that talk about *patience* and fun and surprise: Tell me, how would you recommend writing all this into a catalogue course description?

The following students were either quoted in the course of these pages or have works submitted for reproduction. My respect and gratitude go out to them: Joseph Cannon, Julia Caruana, Catherine Decker, Denise Feldmeyer, Sheila Fortin, Lisa Hackett, David Henning, Tawana Jennings, Jennifer Klas, Heidi MacKenzie, Adam Ryan, Catherine Skowron, Todd Wilber, and Kenneth Wojcieszek.