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TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Casting the Wide Net

As contemporary art practices encompass an increasingly broad field of strategies, techniques, and skills it is inevitable that art education becomes more demanding for both student and instructor. Art departments in higher learning institutions are confronted with the resultant fragmentation and in response computer labs capable of three-dimensional printing are erected side-by-side with foundries that have changed little over the course of a century. My diverse professional and artistic backgrounds have proven invaluable in this regard. Students are as likely to discover performative art on YouTube as they are to encounter a painting in museum. And yet, it is the common threads that are woven through the multitude of disparate approaches that bring a diverse group of students to seek a deeper knowledge beneath this widening umbrella.

My guiding goal for students is the revelation of those underlying commonalities shared by the expanding range of artistic practices which, despite their apparently disparate nature, are part of a continuum. The fertile ground of a hard-earned art education is the wellspring from which extraordinarily focused lines of inquiry may emerge, frequently the result of a heightening of some component of those initial areas of study. Exposing students to diverse strategies and methods allows them to begin positioning themselves as artists on that continuum, tangibly linking day-to-day challenges with the process of becoming an artist.

Learning by Doing

Influential designer Milton Glaser, who gave the world the iconic “I♥NY” graphic in the mid-1970’s, emblazoned the phrase “Art is Work” above his firm’s East 32nd Street door. For students engaged in the study of art this challenge becomes a mantra, repeated with each new project undertaken. In an academic environment increasingly defined by tightly focused test preparation, the studio class requires a challenging period of acclimation. In our digital age of constant multi-tasking, three hours of focused activity is akin to immersion in a foreign culture. Extrication from the constant distraction of text messages, Facebook posts and Tweets initially results in a seemingly insurmountable withdrawal. Pushing through this barrier with Freshman students requires individual attention and assessment resulting in an often spectacular shift in attentiveness that benefits all aspects of academic life.

An example of just how individual this break-through moment can be occurred working with a student-athlete in a foundation drawing course. An athletics-mandated assessment resulted in an individual meeting in which the student expressed frustration at an inability to produce work of the quality he was striving for. It was not until I approached the notion of focus in sports-oriented language that he grasped the concept (in this case, getting “in the zone”). The resultant work not

only gained an extraordinary degree of discipline and focus, the content gravitated to the exploration of focus as a conceptual anchor.

Students who have broken through the attention barrier are like the child who has learned to form words from letters. What was formerly a jumble of shapes and colors becomes a new world replete with possibilities. In my experience, these students whose eyes and minds are freshly opened are undeniably exciting to work with. The plasticity of ideas, the unbridled enthusiasm, and the willingness to tackle just about anything are traits that should be fostered throughout an academic career. Balanced with the ability to objectively self assess, this potent combination of enthusiasm and objectivity is at the heart of tenacity, perhaps one of the most advantageous traits for an artist engaged in a life-long practice.

Process and Outcome

Students quickly discover a community united by shared challenges and triumphs in the studio-classroom. Inherent in the group critique format is the discussion of process which inspires empathy, comradery, and often a healthy competitiveness. Over the course of a semester, students learn to objectively recognize successful ventures and unsuccessful experiments while constructively offering assessment and alternative approaches. It is imperative that work and group assessment occur in the studio-classroom so that students carry these habits back to the isolation of the individual studio where self-assessment is crucial. I guide and enable these discussions, gradually encouraging increased ownership by the students while continuing to add an art historical, as well as contemporary theoretical and practical context.

In addition to individual work, collaboration also enhances the classroom community. Web-based technologies can uniquely enable these engagements and break down the isolation of the individual studio, an effect I experienced when employing the surrealist “exquisite corpse” model in a web-based art assignment. Despite being physically disconnected students were able to share materials and work in collaboration using the internet and the resultant projects that were both compelling and community-enhancing. Working in teams, students formed new relationships and found commonalities that they may not have otherwise recognized.

As a practicing artist I am deeply engaged in process, both through making and looking. With the knowledge that my students are embarking on that same well-trodden path of discovery, I strive to support their process empathetically and assess their outcomes objectively. It is that life-long enthusiasm for the power of images and ideas that I hope to instill in my students. The journey, in this case, is the destination.