

Teaching Philosophy

The biggest role model for me as an educator has been my painting professor, mentor, and friend, George Dugan. Having taken his painting class as a college student majoring in Molecular Biology, I was infected by his love of art, and of *being an artist*. He spoke like no one I have ever met about the world and about painting, and put me back in touch with what I have known to be dear to me since childhood, but have forgotten over the years. As it is for many, the start of my journey as an artist was met with many challenges both from without and within, but George was always there to lift me up and reignite my confidence. His words and outlooks on life, on art and on what it means to be a teacher and a supporter are permanently with me.

I very well remember the first time I did a painting demonstration. I was fresh out of graduate school and 20 people were expectantly watching my brush. The pressure could have easily been paralyzing. In that moment, I was reminded of what is important – aside from passing on whatever techniques I can, I want to share with the students a sense of confidence and joy in this open ended, fluid process. The painting itself matters less than expressing **how to confidently search**. It is an activity of adjustment and exploration, a continuous creation and negation, not a straight path. I share the plentitude of “mistakes” occurring along the way, of statements made and amended, which gives the students permission to work like humans, not robots. My demonstration and class is successful if it conveys the pleasure of making, instead of the pressure to produce a masterpiece, and seeing the students diving into their work headfirst is most rewarding.

When teaching the fundamentals of drawing and painting, **my objective involves as much unlearning as learning**, if not more. Our perception of the world is weighted with much knowledge, clouding our capacity to see more clearly, critically, and acceptingly. Forgetting what things are “supposed to be”, and simply observing, allows the mind to return to a childlike curiosity, and have a reverence for the infinite variability, correlations, and intensity of worldly forms. Making art sets aside the need for practical logic, and allows us to indulge in being completely gullible to our naked perceptions. I strive to instill in my students this **sense of radical trust**. It can start with painting/drawing from perception and extend to a much more general trust in one’s own way of seeing, thinking and making, applicable to any kind of work.

I am thankful for the extensive technical education in painting, drawing and artistic anatomy which I received at the New York Academy of Art, enabling me to carry out what I envision. Knowledge and mastery of traditional and contemporary methods bridges the gap between the imaginary and the achievable, affording a great sense of freedom. I want to ensure that my students have ample access to this capacity, and I continuously refine the methods by which I deliver these techniques. At the same time, it is crucial for me to convey that **skill and technique is not an end in itself, but rather another tool in the toolbox** which the artist uses, twists, or doesn’t use, depending on a current need or desire. The pursuit of mastery for itself aims at craft, not art. I make sure to point even the beginner students towards utilizing the skills they gain to exploring *their art* - seeking what is near to them, is interesting, important or intimate. As they gain more ability, I transfer the structure of the projects to increasingly self-directed work, and take on the role of a supporter and challenger.

Many beginner students are often under the impression that a kind of mystical “talent” needs to be inherent in an individual in order to make art, and many believe that the gods have withheld this blessing from them. On the contrary, others who have been labeled “talented” at some point, often cling for dear life to methods that bring them security and admiration, impeding further growth. I do not see “talent” as some singular universal quality, but rather as one’s ability to allow their own innate predispositions, curiosities, and perceptions to be their guides, wherever they lead. One’s ability to listen and commit to their own inclinations, is what mobilizes those “talents”. My goal is to build in my students a knowing that **their own vision and voice is precisely the authority to be followed**. Through class discussions, critiques and individual mentorship I encourage my students to *observe* their

own tendencies, desires, abilities, and “weaknesses”. The comprehensive knowledge gained from this observation is the foundation upon which to build a continually evolving, all-inclusive understanding of the self, and one’s work.

Artmaking is a process that resides simultaneously in the learnable world of knowledge and skill, AND in the realm of the capricious, the Dionysian. I focus on a rich and playful experience of being a maker, encourage experimenting, cooperating with materials, plunging into new media, techniques, and fields of study, and giving a break to the heavily laden seriousness of the dutiful adult mind. **The process of exploration itself is the objective;** the resulting outcome is a side effect. I recall how in a class where I had the students make palette knife paintings with frosting and food dye instead of paint, I observed one student make a phenomenal piece, and then lick her palette knife with a satisfied grin. Her work improved drastically since that class (although probably an unhealthy amount of sugar had been consumed).

One challenge that I see with regard to art learning in the context of academia is the presence of the grading system. Although I understand that assessment by the instructor is an indispensable component of a degree program, I feel strongly that it creates a dynamic of the student/teacher relationship which is not the most conducive to optimal learning in this particular field. Having taught multiple workshops outside of the university, in which grading was absent, I can see a marked difference in the student experience. As an educator, I see my role not as the bearer of a truth to be followed, but as a provider and supporter. I *provide* my students with the information, experiences, practice, and knowledge that would be useful for them, and *support* them as best I can in deciphering how to apply it. The student’s role is to absorb and learn, not for the purpose of satisfying the instructor or gaining a good grade, but for themselves, to use the material for their own purposes. I may risk sounding like an idealist, but seeing students hold back in their work because they are afraid that I wouldn’t like it, is too upsetting. I strongly encourage them to explore their own interests, but in the school environment they are too often focused on what “the professor would approve of”, rather than on what they themselves want to make, since in the back of their mind they know that I am the one determining the grade. This inhibition would be absent for the same individuals in a different setting. Although many are easily able to be wonderful exceptions to this, for many more the shift from learning and making for oneself, to satisfying an imaginary authority is troubling. For this reason, over the past years I have been refining a grading system, in which a bulk of the grade is determined by the students themselves, still leaving plenty space for me to discuss it with them and make appropriate judgements about the final grade. This approach truly allows the students to turn the focus of learning back to themselves, and get great practice at gaining **a skill that is most crucial for any artist (and any individual) – self assessment**. They learn to seek the middle ground of integrity with their own work – not being overly critical, and not setting oneself a low bar either. The students receive plenty of valuable feedback from myself and their peers, but they know it is up to them to determine how they will grade themselves for each of their projects, according to their own criteria, which are by no means universal.

Expanding the students’ knowledge of their historical and contemporary surroundings, communities and cultures, forming a picture of how art has shaped over the centuries, and its currents today, conveys that **their work does not exist in a vacuum but is a way of partaking in a deeply human, ancient and vast world**. The human experience has been regurgitated on this planet for millennia. Tapping into this historical and contemporary wealth provides an immeasurable amount of free experience, a wider language to think and see with, and a fertile ground from which to invent oneself.

Art is a most fundamental way in which our species digests and expresses its relationship with the elements, oneself, and each other. It is my greatest hope that upon completion of my courses, every single one of my students leaves feeling at least a little more free, more capable, and knowing oneself a little bit deeper. Whether the student is pursuing a career in the arts, or took the class to satisfy a glimmering interest, this expansion undeniably benefits their life and world, and it means everything to me when I see my students break through various hurdles and evolve.