

Many Styles, Drawn Together

The Studio School At 40

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The New York Studio of Drawing, Painting, and Sculpture is housed in a nationally land marked building on 8th Street - a maze-like architectural wonder that combines four Victorian townhouses, mews carriage houses, and Art Deco frontage - which has always been a dynamic center for intellectual adventure. It began as Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's studio, then became the original home of the Whitney Museum. In the late 1960s, artists and philosophers (including Buckminster Fuller, Meyer Schapiro, and Morton Feldman) gathered there around the Studio School's founder, Mercedes Matter. And these days, current Dean Graham Nickson leads an Evening Lecture series, which has brought hundreds of leading art critics, thinkers, and artists to the school.

On the occasion of the school's 40th anniversary, I was asked to curate an exhibition about its history. As an art historian, my research centers around a generation of New York-based, painterly figurative artists, many of whom taught at or were even founding faculty members of the school. The exhibition, "The Continuous Mark: 40 Years of the New York Studio School," whose first part opens today, will examine the institution's history, via the work of approximately 100 faculty members and alumni.

The school was founded in 1964, after Mercedes Matter published a harsh critique in Art News of the state of current art education. She criticized art schools for their fragmented, busy curriculum, and for teaching students about "what is going on" in the art world but never actually "how to draw." Matter taught at Pratt at the time, and a group of her students prevailed upon her to start a new school based on the ideas she outlined in print. The students then took an active role in locating a space - originally a loft at Bleecker and Broadway - constructing worktables and modeling platforms, and even paying the rent. The school moved to its current home in 1967 (a move made possible through a student who died young and left her inheritance to the school).

Although the school has always emphasized working from life, and many teachers avoided discussions of content, the divide between abstraction and representation was indeed fluid and dynamic. A teacher like Nicolas Carone (who taught for nearly 25 years and has been hugely influential within the school) claims an ideal art to be "abstraction with content." Charles Cajori's "Seated Figure" (exhibited in part one) hovers at the edge of abstraction and sets the tone for the conversation around these issues. Esteban Vicente, the noted abstractionist, was also a founding faculty member.

Drop by the school this week, and you will note in the galleries work by these artists, as well as Leland Bell, Alex Katz, George McNeil, and Matter - all dating from the period - a quick course in early faculty aesthetics. In those days, Studio School students learned "plastic values": the creation of form on a two-dimensional space. The object, whether the still life or the figure, was basically an armature - an excuse - for organizing forms in space. This teaching was based on that of Hans Hofmann, who had his own school on 8th Street in the 1940s and 1950s, and with whom many Studio School teachers, such as Matter, Carone, and McNeil, had themselves studied.

In the 1970s, a generation of influential abstract artists began to emerge from the school, including Andrea Belag, Emily Cheng, and Christopher Wool. Faculty included rigorous

abstractionists Milton Resnick and Jack Tworkov. Philip Guston - another founding faculty member - was a particularly powerful influence at the school (he was making his own transition from abstraction into more personal imagery at this time). He encouraged his students to develop their own personal vision. Steven Sloman, a student of Guston's in the 1960s, became a teacher in the 1970s.

The 1980s were a time of transition. Sculptor Bruce Gagnier became dean for several years and was followed briefly by painter and future MoMA curator Robert Storr. Mr. Gagnier brought in a new group of teachers. Oprah Shemesh embodied the cultural mix of the 1980s: Her paintings take on sexuality and the body and have a European, neo-Expressionist feel. Ross Bleckner taught at the school and curated an important exhibition there, "From Organism to Architecture." The mystically inclined monochromist Frederic Matys Thursz, a faculty member who did not believe in drawing, provided a very different kind of guidance than the founding teachers. This period seemed to open up the school to influences that were swirling around at the time outside its doors.

In 1989, Graham Nickson became dean. Mr. Nickson, who is British, brought to the Studio School the influence of his own training at the Camberwell School of Art, where he had studied with Euan Uglow, who in turn worked under William Coldstream at the Slade. The tradition developed by Coldstream is based on intense observation, working from life, and employing an exacting system of measurement to scale down what the artist sees before him onto the page. The influence of Coldstream, Uglow, and the Slade - brought via Mr. Nickson and other British teachers he has employed - is a new element in the mix of teaching ideologies at the school.

Mr. Nickson pioneered the Drawing Marathon, an extraordinarily intense two-week, full-day course of study, which he has taken around the world. British emigre students have included such figures as Matthew Ritchie and Cecily Brown. The latter purportedly once complained that the charcoal smudged Studio School students didn't understand her dressing up to attend parties, yet her work displays an undeniable Studio School painterly panache.

Although Mr. Nickson's own style of large-scale, complex, psychologically suggestive figural painting has certainly made its mark at the school, there still is no single "Studio School" vision. More recently, teachers have included Rosemarie Beck, Paul Resika, and British artists Carole Robb and Garth Evans; works in the final show of this series will include these artists as well as John Walker's muscular abstraction, a seemingly alchemical abstraction by Bill Jensen, and densely painted, evocative works by Jake Berthot, Eric Holzman, and John Lees.

Teaching and painting are the two principal legacies of the school - and in most cases, the artists selected for this exhibition are actively practicing, exhibiting, and often teaching, not only at the Studio School but also around New York City, nationally, and internationally. The common denominator, in the face of diverse artistic output, is an extended tradition of seriousness and innovation; a willingness to utilize the timeless languages of painting, drawing, and sculpture; an engagement with art of the past; an appetite for intellectual adventure, and a devotion to sustained studio practice.

This is what distinguishes and marks the New York Studio School.

The Continuous Mark: 40 Years of the New York Studio School, Part 1 (1964-1971)

"The Continuous Mark: 40 Years of the New York Studio School," will be held in four separate parts, between today and May 7. The installations move chronologically through the decades of the school's history, combining the work of faculty and students and presenting a glimpse into four periods of the School's history. Many of the selected works date from the periods represented, but others are more recent. Grounds for these decisions were aesthetic as well as historical: to convey both a sense of the educational system at the time, as well as communicate the possibilities for what an artist who trained there might become.

Part one (1964-71), opening today, includes the work of founding and early faculty members, as well as founding and early students. Themes presented in this show include a group of works about the body, in the entrance halls to the school, such as George Spaventa's "Walking Woman" bronze; cutout figures by Mark Zimetbaum; Carl Plansky's self-portrait, naked in work boots; feminist works by Marjorie Kramer and Irene Peslikis; Judy Rifka's post-September 11 skeleton meditation, and Chuck O'Connor's 1968 classic Studio School style nude.

In the galleries, works by Charles Cajori, Gretna Campbell, Louis Finkelstein, Sidney Geist, and Alex Katz set the tone for discussions around abstraction and figuration, planar form, and active drawing; while heads by Earl Kerkam and Nicolas Carone examine the soulful possibilities of Studio School aesthetics.

Selecting the works for this exhibition was fascinating: it very much contradicted the idea of a unified "Studio School style." It was my own "marathon," a la Mr. Nickson, of research, interviews, studio and gallery visits. But this is only the beginning of the story.

Until March 5 (New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting, and Sculpture, 8 W. 8th Street, 212-673-6466).