

The Art of Awakening

"The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards." —Anatole France

Nicole Brisco

Have you ever wondered what your students take from your art class? Is it the technical skills, the creative skills, the dedication, or the intangibles that give an art student the tools necessary to succeed in art college and as practicing artists after they leave your classroom? Have you ever wondered what path they will take when they leave your door? As I watch my students graduate year after year, I often find myself trying to capture one last memory before they leave the nest, hoping that I have provided them with a distinctive quality that sets them apart from the rest. The following interview is my exploration of this topic with Deeann, a former student who graduated from Memphis College of Art, and is now a practicing artist in Nashville, Tennessee.

High School, Days Past

Nicole: Deeann, you were a great art student. As I recall you had a difficult time scheduling art as a ninth grader. What made you so passionate about taking art and sticking with it for your full high-school career?

Deeann: I think that you encouraging me to take art after receiving a recommendation from my middle-school art teacher is what gave me the confidence to take high-school art. But I didn't feel passionate about it until my sophomore year when we did gesture drawing. I remember you telling

me that my gesture drawings were equal with college level drawings and you continuously complimented my work to the point where I felt art was going to play a major role in my life.

Nicole: I know your main goal in high school was to stay in art long enough to create an Advanced Placement Portfolio. How do you feel this experience enriched your art-making? Can you recall a particular lesson that helped prepare you for making a body of art?

Deeann: I think that when we did a painting revolving around a social issue of our choice and had to have a process journal devoted to that one piece, I began to see how fun it was to have complex meanings behind a drawing rich in layers, filled with hints to the concept of the work. To make work that is saturated with both concept and aesthetic technique is a challenge that results in maturity as an artist.

College Years

Nicole: What a great honor to be awarded multiple art scholarships. How do you feel your high-school experienced prepared you for an art college?

Deeann: Every semester in school I had to keep a separate sketchbook for each studio class, so it was normal to have three sketchbooks to keep up with each semester. Several people,





including a couple of my professors, said to me “you must have had a good high-school art teacher” because I was prepared for deadlines with no late exceptions, was able to talk about everyone’s work in a critique, and could read between the lines on our sometimes vague assignments.

Nicole: I am sure jumping from a small pond to an ocean of art-making was very nerve-racking. I was your only art teacher in high school. What experiences with professors made an impact on your art-making in college. Do you recall a particular lesson, conversation, or technique that contin-

ued to build that foundation?

Deeann: My life drawing professor, Fred Burton, strongly encouraged being loose and messy while working. He talked a lot about the process of making the work and the importance of repetition and layering.

And Susan Maakestad, one of my painting professors, encouraged us to make whimsical mixed-media studies for our paintings outside of the sketchbook. She also told us that if we were stuck on finishing a painting that we should do something drastic to it, leave it alone for a while, and then come back and perhaps find a solution to the original problem.

Nicole: As you approached your senior year at art college I recall you talking about your senior show. You mentioned that you had to create a concentration not that different from the one you had created in high school. Compare and contrast those two experiences and explain how they prepared you for life after college.

Deeann: In my last year of painting, we had to create a twenty-piece body of work with common concepts, themes, and similar working style. I think working in a series teaches you to work repetitively and discover patterns, habits, and your strengths. I even applied this way of working to my other studio classes at the time, and my work matured in those classes as well.

On My Own and Making It!

Nicole: It is always exciting to see my student create this awesome body of work and to be able to work intrinsically. What continues to motivate you as an artist?

Deeann: The main thing that keeps me going is that I feel most like myself whenever I have been in my studio working for hours. It is hard sometimes to be in there if I am feeling out of ideas, but I watched an *Art:21* video with Susan Rothenberg in her studio and she said something that stuck with me. She said that, even if all you do is sit and stare at

your work and make one brushstroke on a single painting you’re frustrated with, you were working and you were in your studio, and that is what is important.

Deadlines are another thing that keeps me motivated. I set goals for myself and goals to make entry deadlines for shows. Since graduating, I have entered twelve shows, gotten a lot of exposure locally, and won a purchase award. One of my pieces was the critic’s pick in the *Nashville Scene* and I have also been invited to have a solo show in a gallery in Memphis.

Nicole: Looking back on it, what qualities did you experience with teachers in your life that you believe made a difference in who you are today? Do you have any advice for art teachers trying to prepare their students for the art world today?

Deeann: You know, the way you and my professors really influenced me was through encouragement. You encouraged me to go for it with my art, and convinced me that I could actually be a professional artist and not go to a normal college and end up with a mediocre job that doesn’t use my gifts. And Susan and Fred really thought I had what it took to be a working artist.

Deann graduated in December 2007 from Memphis College of Art with a Bachelor of Fine Arts with an emphasis on Painting. Her paintings were published in the *30 Day Worship Journal* in the student Bible Study book *Wired for a Life of Worship* and featured on the cover of *The Air I Breathe*, both by Louie Giglio. *The Relevant Store* represents her as an independent artist and limited edition prints of her work are available. Her work was featured in the *Nashville Scene* as a critics pick for the Untitled Artist Group Show, *Multiple Origami* in June 2008. 🐾

Nicole Brisco is an art teacher at Pleasant Grove High School in Texarkana, Texas, and a contributing editor for SchoolArts. nbrisco@pgisd.net