2024-02-01T03:34:52.692Z Michael O'Sullivan

Drawn To Art

Maybe everyone is an artist, as Joseph Beuys said, but art school might not be for everyone.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the traditional classroom, without the upfront expense and commitment of school. They go by different names: drop-in classes, open drawing sessions, walk-in ateliers. (Minnesotans, I'm told, call them co-ops.) But the idea behind them is pretty much the same -- a laid-back, flexible, pay-as-you-go setting in which to draw or paint with other like-minded individuals. Because they're often self-guided, or with instruction tailored to different levels of ability, they can be perfect for those who want to acquire the basics and for those looking to sharpen their skills -- skills that may or may not have lain dormant since college, high school or beyond.

In the past several weeks, I stopped by a few of them.

Art League School

On a chilly Friday evening in early February, I begin my rounds with a visit to a somewhat spartan studio in the low, converted warehouse building that constitutes the annex to Alexandria's Art League School. The school's offerings include formal classes and an array of proctored, but not instructed, life-drawing sessions like the one I'm sitting in on.

Joining a rough circle of seven other people (two more will eventually show up), I pull out my sketch pad and begin drawing the powerfully built naked model raising what looks like a broom handle above his head in the center of the room. After a few minutes, his timer beeps, and he changes position, accompanied by the sound of a flurry of turning pages. Tonight, in accordance with the wishes of the group, the first half-hour will be devoted to quick warm-up sketches of five minutes' duration, followed by two hour-long poses, although the sequence and duration of poses changes week to week. "Did you notice how our model didn't flinch for over an hour?" jokes monitor Joe Spollen, who runs the session, after the first 60-minute pose ends. "They've all been screened through the astronaut program."

Other than during breaks, when the model steps down to stretch his limbs and students move about the room, chatting and checking out one another's work, there is no sound but the tick-tick-tick of the wall clock and the scratching of brush, pencil, pastel, charcoal and eraser. It may be

a Friday, party-hearty night in nearby Old Town, but this group is here to work, says Spollen, who has been monitoring drawing sessions at the school for eight years.

"Sometimes a social event will break out afterwards," he says, but while the model is there, it's all business. Only a few times has Spollen had to throw anybody out, when it became clear that a couple of visitors had dropped in to ogle the model, not to make art. It's easy to spot gawkers, he says, even if they come armed with pencil and paper as a prop. "You can just tell," he says. "It's like suddenly you're in a Budweiser commercial."

As I look around the room during a break, it's refreshingly clear to me that everyone has his or her own definition of "figurative" art. Though everyone else has rendered the model with more or less strict representation, Elizabeth Frownfelter, a youth instructor and registrar at the Art League, has created a composition of abstract-looking blobs in charcoal. "See this form here," she says, pointing to one shape whose rounded contours more closely resemble the innards of a lava lamp than a human figure. "This is based on his shoulder."

Dana Ellyn Studio

Dana Ellyn wants to teach the world to paint. In fact, after a mere half-hour of watching me take notes over her students' shoulders, three of whom have gathered in the D.C. painter's 860-square-foot studio/living space on this Tuesday evening, she has cajoled me into putting down my reporter's notebook and picking up a brush. Before long, I'm comfortable enough to ignore several of the painting tips she typically doles out to first-time students -- such as how it's better to paint the background first and the foreground last -- much to the detriment of the imaginary portrait before me (which is starting to look remarkably like "The Addams Family's" Uncle Fester).

"You're about to find out why I said that," says Ellyn, a George Washington University grad in fine arts and art history who quit her law-firm job five years ago to become a full-time artist. Too late. I've already realized my mistake, as the once-crisp outlines of Fester's bald head have become obscured by globs of encroaching acrylic sky.

The artist offers several painting classes a week at her live-work condo, where the walls are decorated floor to ceiling with her boldly graphic paintings. Although she prefers a six-session commitment, attendance is flexible. One student, who tonight is working on a design of his own creation that I'll call "Turkey in a Landscape," says he skipped the last couple of sessions due, in one instance, to illness and, in the other, to "ennui." Ellyn also runs a program called Art at Work, in which she takes her classes on the road to companies and their employees.

Tonight, in addition to the budding Audubon, two young women are copying art-book reproductions: a Gustav Klimt nude and Claude Monet's "Woman With a Parasol -- Madame Monet and Her Son." (Ellyn doesn't use models. Students can choose to work from photos, reproductions, still lifes or their own imaginations.) This being the night before Valentine's Day, a nearby table holds a basket of crusty bread, homemade hummus and a bowl of red, heart-shaped gumdrops. There's also a bottle of red wine -- only for students who are of age, of course, Ellyn laughs with a glance at the American University freshman at work on the Monet, which is now upside down to facilitate painting the blades of grass.

Despite the wine, Ellyn compares her classes to a health-club membership. No one wants to exercise at home, she notes, but people will work out in a gym "if you can just get them out of the house."

Atelier Royal

With a crust of snow and ice still on the ground one day after a Valentine's Day storm and many Prince George's County homes without power, I'm a little surprised to find eight people painting and drawing a nude model when I walk into the warmly glowing studio space Gerald King has built behind his Riverdale home. Identified by a sign taped to the door reading "Atelier Royal," the free-standing structure has tall ceilings, nearly every inch of which is covered with art made from King's excursions as a copyist to the National Gallery of Art, where once a week the retired Prince George's Community College art teacher can be found rendering replicas of the great masters'.

A couple of beers stand open around the studio, which, true to its name, has the vibe of an old-fashioned art salon, midway between laid-back and heady. Minutes into my visit, King introduces me to his "celebrity guest," an Upper Marlboro painter named Grace Kim whose still life of a persimmon graces the December issue of the Artist's Magazine. Other regulars include an employee of Artex, the local art handling firm, who tonight has barely sketched in the outlines of his painting, and a government employee who's somewhat further along.

Unlike a lot of other figure sessions, King's model will hold the same pose not just for tonight's entire three-hour session but for five weeks running. That affords those working in the notoriously slow-to-dry medium of oils sufficient time to finish a painting. Those making pencil sketches, or wanting variety, simply relocate to another part of the room when they're done or choose a new body part to concentrate on.

What also sets Atelier Royal apart from most open drawing sessions is that King offers a choice of instructed or uninstructed participation. Even for those who aren't necessarily seeking the benefit of his years of teaching experience and just want to be left to their own devices, he's

ready to help, whether it's to offer a word of advice to a painter who has been coming for 25 years but tonight is having a little trouble with the model's hip, or to expound on his philosophy of the value of figurative art in a world that increasingly seems bored with it.

"I heard Gerald bending your ear on Bouguereau," one artist confides to me as I move about the room, referring to my earlier conversation with King about the French academic painter of the late 19th and early 20th century. "Sooner or later, he works on us all."

Guy Fairlamb

Coffee and Krispy Kreme doughnuts are the first thing I'm offered upon entering Guy Fairlamb's painting class in Georgetown's Christ Church, a class made up primarily, but not exclusively, of women who don't need to work -- what painter Fairlamb calls his "Georgetown ladies." (An unsurprising demographic, given that it's Tuesday morning, when many people are on the job.)

Moving from student to student, Fairlamb often prefers to step in and take over the brush himself rather than merely explain what he's talking about. "It's much easier to show," he says, adding a thin line of gray paint to the edge of a hand in one student's portrait of T.S. Eliot.

A while later, everyone stops working to offer critiques to their peers. Some are working from photos; one has set up a still life of bowls and citrus; yet another is in the midst of a series of children's book illustrations from her own imagination. There are no models here. Although Fairchild appears to have an arsenal of handy painting tricks, it's during these peer critiques, in fact, that some of the most on-point suggestions seem to arise.

"It's too chalky," complains one student of her own work, a painting from a photograph of a Senegalese woman supporting a basket on her head. "It's supposed to be chalky," someone else offers. "I disagree," Fairlamb says. Suddenly, another opinion: "You're putting too much white in your pigment," says Sidney Lawrence, a retired Smithsonian museum publicist and artist with years of local exhibitions under his belt. "I used to do exactly the same thing. It needs sharpness, more definition."

Problem solved? Until next week, perhaps.

McLean Project for the Arts

Joe Wetzel, who runs the twice-weekly open figure-drawing sessions at the McLean Project for the Arts, offers the following explanation of what he calls the "shared guidance" artists will find there, describing it as a middle ground between solitary practice and more formal instruction:

"You can sit in a room alone and paint a peach or a nude all day long," he writes by e-mail, "and then at the end of the day -- perhaps -- adequately come up with some kind of valid critique of what you've done.

"Entirely different is the access to different sets of eyes, experiences and styles interpreting the same thing as you at the same time as you. The learning doesn't have to be loud or even verbal; just the glance at that different view and interpretation of the same thing can be dynamic and unlike any revelation one can reach on their own."

During a Tuesday night visit to the art center's spacious and brightly lighted Susan B. DuVal Art Studio, Wetzel's description of that dynamic is borne out by the behavior of the 19 men and women gathered here. Some paint, some draw. Several hold small sketch pads. One works at life size, lashing with the vigor of an athlete (and a bit of charcoal) against a six-foot scroll of paper pinned to the wall. Skill levels range from the awkward to the jaw-droppingly accomplished.

For the first hour, nobody says a word, until Wetzel announces that it's time for a break. As brownies, baked by his wife, are brought out, the room gets much noisier, filled with the sound of artists mingling and looking at one another's work. Even the model, a 20-year veteran of area art schools, stops to tell me that precisely what she likes about the place is that "it doesn't feel like a classroom."

Except that, a few minutes later, break time is over. The room falls as silent as a library. Accompanied only by the sound of turning pages, everybody gets back to work.

Male Figure Drawing Group

In a second-floor room at D.C.'s downtown Warehouse arts complex -- one normally used as gallery space, judging by the paintings of anthropomorphized chickens on the wall -- a half-dozen men with sketch pads are gathered around a nude model, a first-timer who jokes nervously that his "butt is falling asleep." The sounds of opera on the boombox mute the white noise emanating from the heating system and the faint strains of jazz drifting in from the bar and cafe downstairs, where participants sometimes break for coffee and brownies.

Two of the artists work in watercolor. The relatively quick, 20-minute poses they're on at the moment -- after a warm-up hour spent on a series of one-, five- and 10-minute sketches -- are great, says one, because they force you to "learn to let go." The rest work in graphite or ink. Comments today are limited to gentle encouragement ("That's really nice") or wry self-deprecation ("This one isn't too terrible").

Begun in 1995 under the auspices of the Triangle Artists Group, a local organization of lesbian and gay artists, the regular Monday night

sessions were created as a gay-friendly "male space," according to founder Frederick Nunley, who still runs the group. What sets it apart from any other -- besides the fact that the models are always male, and usually fit -- is what he calls the sessions' gay "social" vibe. Unlike similar drawing groups elsewhere, Nunley says he strives to stay away from erotic poses. True, the composition of the group is largely gay men, but Nunley wants all who participate to feel comfortable, including the rare female artist and the occasional straight model.

When he uses the word "seductive," he's talking about the nature of figure drawing in general, a skill so challenging that when you nail it, "there is nothing in the world more satisfying."

Michael O'Sullivan writes about art and film for the Weekend section.

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