

THE TEACHING STUDIOS OF ART®: Excellence Without Rigidity

Taking inspiration from the teaching model of jazz musicians, this school features a wide variety of rotating instructors at two very different campuses.

BY AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS



Instructor Patricia Watwood conducting a narrative portrait demonstration at the Brooklyn school.



Instructor Bennett Vahnais helping a student with her plein air landscape at a TSA workshop in the Berkshires.

The Teaching Studios of Art (TSA), in New York, offers a wide variety of instructional options in terms of subject matter, style of teaching, and structure of classes. The school, founded and run by artist-instructor Rob Zeller, currently has two campuses. One is in the coastal town of Oyster Bay, on the North Shore of Long Island, less than an hour's drive from New York City; the other is located in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, an area becoming increasingly known as an incubator for contemporary art in New York City.

The rotating faculty is largely the same at both locations, but the subjects they teach are often different. For

example, instructor Bennett Vahnais teaches plein air landscape painting at Oyster Bay and figure drawing and painting in Brooklyn. Some faculty may teach a semester-long class at one location and teach short workshops at the other. Oyster Bay is the more established of TSA's two campuses, and it is situated in a much more affluent community in the heart of Long Island's famed Gold Coast. Among the facilities there are 12 individual workstations for drawing or painting from casts or still lifes, a large studio space for a class to work from a model, a gallery space, a small kitchen, and a student lounge. Landscape painters need merely to step outside to find beautiful views of Oyster Bay Harbor

and Long Island Sound, as well as greenery in nearby nature preserves.

In contrast, the Brooklyn campus is surrounded by the things young contemporary artists crave: urban decay, hip bars, coffee shops, and an exciting batch of new art galleries. The school features a large space for drawing and painting from a model, 12 individual workstations mounted along one wall, and Zeller's personal studio. One of the exciting advantages of the Brooklyn location is its close proximity to the private studios of some of the most exciting young realist painters working today. Workshops such as Adam Miller's Venetian Method often include a visit to the instructor's own studio. "Students need to see that we

are all working artists who are trying to get our artwork out there and make a difference," Zeller explains. "It gives them inspiration."

The cultures and clientele of the two spaces are also different. The Bushwick campus is attended by a decidedly younger group who tend to come from a background in art. The Oyster Bay location attracts a wide range of students, from those learning the fundamentals to those returning to artmaking after many years.

Both campuses, though, are united by Zeller's instructional philosophy, which, in its flexibility and inclusivity, differs from that of many other small art schools and ateliers. "Many art schools revolve around one artist and

his or her instructional philosophy," Zeller explains. "The Teaching Studios, though, follows a model set by jazz teachers. In Harlem in the 1950s, music studios would be rented for lessons with different musicians holding court. All the instructors were excellent, but because the maestros were constantly changing, there was no philosophy of 'my way or the highway.' That diversity is the philosophy of the Teaching Studios. We've added variety to the atelier model, and we are extremely fortunate to have such a talented faculty."

The TSA faculty are all working, professional artists, in addition to being teachers. Among the many instructors who have taught at the school are Patricia Watwood, Chris Pugliese, Adam Miller, and Kristin Künc. All are representational artists who employ traditional techniques and subjects in their work. But the instructors' artistic focuses and instructional philosophies vary, and students are free to gravitate to one or several teachers, depending on their interests and what instructional styles they respond to best. "We want excellence without rigidity," Zeller says.

This mission is largely informed by the founder's own varied art education. Zeller earned a B.F.A. from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts and an M.F.A. from the New York Academy of Art, and he studied for two years with Jacob Collins at the Water Street Atelier, in New York City. He is the winner of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant—an award not often given to representational artists. TSA was born out of landscape workshops



OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Instructor Adam Miller critiques a student's underpainting during a Brooklyn workshop.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW
TSA founder and instructor Robert Zeller maintains his own studio in the Brooklyn School so that students can see his work in progress.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT
Cast drawing is a major part of the curriculum at the Teaching Studios of Art; instructor Adam Miller's portrait demonstration in progress; The Teaching Studios' figure program in Brooklyn features one long pose for 4 weeks; the instructors rotate, but the model and pose stay the same.





that Zeller taught in New York City's Central Park in 2008. He soon after began teaching in his Brooklyn studio, and the following year he opened a school.

Like many other art schools, TSA pays careful attention to lighting and uses a combination of light sources, which Zeller believes allows for more accurate value judgments than starker setups.

The Oyster Bay studio is lit by daylight-corrected fluorescent lights, as well as a limited amount of natural light. The Brooklyn campus features both warm and cool bulbs pointed toward the model and daylight-corrected fluorescent

lights on the easels. In addition, the rooms' white walls create ambient light that leads to softer shadows and a more naturalistic look.

A key element of TSA's instructional practice is the individual workstations at which students can work from a still life or plaster cast. Each station consists of a neutral-gray shelf and backdrop hung along the wall, accompanied

by an easel and side table. Although the workstations are identical in their construction—offering students a degree of uniformity and consistency—artists are free to arrange themselves and their lighting as they wish. In this way, these workstations are much like the Teaching Studios: devoted to classical techniques but built with freedom and flexibility in mind. How appropriate for a school that strives to teach its students classical skills through uniquely individual learning experiences. ■

Austin R. Williams is an associate editor for American Artist.

For More Information

To learn more about the Teaching Studios of Art and to register for classes and workshops in Brooklyn or Oyster Bay, visit www.teachingstudios.com.



OPPOSITE PAGE
Patricia Watwood conducted a painting demonstration for students in Oyster Bay.

ABOVE
The Oyster Bay location offers scenic harbor views.

ABOVE RIGHT
Rob Zeller demonstrates anatomical structure for his portrait class in Oyster Bay.

RIGHT
Instructor Chris Pugliese demonstrates a color-glazing technique in an Oyster Bay workshop.

BELOW
Kaity
by Robert Zeller, 2011, oil, 24 x 18.

