



Bringing Old-School Fine-Art Values Into The 21st Century

BY TERRY SULLIVAN

Hollow, xxx. Copyright © Rob Zeller. Used by permission of the artist.



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hen you walk into the Teaching Studios of Art (www.teachingstudios.com) in Oyster Bay, Long Island, you enter a large, low-ceilinged room with the usual clutter of easels, chairs and shelves packed with various still-life objects. But near the back of the room, you'll find six white sculptural and fragmented reproductions based on the face of Michelangelo's *David* hanging on the wall. Those fragments are a reminder of how the school differs from others: "By focusing our efforts on training artists in traditional techniques that are sometimes difficult to master, we feel we are offering something most art schools do not," the school's website states.



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The *David* fragments reveal much about not only the school but about founder Rob Zeller, a New-Orleans-born artist and teacher. Both the faculty at the school, in its fifth year, and Zeller share a love of

classical beauty of past masters and a reverence of and respect for tradition. Both emphasize the importance of techniques, methods and concepts that date back to the Renaissance and beyond. But there's even a

more pragmatic reason, although nonetheless symbolic, for why the fragments are there: The students are encouraged to draw and paint directly from life, which includes plaster casts, just as artists in Michelangelo's time drew directly from ruins that dated back to antiquity. In short, it reflects one of the school's main objectives — all artists should master how to draw and paint from life.

THE ORIGINS AND PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING STUDIOS OF ART

Although Zeller may have a clear plan for how to impart traditional fine-art values to his students, he had no such strategy in actually getting the school up and running. At first, he hadn't even planned to start a school. "In 2007, I was offered a job at my alma mater (New York Academy of Art, in New York City) teaching cast drawing. It was my first teaching job. Then, I got an offer to teach the same subject at a small private art school in Oyster Bay called the Stevenson Academy of Fine Arts. They went out of business after their founder died. But I saw an opportunity there. I saw that the North Shore of Long Island could support an art school, if it was managed properly. So I lined up a few investors, and set about trying to create a great school."

The school runs regular classes at the Oyster Bay location. The school also has a Brooklyn location, which is also where Zeller lives. The Brooklyn location hosts mostly workshops, which are held for several consecutive days. Various classes include



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1 *Bushwicknocture#2*, xxx. 2 *Bushwicknocture#2 draw*, xxx. 3 *Cecily2*, xxx. Copyright © Rob Zeller. Used by permission of the artist.

portraiture, landscape painting, anatomy, sculpture and old master copy classes. Zeller does not require students to take any prerequisites.

In setting up his school, Zeller decided to take a somewhat different approach, particularly in the world of academic ateliers. “Many art schools revolve around one artist and his or her instructional philosophy,” Zeller said. “The Teaching Studios, though, follows a model set by jazz teachers. In New York City, in the 1950 and ’60s, music studios would be rented for lessons with different musicians holding court. All of the instructors were excellent, but because the maestros were constantly changing, there was no philosophy of ‘my way or the highway.’ Those studios were called ‘teaching studios.’” Zeller says this was not a term ever used in fine art before. “I wanted to take that

mix, that diversity, and apply it to the atelier model. That diversity is the core philosophy of the Teaching Studios.”

While it’s true that Zeller emphasizes old-school traditions, he also makes the most of modern technology. For example, Zeller recently created several online workshops (available online through his personal website, www.robertzeller.com.) “The online classes are with a company named Craftsby and came about as a result of our relationship with Michael Gormley,” the former editorial director of *American Artist* magazine.

For Zeller, online learning is a great opportunity to reach even more students. “Online learning is something that I want to move Teaching Studios into,” Zeller said. “I learned a great deal from filming the Craftsby lessons that will help me when it’s time for us to create the Teaching Studios line of online classes. I’m very careful about the branding of Teaching Studios, so I don’t want to attach the school’s name to anything that isn’t excellent.” For Zeller, online videos and education “is definitely a to-be-continued subject.”

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RESTARTING AN ART CAREER

Incredibly, the Teaching Studios of Art is only half of Zeller's story. He's also very much a practicing fine artist, although he admits that founding the school took up most of his time in the first few years. "Since founding the Teaching Studios in 2009, I have put gallery representation on the

back burner until now. The school's first three years ate up almost all of my time." In fact, he felt those first three years of founding the school completely destroyed the momentum of his personal artistic career. "But that was a sacrifice that had to be made. I had the vision for the school, and had convinced people into lending me money to build it. I had investors to pay back and had to make a new business work in the midst of a pretty serious economic downturn. It all fell squarely on my shoulders. Some things I did well in, others I failed in."

But in the fourth year, he felt like he was able to restart his career. "I regained my footing and began to make my personal artwork in a cohesive manner again. I was surprised to see that I had actually improved both technically and conceptually, despite the long

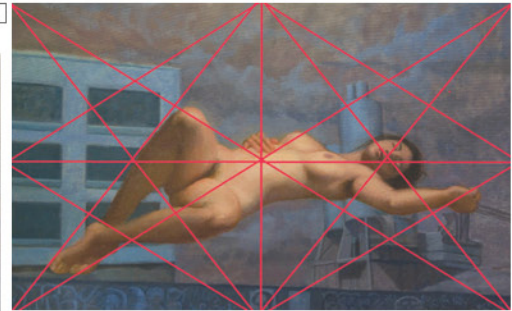
layoff. I attribute this to several factors: the quality of the faculty I surrounded myself with, the ancillary benefits of teaching figurative anatomy and portraiture helped solidify those concepts in my brain and hands, and I got to work with some of the top figure models in the New York City area. Good models make a huge difference. There is a difference between a model and a muse. I got to work with several great muses."

Zeller's paintings weave a variety of past styles and movements, but he makes them serve his own vision. "I create a passionate realism, heavily influenced by the opposite polarities of mannerism and tonalism. These are my two favorite movements in art history and both involve metaphysical/spiritual elements," Zeller says. Like many classical

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5 Cecily Bust Robedit, , xxx. 6 Bushwick Nocture #1, xxx. 7 Bushwick Nocture #1 with grid, xxx. Copyright © Rob Zeller. Used by permission of the artist.



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“ My work is about the beauty in discovering the truth of those forms, but also, maybe by a modernist influence, the disintegration of them. ~ Rob Zeller

realists, the nude and human figures play a key role in his work. “I think that ultimate truths can be caught in the simple forms of the human figure and portraits and narratives that utilize those truths. I find that I keep coming back to that realization, over and over again. My work is about the beauty in discovering the truth of those forms, but also, maybe by a modernist influence, the disintegration of them.”

Yet his love of the figure comes from disparate, somewhat fragmented elements in his past. “I grew up in New Orleans. There is a Catholic baroque quality to the older parts of the city that are like being in a time capsule. ... I grew up looking at statues and paintings of saints and madonnas and all the visual trappings of the Catholic religion. It was early fodder and inspiration to be a realist painter.” But at the

ROB ZELLER'S WEEKLY STRATEGY FOR GETTING THINGS DONE

As most working artists will tell you, life in the 21st century is hectic. As both the director of an art school and a professional artist, Rob Zeller knows that time can be a precious commodity, which is why he has to be careful with it. “I have learned the following four lessons,” he says, “and I try my best to adhere to them every week.”

1. “I find that with limited time, I have to make every moment count. So I try to love the thing I am working on at that moment. Which is not always easy. Who “loves” fall registration? Who loves website maintenance or bookkeeping?” What Zeller also admits is that at times, he has to remind himself that he loves painting. “So many factors can sap your creative drive. Like any relationship that counts, loving your vocation (in all of its facets) takes work.”
2. “I schedule at least two full studio days a week that are not violated by phone calls or texts,” he says. He tells himself to simply turn the phone off and “get to work.” In addition to that, he has two more studio days that are a mix of administrative responsibilities and studio practice. So for Zeller, it’s “two hours on and two hours off. ... I do this for about 8-10 hours on those days.”
3. Zeller says that it’s important to exercise regularly. “It gives me more energy. ... I listen to my body; it will tell me when I have pushed it too far. I regularly run and workout. In addition, I get acupuncture once a month.”
4. It’s important to also have a hobby. “Mine is guitar,” Zeller says. “I enjoy the alternative creative outlet and expression. I play in 20-minute blocks, maybe two to three hours total a week.”

same time, Zeller also witnessed how women would expose their breasts at Mardi Gras “because the crowd chanted for them to do so, or merely for a pair of beads from a Mardi Gras float in a parade going by. Then, everyone puts ashes on their forehead the next day (Ash Wednesday) and repents for being tawdry. Nudity and a bawdy sensuality were prevalent in the atmosphere of New Orleans. It was a very surreal environment to grow up in.”

This dissonance in his formative years may also have been an influence in the artists he has chosen as heroes. “I did not become a classical realist out of a love for David or Ingres,” he says.

“I honestly find them a bit staid and boring. I was drawn to real artistic weirdos like Parmigianino, Pontormo and Michelangelo. These men were into alchemy and asked deep theological questions in their work.”

You can see this tension, this weaving together of disparate elements in his paintings. For instance, in his “The Virgin of the Mall” series, Zeller depicts a nude standing in a parking lot in front of several retail stores. In his painting *Hollow*, Zeller merges the timelessness of a nude with the dullest and most un-classical backdrops. Yet the painting moves beyond just shock and humor of coming across a nude standing in

the middle of a mall parking lot. Upon closer inspection, you notice a complex interplay between two main contrasting elements: The sharp, abstract shapes of the logos, the mall’s architecture, and the yellow lines on the parking lot pavement that are visually competing with the soft, undulating curves of the nude form and the bold chiaroscuro in the figure’s modeling. The figure enhances the shallowness (in every sense of the word) of the mall’s setting. In return, the mall’s abstractness emphasizes the figure’s vitality and our connection to it. In such a work, Zeller, a classical realist, brings that classicism into the 21st-century.

Zeller said he created this series, in part, to harness all of the information he had learned and to make a bold statement. But he said a show of the work at 511 Gallery in Chelsea, NYC, bombed, selling only three out of 16 paintings. However, “I did win a Pollack Krasner Foundation Grant,” he says, which put \$20,000 in his

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Casey Baugh at BK Studio.



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pocket. “That series played a big part in winning the grant.”

At present, the seemingly tireless Zeller is engaged in three distinct bodies of work simultaneously. He is also working at trying to get representation both in New York City and in his hometown, New Orleans. The first is a series of portraits of

local Bushwick and Brooklyn young women and men. “An uncharitable title might be ‘The Hipster Series.’” A second series is of narrative paintings he calls the “Bushwick Nocturne Series.” These works, Zeller says, “feature nude figures floating, or simply sleepwalking in a dreamlike version of the urban landscape of

Bushwick, Brooklyn, the incubator of the contemporary art scene in NYC.” A third group he is working on is a series of figurative tonalist landscapes. “The tonalists were not famous for including figures in their paintings,” Zeller says, “but I wanted to try my hand at continuing the conversation they started with their dreamlike landscapes. My tonalist paintings are set in Long Island and feature full-scale nudes.”

In both his work with Teaching Studios of Art and his personal work, Zeller finds inspiration in many of the realists that teach at his school. “I am very fortunate to be surrounded by some really great realist artists involved with Teaching Studios, like Adam Miller, Bennett Vadnais, Kristin Künc, Maria Kreyn, Chris Pugliese, John Morra and several more.” For him, this community of artists pushes him, “to constantly improve. I watch them work and am inspired to take things to another level. Having that many artists as friends also teaches me that there is no ‘one way’ to be an great artist, or to make a good career for myself.” **PA**

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