

FRANCIS CUNNINGHAM

Unframing

A PAINTER'S MEMOIR AND PHILOSOPHY



ON THE COVER:

Francis Cunningham's classroom at the New York Academy of Art, 1986. Photographer unknown.

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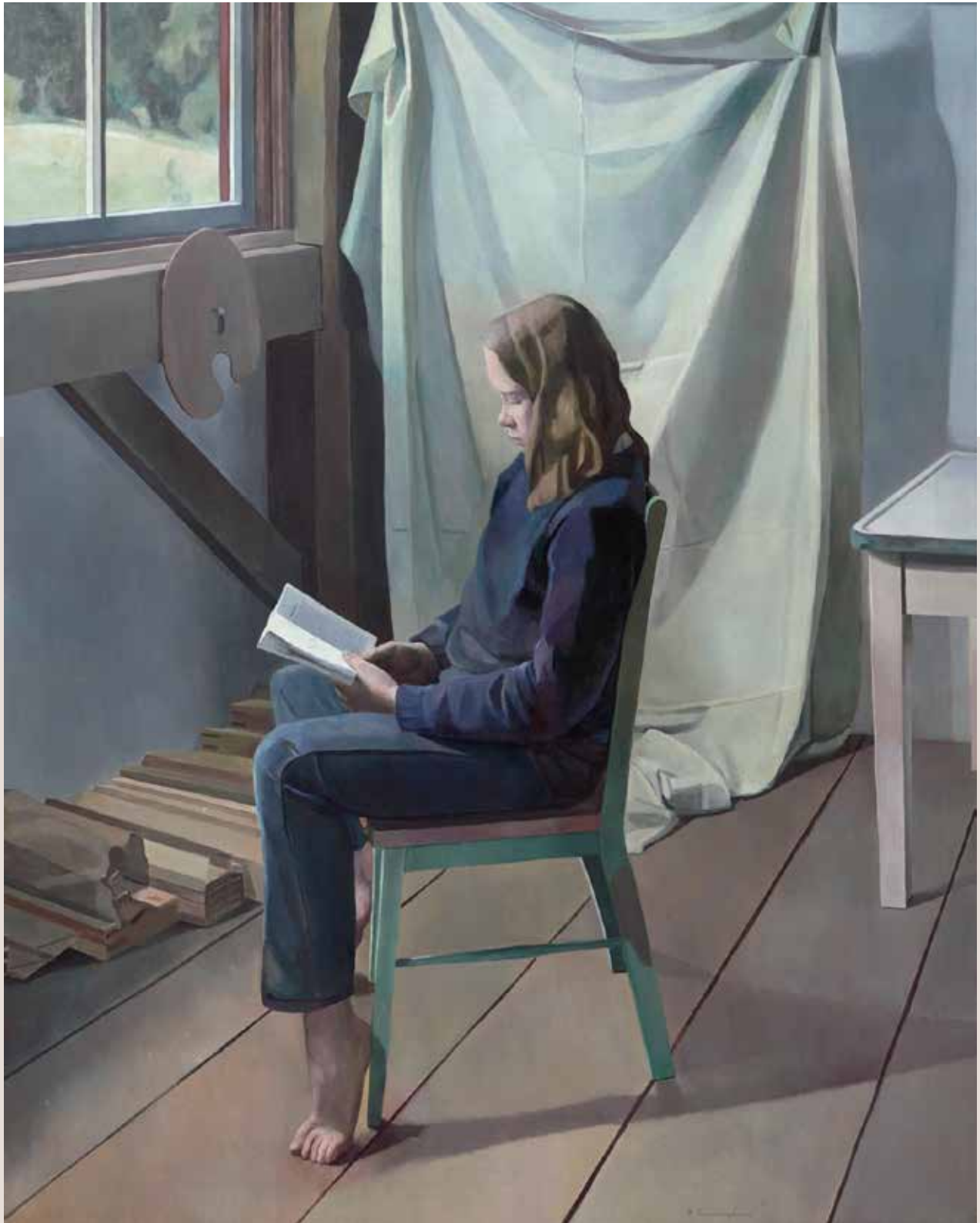
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A Daughter's Introduction



My father has been writing for as long as I can remember. In a very real sense, he's been writing the same book over and over. This one, his memoir, is distinctive because it is a memoir. I helped him turn it into one. What we had when we began four years ago was a self-published manuscript called, *Unframing the Nude*, a soft-bound collection of his pedagogical notes, lectures and philosophical essays, written throughout his career, about his approach to painting the nude from life.

In 2018, an art book publisher in Milan, Italy, named Eric Ghysels heard about my father and said he wanted to publish *Unframing the Nude* through his house, 5 Continents Editions. Everyone in the family was thrilled. Finally, there would be a legitimate book. But then Ghysels paid a visit to my father, whom he had never met, in his studio and apartment in New York. When he saw my father's work in person -- the many, many paintings stacked against the walls, hanging from the moldings, perched on the old wooden trunk in the dining room and braced in the easel in his north-lit studio -- he basically fell on his knees and gasped. "Where have you been? You are a master painter. These are brilliant. America has not been paying attention."

Ghysels determined right then and there that he would not publish *Unframing the Nude* but instead would produce a monograph of my father's work. He envisioned Francis Cunningham, the monograph, in art bookshelves sandwiched between the "C" of *Courbet* and the "D" of *Durand*. In the next few years, right before Covid swept through Milan and the pandemic put a halt to life as we knew it everywhere, my husband, Bill, our son, Thomas, and I did the legwork to present 5 Continents Editions with 180 images of Cunningham's paintings and drawings, as well as to gather essays about his oeuvre.

The monograph came out in the last month of 2019. It was gorgeous, riveting, first class. Most artists would give their eye teeth to have such a thing. By January 1, 2020, my father was back at work, re-tackling *Unframing the Nude*. He still wanted that one published. My husband hesitated to have anything to do with this renewed obsession because everything he had to give, he had given. He, along with Martin Gottlieb, my father's former student and an esteemed former editor for *Newsday* and other major media publications, had edited the original *Unframing the Nude* and brought it up to professional snuff. They both were done.

With great reluctance, I told him I'd give the manuscript a fresh read. Reluctant against wanting to make a commitment to him, in part, because he is a charismatic, passionate, impatient and complicated person whom I love with every fiber of my being and because I'd be nuts not to recognize that there were risks involved: My father can be like Cronus and eat his children. I turned the pages and was struck by how much this book belongs in the world. I felt I understood where he was coming from. I saw him. Not as a father but as a man. A man who has remarkable intellectual instinct for what lies beneath the surface of almost anything – and yet his own curious story, the one that had informed his paintings and his life and therefore mine had been tamped down, if not ignored. Would he be willing to look with me at his childhood and adulthood, the disappointments and regrets, as well as the triumphs? Could we broach his Christianity and deep faith? His thoughts on materialism and ambition? Education and dreams? Secrets and sacrifices? Death and parenting?

If I were to take on this project, one of my ulterior motives – I admit -- was to perhaps nudge him gently away from being so angry that he was not better known or more successful. I believed there was another way to look at his life and that I could use for him the same journalism skills that I had used for the biography I wrote about ballet director Robert Joffrey. I had access to boxes of family photos and letters and newspaper clips, reviews of my father's work, as well as my memories of also having lived in New York in the '60s and '70s.

My father occupied a place in the art scene at that time as a respected figurative painter. Not an easy period for figurative painters, but a booming one for dance, for architects and for artists of the abstract. He had started two art schools. One still exists. If I were to do this job, I would have the excuse to immerse myself in his paintings and drawings and get to know them well and put them into a context.

I offered to help him take the steps toward publishing *Unframing the Nude* on the condition that he would be willing to unframe himself. Could we weave in his personal emotional narrative? Could we transform an already "finished" manuscript, written by him for the purpose of describing his technical discoveries as an artist and teacher, into a more personal story with appeal to a general reader?

My father's life is guided by the same principles as his art. Knowing this gave me the confidence that as long as we were rigorously honest and open and geared toward having some fun, we might produce a compelling memoir that has integrity. The words would be his. The editing mine. (I am not a ghostwriter.) I would go subterranean and lift into the sunlight chunks of what he had buried. I provoked. Although we lived 3,000 miles apart, my interviews with him and editing sessions took place exclusively face-to-face, working side by side, mostly on paper. (He is not computer literate.) I provided him artifacts and proof that his memories were on point, and they mostly were. His mind is a phenom, while his rip-roaring sense of humor and aptitude for joy come straight from the heart.

One of these days, he will die. His painting and drawings will move down a generation to my sister and to me. And when we go, they will pass to the next generation. Then the next, which has five members already in it. A memoir is a record; it sticks a pin in how we were. We stand on each other's shoulders whether we want to or not, each generation with a separate language, communicating about beauty and love and survival to our own satisfaction so that we can share.

My father's paintings continue to blow my mind. As is true for my sister Katharine, I have lived with many of them my whole life, and they grow and grow and grow in their vitality until they almost shimmer off the walls and speak. He has sold a third of them. What will happen to those and the ones that are in university or art academy or museum vaults? What is his legacy? Why should we care? We feel responsible.

My father and I agreed to a new title, *Unframing: A Painter's Memoir and Philosophy*, and to end it with his story of the New Brooklyn School of Life Painting, Drawing and Sculpture when, in 1982, he and his co-founder, Barney Hodes, were forced by bankruptcy into a painful merger with Stuart Pivar and his New York Drawing Society. Together they produced a hybrid beast from the two schools and called it, The New York Academy of Art. More than four decades later, it is still operational and accredited.

He dedicates *Unframing: A Painter's Memoir and Philosophy* to Barney and their students because his teachers, his teaching and his schools feed his identity at every turn. You cannot separate the painter Cunningham from the teacher Cunningham from the father Cunningham.

I read the final version to him aloud. He approved and said, “Do what you want. I trust you.” Then, true to form, he started writing another book with another editor. Today my father turns 95 years old and is still taking things down to essentials. No two paintings of his are alike because the light is always changing. So too, I hope this “pedagogical memoir” will allow for and encourage multiple changing viewpoints over time.

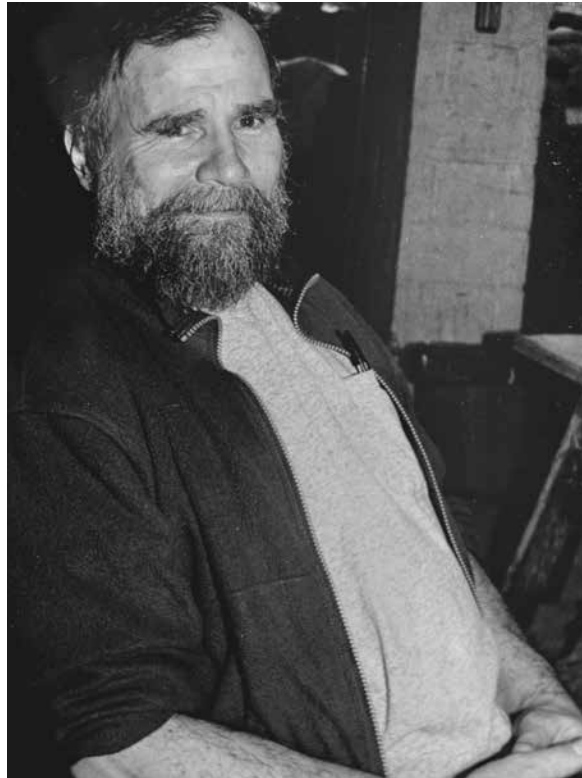
Sasha Anawalt

January 18, 2026

Pasadena, California

Dedication and Preface

This book is dedicated to the late Barney Hodes (1943-2023) and all who were students and faculty at the New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting and Sculpture (NBS). We built the school together starting in 1979 with a focus on the life-size nude in painting and sculpture. The models were the center of our practice. We did not teach or seek a singular defining style. We asked questions, all of us, students and faculty alike because we were equals in our school's rare democratic and non-hierarchical structure. Why the nude? Why life-size? How does a human being move? What do the movements mean? How does one proportion the human body? How does one deal with its color values? How is the inner life of a model expressed by the outer forms of the body?



Left -- Barney Hodes in 2002

Top right -- The author's class in 1986 at the New York Academy of Art, which began as New Brooklyn School (NBS) where the living nude model anchored the school's central purpose.

(Henceforth the author will be referred to in captions as FC.)

Bottom right -- P.S. 9 Annex, which is where the NBS first located.



We had to start a school because so much technique had been lost, casualties of the abstract expressionism and pop art which dominated the art market and schools. "Quite suddenly, the model was gone, together with the pedagogic support system of anatomy, perspective and tonal drawing that had made her indispensable," John Russell, art critic for *The New York Times*, wrote on the occasion of our school's founding, "It turned out that there was a tenacious minority that hungered after an

old-style art education, model and all, and refused to give up. That is the rationale behind the New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting and Sculpture.”

We did not see ourselves as “old-style” and we did not see living models as “old style,” either. How could they be old or irrelevant when what was in front of you to paint was a human being whose current and distinctive life revealed itself through every inch of his or her body, if you looked. Soulless plaster casts, the going trend for student figurative artists at the time, inspired mainly copyists and technicians. We saw an urgent need to teach and prove differently because no one knew what the nude should be or what it was about. Barney and I knew it was not about the gods – Venus, Apollo and the rest. The gods and goddesses of antiquity, including the neoclassical revivals that continued into the 20th century, were dead; the forms that gave them life seemed bankrupt. The models in the art schools of my time were seen as naked people, way stations on the road to making art – you could not rightly call yourself an artist if you had not had at least some experience with the figure and anatomy, went the traditionalists’ argument. But there was no art left to make in the old forms. Everyone taking up the figure was busily demolishing the old forms in various ways: Picasso, Matisse, Roualt, Klee, the German Expressionists and closer to my time and place, Hans Hofmann, Lee Krasner, Mercedes Matter, Willem de Kooning and Elaine de Kooning.

Left -- Elaine de Kooning's *Home*, oil on masonite, 17 1/2 x 14 in., 1953
Credit: Mutualart.com.

Elaine de Kooning and Edwin Dickinson were close friends and mutual admirers, as was Dickinson with her husband, well before Willem was famous. Artistically they went their separate ways — the de Koonings boldly into abstract expressionism, while forswore the gallery and commercial scene and quietly pursued figurative work.

Right -- Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, painted in the mid 1480s, in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.



Barney and I were on a peculiarly lonely humanistic quest, straddling classical ground – the Greeks, the Renaissance – and the territory of contemporary anatomy. We believed radical progress would come by moving the nude closer to real life.

The temptation throughout history in painting was either to idealize or exaggerate the physical truth of how unclothed human beings look and function. To our minds this meant there was a similar blindness toward the emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual. We wanted to create a nude who could potentially, imaginatively, stride out of a painting or sculpture and have a substantive conversation in the same room with you about things that matter to you now.

Barney and I developed techniques for accomplishing this. He, in sculpture, and he has written brilliantly about it over the years mostly in the Arts Students League's *Linea*. My technique is strongly influenced by my teachers at the Art Students League, Robert Beverly Hale and Edwin Dickinson, whose fundamentals of drawing and painting are historically American, and too often under-recognized and under-valued.

Most of us at NBS saw the need to relate art forms to one another, in my case, painting to dance and the anatomy of movement. Inevitably when the human being is your subject as a painter, you must grapple with meaning and relevance. Dance and theater had been concerned with the relationships among movement, gesture and meaning from their beginnings, and had worked out systems often in writing (François Delsarte, Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, Étienne Decroux, Eugenio Barba, to name a few), which meant the techniques could be read about, studied and passed down.

As I look back over my life's work and that of my students and NBS faculty, I feel an urgent responsibility to record what we did and learned. This includes detailing the "how-to" behind some techniques, especially Charles Hawthorne/Edwin Dickinson's color spots. It is this love of the practical that drives me to write, noting everything we figurative artists think we have discovered so that the next generation can



Martha Graham, student and partner of Ted Shawn in a publicity shot, 1925. Graham pioneered American modern dance. Striking like a thunderbolt between the world wars, she transformed our sense of the body's possibilities in motion across the arts, across the sciences and across the generations still to this day.

make progress. Landscape and still life have always shared co-equal space in my work with the nudes and clothed figures; what applies to one genre applies to the other. This has been true since I started painting at age seven. I begin this memoir with my early education and end with my final days as a teacher, paying attention to what was going on culturally in New York from 1955 to about 1985, when I taught my last class and returned to my studio, producing work for another 34 years.



Edwin Dickinson in 1950 in Wellfleet, MA, where he lived with his wife and had a studio. FC and his wife, Kitty, visited the Dickinsons there. Dickinson affectionately called her “Madame Kitty” and encouraged FC to write, because he felt FC articulated what he taught. Dickinson was known to say, “What would Cunningham think.”

Photo: from “Edwin Dickinson: Selected Landscapes” by Joe Shannon, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1980

FC’s, *Self Portrait, Mirror*, 1961, oil on canvas, 30 × 24 in., Collection of the artist



I believe the timing of our short-lived New Brooklyn School, its practice and direction had come too early. It was taken over by Stuart Pivar in 1982, becoming the New York Academy of Art and thereupon lost its original character and mission. I hope that by honoring Barney Hodes, our students and my teachers, this memoir will help lift the burden on future artists and inspire them to take up where we left off.



Barney Hodes and FC c. 1980.

Francis Cunningham
August 9, 2024

Chapter 1 *Beginnings*





FC with his mother, Marcia Winter Davis Cunningham, at around age one and a half on the rooftop of their apartment building in New York City, where he was born in 1931. On close examination, she is showing him a drawing of a figure, possibly one she had drawn.



FC, age 12, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he took his first art classes at the Berkshire Museum from George Picken.

George Picken (1898-1971) studied and also taught at the Art Students League, beginning in 1933, and it is his drawing of the building that the school used on the cover of its catalogues and materials for many years. Edward Hopper mentored him, but of possible note to FC's future, Picken was strongly influenced by the writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson who wrote, "[There are] two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing. The first implies that we move round the object, the second that we enter into it."

When I was five, I did a watercolor of red tulips all in a row. My mother had read me *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates*, which is set in Holland, and my image of Holland was of a wet and cloudy place. I painted these tulips against a gray background and felt the wetness. I made this painting and lived in it. My mother sent it to the Berkshire Museum where it won a prize for "Best Under Six." All through my childhood, in watercolor or colored crayons, or in the zoos I made out of clay or in the model airplanes of balsa wood – I lived in them. To this day it has been the same: if I can live in the drawing or the painting, then perhaps someone else can too.

My parents took me to New York for the World's Fair in 1939 when I was eight. We went to the Frick Collection. There I saw Piero della Francesca's *Saint John the Evangelist* and Anthony Van Dyck's portrait, *Frans Snyders*. The monumental dignity of the one -- a volumetric figure rendered abstract by his robes defining the form -- and the superb sensitivity of the other -- Frans Snyder's face and hands, a particular kind of hand, with more vitality and sensitivity than I had known possible, overwhelmed me with such excitement for composition and color that on that day in all innocence I knew what I wanted to be doing. If this was civilization, I said to myself much later when I fully understood epiphanic weight of what had happened, I want in.

My mother, Marcia Winter Davis (Cunningham) (1902-1981), supplied me with water colors. She had studied seriously at the Boston Museum Art School in the mid-1920s, taking classes with her friend, Polly Thayer (Starr), who she asked to be my godmother after I was born. When Poley -- which is what I called her as a child and the nickname stuck -- gave me to my first set of oil paints at age 12, I took to it, painting whatever was around me: still life objects and fruit, a horse-drawn wagon, and the hay barn that was next to our house in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Old Man Peck would harness two Belgian work horses, Fred and Nelly, to this wagon every day and go uptown, collecting miscellany along the way and leftover edibles from the grocery stores for his pigs. I'd paint them out of my head.

For two summers, starting at age 12, I was enrolled in a painting class at the Berkshire Museum with George Picken, who had a house in Tyringham and was also the painting instructor at Columbia University. These summers were miracles of discovery. We painted some still life but mainly we went to different places in Pittsfield: Pontoosuc Lake in Lanesboro, an old barn, a brick factory with a high chimney beside

a tree-lined canal. Picken had a real and helpful effect on me. I learned to draw strength from a place, to like localism.

FC's JUVENALIA,
AGE 7 TO 16
Clockwise --

Top left-- An imagined clipper ship.
FC's earliest extant painting, water color,
1938. Collection of the artist.



Top right-- Mill near Lake Pontoosuc,
oil on canvas board, 24 x 18 in., 1946.
Collection of the artist.



Bottom right -- *Oranges*, oil on canvas
board, 24 x 18 in., 1947. Collection of
the artist.



Bottom middle -- Still life painted in
George Picken's class at the Berkshire
Museum, oil on canvas board, 20 x 16
in., 1946. Collection of the artist.



Bottom left -- *Bridge, Merle Graves' Land*,
oil on canvas board, 24 x 18 in., 1946.
Collection of the artist.



One day something happened while I was weeding in our vegetable garden. It came to me as a feeling, a kind of foreknowledge that there was a profound difference between painting as a pastime and painting professionally -- and that I was headed down a road for which I would pay a steep price. It was a powerful premonition. I had seen master painting in the Berkshire Museum and in New York and had it in mind, and then there was my mother and genetics. Years later I saw her tonal drawings of live models from the Boston Museum School. They swept me off my feet. I had no idea she had done such work and had such natural command of the reality of form. She had hidden these drawings, repressed them. While my godmother had won every award, my mother received no support or encouragement. Said Poley years later of my mother, "I don't think she ever took [drawing and painting] seriously. She put herself down, and thought art was an awful life."

My mother left art school, went to New York, worked in various jobs, met my father, a lawyer, Francis de Lancey Cunningham, married him in 1928 and three years later had me. We soon thereafter moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, mainly for my father's health, which had never been good; he had had tuberculosis as a young boy (as had his mother who died of it when father was ten) and never returned to full strength. The financial panic that absorbed much of the world by the time of my birth, affected my parents who had taken in my mother's mother and, in time, would effectively adopt my younger cousin, Maudie. My father, who had been editor-in-chief of the *Columbia Law Review*, started his own law practice in Pittsfield; he paid the secretary, but not himself, and did a great deal of *pro bono* work for people who could not afford representation.



FC's MOTHER'S DRAWINGS

Charcoal drawings by Marcia Winter Davis, FC's mother, made during her time at the Boston Museum Art School before moving to New York City. Note the jockstraps on the male model and how the female model is covering her face with a jar. Only by the 1960s, when the jocks come off the male models in American art schools, was there full acceptance of the human model as a human being. Until then they were objectified. Private collection.



Although they themselves had both grown up with a hefty measure of financial comfort (especially father), my youth was by comparison chaste. I have recently found letters and files of my father's, discovering in them financial information that let me know how close to the bone we sometimes were. That said, a long line of early American ancestors, beginning on the Cunningham side with a minor nobleman, the French Huguenot, Étienne de Lancey, paraded through the background of our family in portraits, including one by Asher B. Durand of Lavinia de Lancey.



Left -- Three generations of de Lancey Cunningham men: FC's grandfather William de Lancey Cunningham (b. 1859), holds Francis de Lancey, Jr., (b. 1931) and FC's father, Francis de Lancey (b. 1892), squats to make eye contact.



Right -- *Portrait of Lavinia de Lancey* (1831-1909) by the well-known American painter, Asher B. Durand. Lavinia was FC's great grandmother.

Étienne de Lancey had fled to the British colonies in 1786 with the family jewels sewn into his coat hems and when he settled in Manhattan, he turned those jewels into a considerable fortune as a merchant and then caught the attention of the even more wealthy Anne van Courtland. They had three sons (James, Oliver and Peter), all three of whom fought in the American Revolutionary War, entered politics and to varying degrees shaped New York City's governance.

My parents, their natures, their character, were self-effacing, humble, given to empathy and a deep conviction that nobody was better than anybody else. They were both Episcopalian. They cared about the underdog and went out of their way to help people who had been wronged or were suffering.

I remember one time when my parents stood by Mrs. Noxon and her eldest son, Johnny. Her husband had been sent to jail, sentenced to death for electrocuting and killing their youngest son, who had Down Syndrome and was six months old. My parents thought Mr. Noxon was probably guilty but that it had been a “mercy act,” and that this was no reason for people in the community to ostracize his wife and other son, who were completely innocent. After seeing their neighbors and others turn their backs on Peggy and Johnny Noxon, my parents reached out and took them into our home, looking after them for a long period of time.

They also had empathy for Mr. Noxon, the father, because he had been gassed in World War I and suffered terribly from it, in addition to which he had contracted polio. A Harvard-educated lawyer, John F. Noxon was notoriously unpopular with fellow lawyers. In prison at Massachusetts State penitentiary, he became the head librarian and, incredibly, Malcolm X would later write about Noxon, appreciating him deeply for guiding him toward certain books when he, too, was serving time in the same prison. After two years of doing time, Mr. Noxon was pardoned.

FC circled in a photo of the one room Morehead school house, published in the *Berkshire County Eagle*, September 7, 1938



My parents raised me from age six to 24 on South Mountain Road, -- a country road where Protestants, Catholics and Jews, Whites and Blacks, upper, middle and working class lived. I think about South Mountain Road almost every day to this day; I breathe its air and remain close to the friends I made there until our dying days. The Black kids were subjected by law to a segregated public school education. Everybody else on South Mountain

Road went to the one-room schoolhouse, Morewood School, for first and second grades. Miss Whelan taught us. It was reported she had a whip in the woodshed, but no one ever saw it. We loved her. We played football together in the fall, baseball in the spring and sledded or skied in the winter. If anyone cheated, we took care of it ourselves. We stayed together through Redfield grammar school and Plunket Junior High.

My mother's father, Charles Thornton Davis (1863-1936), founded the Land Court in Massachusetts that set the pattern for the Land Court for the rest of country; he was its first Chief Justice. My father had also once nearly been appointed a district court judgeship in Massachusetts (he had turned it down, because, he said, he recognized his inability temperamentally to make the kind of absolute judgements required of a judge). Grandpa Davis's half-sister, Mary Sewall Gardner, (1871-1961) founded the National Organization of Public Health Nursing and spent the war in Italy as a chief nurse on the American Red Cross Tuberculosis Commission. She wrote the textbook for public health nursing that was translated into 33 languages and was asked to serve on the Hoover Commission to Europe after the first world war.

My point is that jurisprudence and public service mattered in my family. I was expected to have a career and to be independent like them. I knew what I wanted to be. Yet the more I revealed my commitment to painting, the more my mother pushed back. My father felt he did not know enough about painting to have a position on it. He was a gifted photographer who was exceptionally modest about his eye for composition. He was also a hunter, who spent time in the forests and woods alone and understood the animal in human being's actions. He knew there was a limit to how much he could control my natural curiosity or passion to paint.

For her part, mother believed in firm discipline and in being honest. I recall being 13 or 14 and talking with her beneath the English walnut tree in our front yard. She said, "Well, you're not going to be a Michelangelo." That stung. It was years before I could answer that, "No, I was not going to be and did not want to be Michelangelo." In the first place I am a tonal not a linear draughtsman and furthermore, my circumstances in Pittsfield in 1944 were certainly not those of Florence, Italy, in 1500.

We tussled gently back and forth over these issues of painting and yet, to their credit, my parents always took me to art classes and went out of their way. By age 14, they allowed me to go to New York City by myself and stay with my grandfather, William de Lancey Cunningham. Widowed at an early age, he lived in a brownstone at

332 West 77th Street, off Riverside Drive, and I remember him fondly, as well as his sister, Aunt Bessie. They gave me freedom.

My purpose in New York was to visit the galleries on 57th Street, which I did solo. Over time, the dealers became accustomed to me and openly appreciated a young person interested in contemporary art. Some invited me to see the works of the artists they represented that they kept in the inner sanctums of their offices, hidden from public view. I spent days looking at contemporary art in galleries like this and days, as well, at the Museum of Modern Art. I had an affinity for Georges Braque and trouble with Picasso. My eye was figuring out what resonated, what to use, and how to approach painting on my own.



Ben Shahn gave this drawing to FC at this time. You can see on the lower left corner where he inscribed, “To Dick,” which is the nickname FC goes by. The drawing is after a photograph Shahn took of a field worker during his time as a Farm Security Administration employee with his good friend, Walker Evans, the eminent photographer. This was when the government paid photo-journalists to document the harrows of the Great Depression on Americans.

When I was 16, the Boston Museum School came to Pittsfield for a summer session at the Berkshire Museum and my parents let me attend. Ivan Mestrovic taught sculpture and Ben Shahn taught painting. I was easily the youngest person in the class that included many war veterans. On the first day, I saw my first female nude -- a woman of about 40, standing on a platform in a robe which quickly dropped and the next minute she was naked. My surprise lasted no more than a minute, replaced by the complexity of trying to put down on a sheet of paper what was in front of me. Later, Shahn would remark that everyone was drawing this person and that no one had drawn what he thought distinguished her – the little silver cross hanging from her neck. I have held onto that remark because I have never believed that an accessory, be it jewelry or a tattoo, alone defines a person. For some painters it does, Shahn was one and I although I have immense respect for his work and gained from it, fortunate as I was to meet him this early on in my life, I did not agree.

One day, Shahn invited all of us to submit work for criticism. I brought in eight or ten paintings on canvas board and lined them up on the floor against a wall. Shahn scrutinized them and the next thing I remember was him exclaiming, “Where do you live?” “South Mountain Road,” I answered.

It turned out that Shahn and his family were staying at the Caldwell’s farm about a mile from my house. Knowing this, he threw me and my paintings into his convertible and we tore down South Mountain Road and into our driveway. Upon meeting my parents, Shahn did not hold back. “He’s got to go to art school,” he urged, “the sooner, the better! Skip college!”

My parents' response was a mixture of pride and surprise and sheer agony. What I hadn't quite appreciated then is that my mother had already seriously considered being a professional artist herself, but had sacrificed that dream after thinking it through (the social stigma, financial insecurity, rejection, not living up to your own gifts, to name a few). Bottom line: She was probably scared for me. I saw her concern as a lack of faith in me, even though I had plenty of evidence to the contrary -- about everything else but painting.



Anthony van Dyck's
Frans Snyders, ca. 1620,
Oil on canvas,
56 1/8 × 41 1/2 in.
Courtesy of The Frick Collection;
Henry Clay Frick Bequest

Piero della Francesca, *Saint John the Evangelist*, c. 1454–1469, tempera on panel, 52 3/4 × 24 1/2 in., The Frick Collection, New York

Once part of a much larger altarpiece created for the high altar of the Augustinian church in Sansepolcro, Italy, the Frick Collection, purchased it in 1936.



Over the summer, she, father and the Shahns became tight friends. Shahn's wish that I go directly to art school was not going to happen; my mother did everything she could to discourage me. She wanted me to go to Harvard. [Shahn](#) would offer to continue to counsel me if I went to Princeton where he taught, but I felt that much as I admired him and the humanity in his work, what I cared about (Piero's *Saint John* and Van Dyck's *Frans Snyders*) did not coincide with his linear technique or social realism. These were not thoughts, but feelings and intuitions. I would act accordingly.

Over the next year, many heated discussions between my parents and self were had. These two letters, which I discovered only recently, were written by my mother to my godmother, Poley, and capture the substance and quality of our family dynamics.

Excerpted for relevance, I nonetheless quote my mother at some length because I believe part of any artists' makeup, whether they want it to be or not, is a visceral response to their parents -- be they vocal or silent, present or absent, informed

Polly Thayer's portrait of Marcia Davis Cunningham painted around the time of these letters.
Private collection.



or blind, sympathetic or judgmental, well-off or struggling.

Reading these letters for the first time late in life, I recognize that my mother was as honest with me face-to-face as she was with Poley in her letters. Mother withheld nothing; she didn't prevaricate or hide her logic. I respect and love her for not softening to spare me, damning me with praise as she does.

Marcia Davis Cunningham's letter to Polly Thayer Starr on December 8, 1948

My dearest P,

The more I think of Dick's being an artist, the more my heart sinks. And my dearest P, how many times have I heard you say the artist cannot even fit into any Christian way of life. Surely the good artist cannot be a very good person or citizen just because he must be selfish and self-centered and put his work and his creative needs before anything else, his wife, his children, his friends, everybody and everything.

If Dick were a queer sort of genius, if he would have nothing to do with anybody or anything outside of his artist's field, I would perforce say that is that, but, to quote what was written about him in the school paper, when he was chosen as co-captain of the St. Paul's School football team (they wrote up why each member of the team was picked):



Father and son. Francis Cunningham, Senior., was called “Frank.” Junior went by “Dick.” They were both only children and shared a humanistic approach to life.

FC’s father drove him many miles to see art shows and meet with eminent museum administrators, including James Thrall Soby, (1906-1979), who was a friend of Ben Shahn’s and collected his work. During the time, of FC’s visit, Soby was chairman of the Museum of Modern Art’s department of painting and sculpture. He lived in New York City and Norwalk, Connecticut. Curator, scholar, author and an important collector, Soby helped spread the word about Surrealism with an exhibition he curated at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, where he also organized the first ever retrospective of Pablo Picasso’s work in 1934. He and Alfred Barr, founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, were also close friends.

“Cunningham — although handicapped by lack of weight, he more than made up for this by the aggressiveness of his defense line play, his ability for quick diagnosis of plays, and his hard tackling. A conscientious and hardworking leader, never discouraged, and always eager to try anything to improve his own or his teammate’s play; a player of tremendous competitive spirit.”

Now doesn’t it seem as though some of these qualities should remain in action and not be lost in self-absorption or a very faintly possible masterpiece?

Much love dear P, and write me soon.

Dove [Poley’s petname for my mother]

This next letter was written after I had agreed to a compromise of attending college for one year.

Marcia Davis Cunningham’s letter to Polly Thayer Starr on January 10, 1949

My dearest P,

As you must know, I have been very torn for I understand his [FC’s] point of view better than he thinks I do. However, it is only fair to give you, as well as Dick, a clear picture of the other side, which is not very different from Dick’s, though I’m afraid he thinks so.

For the past four summers he has done what he most desired. The first two summers painting with [George] Picken, the third at the Boston School here at the Berkshire Museum, and last summer in Europe. His friends and contemporaries here all had jobs of one sort or another and were bringing in some pleasant financial aid to their own families’ pockets. However, we not only forked up for the lessons, trip etc. but we put no opposition in the way of his choice and Frank [Francis Cunningham, Sr., F.C.’s father] bent backwards in trying to be sympathetic about the painting and wearily drove him miles to see Mr. Soby etc.

Frank even went to bat with the powers that be at St. Paul's to get them to allow Dick to get off for exhibitions and to have more free time for painting. Naturally, Frank would much rather have had Dick either working in the summers or going fishing or shooting with him, but he made no moan. When it came to the question of chucking college for art school, Frank was more than distressed but still did not lay down the law and indeed has consulted with everyone he could as to the right thing to do.

Practically everyone including the Rosenfelds and Ben Shahn were agreed that Dick should at least have one year of college that he might at least know what he was discarding, and Ben said those eight or nine months out of his painting life could not possibly hurt him as an artist. This compromise of one year seems to me so reasonable and so little to ask of Dick that I am dismayed at his kicks about it.

Of course, it bears out my feeling that the artist is and, alas, must be an unreasonable and completely selfish person who must follow his desires and career at all costs.

It is no use saying, "You are wrong, look at so-and-so." So-and-so lost ground as an artist every time he compromised, I'll bet my last dollar. For Dick to have painting as a real part of his life, as music is Jay Rosenfeld's, would greatly enrich it, but how could any parent want his child to embrace it as a career?

He has many qualities, as well as interests that are sorely needed in the world today and I hate to see him throw everything aside on the very off chance that he become a truly great artist.

Don't try to tell me he can be both. I believe Ben Shahn's painting at the moment is suffering because he is concerned with social injustice and because he is too considerate of his family. To be sure, this makes him a nicer and finer person but it doesn't make him a better painter. I don't believe Dick can give up what he is or what a good part of him is for Art and I cannot see anything but great unhappiness for him in the struggle. He may

suffer much now in not doing what he wants to at the moment, but I doubt if it will be as bad as what would come in the future.

However, if it is to be, we won't try to hinder it with parental or financial opposition. This vacation Dick began to say, "if I go to college." And after Christmas apparently accepted the one-year plan.

I must turn into bed now, darling. This is a long screed that doesn't half get to first base but I can't do more now and you must be tired of it. Write me what you think and don't put on the gloves. We have never had to do that, have we?

Much love, dear Cat, always from Dove
[Cat was Poley's petname]

Without apparent provocation on our part, Harvard presented me with a plan whereby I could go to the Boston Museum School at the same time as attending Harvard and graduate from Harvard in six years. But I knew in my bones that the Boston Museum School was not right for me. If I was going to college, I'd go on the standard four-year plan. At Harvard, I did no painting. It was for me an uncreative place and antithetical to painting. It did not even have an American art history program, presumably because American art was not worth studying, let alone making. As I had been in high school, I was quiet. I was still. I put painting on hold. I waited. It's hard to imagine this as I write it, that from 1947 to 1953 -- for six years -- I lay dormant as a painter. I never gave up wanting to join the walls of the Frick and be part of the civilization I saw in Piero and Van Dyck. I never felt I wasn't going to get there.

I remained at Harvard for four years, frequently changing my major starting with Renaissance History & Literature to 19th Century History & Literature to, in the end, Fine Arts. The program was affiliated with the Fogg Museum, which meant paintings and drawings were at hand, as opposed to reproductions. I would write my senior thesis on the English period of Van Dyck, at the suggestion of Robert Wark, my thesis advisor -- and later the director of the Huntington Library and Galleries in San Marino, California. Wark was a Canadian with a background in history and mathematics before turning to art history. He brooked no nonsense. I received a *magna*

cum laude and there was some enthusiasm for me to go into art history as a profession. Wark facetiously said, “you don’t want a scholarship to Princeton to study art history, do you?” He knew me. I could no more have been a scholar any more than I could have been a lawyer. I was a painter.



A plumb is a weight that, when attached to a string, pulls gravitationally toward the earth’s center and defines an absolute vertical line. In class, Dickinson used a nail for the weight.

I did not know then that I had experienced the plumb in its moral dimension well before I would know it as a nail hanging from a thread in Edwin Dickinson’s class at the Art Students League. Every person has their own built-in moral plumb line, their own world vertical. Listen to this and do not go off on a tangent. If the plumb says no, that means no; if it says wait, wait. Don’t let yourself be pulled off the plumb by the many who will give you sincere and loving advice. For me that meant no to a life in academia. I heeded my inner voice and accepted that I’d still have to wait some more before going to art school.

The Korean war was in full swing as our class graduated from college. We all knew we were headed for the military and a small group of us decided on the Marine Corps, choosing to spend 21 months as officers rather than two years as privates in the army. On completion of training, I was sent to an outfit that coordinated close air support with the infantry. I became the embarkation officer of that outfit and they said in 30 years they had never seen an impressive fitness report such as mine. I worked hard and exceeded at getting men and equipment on and off combat ships (LST’s).

There is a saying “once a Marine always a Marine”. There is a part of me that is a Marine today and will be a Marine when I die. That part of me knows full well that Mars, a god of tremendous force -- who is male in antiquity and as we now know through the Israeli Army, also female -- cannot by human means be reconciled with peace. The attempts of the human race to do so have resulted in nothing but abysmal failure and will continue to do so as long as we look to human nature to create a revolution from a goal of death to one of life.



Capt. Francis D. Cunningham, Jr.,
Marine Air Control Squadron 26 in
Beaufort, South Carolina.

I would not fully conceive of a source powerful enough to accomplish this until I reached the age of 93. That is a long time, a lifetime of painting, looking, thinking and doing. It has to do with the flesh. I wonder if there is anyone alive who has spent more hours than I have contemplating and painting flesh. For all those years I have had a profound quarrel with St. Paul over the word “flesh” as it appears in his Epistles. This word I have always understood to be placed by Paul in opposition to

the spirit – the sins of the flesh, the lowly flesh. My entire life of looking and painting has been given to finding exactly the opposite – two entities, flesh and spirit, in one body, never to be separated in life or placed in opposition to one another, however dysfunctional the human being may appear to be. But I have discovered through reading Fleming Rutledge’s astonishing book, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, that what was originally translated as “flesh” is closer in meaning to what we call “human nature.” In Paul’s meaning, it is human nature that is opposed to the spirit. It is human nature symbolized by the word “flesh” that is inherently sinful – the original Sin – from which not a single human being escapes. St. Paul is radical: sin involves everyone, the righteous along with the ungodly. Mrs. Noxon along with Mr. Noxon. This profoundly alters the contemporary meaning I gave to “flesh”. In reading St. Paul, with this newly expanded understanding, the requirements for what my eyes have seen all these years is met.



FC's MARS and APOLLO

Left -- *Cathy*, oil on canvas, 106 x 48 in., 2000-2001. Collection of the artist.

Right -- *Ramon*, oil on canvas, 106 x 48 in., 2003-2004. Collection of the artist.



If I was thrown off by a mistranslation, how many others have been also? How many of us associate nudes with sin? Flesh as an inherently anti-spiritual subject? These ideas are part of Judeo-Christian heritage and they have dominated European and American cultural identity for centuries. This problem with translation is not altogether surprising. Anyone with a knowledge of Greek beyond the most rudimentary level knows that words in Greek have multiple meanings and the richness of the language expressed in the poets and dramatists lies in these shades of meaning. Not English nor any language can adequately cope.

To me, this is not idle history but an intensely alive present -- a “now”. There is nothing like making peace after a fight. From quarreling with St. Paul, I have come to love the man. He is incorrigibly feisty. He never accepts no. He speaks out for truth from a complete devotion to communicating to his listeners – Romans, Galatians, Corinthians, Jews (which he was) and Gentiles. For this he would pay with his head, in Rome.

If you are wondering why I am including this exegesis and credo now in the first chapter of my memoir instead of placing it comfortably and chronologically at the end, it is because I have approached painting through my eyes, not through religion or any system. If you understand this you may comprehend how the force generated by St. Paul lands on me like a bombshell, clarifying and confirming the evidence of a lifetime of looking and painting. So much for the meaning of the word “flesh”.

What I am saying about figurative painting today is that what and who we are, where and how we live, which tools and clothing we use, is there to be seen, when our eyes are open and the mind with its judgements keeps quiet. Why clutter up the experience of what we see with the trappings of the past, the glories that were Greece, the idealizations of the Renaissance? Unframe it, see it in its manifest presence, see the nakedness of beauty in its truth without adornment, see it and not what you think of it.

What St. Paul does for me is confirm the truth of what my eyes have seen -- the shock of seeing something when the painting nears completion that was unexpected, unsought for, but true.



FC and Kitty Spalding "smitten" at the Miss Hall's spring dance, 1949. Maude Davis in white is seated beside FC. (Photographic detail)

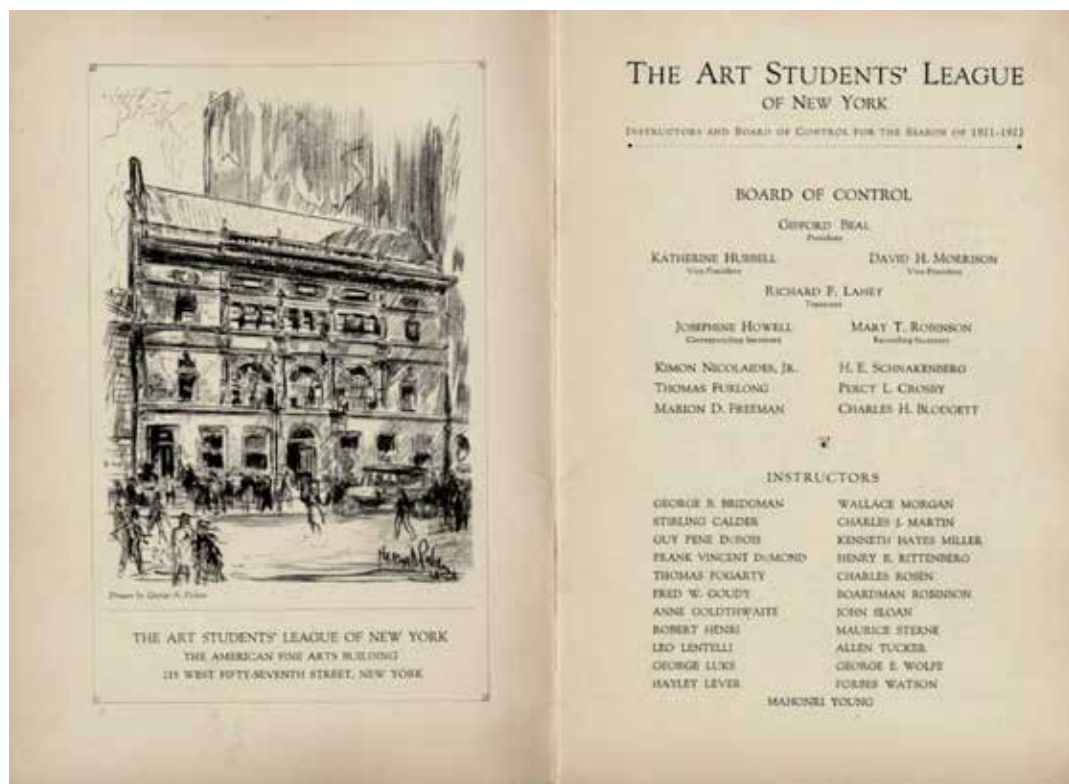


Wedding photo of FC and Katharine Ames Spalding in 1954, North Easton, MA.

To return to the narrative, I would be married in 1954 while in the Marine Corps to Katharine Ames Spalding. Kitty and I had met at the Miss Hall's School spring dance in Pittsfield, when I was a junior at Harvard. I had been invited by my cousin, Maude Davis, who had grown up with me during the war in our house. Maudie, as she was called, eventually went to Miss Hall's, a girl's boarding school, and thought I would very much enjoy meeting her school friend, Kitty. She was right; I was smitten from the start.

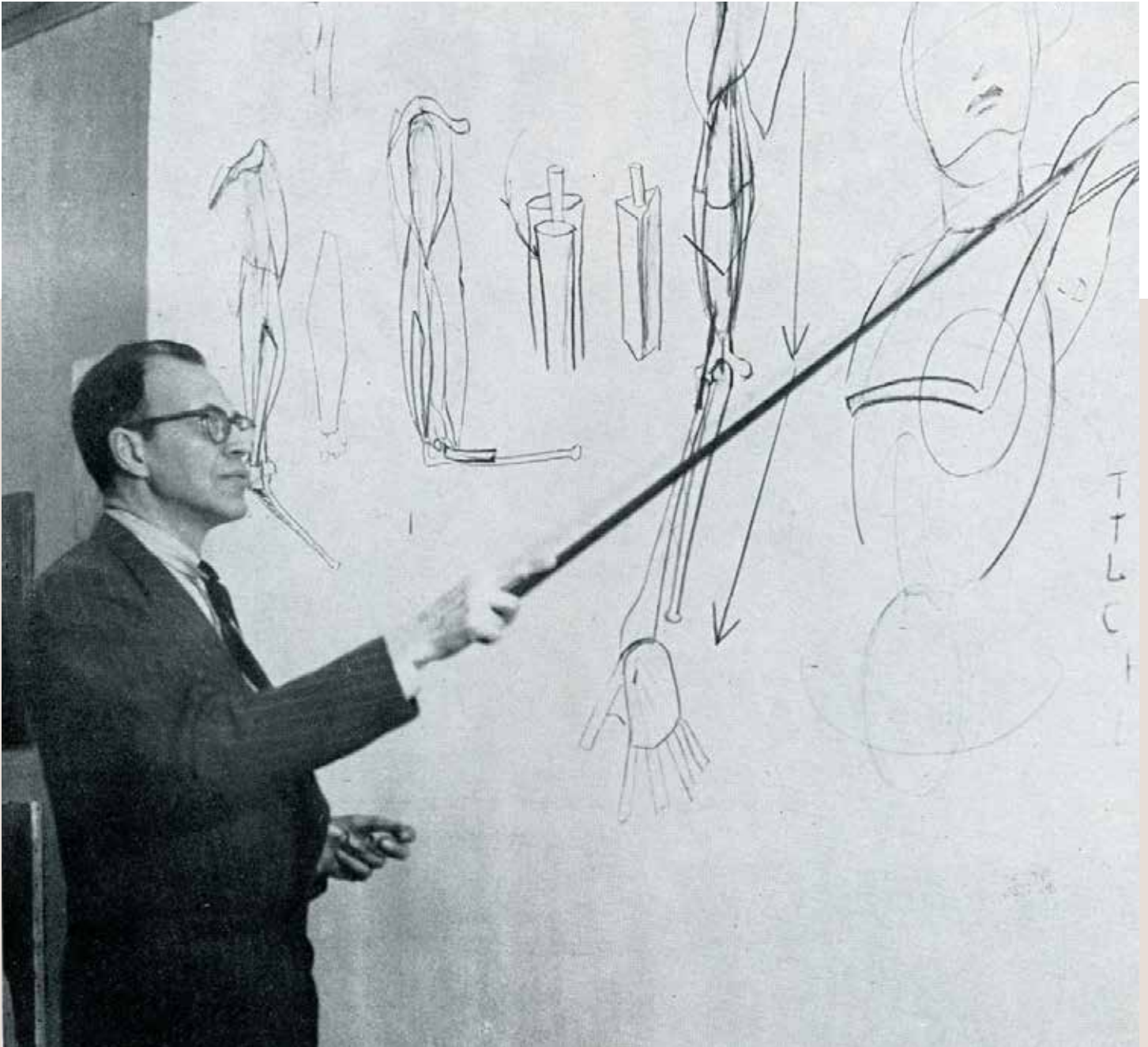
Kitty went to Radcliffe College the following fall and we spent the year together in college in Cambridge before I joined the Marines, stationed in Cherry Point, North Carolina. We married in September 1954 and arrived in New York in the fall of 1955, whereupon I enrolled in the Art Students League. Finally, I knew where I belonged. Kitty finished her Bachelor's degree at Barnard College and eventually became the head librarian of the Brearley School. We had two daughters, Sasha in 1956 and Katharine in 1957. Kitty was with me from the go, in favor of my painting the nude and everything else. Her support was boundless and my parents adored her. Her faith in me as a painter, who she understood would never give it up, had a calming affect on them. Sometimes I think marrying her was the only thing I ever did that was truly sensible.

George Picken's drawing of the Art Students League. Picken was FC's first art instructor, when FC was 12 and living in Pittsfield.



Chapter 2 *Art Students League*

I. Robert Beverly Hale: Anatomy



There have been three major forces in my painting career: Robert Beverly Hale, Edwin Dickinson and my godmother, Polly Thayer Starr. I studied with Hale and Dickinson at the Art Students League; I worked informally with my godmother until she died -- but she belongs in this section about the League because it is she who taught me about objective proportion, unlocking how to paint an anatomically functional nude, a painting of a real human being. She also helped me assimilate Hale and Dickinson's training with my own point of view.

For those of us in the 1950s who were interested in representation, the League offered only unconnected islands in the mainstream of abstraction. In terms of anything resembling a cohesive program on figurative work, there was none other than with Hale and Dickinson. They were outsiders, anomalies at the League -- both of excellent standing. Hale would start, Dickinson would finish. Three years spent with Hale: drawing only. Then we would be passed along to Dickinson, who would introduce us to color and oil painting.

Without Hale (1901-1985), an entire language of three-dimensional form would have been lost. Of the figurative artists I encountered at the League not a one could have taken up and demonstrated as he did the form concepts of the Renaissance. He was a brilliant and entertaining lecturer, and he knew, as no other teacher did, artistic anatomy -- the way in which the body's anatomy can be put into geometric form concepts and rendered intelligible by means of light and shade.



Robert Beverly Hale lecturing on anatomy at the Art Students League.

Photo: Dorothy Weiter, republished from the ASL catalogue, 1955/'56.

It is incredible to think that as head of the Department of American Painting and Sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Hale made the time to teach and that he was especially noted for being sympathetic to beginners. In class, he drew linear diagrams of the body's parts on a whiteboard -- skull, ribcage, spine, pelvis, upper and lower arms and legs, bones and muscles -- with a piece of charcoal attached to a long stick. He was called "Liney" at the League because he was so famous for his lines. I don't know whether this was behind his back or in front of it, but I did recently learn something new about Hale that made me rethink his adherence to line drawing and see it not as something he chose to do only because he was unable to draw tonally. My daughter, Sasha Anawalt, interviewed Stuart Feld in February 2023 in his office at Hirschl & Adler, where he is director and president. Feld, who had been working at the Met at the same time when Hale was curator of American paintings,

recounted seeing Hale on numerous occasions, sitting at his desk completely absorbed in drawing the most sumptuous tonal figures with well-articulate muscles and form in shades of dark and light. “They were extraordinary,” said Feld. “And made with such feeling. I wish I had kept some. They probably went into the trash.”

None of us at the League saw any evidence of Hale as a secret tonalist. There, he kept to illustrating that part of the body which was the assigned subject for the day with his stick and charcoal for half the class, taking the remainder for reviewing the drawing pads of four or five students, seeing each of us several times in a semester. He went through the entire human body twice, in the course of a year. Fortunately, as of this writing, you can see videos of his various lectures online, starting with [the rib cage](#).

When, after each session’s diagrams were done, whoosh! with a chamois on a stick, Hale would erase them. No evidence, no past, no oeuvre. And there is something wonderful in that. I studied for three years with him, beginning in 1955. In the final year, he made me his class monitor. I was an acolyte, a true believer.

In class, following in the footsteps of his drawing master, George Bridgman -- who was known for “bringing Michaelangelo into the 20th century” -- Hale would relate the anatomical geometric form concepts illustrated in his diagrams to old master drawings. We learned that the whole world could be put into a cube, sphere, cylinder, cone or variance thereof, and applied these form concepts to the nude model which we were drawing.

His chief concern was rendering the illusion of three-dimensional form on the flat surface of a sheet of paper. Everything he taught about anatomy was directed toward this end. The form concepts were something that he could diagram but which he could not -- or, it seems, would not -- demonstrate himself in his in-class drawings. He would insist, “...think the form, feel the form, run your line over the form.” We would determine a single source of light, usually from the upper left or upper right, to indicate the front and side of the object we were drawing. There were usually multiple sources of light which if copied would destroy the illusion of form, and so the individual student would make a decision about the source of light, never mind what was happening in nature.

We were shown how to light a cube, sphere, cylinder or cone, and then how to fit the parts of the human body into these geometric form-concepts. For example, a skull might be conceived as an egg in front (the face) and a ball behind (the cranium) or it could

be seen as a cube with a front and side, top or bottom, depending on where you were looking at it, from above or below, straight on or at an angle.

The entire body was conceived in terms of geometric form concepts which incorporated the skeletal structure and muscles. The muscles were grouped into form concepts according to their functions. We learned the origins and insertions of the muscles and their functions. The sternocleidomastoid muscle, for instance, originates in the mastoid process on the skull behind the ear, and like a rope, wraps around the cylinder of the neck to insert in the manubrium at the head of the sternum, with a tab inserting into the clavicle (collar bone). Its function is to rotate the head. We learned when you draw lips to think of them as lying over a segment of a cylinder, like a tin can, that has a position in space and a thrust. Then your line will define the lips while traveling over the form of the lower jaw in proper perspective. “Establish the mass, determine the thrust, and carve the detail,” Hale said.



Robert Beverly Hale handling the skeleton, showing with his hands the way muscles wrap the skull “like rope(s).”

Photo credit: A. Luisi ca 1974, reprinted in the ASL catalogue 1980-’81

In 1957, a year after Jackson Pollock’s death, Hale -- in his capacity as curator of the Met’s Department of Contemporary Art -- persuaded the Met to buy Pollock’s 1950 mural-sized drip painting, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*. That single purchase blasted the art market wide open. I cannot overstate this, nor can anyone: Abstraction dominated painting after this acquisition. The modernist aesthetic was then, and still is, fundamentally opposed to representation which is popularly -- and wrongly -- regarded as mere “illusion,” the copying of reality. We figurists were sent to pasture as unessential and irrelevant. This was a situation I was determined to rectify. I think I had finally encountered an instructor who could give me some tools: Hale.



Jackson Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950. The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488978>

Every spring Hale took his class to study master drawings at the Metropolitan Museum. He introduced us to A. Hyatt Mayor, curator of prints & drawings. To my astonishment -- and to my classmate and friend, Jack Leavey’s -- after welcoming us as a group, Mayor invited any and all of us to come in and study the drawings at the Met whenever we wished. That was enough for me. Jack and I left the next day to take up Mayor’s invitation. We checked in as required and went to the main viewing room of the Prints & Drawings Department. There were tables with racks for viewing drawings and there were guards and assistants. “What would you like to see?” We asked for Poussin drawings. One was brought out and placed on a rack. We looked at it for more than an hour. All the time we were looking a museum guard stood behind us. This went on for several mornings, during which we might look at only three or four drawings.

Finally, we asked the woman in charge if it was really necessary to have a guard behind us. She said, “I’ll ask Mr. Mayor.” We were brought into his office and Mayor asked us what we wanted. We explained the situation and the next we knew we were being escorted into the large room in which were kept the Met’s collections of prints and drawings. “What do you want to see?” asked Mayor. “Degas,” we replied. Mayor went to a cabinet, unlocked it and brought out a box. In it, matted and protected by sheets of diaphanous paper, were about a dozen Degas drawings.

Mayor handed the box to Jack and pointed to a small table with a viewing rack. Jack placed the box on the table, opened the first drawing and there before us was the little ballet dancer at the barre. The hair went up on the back of our heads. The next thing I recall was Mayor pointing to a large ring of keys and the cabinets and saying, “There are the French drawings, the Italians are here, the Dürer prints over there and we have the finest collection of Goya wash drawings outside of the Prado.”

All we had to do thereafter was check in at the front desk and every day go into this room where we each would take a table and draw; the place was ours. Mayor said later that when he saw Jack handle that first Degas drawing he knew that the crown jewels could not have been in safer hands. “Drawing is a thought with a line around it,” Hale would say. Day after day we discovered this for ourselves. In the Metropolitan were some of the most important drawings in existence anywhere, including the Michelangelo Sybil, the great Titian Trees, the Raphael and Leonardo quick studies for painting compositions. I held these in my own hands and studied them, looking for hours and hours.



Edgar Degas' *Little Girl Practicing at the Bar* [sic]. Black chalk and graphite, heightened with white chalk on pink laid paper, 12 3/6 x 119/16 in.

Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

I saw in a Raphael study for a Madonna and Child, the first tentative search for the composition, freely and lightly placed on the page. Feet, head, and general body position might, in a small sketch that was only several inches wide, miss their final placement by a half inch or more. I followed the draftsman’s thought and his search for form and space throughout his every mark. I learned there are many ways to look at the body. One may look at it with an eye for beauty or an eye for pornography, for its energy, movement and proportions as in much of Western art, or for a graphic distinction of the sexes as in the prehistoric Chauvet Pont d’Arc cave and in other later cultures. The naturalness of the human body without clothing, the fact that a naked body is itself natural and that it can become a nude, has been for me a two-way track that unites the naked and the nude, the artists transforming the one into the other.

The nude has been part of our artistic heritage and history for at least 32,000 years. By now, you would think we would have moved to a full acceptance of any nude of quality no matter what the century or by whom or from whatever place of cultural origin.

I believe that human beings have an inherent sense of quality that is unfortunately often educated out of us. We have, in university art departments, too often substituted reproductions, photographs, slides, and virtual reality for the real thing. If you fall in love with a virtual man or woman you are falling in love with air, not flesh. When the real object itself is not there, we may bring to the experience all the baggage of someone else's experience, what others think, and how we are expected to respond. Over time one learns to keep silent before a work of art and let it come to you. It is like a private conversation over the ages with someone just as alive as yourself, or like talking with a contemporary who lives in another country.

Discovered only in 1994, *The Venus and the Sorcerer*, a Paleolithic drawing of black charcoal hangs on a cone of rock from the ceiling of the Chauvet Pont d'Arc cave in Southern France. The black pubic triangle of the Venus with engraved labia are placed at eye level, focusing attention on what is considered to be humankind's earliest depiction of the human form. A nude! Perhaps the first, created, it is thought, at least 32,000 years ago.

Image from the Bradshaw Foundation.



Michelangelo's life studies for the Libyan Sibyl, ca.1510-11, purchased by the Met in 1924; chalk, 11 3/8 x 8 7/16 in.

Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The stillness of a painted human figure, even though it is depicted shouting or in motion, permits a kind of consideration and enjoyment not possible in athletics, dance, or the theater, or in movies or videos. Those who think that painting has been replaced by the new idioms in the 21st century simply have not experienced painting. It will be rediscovered by a generation unimpressed by money, glamor, and newness for the sake of newness. These are the values I inherited beginning with Hale and even more deeply reinforced by Dickinson.

Thoughts in art come in many colors and sizes. They can be broken down very broadly into two categories: good thoughts and bad thoughts. That may seem simplistic, but the good thoughts are life-enhancing, and the bad thoughts are inharmonious and life-diminishing. One builds, the other contracts.

There is a moral force to a well-drawn line, a moral sense of rightness or wrongness to color notes. Shapes and color relationships can raise you up or cast you down. The work of art is there to be experienced in all those intertwined levels -- physically in response to its shapes and colors, as well as mentally, morally, and emotionally. Just as there is a rightness to a piece of carpentry or a well-made article of furniture so there is a rightness to a well-made drawing or painting, whether figurative or non-figurative, no matter what the culture or period in time.



ANATOMICAL FORM CONCEPTS

Left -- A black and white image of FC's portrait of Hyatt Mayor's daughter, Martha Mayor and her children, painted in 1966, the year Mayor retired from the Met. The child on lower right is Yearley Smith, who became the voice of Lisa Simpson on *The Simpsons*. Private collection.

Right -- Raphael's study of Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, ca 1506-7, red chalk, 8 13/16 x 6 1/4 in.





Left -- FC's *Walking (Tom)*
Oil on canvas, 72 x 36 in., 1999.
Collection of the artist.



Right -- FC's *Reaching (Regina)*,
Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in., 1993-1994.
Collection of the artist.

II. Edwin Dickinson: Color-Values





Edwin Dickinson in Studio 5 at the Art Students League, ca. 1958. The model in the background could be Mimi Scherb, who FC painted many times later in life.

Courtesy Art Students League archives

What I learned from Robert Beverly Hale about the body and form was built into me over three years on some irreducible level. I took his afternoon class five times a week from 1955 to 1958 and during this time I also frequently took advantage in the mornings of an unoccupied upstairs room in the League that had a skeleton. Using a medical anatomy book, I went through the anatomy of the body, touching and feeling the origins and insertions of the muscles on the bone. You will not find this in a plastic skeleton, any more than you can experience the comparable qualities of a drawing in a photographic reproduction. I brought this awareness with me to Edwin Dickinson's class, when I took up painting, beginning with him at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in the spring of 1958.

Dickinson and I hit it off like a house afire and he eventually made me his monitor at BMAS. But, because his ASL class was held at exactly the same time as Hale's, I could not start with him at the League until 1959. This is important to note because it means that from 1955 to 1958, I did no painting. Just drawing and anatomy. That was Hale's preference, Dickinson's, too.

Though they were complementary, Dickinson's approach could not, on the surface, have been more different from that of Hale's. Dickinson would have us shed every preconception so that our eye might see how nature appears when freed from preconceptions; Hale taught geometric form concepts and encouraged drawing out of one's head by using knowledge and memory. Dickinson was an artist, Hale a lecturer. In my experience, both instructors were genius. They admired each other -- Hale arranged in 1955 for the Met to acquire from a private donor what would arguably become Dickinson's most famous work, the symbolical painting, [Ruin at Daphne](#).



Dickinson's *Nude with Pine Cones* (Marie)
Oil on canvas 29 x 21 in., 1939.

I regard Dickinson as my principal influence and instructor. But, in late 1959, just as I was beginning with him, he had to withdraw from teaching altogether because of deteriorating health. He had contracted tuberculosis (as had my father and my maternal grandmother) and that same year would have one of his lungs removed. We kept in close touch until he died on December 2, 1978. In conversations with others about painting, he was known to say, "what would Cunningham think" and I will take that with me to my grave. I felt I understood him. That he should have felt the same was a reward beyond measure.

Dickinson, when I met him was slight in stature, fine-boned with a meticulously trimmed beard, a vestige from when he had painted himself as a civil war soldier. He always entered the class five minutes or so after it had begun and left five minutes or so before it ended. It is not that he was anti-social; it was just that the teacher was the teacher and should dress, speak, and act accordingly. He was set apart in speech, dress, and manner, and was sometimes described as Edwardian. He accorded time to each student in every class, treating beginner and advanced as equals. One could occasionally find an established author or some distinguished person in class with the rest of us. He welcomed the serious-minded amateur.



Dickinson's "Self-Portrait in Uniform" (1942), in which the artist depicts himself in a mirror dressed as a Union soldier. The Civil War was an obsession of his.

Courtesy Babcock Gallery,
via Hyperallergic.

Dickinson asked me to be his monitor at the League, and after the class we would sometimes go out for a beer at the Anchor Bar on 7th Avenue. Our talks were wide-ranging, but mostly about teaching. He believed that one should not teach for money; one owed it to the profession to give back and that teaching was a cup that did not "gain in the overflow." He was never excessive or a show-off. He despised the commercialism of the galleries, and the commercialization of our culture at large. Throughout his lifetime he refused to write about his work or teaching methods and painting techniques. At his wife Frances "Pat" Foley's urging, I took detailed notes of his pedagogy and how he set up class. I lay these out in Chapter Three because they expose a cast of mind in art instruction that is sorely missing and to this day invaluable. Dickinson's approach as a philosophy will surely withstand the test of time and as a technique emphasizing color-value, deserves revival.



Dickinson working with his student Carol Cleworth with Jack Leavey standing behind them.

Courtesy Arts Students League archives.

This 1982 letter to me, below, from Pat, his wife, provides a real feel for the man. Earlier that year, I had interviewed the abstract painter, Don Smith, whose area of expertise as a professor at the University of Rhode Island concentrated on Dickinson. I sent Pat the audio tapes and she had this to say [slightly excerpted]:

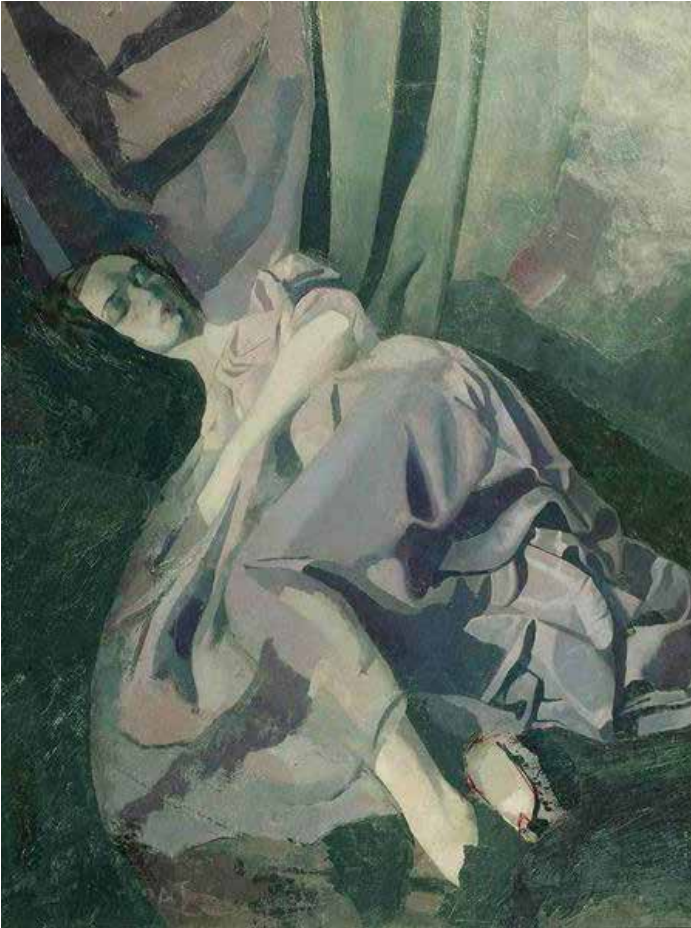
Dear Dick,

Hearing again familiar expressions that Edwin used – “the press of high excitement”, “or the qui vive” and many others – has been a tremendous experience. Hearing his views and ideas clearly and truthfully described and well told was very exciting and the quality of your thoughts made a strong impression on me. The tapes are priceless. However, I can’t help wishing that you would like to -- and would have the time to -- write about your and his teaching of painting. If you would do that the result would be very valuable to us all.

...Nearly everything you said rang true to my recollections. Two of the exceptions I want to mention to you: Edwin talked often with me about not believing in free will and the effect that belief had on his other views about life and art! I would say that your good attempt to explain that view of his did not ring true to my impressions; certainly that would only be because you had not yourself heard him speak of it. I hope you don’t mind my mentioning this.

As regards Edwin viewing his life as luxurious, Gus Peck’s and Anna’s [Hamburger] accounts amused me. You, who knew him better than these very good friends did, will I am sure see why. Edwin never gathered greens or fruits or anything else except quahogs. Whenever we went blueberrying, after picking and eating a few berries, he would stand about squinting at the trees and sky or be looking through a finder or holding a favorite fossil in his hand slowly turning it toward the light of the sun. Edwin loved Wellfleet [Massachusetts] but he didn’t call our life here luxurious!

Dickinson spent the summer of 1912 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the northern tip of Cape Cod, where he studied with figurative painter, Charles Webster Hawthorne (1872-1930), after unhappily having studied in New York with Hawthorne's primary teacher, William Merritt Chase. Hawthorne exerted a lasting influence on his understanding of color and subject matter and how to lose one's expectations in seeing. A radical who leaned on traditional techniques, Hawthorne was much admired by the eminent art critic, Royal Cortissoz (1869-1948), of the *New York Herald Tribune*, who was known for his abject opposition to modernism.



Left -- Dickinson's painting of his wife, Frances "Pat" Foley, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in., 1927. Collection of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA

Photo: Babcock Galleries



Right -- FC's portrait of his eldest daughter painted in 1968 shows Dickinson's influence in terms of its station point, looking down on the subject.

Sasha Reading, Sheffield
Oil on canvas, 44 x 33 in, 1968.
Private collection.

The only written material I know on the Hawthorne/Dickinson method is the book Hawthorne's widow put out in 1938, *Hawthorne on Painting*, a collection of his students' recollections and of his sayings. It is an enticing and informative book, but the authors are clearly students. There is not the attention to a full understanding of the technique that is necessary for a practicing professional painter.

III. Polly Thayer: Objective Proportion



The painter Polly Thayer (1904-2006) steered me to Robert Beverly Hale at the Art Students League. She had attended the Boston Museum Art School with my mother in the mid-1920s and received a classical academic training under Philip Leslie Hale, who was a distant relative of Robert Beverly Hale's. She had also studied at the Art Students League in the 30s with Harry Wickey, who, significantly, was known as an illustrator and a sculptor.



Polly Thayer in the 1920s.

Courtesy of Polly Thayer Starr
Charitable Trust and the artist's website
www.pollythayerstarr.org

She and my mother started with a year of drawing in charcoal from plaster casts of antique statues, alongside an ongoing study of anatomy and perspective. The Boston Museum School mandated that only when a student had excelled at these subjects could she or he advance to life drawing from a nude model. And then, only if you could draw a credible nude with unimpeachable technical skill, were you released from ever having to draw nudes again. To be clear, the aim of academic training pervasive throughout art schools in America at the time was to prove you could draw a nude in order that you could move on to “better” subjects.



Drawing by FC's mother, Marcia Winter Davis (1902 - 1981), during her time at the Boston Museum Art School, ca. 1926. Private collection.

In keeping with 19th century custom, the female models in Poley's and my mother's classes were nude and the males wore jockstraps. This shows you what the baseline was at least in my life, coming out of an inherited background of embarrassment over a male nude, while seeing females as acceptable. When my mother told me, “No nudes is good nudes,” she really meant it especially regarding my male figures – one of which, *Patrick*, created a stir in 1975 when shown at my Madison Avenue gallery, Hirschl & Adler, as its first frontal male nude in 17 years. The shock of *Patrick* (posing without a jock strap) led to censorship of my painting and being dismissed from the gallery that had represented me for eight years.

There wasn't a market for nudes. Nudes were “European.” Unoriginal. They had no place or purpose in America – so the arguments, as I imagined them, went. But I had never felt that way. In fact, I'd say my life's purpose was to paint and draw nudes that would change people's minds about the beauty, dignity and complete originality of each human being, expressed by their posture, the discoloration and scars on their skin, and yes, their movement. How to do this in a “static” art form? How to unidealized the nude and make a real American nude that was a match for its ever-moving, breathing sentient viewer? This was the challenge I posed to myself. The answer lay partly in painting the models life-size, and in acknowledging that my nudes on this scale are best seen, indeed meant to be seen, from 68' away -- or the same distance

from the floor of the Sistine Chapel to the ceiling. In *Patrick's* case, he should be seen eye-level by setting the painting on the floor or close to it.



FC's *Patrick*, oil on canvas, 80 x 44 in.,
1973 - 1975. Collection of the artist.

Thereafter, upon completion of every life-size nude, I would invite her to New York to criticize. When is the ice going to melt? Poley once asked, while studying one of my nudes. She had an idealistic mental picture of what art was. When was I going to make art? She saw *Patrick* as “student work,” and me as frozen in what I was seeing with the nude. She had the perfect eye for objective proportions, so I used her. I had to stand against her and my mother. Poley was a Quaker and a direct descendant of the Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. She believed in the right and need for everyone’s individual voice to be heard and that was the way she and I conversed. Her criticisms were brutally honest and specific and I insisted on this – skip the compliments. I took from her academic training and used it to make a nude that did not fit her canon. She taught me to measure the “objective” proportions of the body -- what she had done as a student — to compare the length of the thumb to the nose and the big toe. As I would discover, this training in objective proportion was necessary if I were to make an anatomically functional nude, one that could suggestively move and take positions other than the pose in which it was painted.

In 1929, Poley’s painting, *Circles*, done in Boston under Hale’s attentive supervision when she was 23, won the First Hallgarten Prize from the National Academy of Design. This painting, along with a solo show in New York, established her reputation and caught the attention of Royal Cortissoz, who wrote her a three-page typed letter (dated July 29, 1929, from his home in Lake George, New York), in response to her request for career advice.



Polly Thayer’s *Circles*, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in., 1928

“Clashing patterns of abstract circles the wallpaper mismatch with the tiger printing of the rug, all of this unusually and subtle chaos becomes alleviated by the bare skin of the figure.” — text accompanying the painting; collection of the New Britain Museum of American Art.

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Cortissoz wrote, “I have to tell you quite frankly why I have been keen on writing to you. It is because your work has made a far deeper impression upon me than has that of any young painter whom I have encountered for years. I remember nothing of the kind so exciting since Charles W. Hawthorne....You know what is going on today. The academic types have fallen upon routine. The modernists are moving helplessly and freakishly about in worlds not realized – and, to my mind, never realizable.... Choose the path that leads to a thoughtful and truly interesting art.”

Cortissoz also emphasized something in his letter that I now realize Poley often repeated to me, namely that artists must “have something to say.” She argued that the only sure way for an artist to make meaningful work was if the artist had a message. “You have to bring something to it,” she said. She felt that my colleagues, Lennart Anderson and Philip Pearlstein, had that special “something,” each in their own way. They

made art. I didn't. But her position did not blunt my approach. This is one of the places where Poley and I amicably diverged. My paintings do not have an ulterior motive or message and never have. In my mind's eye, you come to them clean and supply "meanings" yourself. The subject of the painting is never the subject. By the time I painted *Mimi Scherb*, 1970, Poley had changed her mind. This, she confessed was a mature knock-out piece of work, a work of art.

FINDING MEANING

"In one worktable still life, David Potoff's *Tools*, a blank paper envelope stands upright against a sturdy metal toolbox. Unopened, it might or might not have a letter inside. Envelopes not being known to stand easily on edge, this is no casual arrangement. Instead, the quietly eccentric compositional element, scarcely noticed at first, goes to unusual lengths to frame a bare, unmarked envelope for what it is: a potential carrier of meaning." — Christopher Knight, 2020 Pulitzer Prize Winner for art criticism

FC's *David Potoff's Tools*,
Oil on Canvas, 36 x 50 in., 2003 - 2004.
Private collection



Poley lived most of her life in Boston save for a brief stint in New York in the early 1930s to study at the Art Students League. Only there did she begin to find answers as to the "why" of her own painting -- its meaning and message. When she did, she braved a direction entirely different from Philip Hale, the Boston Museum School and Charles Hawthorne with whom she had studied for two summers on the Cape. She was not impervious to the explosion that had occurred in New York in 1913 with the Armory Show. Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky and the rest had sent shock waves still felt by young artists in the early 1930s. Modernism swept everything before it. Less than a year after she painted my portrait, she painted the poet May Sarton, (1936) and it is one of her most frequently reproduced and revered works. You can see from the difference between them that by 1936 she was moving fairly and squarely toward abstraction.

I think she always pursued her own line of questioning. She treated me like she expected me to do the same. She had given me my first oil paints and supported me financially at crucial times in my life to a degree that is hard to fathom; she was so generous, not only to me, but to my parents. I could not have had the career I've had without her. Poley set the terms for being my intellectual sparring partner and artistic co-equal; we agreed to disagree about many things, but our common denominator was a deep respect and great love for each other. She used the word *agape*, meaning a love that “loves the truth,” she said, and is not “envious or boastful or pompous.” She taught me the value of what the poet William Blake described as learning to see not with but through the eye. She encouraged me and others to “activate that ‘third eye’ we all have, that the East recognizes and that we in the West generally do not.” She was a powerful force in my life and, in part, it is because of her that I kept myself open to criticism and to reading unlikely sources for inspiration, including Thomas Merton’s *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Knowing nothing of Zen, I identified with it in the practice and teaching of painting – looking without preconception. But the principal learning from Poley came when she stood in person in front of my paintings of nudes during the 1970s and ‘80s. She emphasized....

In our many discussions — especially in person, standing in front of my canvases of nudes in New York during the 1970s and 80s — she emphasized something called, objective proportion or the actual mathematical proportion of one section of the body to the other. Objective proportion had been central to her training at the Boston Museum School. It involved looking right at the model and comparing the thumb to the nose to the big toe and asking, what is the proportional relationship?

*Objective proportion is based on geometry
and goes back to the Greeks — significantly,
its origins are sculptural.*

Objective proportion is based on geometry and goes back to the Greeks — its origins are sculptural -- but it would not be until 2018 that I would make use of it. Objective proportion -- as I unconsciously had absorbed from Poley through regular conversations (we spoke almost every day by phone, if not in person) until her death in 2006 -- proved to be the missing piece in my life-long quest to avoid idealizing the form.



Left -- Polly Thayer's *Portrait of Francis Cunningham*, oil on canvas, 25 x 33 in., 1935. Private collection.

Right -- Thayer's *Miss May Sarton*, oil on canvas, 25 x 21 in., 1936. Collection of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Paul J. Sachs through Polly Thayer Starr and May Sarton.

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Unlike the Greeks, unlike the Renaissance painters, I was interested in multiple station points, which changes what you see of the nude, depending on where you are standing. Objective proportion comes in handy when you need something stable and fixed. In other words, something that assures that the artist is not affected by where she or he is standing in relationship to the model.

I go into this in a separate essay, *How High for How Wide? Revealing the Golden Section in Greek Sculpture and Within Us All*, illustrated and designed by Sean Kelly and available on my website. I provide lessons in it, because there is a system and the lessons build and unlock, from what I understand of art history, an advance in painting human beings that allows contemporary artists to paint figures that are anatomically functional.

What's important to know now in this particular chapter on the Art Students League and my formal education is that I learned anatomy from Robert Beverly Hale, color-values from Edwin Dickinson and objective proportion from Poley. Poley and objective proportion affected my work most profoundly after I painted *Mimi Scherb*, 1970.

While painting *Mimi*, I became fully aware of the distinction between what art historians have termed ‘objective’ and ‘technical’ proportions in the human body. As an artist, when you are drawing the body, how do you proportion its parts? Objective proportions are the actual real-life proportions of each part of the body. Technical proportions are the proportions that appear in your drawing, painting or sculpture. The question is, can the technical proportions incorporate and reflect the objective proportions of the body that you are drawing? They must, if that figure is to make you feel that it is alive.

I was innocent in the painting of *Mimi Scherb* (1970). Mimi, my model, had recently lost her husband when I asked her to pose for this painting. By the time she was ready, a season later, her grief had morphed into resignation. Her face surrendered to solitude’s weight; her shoulders slumped, and mortal gravity pulled at the folds of her skin. Her state of mind, her widowhood, appeared in her movement, her posture, her pose. How could I plumb these emotional depths while also expressing sympathy for her at an especially vulnerable time? I knew Mimi well, having painted her previously. How could I do justice to her humanity? A nude is the most vulnerable. I would look at her without preconception and honor the extraordinary varying colors of her flesh and the grace of her form. I would paint her not as an ideal, but as a real person – not hyper-real or pseudo-real. Her inner life would beat on the canvas, if I could get it right.

I drew Mimi’s head according to its proportions as seen from my station point, and I knew that optically it was perfect. But she kept saying, “You have made my head too small.” Finally, I took courage and made it substantially larger. I saw that the head looked right, although relative to the other parts of the body, it measured wrong. I had to move my eye into different positions, or station points, throughout the figure to accommodate Mimi’s objective proportions. In the end, as seen on the canvas, Mimi is free to move around and change position. I had done it!

Mimi was the catalyst that married my Edwin Dickinson training about color to the knowledge learned from Robert Beverly Hale about anatomy and form. Poley declared it my “first mature nude” and a “knockout.” Critics responded in kind. After *Mimi Scherb* (1970), I was on my way.



Polly Thayer Starr

Photographed by Steven Trefonides.

Courtesy of the Polly Thayer Starr
Charitable Trust



FC's *Mimi Scherb*, 1970
Oil on canvas, 50 x 32 in., 1970 - 1971
Collection of the Art Students League.

Chapter 3 *The Blue Smoke*



I made three discoveries in the Dickinson class that propelled my career. They were discoveries in every sense of the word and were recognized as such by Dickinson (1891–1978) as they occurred. Had I found a new continent or was this a rediscovery? For me it was the former, but in either case they are discoveries to be shared because they are concerned in a specific way with the vocabulary of painting. The first came in the spring of 1959.

At the time, I was Robert Beverly Hale’s class monitor. I had helped him with the annual class concourse and was now free to enter the Dickinson class. Earlier in the spring I had attended a one-night-a-week class with Dickinson at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and had also been his monitor in that class. I was comfortable with the basics: how to set up for painting, mix color, and abandon assumptions.

My first discovery came in *Model with Red Bandana*. I was working three-hour sessions each day on an area of color value about the size of a saucer. I had set the key in an area of optimum color value contrast. We never isolated the model in the Dickinson class; the model was always seen in the context of surrounding shapes. Using the finder, I gave about half of the canvas to the model, the rest being background. As happens with reproductions, especially when reduced in scale, you cannot see that the area to the lower left, next to the model and below a section of turquoise drapery, contains a portion of studio floor, a part of a fellow student’s paint box, parts of two other students and some parts of easels. The color value notes within this area are very close. When Dickinson came in on Tuesday and began making the rounds, the class was, as usual, silent except for his voice, soft but clear. When he got to me, he said nothing. This went on for so long that the class began to stir, wondering what the matter was. Finally, speaking of the area I have just described, he said, “you could put a fishing pole in that space.” That was it -- no further comment.



FC’s *Model with Red Bandana*, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in., 1958. Collection of the artist.

“You could put a fishing pole in that space.” —Edwin Dickinson

The next day I continued the painting and took up an area of studio wall which was an un-nameable shade of yellow-grey, adjacent to the model’s red bandana. I recall thinking, are the color spots on this wall moving toward the dark, left to right, are they getting warmer or cooler? I got nowhere. If I asked such questions and tried to think it through, I could not get it right. Finally, I gave up the battle and put down the pieces of paint as I saw them with the innocence of a child. When Dickinson returned on Thursday he looked again at length. He patted the canvas and all he said was, “Virtue is its own reward.”

What this did to me was stunning: I had found a handle to what makes the old masters sing – getting the color-values right, getting the relationships right. I had created the illusion of depth in a painting such that you felt you could go fishing in it. That’s what Dickinson, I thought, meant. This painting was no copy. It had come straight out of my own looking. When I considered the quality of these color spots and what they could do, Pollaiuolo’s painting of David in Berlin came to mind, and I said to myself, “Move over, I’m coming!” I saw my whole career in front of me in one glance. From this beginning I saw the end. That has been a motivating force, enough for a lifetime’s worth of painting.

The second discovery came a short time later. The model was a woman of mixed heritage, neither dark nor light, a little yellowish, perhaps the color of zinc. I set the key of the painting in an area near her shoulder, and painted the background and skin tones as I saw them -- pieces of color value. When Dickinson came on Tuesday he bounced up and down on his toes: “That’s just like sculpture,” he said. I was deeply reinforced. Color spots, observed through the eye without intervention of the mind, could describe three-dimensional form as well as space, and I had brought out the form of this particular model’s shoulder in its plasticity just as if it were sculpture.



Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *David Victorious*, oil on canvas, 18.1 x 13.3 in., c. 1472

Collection of Gemaldegalerie, Berlin

A fellow student then remarked that I had painted the model’s skin tones closer in color to copper than to zinc. And so I had! I scraped down the canvas and began a new painting. When Dickinson came on Thursday he said, “Where’s your painting?” “I lost it,” I confessed. He gave me a look of disgust that I will carry to the grave. There are ways in which one learns that once you set the key of a painting you change it at your peril. This is how I learned.

The third discovery came in a painting of a male model’s legs and background. When Dickinson saw it approaching completion on a Thursday, he said, “Don’t you see the blue smoke?” I did not know what he meant, but I always tried to work his criticisms out for myself before asking him to explain. In due course I turned to the same fellow student, who had been in the class longer than myself. “I think that he means that if you squint,” he advised, “you will see that the shadow part of the lower leg goes more with the background next to it than it does with its own light side.”

FC's *Legs*, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in., 1957. Collection of the artist.

"Don't you see the blue smoke?"
—Edwin Dickinson



I took my life in my hands, squinted, and darkened this area on the leg perhaps ten times more than I thought necessary. Corrections are almost never made powerfully enough – you will have made a decision and set down tracks which you now will have to overthrow. I carried out the change and now, lo and behold, the form sprang to life. I had gotten the relationships right. Blue smoke is a metaphor, what you do with a metaphor is what you do. It's technical. It has to do with the squint.

But this was only the start. When it came time for the Dickinson class course, Dickinson hung this painting at eye level directly opposite the entrance door to the gallery, 70 feet or more away. The color spots I had put down read in terms of form and space from across the room. The effect could knock you down. Form and space will appear unbidden in anyone's work when the color spots have been painted in their true relationships.

Dickinson's class is legendary to this day at the League, yet few former students have written about it in sufficient detail to be able to replicate the environment, principles, substance and conditions of his training. By describing his approach to painting from life, I hope to demonstrate why there is a good and urgent reason to preserve his training and philosophy before they are lost. The human tendency once

was to prefer the immediate physical world over techno-realities. We are learning that painting and the other arts serve human needs that teach us something about ourselves – just as much now as in the past. But we can't learn about what we've lost when it's lost. I choose to claim -- and I trust others will -- meaningful and enduring space for figurative work because it serves a primal need.

Dickinson believed you learned to be a professional painter by first becoming a professional student. This included ethics. He would not speak negatively of a fellow painter or scorn another artist's viewpoint. He would do nothing that might take the bread from a fellow painter's mouth. In his Studio 5 at the League, organization, good housekeeping and codes of behavior prevailed.

The studio had a high skylight running the length of the north side, angled between wall and ceiling. In the center of a room that could accommodate no more than 15 to 20 students, the model was posed, or rather woven into a jumble of wooden boxes, easels and drapery massed into large shapes using other drapery, newspaper, umbrellas or whatever came to hand to fill out the form, so that there were no mean or picky folds in the resultant shapes. The point of this set-up was to create large masses and rhythms that tied into those of the figure itself. The creation of this medley, which had to be taken down and repeated as exactly as possible each day, was the responsibility of the class monitor. Each Monday, as monitor, with the help of other students, I would create a new arrangement of arcs, angles, and light and dark colors of harmonic but contrasting hue. This welter of shapes, which included the living human figure, formed a scene from which dozens of surprising compositions might be abstracted. It was the very reverse of the usual way of posing the model, seated, standing or reclining, and isolated against a blank wall or backdrop. Dickinson would come in on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. The class met five days a week. The monitor came to every class, took class like the other students, except on the days Dickinson was not present, then the monitor served as the instructor. To be a monitor is an honor.

Students were positioned beneath the skylight in a semi-circle around the set-up. You did not go to the back of the room because from there you would be painting the model and set-up against the light. Everything in his class contrived toward giving us the advantages of objective sight; he wanted us to see what was really in front of our eyes. Dickinson taught that you do not train your eye through powerfully



A contact sheet showing the classroom arrangement of Dickinson's Studio 5 at the Art Students League. The model is most likely Mimi Scherb. On occasion when the model could not show up, Dickinson would step in and model, dressed. He'd take a pose of ten minutes and then teach for ten minutes.

Courtesy of the Art Students League.

simplified contrasts of light and shade, but through dealing with the half-tones produced by light falling on objects to bring out their dimensions. He would say, "Leave the Caravaggio until later," meaning silhouettes and extreme contrasts of light and shade.

Some of us were seated on the floor with our canvases propped on a taboret (a wooden box on which to rest your pallet). Behind, others sat or stood at easels. Your station point (which we refer to as the location of your eye) was sacred but so was your neighbor's. You were responsible for choosing your station point. Intense concentration prevailed, the only sound being Dickinson's voice, demure but audible, at an individual student's station point. He positioned his eye in the place your eye was situated so that his comments came from what you saw and were painting. If you wanted to speak with your neighbor, you went outside the studio. If you forgot, you might suddenly become aware of a great silence punctuated by the noise of your own voice. Or worse, Dickinson's being raised over yours. The monitor would explain the importance of not talking in class, and the offence would not be repeated. I developed elephant ears to pick up what he said at other station points. If it was something that concerned you, one could go quietly and stand behind and see what he was talking about. Another's gain or miscalculation could be instructive. As I have said, Dickinson taught the profession as he knew it to all comers, old or young, skilled or unskilled. We all received the same.



FC's *Mimi Scherb and the Mirror*,
Oil on canvas, 44 x 50 in., 1964. Collec-
tion of the artist.



Dickinson in Wellfleet.

Photo taken during FC's and Kitty's visit
.Collection of FC.

At this juncture in his teaching career in 1959, Dickinson did not lecture. He did not want to influence us in “the art of it” or influence our seeing with concepts such as anatomy, perspective or color theory. He taught, as I think we all must, from where he was at the moment. I have heard from older painters that when he was painting the *Ruin at Daphne*, (1943-1953), he would actively teach perspective through lectures and diagrams.

From each person's station point there were three things to consider: you had to be able to see that portion of the set-up which you selected through your finder, and your palette with all its colors laid out, and your canvas – simply by rotating your head. Dickinson taught that if you could not compare the colors you were mixing with the nature you were looking at directly, you would inevitably make the mistake of working from memory rather than through the eye. You needed to see your canvas, the palette and the nature together, unobstructed.



Dickinson's *Ruin at Daphne*,
Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in., 1943-53.
Collection of The Metropolitan
Museum of Art

We placed our canvases on the easel with the easel turned so that there would be optimum light on the canvas and no glare when the paint was applied. We learned to position the canvas with the sides precisely vertical and horizontal. These we considered to be the first four lines of your composition, and they must reference the world vertical – gravity – and the world horizontal which is at a right angle to it. By tightening the easel's lower crossbar firmly and pressing down on the upper crossbar, one could attach the canvas so tightly that it would not fall off when tipped forward. We raised or lowered the canvas on the easel while painting to see the color spots we were working on without glare.

One should be able to 'pick up the easel by the canvas and dance with it.

Dickinson's approach to painting focused on color-spots; he used this term sometimes in conjunction with 'patches,' 'notes' or 'pieces of color-value.' His emphasis on the abstraction or objectification of color meant that our set-up, the light on our canvases and positioning of our easels were critical – as were the arrangement of colors on the palette itself. I suggest viewing [this video](#) on mixing color for a demonstration of what I discuss next. (The video is made by the artist and friend of mine, Jon Peters, and lives on YouTube along with many others he did about my painting techniques.)

The key to arriving at a color-spot, a mixed piece of color to be applied directly to the canvas, is to be ready to use any or all your colors with your mind open to the surprise and unexpectedness of seeing. Dickinson made the following remark which I have always used in teaching: "If you think Caucasian skin tones are pink and white, look at the shadows under the chin. You will see color like weathered shingles on a roof or more like the inside of an oyster shell than anything that can be called pink or white." Look deeply at Black skin and you may find soft grey, steel grey, yellow, green, red. Move your eye toward the color, rather than to the outline of the figure. Build the figure through color and examination.



Ephraim Rubenstein, left, with FC. at a show of FC's at the University of Richmond's Marsh Gallery in 1989, where Rubenstein also taught. Rubenstein was a student in FC's high school class at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, as well as a beloved teacher of figurative painting and drawing at the Art Students League. He taught with FC at the League and also at the New Brooklyn School.

Drop-handled palette knife on FC's palette.

Dickinson used the approach, methods and techniques he learned from his teacher, Charles Hawthorne (1872-1930), and they in turn informed my teaching. Moreover, they are continuing to be practiced by my former students Uri Blayer, Robert Bunkin, Peter Colquhoun, Robert Feinland, Kate Gridley, Israel Hershberg, Richard Leto, Valerie Mendelson and Ephraim Rubenstein, who identify chiefly as artists. Gridley, Hershberg, Mendelson and Rubenstein have maintained teaching as integral to their professional lives. I have seen encouraging signs from them that there is a desire among young artists to know more about how to paint from life using the color-spot technique which relies on the arrangement and choice of colors on the palette.

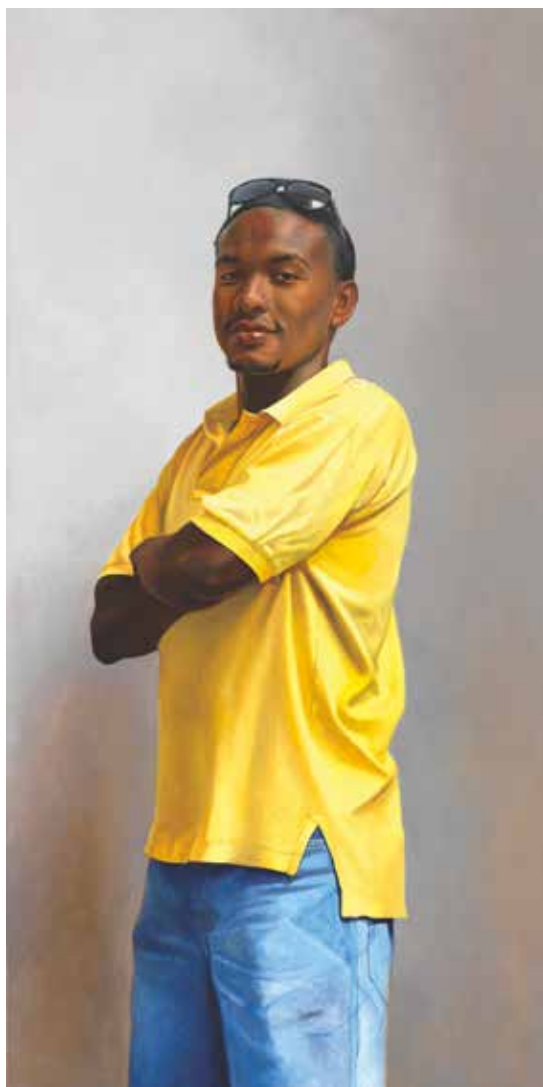
The palette itself is made of wood or Masonite, not paper or glass, so that the principal instruments we use for mixing color -- two drop-handled palette knives -- will pass readily over the surface of the palette in the making of homogeneous mixes of color. The knife cannot travel over the uneven surface of a paper palette and it may stick on the too-smooth glass surface. Dickinson said, "You will need to use all the colors on your palette to paint an overshoe." To mix colors together into a readable spot of color value on the palette one must use a palette knife, because the brush becomes charged with paint and will not do the job. One should mix enough paint, better more than less; you can always use bits of the leftover paint in another mix. With two knives, you clean one with the other instead of stopping to wipe the blade. The knives should be drop-handled because this gives you maximum use of the blade.

The blades should be relatively firm and about three inches in length.



Laid out along two adjoining sides of the palette are perhaps 12 to 14 colors grouped in piles of a sufficient quantity for the session of painting. Reds, yellows and blues should be grouped and placed not so

close to the edge as to fall off and not so far in as to take up working space. They are always in the same place so that with practice you will reach for them as instinctively as a virtuosic pianist reaches for a note. Beginners do better with larger palettes. Their palettes should not be less than about 14" x 18", and preferably larger.



FC's STUDENTS' MATURE WORK

Top left -- landscape by Uri Blayer,
Masada Rocks, oil on linen,
43 x 55 in., 2013. Private collection

Top right -- portrait by Robert Bunkin.
Violet Baxter, flashe on paper,
17 x 14 in., 2018. Private collection

Bottom right -- portrait by Kate Gridley.
Aubrey, 30 x 60 in.. From the series *Kate Gridley: Passing Through — Portraits of Emerging Adults* exhibited at the Museum of Art Fort Collins, May 2017.

Bottom left -- landscape by Israel Hershberg. *View from Giglio, Fall*,
oil on linen, 27 x 39 in., 2022-2023.



FC's STUDENTS' MATURE WORK

Top left -- landscape by Valerie Mendelson, *Winter Wall*, 36x40 in.

Top right -- nude by Ephraim Rubenstein, *Nataliya 2*, oil on linen, 28 x 54 in.

Middle right -- cityscape by Peter Colquhoun. *Roof, Clinton Hill*, oil on linen, 32 x 60 in., 1991.
Private collection

Bottom right -- interior by Robert Feinland, *Studio with Reflection*, oil on linen, 48x46 in., 2022

Bottom left -- portrait by Richard Leto, *Woman at Window*. Private collection.

In addition to the colors, we laid out three large strips of flake (lead) white, one for mixing with lighter colors, one for the darker and one in reserve. You needed three times as much white because, in this technique, your color spots will be opaque; you are covering the white of the canvas completely rather than using the white of the canvas, as in transparent glazing techniques. A color spot must be transferred to the canvas as you have mixed it on the palette, without alteration using turpentine or another medium or in the brush handling. We learned to ‘pull down’ the piece of color with the little finger or knife. In the color spot way of working there probably will be some white in virtually every color mix. You learn that when you have added white to lighten a mix you must add more pigment or the color spot will go blanche or chalky. Likewise, and for the same reason, you must be prepared to add more pigment when you darken a mix. Every color or mix of color has three properties: hue (red, yellow, blue), value (degree of light or dark) and intensity (or brightness).

What the shape of the color spot is to be you must decide, for it is not there in the nature with a line around it. We were trained to squint, which simplifies the appearance of nature into large relationships. “If it can be given up in a squint, give it up,” Dickinson would say.

We learned to see the three-dimensional world flatly, the areas of color value as they would appear on the flat canvas. You can imagine the complete detachment from subject matter, from the what-it-is of the objects, that this demands. This is seeing.

Dickinson would refer to what we were looking at as ‘the nature.’ We approached the nature through the finder, two L’s of light-weight cardboard held together by paperclips to form a rectangle proportional to the shape of one’s canvas. A useful finder size for work done in the studio would be 7 1/2” on the leg by 1 1/2” in width. Out of the jumble of the set-up, you look through the finder to select a subject that lifts your spirits and which satisfied the two necessary choices you must make in every painting taken from sight: scale and the degree of contrast in color-value.

You train yourself consciously: Am I at or near the life-size scale I wish to have in my painting? Is there an interesting degree of color-value contrast in my choice of subject? These two choices are crucial – scale and degree of color-value contrast -- not just for the beginner but for any artist, whether they are using a finder or not, whether they are figurative or not.



FC's oil painting, *Still Life with Finder and Engineer's Rule*, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in., 1958. Collection of the artist.

The finder gives you the first four lines of your composition. Every shape within it relates to these lines. We were encouraged in the Dickinson class to work at close to a life-size scale, which meant selecting through the finder a part of the body and a part of the background, usually divided into about half figure and half background, for the sake of contrast. Thus, if your selection included a part of the model's arm which was four inches wide in the nature, you would be dealing visually on the canvas one-on-one with the color values and half-tones that in the nature describe the arm's volume. By making the arm slightly smaller than life-size and because the figure that you are painting is at a distance behind the picture plane, the painted arm will appear life-size in scale. Were you to have taken the whole figure, let's say on a 16" x 20" canvas, the model's arm would have been reduced to the width of a pencil, perhaps 1/4". You would have given up the half-tones and not trained your eye.

(Incidentally, these are the half-tones that give the form three dimensions. When forms are over life-size on your canvas, one must invent tones -- and this does not train your eye. Leave these choices until later in your practice.)

As regards your choice of color-value contrast, if you take a blank wall as your subject through the finder, you won't develop your ability to discriminate color-value in the lights, darks and half- tones. Leave the simplifications and subtleties of Ad Reinhardt or color-field painting until later. In different paintings, develop yourself by experimenting with the key: high key (light), low key (dark), warm or cool key.



FC's *Reclining Nude*, oil on canvas, 22 x 27 in., 1958. Collection of the artist.

The legs are painted at life-size scale and occupy approximately half the canvas, as Dickinson encouraged.

Over his lifetime, Dickinson sought subjects in nature that were changing -- moments that flashed in his eye, often in inclement weather. He would capture these on canvas within a matter of minutes and in a single sitting, setting up his easel with, as one student said, the “focused efficiency of an emergency room surgeon.” He drew the whole composition within five minutes, and then in an excited heat generously spread paint working from the center out to the contours of the canvas. Called premier coup or first strikes or simply strikes, most were landscapes, which is what he painted more than anything else. The rigor of the premier coup technique -- also known as *alla prima*, or “at first attempt” in Italian -- and its economy of time

sharpened our focus in the Dickinson class when he would limit us to drawing in five minutes. The first three were spent selecting the composition through the finder. The next two were spent drawing on newsprint paper, sometimes with the side of the little finger dipped into neutral paint. We divided the canvas out to the edge into a few large shapes, describing the principal areas of the composition as seen with the aid of a squint. You may see some of these drawing indications if you look closely at *Model with Red Bandana*. Premier coup painting is done in one sitting. It is comparable to haiku; it takes one aspect of nature, summarizes it and is done. Sometimes the subject is instantly recognizable. Sometimes, it is not.



Dickinson's *View Towards Great Island*, 1941, oil on canvas (premier coup), 8 × 12 in., Provincetown Art Association and Museum

Photo courtesy of Arts Students
League publication, Linea, May 2021

You might paint for hours without any recognizable shapes such as arms or legs or drapery appearing on the canvas. Color-values may appear to crawl slowly across the canvas, the shapes unrecognizable, entirely abstract in the proper definition of the word (*ab traho* in Latin means ‘to draw from’). That is what we were doing, abstracting color-spots by drawing them ‘from, or out of’ the appearance of nature. Again, the longer one can keep these shapes of color-value ‘abstract’ on your canvas and unrecognizable as to what the subject is – an arm, a breast, a face, a pot, a rock – the more the painting will express the unpredictable moment of your seeing, and its unnameable beauty. Dickinson said when was painting a premier coup, you’d interrupt

him at your own peril. I, too, have found a thrill to the concentration, a danger and corresponding satisfaction in premier coup that is like no other.

I did not know when I was in the Dickinson class that what I had ‘discovered,’ and Dickinson had verified, could be taught. When I became an instructor, I would come to understand that everything I had ‘discovered’ was teachable.

I stayed at the League for another year, but Dickinson missed half of it, sick with tuberculosis. His mother had died from TB when he was eleven. So had my paternal grandmother. Both women had been at Saranac Lake in New York at about the same time, taking the cure and I have often wondered if they knew one another. My father also had contracted tuberculosis which was not diagnosed until years later. Dickinson and I had had this history with TB in our families in common. I empathized and worried about his situation. When I asked him about my leaving the League, he said normally he would advise staying longer, but I was 28 with two daughters and anxious to get my painting career under way. Despite Ben Shahn and my early beginnings, I had been late to start professionally, and it was time to leave the student life behind. I desperately wanted to work with the whole figure on a life-size scale not with just parts of the figure, and for poses that lasted only a week, as were the common practices in Dickinson’s class. (We’d change models every week, as well.)



Dick and Kitty Cunningham in 1960 in Hopkinton, NH, visiting his mother and father.



Daughters Katharine (left), age 2, and Sasha, age 4, at the illustrator Tasha Tudor’s farm in Webster, NH, 1960. Tudor was a longtime friend of FC’s parents.

Why the life-size scale? I knew firsthand that on the life-size scale -- and possibly only on a life-size scale -- one could identify with a painted image. By identify, I mean an almost visceral sensation, an epiphany, a “pop” in the eye, body and mind at once, an explosion of recognition, of knowing without knowing. I had experienced this “one-on-one” in all innocence the previous summer in 1958, when my wife and I spent six weeks looking at art in Italy and, toward the end of our visit, saw the statue of the *Doryphoros* (spear-bearer) by Polykleitos in Naples.

The *Doryphoros* surpassed every statue and painting of the figure I had seen during the previous six weeks in Italy (Florence, Milan, Siena, Assisi, Rome and Naples). The *Doryphoros* seemed alive and in my space -- one-on-one with me, ready to move. I did not know it at the time, but, in point of fact, this sculpture was anatomically functional. The effect of the mathematics of its classical proportions, as unconscious as I was of them at the time, set a vision, a standard for my own work – the ambition to make a nude of our time, as meaningful, essential and real as the Olympian gods were to the Greeks or Christ to the Renaissance.



The *Doryphoros*, or spear carrier, fifth century BCE Greek sculpture from the Archaeological Museum in Naples

Could a nude exist in 20th century America that would satisfy the human desire for holy transcendence through art? Experiences of looking and listening that let you know there is something bigger than you. Could I achieve this? I knew at the time when I left the League that whatever it was would have to be life-size. It had to be with living models who would take poses for more than a week and work with me sometimes almost as collaborators. I believed that if I looked at the model as Dickinson taught, I knew that what I'd see would perforce be a reflection and embodiment of contemporary modern life in the 20th century, which was secular. The ordinary human being is the extraordinary. This I believed. My work with nudes would be through painting on a flat canvas, which presented obvious challenges when compared with the three-dimensional form of sculpture. How to paint movement? Breath? Aliveness? Without denying, romanticizing or purposely distorting what your eye actually sees when you look as a painter? Without being photographic and striving to replicate nature exactly as an end? Without looking at models as material, but as human beings with complicated lives? These were the challenges and questions forming in my conscious mind, when I left the League and went out on my own.



FC's *Self Portrait*, oil on canvas, 24 x 22 in., 1960. Collection of the artist.

Chapter 4 *Hard Choices*



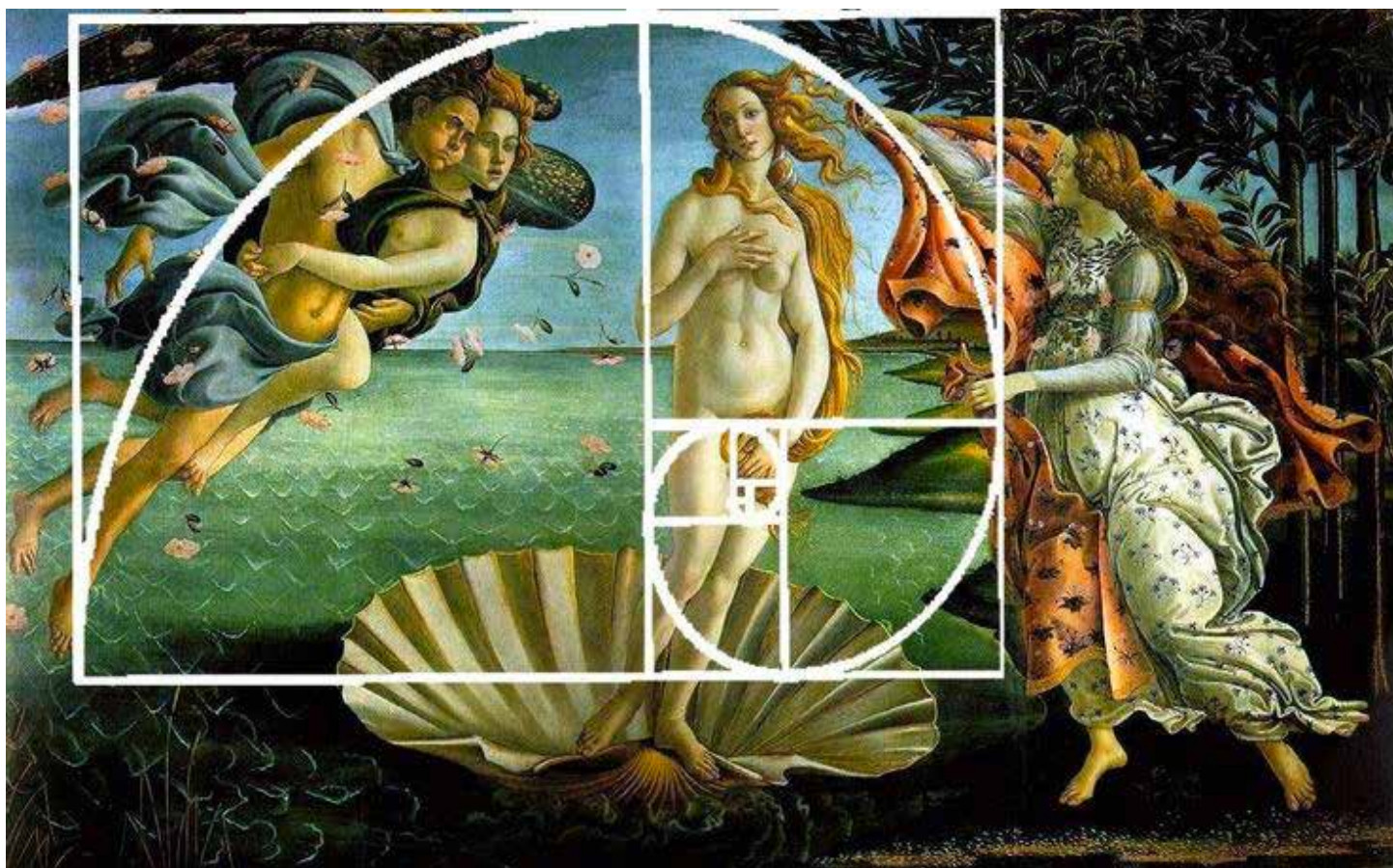


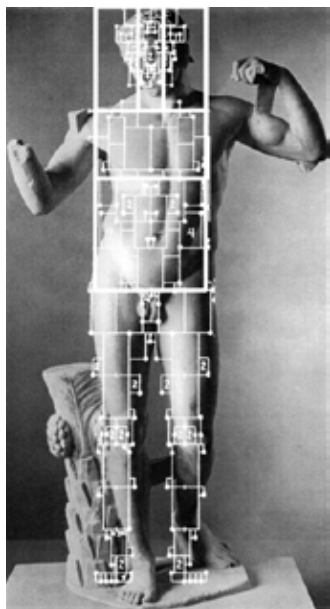
FC teaching at Brooklyn Museum Art School in 1979, where he taught for 17 years until 1980.

I wanted to take up the whole figure and knew that although I had acquired certain conceptual and practical skills, these were insufficient for turning a naked body into a nude. That would require going back to square one on every level, from why the nude in the first place to further consideration of such subjects as anatomy, proportion, drawing and its relation to color.

I began with proportion. Proportion is elemental to every human endeavor from cooking and sleeping to working and playing. The artist who was sharing my studio at One Union Square, Donald E. Gordon, suggested I could apply the Greeks' unit of measure, the Golden Section, one of the most basic and profound progressions in mathematics to painting the nude. The Golden Section is a constant geometric relationship that can expand in much the same way as its famous counterpart, the Fibonacci sequence. It has been argued that the Golden Section is a key building block in nature. The shape of a seashell or a pinecone and the way structures grow in nature relate to a discernable starting combination of complementary elements the same way that a Golden Section progression always relates back to an *alpha* and *beta*, and builds on these proportions.

Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1480) with the golden ratio and Fibonacci Sequence superimposed





Donald E. Gordon's measurements overlaid on a photograph of the Metropolitan Museum's *Diadoumenos*



FC and Kitty with their friends, Aubrey Cartwright (second from left) and Juliet Smart (left) in Naples, Italy, in 1958.

Discovering geometric designs within Greek sculpture as a way to relate height to width provided me with the critical clue into what made the figures live for me in ways that had not been discernible or felt in my experiences with Renaissance sculptures or paintings. At the time, I had no concept of an anatomically functional figure in painting or in sculpture; that idea would evolve empirically over time and came to be central to my work. Suffice it to say, the geometric form concepts of the Greeks interacting with the arithmetic modules of the Renaissance is the alchemy I sought, and I was just at the beginning.

Don had the brilliant idea to place paper over a photograph of the *Diadoumenos* and trace the figure with lines connecting key anatomical points on the body. For the first time I could see what I had unconsciously responded to when I encountered the *Doryphoros* in Naples, a sensation of bristling aliveness that made me leave my skin. I could see that these lines expressed harmonic geometric relationships of height to width. Pushing it a step further, I connected Don's lines so that they formed quadrilaterals and when I took the average of the two longer sides of a quadrilateral and multiplied it by 0.618, an approximate three decimal place expression of the Golden Section ratio, I came up with numbers that closely approximated the average of the two shorter sides. This could not be chance. The coincidence is too close to have been accidental. It worked! I was amazed. I had observed and measured a visual, proportional relationship of height to width throughout the body that could be expressed through the Golden Section. This meant that in a sense, you could predict measurements in sculpture that contrived to make a viewer believe the statue was alive and, if you could do it in sculpture, could you as well in the two-dimensions of painting on a flat surface? And, what if, all human beings were geometrically and arithmetically proportionate, even if they did not look it at first or second glance? Could you find the harmonics in the body, *every* body? I now had more than a hunch you could.

Without a model, I used a magazine photograph of a nude and painted her near life-size, standing in an imagined stream in a wooded landscape. At about the same time, setting aside Greek proportions, I took up classical subject matter with a planned *Judgment of Paris*, making several drawings, one of a female figure reaching for the apple which Paris holds in his hand. As a subject matter for the nude, I had found that classical motifs, as well as the bathers, were played out and meaningless – no better than an excuse to paint the nude.



CLOCKWISE

Top left -- FC's *Nude in Landscape*,
oil on canvas, 51.75 x 44.5 in., 1961.
Collection of the artist.

Top right -- FC's *Judgment of Paris*,
oil on masonite, 10 x 8 in., 1960.
Collection of the artist.

Bottom -- FC's *Bathers in a Landscape*,
oil on canvas, 39 x 50 in., 1962.
Collection of the artist.

In this state of dissatisfaction, I returned to working from sight in an intense Dickinsonian approach from the appearance of nature, exploring different aspects in still life paintings. The intensity of that search, the raw energy, is present in these paintings, exemplified by the still life I did of a ginger jar where I pushed to the edge. How closely could I see without drawing a line? But finally, I could go no further in this visually oriented direction. There is nothing like being brought to your knees. I was 31 years old; Masaccio was 27 at his death and where was I?



FC's *Still Life with Ginger Jar*, oil on linen,
20 x 36 in., 1962. Private collection.

What followed was a period of intense depression. I was at an impasse, a time of not knowing where I was going. Lost. Something was missing, or better said, what was I missing? How does life enter paintings? How does painting enter life? What was I doing? There appeared to be no meaningful reason to do the nude in my day and age and none for pursuing representation of any sort. My inner voices, the critics, the gnomes, sat on my shoulders and antagonized me with this news. They urged me to quit. I fought them. I had to find out how to go beyond the idealized nude of European lineage and make my own nude, one that accepted -- fully acknowledged and used -- my training, my passionate regard for the Greeks, the Renaissance, the past without apology. I had to admit, I liked the rules. I liked the absolutes, but what were they serving?



Simon Lissim's *The Players*, mixed media, paperboard, 27 x 20 in., 1963

Lissim — painter, designer, illustrator, ceramist and stage designer, was a 20th century Renaissance man. Born in Kyiv, Ukraine, he settled in New York City in 1941, where he launched into art education. He was appointed in 1942 head of the Art Education Project in the New York Public Library and crowned this achievement by becoming, in due course, Professor of Art at the City College of the City University of New York.

Professor Simon Lissim came to my rescue, offering me my first teaching job in 1962, which effectively quelled my depression. He had been the youngest of the Diaghilev scenic and costume designers that included Bakst and Benois, and he became my mentor. I taught an adult education program at the City College of New York and found that there is nothing like teaching to make you question everything you think you know.

A year later, Augustus Peck hired me to teach a painting class at the Brooklyn Museum Art School (BMAS). For nearly two years, I taught painting and art history for 24 contact hours a week in the two schools, travelling between Brooklyn and Manhattan. The class in oils that gave me the greatest satisfaction was a High School Scholarship Class that I taught for 17 years at the BMAS. The talent in that class was extraordinary: Robert Bunkin, Peter Colquhoun, Robert Feinland, Richard Leto, Valerie Mendelson, Ephraim Rubenstein and Lori Woloz, were among them. Out of it came many painters, as well as musicians, instructors and an occasional scholar. But, during the time when I was doing double-duty at City College and BMAS, I only painted two large still lifes (*Antique Casts* and *Still Life with Limes*) although they remain among the most instantaneously well-received of my work, I was discouraged by — and honestly begrudged -- the time constraints enforced by such a demanding teaching schedule. I yearned to paint full time. How? How to make a living as an artist?



Left -- FC's *Antique Casts*, oil on canvas, 40 x 36 in., 1964. Collection of the artist.



Right -- FC's *Still Life with Limes*, oil on canvas, 34 x 40 in., 1963. Private collection.



Top -- FC's *Summer, Peterborough Rocks*
oil on masonite, 16 x 20 in., 1960.
Collection of the artist.

Bottom -- FC's *Mt. Everett, Sheffield, MA*,
35 x 41 in., 1964. Private collection.

In the quiet rebellion from my Dickinson training that had begun out of depression, I put lines around objects and did landscapes and still life that were more colorful and freer in brush handling. As subject matters, still life and landscape provided critical answers to my questions about how to paint an anatomically functional nude. In landscape, I moved from the soft-edged unexpectedness of *Summer, Peterborough Rocks*, 1960 to the more readily recognizable *Mount Everett* 1964. In still life, I moved from the object seen from an unexpected station point, soft-edged and mysterious as in *Still Life with Shoes*, 1960 (those are my Marine Corps boots on the table) toward the clear-edged definition of objects as in *The Work Table*, 1965. The mind decisively had entered the picture.



During the early 1960's summers, I invited Mimi Scherb to come to Sheffield in the Berkshires for several weeks of drawing and painting. She lived with us in the house that we built and called The Barn. Completed in 1964, our renovated barn was originally painted "barn red." Built by Dick (Richard) Babcock, the Barn was a 30 x 40 foot converted hay barn lifted and transported from Lenox, MA, with its massive hewn beams in tact. The Barn was over 150 years old when we moved it. My studio occupied the hay loft and Sasha, Katharine, Kitty and I slept in three cow stalls beneath the loft. The Barn's signature 37-foot fieldstone chimney launched Babcock as a legendary builder of converted barns and fieldstone fireplaces. Mimi joined us on picnics, swimming in Umpachene Falls and at every meal. She had been my model for the classes I taught at th BMAS; she was family. I would learn to paint the nude working with her.

Top left -- FC's *Still Life with Shoes*,
oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in., 1960.
Private collection

Top right -- FC's *The Work Table*,
oil on canvas, 45 x 52 in., 1965.
Collection of the artist.

Bottom -- FC's *Floyd Woodbeck*,
oil on canvas, 66 x 50 in., 1972/2008.
Collection of the artist.



In our class, Dickinson had said, “Set up a still life and then go around and paint it from the back.” He was a master of looking down on things, or up at an unusual angle, also in using a mirror. One has less chance to bring expectation into play when the viewpoint is unusual, and that is an extraordinarily invaluable experience. But I was going in another direction, one that concerned itself with the nature of the object depicted. I want a knee to be a knee, a gourd to be a gourd, and for you to see the kneecap or gourd right away -- whereas Dickinson saw them as blobs of color. In Sheffield, my friend Floyd Woodbeck had shown me how to graft apple trees. He knew old fashioned varieties of which there had been literally hundreds, reduced by the 1960s in supermarkets to a comparative few such as Granny Smiths, Macs, Golden and Red Delicious. What a pity. Apples are as diverse as people. There is a difference between a Roxbury Russet and a Tellardy Sweet in their look as well as their taste (thankfully many markets today have returned to selling a range of apple types).

[There is as much difference between apples as there is between human beings.](#) Perhaps Dickinson did not need to concern himself much with the difference between apples; to him an apple was a shape of color value. I love his work for this and for what I learned because of it, but I had to paint in my own way to get at the apple-ness of the particular apple.

Top left -- The only existing picture of the Cunningham family from this time. Left to right: Kitty, Sasha, Dick and Katharine in 1964.



Bottom left -- Sasha drives a horse-pulled plow near the Barn with oversight from FC, while Katharine sits in back.



Floyd collected tools, most of which no one had ever heard of, and many that he had used himself. He lent me a chime knife, a tool that cuts the chime on a wooden barrel, and a barking spud used to strip bark from the hemlock tree, which then would be heated to separate tannin for use in tanning hides. I would paint these tools and come to feel about them much as I do about human beings – each has a purpose. These old tools were largely handmade. A blacksmith would do the metalwork. A farmer would make the handle, knowing that one does not use a brittle wood like hickory for a scythe, but one that is flexible, like ash. These tools have extraordinary beauty. (Sometime in the 1980s, Floyd’s house burned down taking all his tools with it. We were both glad for the paintings as record.)

Top -- FC's *Baldwin Apples*, oil on canvas, 5 x 13 in., 1964. Private collection

Bottom -- The Barn



“The Color of Life Is Unnameable” is a Jon Peters video that captures FC’s distinctive way of looking at the natural world as “shapes of color.” Filmed in 2018 at the Barn Studio in Sheffield, Massachusetts. (This is an excerpt.)



Top -- FC's *Floyd and Hog-butchering Tools*, 1965, oil on canvas, 46 × 40 in., Collection of the artist



Bottom — FC's *Chime Knife, Barking Spud and Gourds*, 1970, oil on canvas, 28 × 44 in., Private collection

Out of my interest in objects for their own sake, I began to raise them up to my eye level so I could better see them in their ‘objective’ proportions. I then put objects on a table or even higher, directly opposite my line of sight, on a still life rig that Floyd made for me. I began to clarify the Dickinsonian “blue smoke” that blends the object with its immediate surroundings. I did this first with still life by putting lines around the objects regardless of the appearance. When you look hard enough at something you may find its edge. This would then follow in landscape and the figure. I have always painted in four genres – landscape, still life, nudes and clothed figure – finding that what I advance in one always vitalizes the other; they connect.



FC's *Golden Section Still Life I*,
1965, oil on canvas, 36 × 44 in.,
Private collection

Among viewers there will be those who will prefer a soft focus to a sharper focus, and vice versa. There are those who prefer bright color to neutral, and so on. There is also a marketplace for art, to which I never played. Commercialization corrupts the natural creative process. I had taken this page from Dickinson, who despised commercialism and what the galleries were doing and had done to art. I think it was not so much that he had been burned as that as a professional painter, he took offense at the galleries' power and dominance that left the artist beholden.

In those early days of the sixties there really was no choice. One had to be self-sufficient. There were no patterns to follow. The figurative artists of this period were scattered; there never would be a collective movement toward representation or realism such as there had been toward Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art or Conceptualism -- the art world trends heartily embraced by the new wealth generation. There were brief flurries such as the Alliance of Figurative Artists in New York that incredibly had upwards of 350 members at its peak, including Philip Pearlstein, Lenart Anderson, Gabriel Laderman and Alice Neel, among many other figurative and realist painters and sculptors, as well as, for an instant, myself, for artist-run weekly discussion groups (1969-1980s). But, in a culture that prioritizes one contemporary art form over another, the return of representation that many claimed was “going to happen,” never did. Its coexistence with Abstract Expressionism which should have been comfortable -- and for me certainly was -- never took hold.

For better or worse I would never follow a commercial route. Always one painting would lead to the next. It is the same today. The mind does not lead the way, the painting does. I could not work otherwise. I listen to the painting.



FC's *Harding's Woods Snowscape*, Lenox, oil on canvas, 11 x 8 in., 1968. Collection of the artist.

Chapter 5 *The Dealers*



I was at Hirschl & Adler Galleries for eight years (1967-1975) and had three solo exhibitions. This was at a time when American painting was being rediscovered. The basic art history course at Harvard when I was there had made no mention of 20th century American painting, and we were actively discouraged from writing our theses on American art. But something incredible happened when, in 1962, first lady Jacqueline Kennedy restored the White House with American paintings and furniture. She made a concerted effort to retrieve all the things in the White House that had been sold off over the 160 years by previous occupants. “It would be sacrilege merely to redecorate it,” the first lady said. She viewed the White House as a museum owned by the people where every stick of furniture and article in it had a direct link to America’s past. She was helped by Stuart Feld, a prodigious Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art who five years later became my dealer at Hirschl & Adler. The end result was a surge of pride and keen interest in American painting and furniture from the public at large, all of which encouraged gallerists and museum directors, including John C. Wilmerding, curator at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., to exhibit and acquire for the first time Eakins, Kensett, Durand, and other lesser-known extraordinary talents such as the marine painter, Fitz Hugh Lane.



Jaqueline Kennedy seated in the East Room with CBS correspondent Charles Collingwood in front of Gilbert Stewart's painting of George Washington for the first televised tour of the White House in 1962.

In New York in 1967, Feld left the American paintings department at the Met where he had completely reorganized the archival systems to join Hirschl & Adler as a partner. He had an impeccable eye for quality in 18th and 19th century American painting, and the results were evident at the gallery. During my time at Hirschl & Adler, the experience was like being in a small museum.

I had been introduced to Feld by Ferdinand Davis, the head of the music department at Hunter College and a collector with a modest budget. Davis went to the Cape in the summers and was friends with Dickinson, admired him and bought his paintings, as well as some of the lesser-known Philadelphia School still life painters of the 19th century. He also bought several paintings of mine and made sure I was seen by certain critics, namely Katharine Kuh who was out of Chicago. I owe an education in American painting to Davis and Feld.

At Hirschl & Adler and elsewhere, I saw the celebrated overblown Hudson River School paintings and preferred the more demure naturalistic studies and landscapes of Asher B. Durand, Jasper Cropsey, John Frederick Kensett and others, to the tour de force, bombastic masterpieces of Cole, Bierstadt and Moran. There was, in part, also a painter's reason for this preference: When my wife and I first went to Italy in 1958, we flew home in a four engine "Constellation" – a relatively slow flight that included a stop in Newfoundland to refuel. On the way from Europe to Boston, I could see out the aircraft window the light change from the soft warmth of Europe to the harsh, clear coldness of North America.

In the North American light, objects sharply and distinctly stand out. We are not a continent for chiaroscuro, nor do we need the addition of the grandiose. One can see this American light and this attitude in the work of American painters who looked for themselves and were not stamped by Europe. At Hirschl & Adler, I saw my ancestors.

Before exhibiting at Hirschl & Adler, I had shown in Greenwich Village at Millie Milch's Waverly Gallery and then uptown at the Harry Salpeter Gallery. Milch and Salpeter took on artists they cared about and as dealers steadfastly promoted them. The Waverly show in 1964, my first one-man show, sold many paintings and attracted attention, including from Mercedes Matter who wrote me in a letter that I have kept. She had recently founded the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture on 8th street with some of her students. A local legend, she had



FC's "ANCESTORS" on preceding page, clockwise

Top -- Asher B. Durand, *Farmyard Evening*, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in., 1835. Private collection. Exhibited by Hirschl & Adler Galleries

Bottom right -- John Frederick Kensett, *View of Mount Washington*, oil on canvas, 30 x 45 in., 1852. Private collection. Exhibited by Hirschl & Adler Galleries

Bottom left -- Jasper Cropsey, *Head of the Lake*, oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 23 in., 1877. Private collection. Exhibited by Hirschl & Adler Galleries

studied with Hans Hofmann and was an original member of the American Abstract Artists group in the 1930s. I revered her modernist abstract artwork and approach to teaching, rooted as they were, in real life observation. Matter had looked through the gallery windows every day at the Waverly until she had finally had a chance to stop in. "It is a joy to see the work of a painter – so rare these days," she said. "Congratulations on a beautiful show."



THE WAVERLY GALLERY SHOW,
1964, clockwise:

Top left -- FC's *Canton Bowl with Pears*, 1962, oil on panel, 15 x 18 in., Collection of the artist

Top right -- FC's *Mother's Garden Wall*, 1963, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Private collection

Bottom right -- FC's *Carriage House Still Life*, 1961, oil on panel, 20 x 16 in., Private collection

Bottom left -- FC's *Reclining Nude, Mimi* 1963, oil on canvas, 22 x 24 in., Private collection



Matter asked if I knew Dickinson because she had known him and his work her whole life, they had both also interacted with Willem de Kooning. Dickinson himself was pleased with the exhibition at the Waverly, knowing how difficult it was to have a teaching life while also trying to work in the studio.

In those days, I dedicated time routinely to searching for a gallery and, until Millie Milch at the Waverly, had been turned down mostly because I did not paint the same thing over and over, which is how most dealers thought you could sell. But anyone who trained with Dickinson knew that each painting would be different. This can be seen in the next show I had at Harry Salpeter Gallery at the end of 1966.

I believed in the nude; nudes elude repetition. In my quest to discover how to make one that would stir people's sympathetic imaginations, I had come up with a mathematical formula together with Donald E. Gordon, beginning in 1959, that I was eager to publish. In the summer of 1962, our article appeared in *The Art Quarterly*. I remember being somewhat hesitant to put our theory on proportion into print -- which I was convinced, and still am, was a breakthrough theory that would earn the family fortune -- and had asked my father, a lawyer, for whom I had immense respect and love, for his advice. In a letter to me, he cautioned against going public with it, writing, "Think twice. This is a competitive world." He argued that until I had a name in the art world, I would not be able to protect my ideas. (The complete formula with illustrations appears on my website in an essay on the Golden Section and the Greek canon of Polykleitos, *How High for How Wide*, designed by the illustrator, Sean Kelly.)

My father died two months before my next solo show at the Harry Salpeter Gallery on 57th street. I had been wooed there because moving uptown was always the aim. These were rough months. Father, which is what I called him, had taken his own life. In addition to having undiagnosed Alzheimer's disease, he had not been well and had been given medication for severe back pain that had further muddled him. He had always expressed compassion for animals who were sick. He believed it was

better to put them out of their misery than to see them suffer, and, worse, see others suffer because of their suffering. He may have had my mother at heart, because she was nine years younger than he and he worried about her having to endure what seemed to him an inevitable and quite possibly slow end that would require all her attention and care. I do not know why he did what he did. But it brought me closer to Poley (Polly Thayer Starr,) because her father, too, had committed suicide. Dickinson's brother had, as well. There was a certain bond among us in my heart.



Above -- FC's father, Francis de Lancey Cunningham, at home in Hopkinton, NH, spring 1955. A self-portrait.

I am also not sure how father's death affected my painting, if at all. When I was away at school at St. Paul's for high school, I wrote him and Mother weekly, keeping them apprised of developments in my painting. I kept a notebook on me and would draw whenever I could; there wasn't a serious art class I could take. When the school closed the only art studio it had on Sundays, which was the best day for me to paint, I began using my dorm room as a studio. My parents furnished me with canvases, some of which I sent to Ben Shahn at Princeton for his feedback. My parents had strong opinions about me being a painter as a career, but they never thought that paintings were a frivolity.



"Family was stabilizing during this time"

Left -- FC's *Kitty at Rote Hill Road*, oil on board, 11.5 x 11 in., 1963. Collection of the artist

Right -- FC's *Sasha and Katharine* (Cunningham, Sheffield), 40 x 50 in., 1964. Collection of the artist.



I went into the Hopkinton woods behind their house after Father died and had a moment by myself. He and I had had a serious conversation the night before and in retrospect I think I understood the import of his heart-to-heart. He was a private man and among the least selfish I have ever known; I loved him dearly. After his death, I relied more on Kitty who was as ever, stalwart and balanced.

At Salpeter I received my first reviews. And again I sold well. By 1966, I was also immersed in dance, attending performances three and four times a week during what would be called the dance boom. Dance critics and choreographers and dancers entered our lives. New York City exploded with the building of Philip Johnson's New York State Theater at Lincoln Center and Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, among others.



THE HARRY SALPETER SHOW,
1966, clockwise

Top -- FC's *Still Life with Basket*,
c. 1965, oil on canvas, dimensions
unknown, Private collection

Bottom right -- FC's *Canaan Quarry*,
oil on canvas, no dimensions, c. 1964.
Private collection

Bottom left -- FC's *Corner of Studio, Betty
Hummel*, 1964, oil on canvas, 36 × 26 in.,
Collection of the artist

I spent the year of 1967 organizing an alumni show, *Primitive to Picasso*, at the Knoedler Art Galleries for my high school, the Episcopalian boarding school, St. Paul's School. As the person who primarily picked what would go in the show, I had access to some remarkable collectors: Lee A. Ault, James Biddle, Arthur A. Houghton, Benjamin Rowland, Stuart Welch, and John C. Wilmerding among them. This show gave me a ringside seat at the market. I could see how collectors behaved, what piqued their interest, what motivated them to buy and how the art business worked. There was a lot of action in those days for all kinds of art and I had no reason to feel that I wouldn't be part of it.



FC's *The Prepared Table*, (B&W image of painting), oil on canvas, no dimensions., c. 1965. Private collection

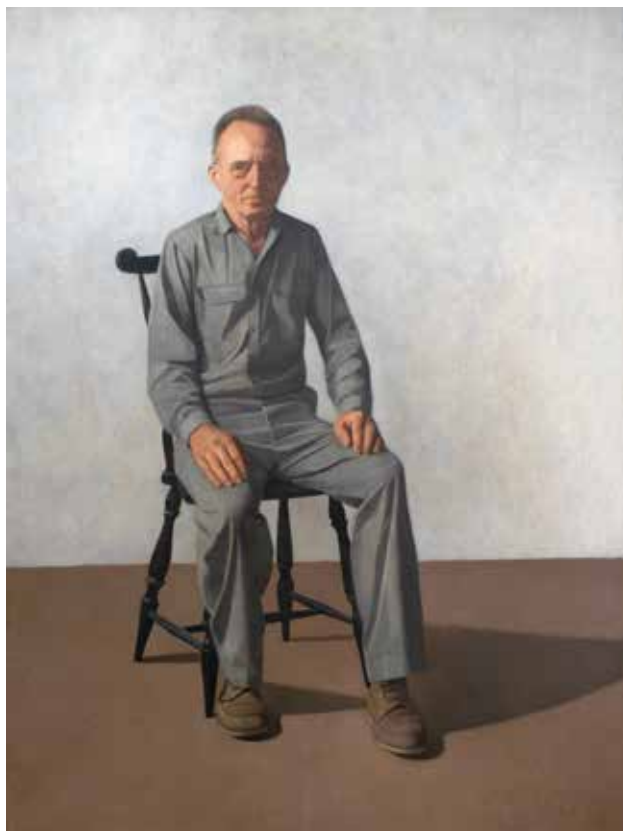
When Harry Salpeter sadly and unexpectedly died, I left soon thereafter for Hirschl & Adler on East 67th Street -- perhaps the most trusted gallery for European paintings in New York, and soon under Feld's guidance to be for American painting. I was among Feld's first living artists in 1967 whom he chose to represent. My figurative work flourished over the next several years and was most notably featured in my third Hirschl & Adler exhibition in 1975. This included four life-size nudes and four life-size clothed figures, as well as some still lifes and landscapes.

On one wall hung my painting of Helen Rabi, wife of Nobel physicist, I. I. Rabi and mother of my wife's best friend. At Helen's insistence, she posed in a full-length black evening gown designed by an eminent Israeli dress designer – unadorned, classic, elegant. In many ways she represented the intellect, the life of the mind at its highest power. You could see this in her brave choice to stand. My paintings take months and months. Helen never faltered. She held her own with immense determination and confidence. I felt she could have hung in the Frick Collection.

Then there was Floyd Woodbeck, my woodsman friend, seated in his grey work clothes. He and I spent untold numbers of days together working the land and talking. I considered him one of my closest friends. His stories about New Englanders were the equal of Emerson's or Hawthorne's or Robert Frost's. You can see from his hands that he is a laborer. The rusty knuckles have been tested and worn down and used. You can picture the soil beneath his nails; I wanted to bring your eye that close to him. As well, I was keen to show how alert his posture is when he sits. He is a raconteur. His portrait entices you to sit around his feet as you might beneath an old pine tree and hear some wisdom.

José Barrera, the first flamenco dancer my wife and I had seen at Jacob's Pillow, strikes a proud pose in his fearsome, maroon velvet-lined black cape with his dark eyes peering beneath his traditional Andalusian pom-pommed hat. He is handsome and ready to stomp. If Helen Rabi was the mind, and Floyd Woodbeck the muscle or body, then Jose was movement and action and the body. He is an artist.

The final clothed figure piece in the Hirschl & Adler 1975 show was of The Reverend Walter B. Wright, Episcopal minister at Christ Church in Sheffield, Massachusetts, where I went. He was among the most humane, patient, kind, insightful and unselfish of people I knew. An accomplished amateur poet, he understood and relayed the teachings of Christ as very few others have. Seated in full vestment and characteristically wearing loafers -- this is the way he would often look when I'd go pay him a visit. When I'd ask W.B. (which is what he liked to be called) for personal advice, it was almost as if I could see through his skin when he'd answer. He glowed or emanated. He was a deeply -- and transparently -- religious man and, for this, not by design, but only in retrospect do I now see that these four paintings as a group represented body, mind and soul in their various aspects. I painted all of them as people you could study, examine and enjoy in the stillness of a work of art.



FC's HIRSCHL & ADLER SHOW,
1975, clockwise

Top left -- *Helen Rabi*, oil on canvas,
60 x 30 in., 1972-1973. Private collection

Top right-- *Floyd Woodbeck*, oil on canvas,
66 x 50 in., 1972 & 2008. Collection of
the artist.

Bottom right -- *José Barrera*,
oil on canvas, 74 x 46 in., 1974.
Private collection

Bottom left -- *The Reverend W.B. Wright*,
oil on canvas, 50 x 32 in., 1972-1974.
Private collection



This diversity of presences -- handpicked for the show by Feld and Prescott Schutz, who headed Hirschl & Adler's contemporary art division -- was replicated in the four chosen nude figures.

Feld and Schutz positioned *Patrick*, a full-frontal male nude, at the top of the stairs, so that it was impossible to enter the gallery without seeing him first. This was a bold move. Hirschl & Adler catered to museums and the Park Avenue and Fifth Avenue crowd who tended to be wealthy and hidebound, scared of straying from anything that was not socially acceptable. But Feld and Schutz evidently believed in *Patrick* enough to give him the prime spot. This was the first time in 17 years that the gallery had shown a male nude.

I painted Patrick as a standing youth, a modern day kouros. Nude, in a frontal stance, hands draped by his sides -- he was an archaic Apollo typical of Greek sculpture. What makes him contemporary? To stand takes balance, which means effort, adjusting against gravity's pull. It is the opposite of sleeping or resting in a horizontal relationship to the earth. Standing is vertical, powerful, alert and vitalized. In the painting, Patrick, who was a dancer, is meditating on an image of his spiritual teacher, Sri Chinmoy, that was taped to the wall beyond the frame. He is in a state of serenity and peace. Did that make him modern? No. I would argue that seeing him for who he is, unidealized, unframed and completely free to move because his limbs were anatomically functional and formed out of painted light and observed color -- is modern.

Imagine after encountering Patrick, you round the corner and are confronted by three more nudes, *Mimi Scherb* (1970), *Karen* and *Lynn*. *Mimi Scherb* (1970) is not about being pretty or superficial or spectacular. It is not about anything. Life marks the whole body, yours and hers; the subject is her life, the object is not her body. At the show's opening one of the critics captured the experience:

"A viewer with the build of a longshoreman was shepherding two women companions," wrote Nancy O. Keefe for *The Berkshire Eagle*. "They stopped before Mimi Scherb, a large painting of an old woman seated nude in a Hitchcock chair... she is not an instant vision of loveliness. The women recoiled and started to move on. The man said, 'Stop. Look at her hands. They're fantastic. Look at her, the picture of old age.' They looked and they began to see.... 'Most beautiful,' one said." The Hitchcock chair could as well have been her throne. Her submission to grief is evident and shows awareness of herself, with eyes closed, but hiding nothing, nude



Above — FC's *Patrick Brown*,
pencil drawing, 16 x 15.2 in., 1974.
Collection of the artist.



FC's HIRSCHL & ADLER SHOW,
1975, clockwise

Top left -- FC's *Patrick*, oil on canvas,
80 x 44 in., 1973-1975. Collection of
the artist.

Top right -- FC's *Karen*, oil on canvas,
70 x 30 in., 1972-1973. Private collection

Bottom right -- FC's *Lynn*,
oil on canvas, 66 x 50 in., 1973-1974.
Private collection.

Bottom left -- FC's *Mimi Scherb*, 1970,
oil on canvas, 50 x 32 in.,
Mimi Scherb, model
Collection of the Art Students League.



and old and hurting, yet also resilient and permanent, a widow who has suffered a recent loss, which in truth she had.

I suppose if you were looking for a nude to hang on your own wall, as Hirschl & Adler may have hoped, Karen – an American Venus, holding dominion on a spare canvas -- would have offered the least resistance.

Then there was Lynn, lost in thought and seated on a plain wooden cube. Whenever the human body appears, in life or art, clothed or unclothed, there is erotic potential. In art, whenever the erotic goes beyond potential to become itself the subject, a line may have been crossed. Although Lynn made some people uncomfortable, I did not cross the line. I wanted to understand light on form and the way the parts of the body move into each other in a dynamic relationship. I wanted to test my belief that in art, the nude body is neutral and that whatever happens beyond the artist's intent lies in the mind of the beholder.

These eight figure pieces, together with a selection of still lifes and landscapes, challenged sexuality, attracting and repelling; they struck religious and moral chords, as well as ranged in subject matter from portraits of working class to elite, intellectual to physical, youth to old age. You could live inside these paintings; I did. They tested what “belonged.”

On the opening day, I came up Hirschl & Adler's stairs as Ferdinand Davis was coming down. “Congratulations,” he said and kept going. At the time, I did not know that this was the last word he would ever speak to me. It was my first indication that a bomb had been dropped.

The opening for the two-week run fell as it typically did on a Saturday. The following Tuesday I had a telephone call from my sister-in-law, Joan Spalding, who had gone to the exhibition and seen a man waving a catalogue and demanding, “Where is this painting?”, pointing to the reproduction of *Patrick*. He was hustled into one of the gallery's back rooms by an employee. Joan followed them in and identified *Patrick*. She assumed I knew that the painting had been taken down and put where it was inaccessible to the public. I did not know nor did I know what to do. Stunned by what appeared to be censorship, I asked the advice of someone who had responded profoundly to *Patrick* in my studio and knew the cultural world of New York, Walter Terry, dean of American dance critics. Without hesitation Terry said, “Go down there and tell them the painting goes back up or the entire show comes down.”

I collected myself and approached Norman Hirschl not with rancor, but with genuine curiosity about why this had happened. My paintings had begun to command a decent price (\$1,500 for smaller landscapes and for still lifes which is equivalent to about \$13,500 in 2025, with asking prices of up to \$33,000 for the larger paintings.) Hirschl dithered for 20 minutes justifying the unjustifiable, sweating the whole time. His excuse for removing *Patrick* was that the head honcho of a major food manufacturing company was coming to the gallery to see a Monet and while ordinarily the honcho probably wouldn't mind him seeing *Patrick*, his wife had recently died of cancer, and so Hirschl felt obliged not to shock him with a male nude. Since the CEO honcho had not yet shown up (and never would), I suggested a compromise to Hirschl that he keep *Patrick* in his rightful place and take the painting down only when the honcho was present.



FC's *Wood Basket and Egg*,
oil on canvas, 17 x 24 in., 1973.
Private collection.

A week later when the exhibition closed, Hirschl, Adler and Feld, who were partners, dismissed me. I was told to take my paintings and leave and not come back with one caveat: Feld separately wrote me a pained letter in which he said I could come back as part of group shows, but never again to expect a solo show. He said the gallery had to make \$25,000 on this past exhibition to break even. I had only sold one for \$750. (Mind you, as the artist, I had also been charged a percentage for the catalogue, the caterers at the opening, including liquor, and for advertising in the *Times*.) I had averaged selling a dozen paintings in each of the previous Hirschl & Adler one-man shows.



FC's *Pears and Basket*,
oil on canvas, 15 x 26 in., 1970.
Private collection.

This demoralizing turn did not, however, happen in a vacuum. There is always a context. Shortly after my exhibition had closed, an article appeared in the *New York Times* written by Peter Hellman with the benign headline, “Gallery Jottings of a Spring Stroller.”

America was deep in the throes of the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil crisis and Hellman, delivering brutally honest observations, reported first-hand on the impact of the economic downturn on the uptown art scene by strolling from one gallery to another for thirty blocks on Madison Avenue north of 57th Street. Among his first stops was at “the unabashedly rearguard” Hirschl & Adler, where he ducked in for a conversation with Schutz, and here is what Schutz told Hellman:

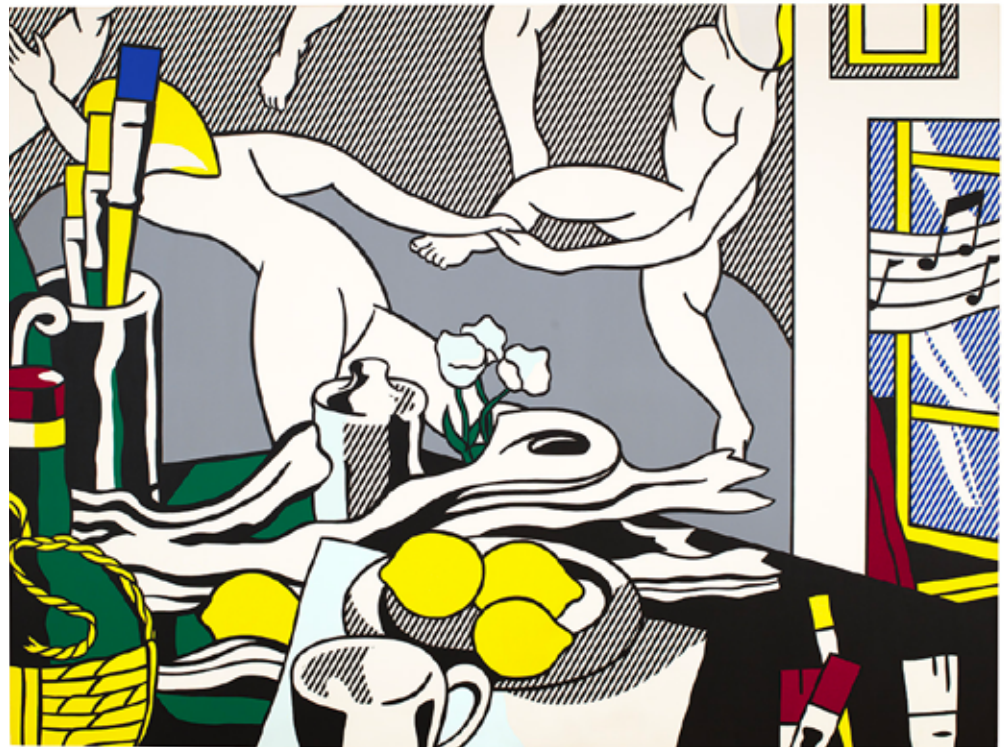


The OPEC oil crisis -- a quadrupling of oil prices led to inflation and a recession in the United States, the most severe since World War II.

“Money problems aren’t the only reason why we’ve had hard going. Our last show, for example, was by Francis Cunningham, a realist who teaches at the Brooklyn Museum. I’d have done 20 backflips to get him reviewed. He showed several nudes which were beautiful but quite frank – including one male nude, the first we’ve hung. I was afraid we’d get some shocked reactions and we sure did. At \$5,500 it was a bargain, but it didn’t sell.”

Apparently after this article came out, Schutz was informed by Hirschl & Adler leadership that if he ever again told the press that the gallery was having hard times and not selling, he’d be the next to go.

Such was the culture of the New York art world at the time -- fiercely competitive, loaded with strong opinion, eyes fixed on the bottom line and who is in and who is out. Dealers’ choice. Artists had little to no agency in the marketplace and if they wished for the power, they were viewed suspiciously by some as selling out, turning commercial, and sacrificing their originality along with their independence. How could artists do justice to their work and still demand more than a bare subsistence? If any of us actually succeeded in commanding top dollar – say, \$300,000 -- as Lichtenstein, Stella, Oldenburg, Kelly, Rosenquist, Rauschenberg and Johns were at Leo Castelli, they became larger-than-life heroes and could avoid the moral quandary I now found myself in: how to stay in the profession and remain true to myself? I heeded my moral plumb and left Hirschl & Adler altogether.



Roy Lichtenstein's *Artist's Studio "The Dance"*, acrylic, oil, graphite pencil on canvas, 8 x 10 ft, 1974. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. S. I. Newhouse, Jr.

Inspired by Matisse, this work was shown at Leo Castelli the same year it was made. Castelli gave Lichtenstein his first one-man show.

Several papers favorably reviewed my “financially disastrous” show (which is how the dealers characterized it). John Canaday, writing for the *New York Times*, singled out my still lifes calling them “strong, serene and assured,” then placed me in the “tradition of Georgia O’Keeffe and Charles Sheeler.” John Gruen for the *Soho Weekly News*, who in addition to being an art critic, also covered dance for the *SoHo News*, exclaimed: “Cunningham presents dramas that remain fixed in memory. Among realist painters of the day, [he] offers singular and substantial pleasure.”

Five decades later, when Christopher Knight, Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, composed an essay for the 5 Continents Edition’s monograph, *Francis Cunningham*, he familiarized himself with some of the Hirschl & Adler paintings that had been exhibited over my eight years with the gallery and wrote:

“The silent dramas in Cunningham’s paintings depart from the dynamic emotional unrest fueling much of Abstract Expressionism and its concurrent figurative analogues.... Instead, Cunningham injects something essential yet in short supply during the rambunctious even volatile years of his first forays into serious, mature painting.... Into the era’s contentious cultural discourse, Cunningham’s paintings injected humility, indispensable but so easily lost. Humility, by its nature, cannot be perfectly done – which offers a weighty reason to keep on painting. In that, Cunningham is neither indifferent nor irresolute but robust.”

After being dropped by the gallery, I instinctively sought the fellowship of my peers who mostly identified as figurative painters, including Sheridan Lord, Philip Pearlstein, Jack Leavey, Morton Kaisch, Ray Kinstler, Gus Mosca, Allen Barber, Will Barnet, Harvey Dinnerstein, Jean Buckley, Sigmund Abeles, Don Holden, Fay Todd, Fran and Barney Hodes. People come first, not ideologies, not theologies, not the State. There was another person who confirmed my confidence in *Patrick* -- the dancer and minimalist choreographer Rudy Perez, a rising force on the downtown post-modern dance scene. After my exhibition had opened I accidentally met Perez through mutual friends for the first time in the lobby of New York City Center. He told me, to my utter surprise, that he had been to see my exhibition and had put up the catalogue photo of *Patrick* where he could see it in his Westbeth studio. In due course, he would create a solo for himself, inspired in part by *Patrick*.

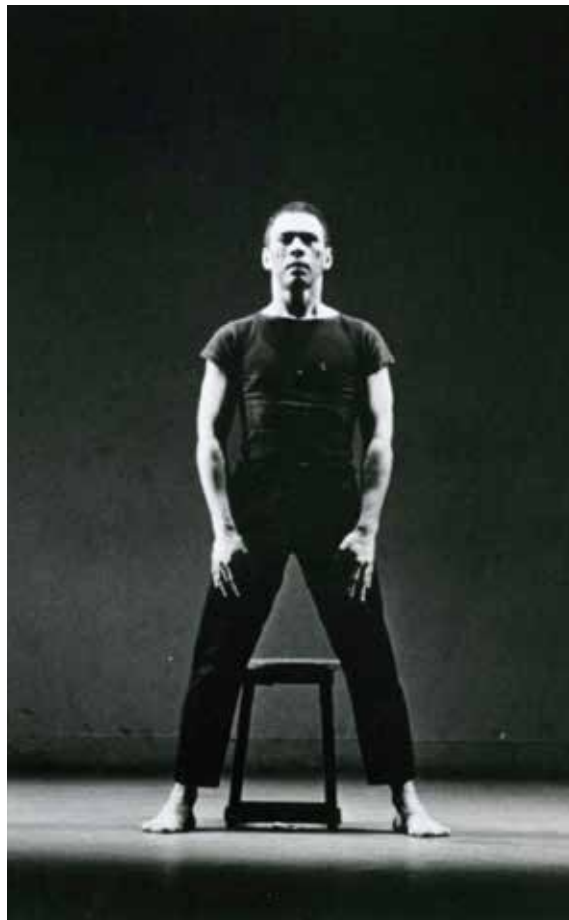
I was now over 40 and out on the street. There was no Ferdinand Davis to make an introduction to gallery dealers. I'd make cold calls dressed for the occasion in a tweed jacket slightly worn at the collar and slightly out in the elbows, a shirt and tie and khaki trousers. That was so the people at the front desk, usually young, wouldn't know me from an Australian sheep farmer who might have a million dollars in his pocket.

I decided to approach Leo Castelli, who was then the premiere gallery dealer for contemporary art in New York. I wanted my paintings shown in a contemporary setting and in the company of abstract art. I wanted their geometric shapes, rhythms and color values to be seen – not just as nudes or clothed figures, landscapes or still life – but as shapes of color on a flat surface. That is what they are, physically. For the viewer, this marriage of realism and abstraction is there to be seen. I know that these two aspects of painting coexist in my work. That is why I tried Castelli.

In the Leo Castelli Gallery, there was no front desk. It was a large room with comfortable chairs and a glassed-in area behind which sat Castelli with his two Dalmatians and his secretary. He was on the phone, and I could hear him talking to

Robert Rauschenberg, planning a birthday party for Jasper Johns – what kind of champagne, who would contact Roy Lichtenstein, and so on.

Finally, he emerged, diminutive of stature, courtly in appearance, and asked what I wanted. I said I would like to show him my work and we sat together while he looked, slowly and carefully, at a large number of 8" x 10" photographs. At one point he stopped, "These are as good as that 19th century painter...who?" "Eakins?" I replied. "Yes, that's it," he said.



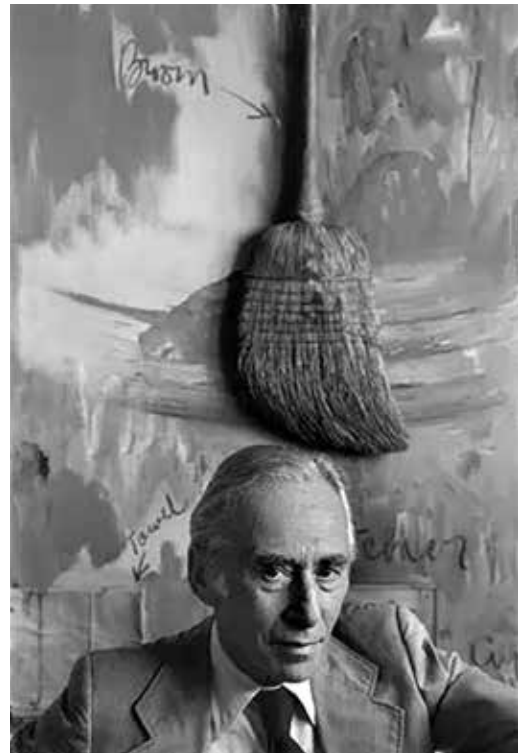
The dancer and choreographer, Rudy Perez, in his solo, *Countdown*, in 1976. Perez was a presence at Judson Church, another vital performance space for the avant-garde that defined New York and the dance boom in the 60s and 70s.

Photo credit: Steve Sbarge

Left -- Stuart Feld in 2017.
Photo courtesy of Hirschl & Adler
Galleries



Right -- Leo Castelli in 1975.
Photo by Jill Krementz



After a long thoughtful time, he said I was not a fit and recommended I try the Miller Gallery. I wrote him a short note thanking him for his attention and reiterated my wish to be in a contemporary gallery with bare walls and no plush carpets on the floor. A few days later the phone rang. It was Castelli, and he wanted to pay me a studio visit -- he would get back to me about a date, later. He never did. Nor did I pursue the matter.

The road not taken? I liked Castelli and felt that he genuinely saw something in my work. I could visualize my work hanging next to non-figurative abstraction, but I could not visualize it on the wall with the figurative aspects seen in the work of Rauschenberg or Johns or alongside Roy Lichtenstein's graphically designed figures.

*“Both an avid lover of realism and a champion
of geometric abstraction could find pleasure in these
[Cunningham] canvases.”*

— Arts Magazine, February 1967

Trying to match artist to dealer perfectly is a problem both artist and dealer face. Being in a gallery in New York comes with its own baggage: who is going to see the work, who is going to buy it? Artist and dealers have to have an audience. Both have to put food on the table. If he had taken me on, Castelli would have had to build a new audience from scratch. If I were younger, I would have called him back. Maybe.

My experiences of looking for a gallery were not unusual. What happened to me happened to most, but not all, of my artist acquaintances in one form or another. I recall a fellow instructor at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, an abstract painter in his sixties who had had a show at the Whitney Museum some years before. I was just starting at Hirschl & Adler. I remember him plaintively saying, “What am I doing now? Walking the street with a portfolio under my arms, looking for a gallery.”

We live in this world of commerce and do what we do because we love it. Those of us who care to teach, do so for the same reason, we love it. One cannot help the occasional but inevitable thought, what on earth do you think you are doing to a younger generation, bringing them into this? Fortunately, when you are young you don’t have such thoughts.

After my New York gallery experiences, I had the good fortune to find Laurel Tracey, a sharp, perceptive and impassioned dealer with unerring taste. She ran a gallery in Red Bank, New Jersey, with her husband and artist, Jon Peters. I showed at the Laurel Tracey Gallery for 20 years, from 2000 until the gallery closed. There was no clientele for the nude in Red Bank, but to have a dealer sympathetic to one’s work made up for much. Laurel and Jon gave me space and an audience. They sold my work at a constant pace and for good prices. Jon made wonderful videos of my process and both paid attention, as they still do, to my work and life. They remain among the best of my friends.

But well before landing with Laurel and Jon, I had taken certain matters into my own hands. Frustrated by the insensitivity, blindness and rank dismissal that nudes seemed to provoke in people, and determined to open minds, to ignite a gasping empathetic awe for the beauty of humankind, I decided to take Barney Hodes up on his idea to start a school for the nude. We opened the New Brooklyn School for Life Painting, Drawing and Sculpture (NBS) in 1979. In the intervening years between the end of my tenure with Hirschl & Adler and the establishment of NBS, my painting changed. I incorporated dance and movement and veered into more explicit dramatic



Above -- FC's *University of Tel Aviv Art Gallery*, oil on canvas, 23 x 33 in., 1997. Private collection.

scenarios and narrative set-ups. I painted saints who on the surface are the opposite from nudes, but who are, to my mind equally spiritual, equally human. They are real people. I saw the Golden Section more clearly as something that exists in us all and if acknowledged in painting or sculpture can stir an instinctive reaction that is felt as harmony. Today, my nudes and figures, if they were to be shown at Hirschl & Adler, would not be censored. We have come a long way in the last half century toward accepting difference in human beings and the realistic depiction of individuals with no clothes on as important art.

Chapter 6

Divine & Human Nature



The period of work I exhibited at Hirschl & Adler was the most realistic and purely visual of my career. It came out of my resolute Americanness and the fact that it was not a recreation or nostalgic look toward the history of figurative painting but a chance to reimagine nudes, clothed figures, still lifes and landscapes in new ways in this new country. My paintings are abstract each in their own way and a separate channel to Abstract Expressionism, and, to my mind, just as new and interesting.



Left -- FC's *St. Francis*, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 in., 1979. Collection of the artist.



Right -- FC's *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, mixed media on paper, 70 x 50 in., 1992. Collection of the artist.

I found, however, that to continue dealing with the energy and meaning manifest in a particular model, I had to make some adjustments to my approach. In 1977, I painted a portrait of Norman Ader, who had trained under choreographer Alwin Nikolais and who had founded the Pumpernickel Players, a children's theater company in lower Manhattan. Ader had an abiding interest in saints, particularly St. Francis, in part because they were real human beings who had strolled the earth just like the rest of us, but unlike most of us, were devoted to God with such pure conviction that they sometimes inspired new religious orders. Norman, a lover of all creatures great and small, asked me to paint him as St. Francis.

“A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson



FC's *The Housatonic at Ashley Falls*,
oil on canvas, 43.75 x 60, 1971.
Private collection .

I had been born and raised an Episcopalian; I went to church on Sundays until around 1971, taking my children with me and making sure they were confirmed in the Episcopal faith. I had attended an Episcopal school, St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, for high school, as had my father. At St. Paul's theological doctrine and history had been drilled into us as though we were to be clerics. My spiritual and philosophical education, however, was equally informed by being raised in New England and having a devout Quaker godmother, who was a descendant of Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson and with whom I was in constant touch.

Picnic in Sheffield at the Barn with Michael Ballard, left, Norman Ader, middle, and FC.



When Norman entered my life as a model and good friend (whose partner, Michael Ballard, was the lead dancer in Murray Louis's company and eventually the subject of *Conversations with a Dancer*, a book he co-authored with Kitty, published by St. Martin's Press), I was a self-declared agnostic. I felt that every saint should have their credentials checked. At Norman's urging, however, I began reading the saints' writings and biographies about them and came to

share his realization that saints are as distinct a species within the human race as pines or oaks are distinct among trees.

In the first painting I did of Norman as St. Francis, the subject took precedence in a way I had not expected. I had included a sun and a moon, which were set pieces borrowed from his theater company and which I later had to scrape out because they took away from the simple grand gesture of his pose. For a similar reason, although they were visually apparent, I had to give up many secondary wrinkles and folds in the Franciscan monk's brown robe he wore. I was finding out that to get at the character of a saint, I had to give up everything that was not germane, regardless of whatever visually was directly in front of me.

This ["giving up everything"](#) was, in a sense, an opposite or reverse response to what I had been doing with the nudes, landscapes and still lifes, where I had wanted to acknowledge the "everything" that was visually present. In some regard, to paint saints was also as far from painting nudes as one could get for subject matter, but I didn't see this at the time, nor was it ever a conscious motivation. I believed then, as I do now, that both saints and living nude models -- because they are incontrovertibly of real flesh and blood -- are optimal subjects for apprehending the "unnameable" sanctity of humankind on canvas.

Most people initially resisted the saints as much as they did my nudes. Why? They both challenge fashion, custom and social acceptability; taking a shortsighted view, they provoked -- and represented -- a transgression of norms.



FC, age 82, in his Manhattan dining room with *In the Studio* behind him to the right and a painting of Regina standing to the left, and Peter *Reaching* on lower right.

Photo: Nathaniel Darst

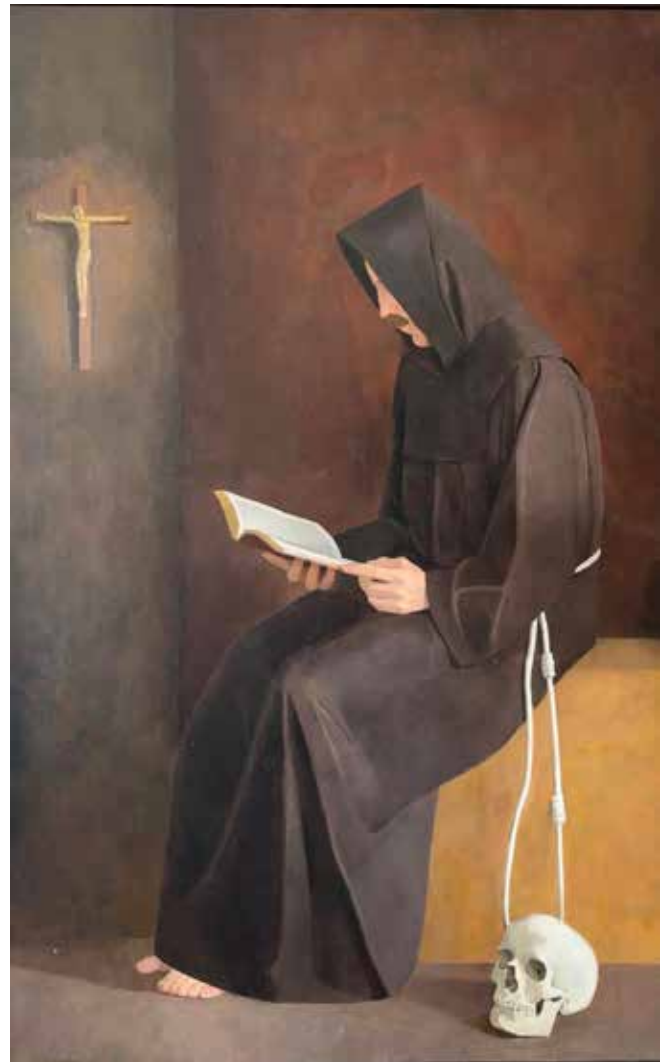
I would paint a total of eight portraits of saints in my lifetime -- including Norman three times as St. Francis and once as a monk in contemplation and once as St. John of the Cross. My final of him in 2011 was a painting within a painting, *In the Studio*. One female model held two poses nude, on either side of a painting of Norman as a Franciscan monk reading. This is the only painting of mine in which nudes and clothed figures share the same canvas space.



Mount Saviour Monastery

By that year, I was serving as an oblate at Mount Saviour Monastery in Pine City, NY, and every other year or so would go there for silent retreats, sometimes spending as much as two weeks without talking. I never converted to Catholicism, nor did I have any interest in doing so. Rather, I was drawn to the stillness, clarity and discipline of mind that came from following the Rule of St. Benedict and brought my senses into closer contact with nature. It had been Ader who steered me toward Mount Saviour, when I

had mentioned to him that I was curious about, and possibly interested in, doing what he had done, which was to go on a meditation retreat at Big Sur's Esalen Institute in California. Ultimately, however, I wasn't keen to go that far away much less spend my time meditating nude.



Clockwise --

Top -- FC's *St. Bernadette*, 1983,
oil on canvas, 30 × 84 in.,
Collection of the artist.
Katharine Cunningham, model

Bottom right -- FC's *Franciscan Monk*,
1984, oil on canvas, 56 × 48 in.,
Collection of the artist.
Norman Ader, model

Bottom left -- FC's *St. Francis Praying*,
1992, oil on canvas, 70 × 50 in.,
Collection of the artist.
Norman Ader, model

“An Oblate is a lay or clerical, single or married, person formally associated to a particular monastery. The Oblate seeks to live a life in harmony with the spirit of Saint Benedict as revealed in the Rule of Saint Benedict and its contemporary expression.”

A Benedictine Oblate is one who will:

- + Read, study and adopt the Rule of St. Benedict to his or her unique state of life, following the Rule as closely as personal circumstances and prior commitments permit
- + Pray the Liturgy of the Hours
- + Pray with Lectio Divina (Divine Reading of Scripture)
- + Gather with other Oblates for prayer, camaraderie, and faith sharing
- + Observe silence and/or the spirit of silence whereby God’s voice may be heard
- + Cultivate a relationship with the monastery (monks/nuns) to which they are associated for guidance, prayer, and instruction in living the Rule (where appropriate).

-- From the Oblates of Mount Saviour Monastery website

This may have seemed a contradiction, but I have many of them. Norman brought them out as few others did. Inevitably, the sobriety of starting our morning painting sessions by reading the Bible -- cover to cover over the years -- would finish with a lunchtime of mirth, composing hilarious ribald limericks which we have written down in what is known by us and a few others as *The Erection Collection*. To this day I can recite Norman’s “Mary Had A Little Lamb.” He was pure genius.



FC having a bit of fun in the nun’s habit that Norman borrowed from the Carmelites for the painting of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Among many other consequential dynamic shifts and ideologies that Norman introduced to my life, none may have been as enduring or important as his interdisciplinary collaborative practice. Norman staged my paintings. He saw them as scenes in his mind’s eye and invited me to engage with him, playing with various poses and gestures in motion much like a choreographer until we both had a deeply felt connection to the fixed design.

By 1981, at the age of 50, I was a regular at dance performances and lecture-demonstrations in the city and at the Pillow. I did not see myself as a director or choreographer, but recently-surfaced videotapes of me working in 1985 with models Jeff Burke and Sharon Chalem for the over life-size nude paintings – *Adam* and *Eve* -- prove that I was in fact integrating my knowledge of anatomy with my awareness of aesthetics, anthropological interpretations of gesture, dance, theater, performance and the visual arts. I was – and continue to be – interested in how the body speaks.



FC working with model, Jeff Burke, on the pose for Adam. The model's approach to gesture, motion, states of tension and weight placement determines the painting's emotional and narrative key and directly relates to Cunningham's objective. Together they developed the pose almost as a dance, which became typical of Cunningham's practice with figure painting. Video edited by Harrison Gish; originally shot by Will, 1985.

To the right -- Jeff Burke and Sharon Chalem working on poses with FC at the beach.



Norman unlocked this fully and further influenced my perception of the artificial boundaries between artist and subject and viewer. He said that I was interested in [capturing people's energy](#), and I think that is true.



Left -- FC's *Adam*, oil on canvas, 66 x 58 in., 1985. Private collection. Jeff Burke, model

Right -- FC's *Eve*, oil on canvas, 76 x 56 in., 1986. Private collection. Sharon Chalem, model

Soon after painting the first St. Francis, I asked my youngest daughter, Katharine, to pose as Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. I had read *Story of a Soul*, the autobiography by this extraordinary nun who died at the age of 24. Norman designed the pose for Katharine and procured the Carmelite habit that she wore. She was, however, in college at the time and frequently too busy to pose. My life-size figure paintings typically take a year to complete. During one of her extended absences, I filled in with a model from the Brooklyn Museum Art School, who, as I would discover, was not the person



FC's *St. Thérèse of Lisieux*,
oil on canvas, 56 x 48 in., 1982. Collec-
tion of the artist. Katharine Cunning-
ham, model

I expected. She wore fingernail polish and in the course of posing as a nun would occasionally exclaim, “shit.”

I have been known to swear like a trooper, but in this context the net result was that the only area of the painting I could work on was her robe. I couldn't reconcile the person in them with a saint. I let her go, and replaced her with another model, an actress/dancer who also could no more have been Saint Thérèse than I could have been myself. And so I ended by wiping out any work I had done with these two models. If one is going to be a saint in a painting, one must become that saint.



Clockwise --

Top -- FC's *Spanish Crucifix*, oil on canvas, 34 x 39.75 in., 1969. Collection of the artist.

Bottom right -- FC's *Vase, Pewter Pitcher, Plums and Butter Paddle*, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in., 1969. Private collection

Bottom left -- FC's *Shaker Basket with White Linen and Gourd*, oil on canvas, 28 x 20 in., 1968. Private collection



Eventually, Norman convinced me to paint himself and Katharine as St. Francis and St. Clare (1982); the pose was entirely his invention. When the Franciscan friars saw this painting at my show at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, they said they had never before seen a depiction of these two saints joined in the mutual love for each other in their vocation. Here are shapes of color- value on a flat surface, humanity into abstraction, with the source coming not from art, but from life.



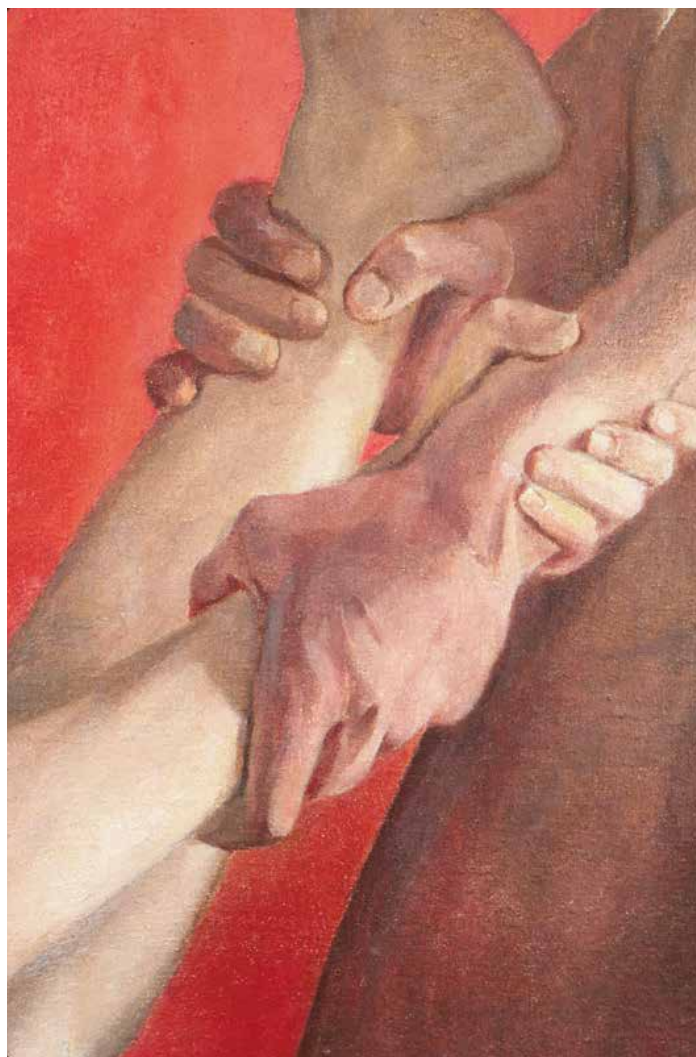
Top left -- FC's *St. Francis & St. Clare*, oil on canvas, 64 x 66 in., 1983. Collection of the artist. Norman Ader & Katharine Cunningham, models



Top right -- FC's *The resurrection of Christ*, oil on canvas, 80 x 43 in., 1999-2002. Collection of the artist. Tom Johnson, model

From this time forward, most of my models were dancers or movement-oriented actors. Tom Johnson was an extraordinarily resilient person and a vital soul. In *Meditation*, his concentration could have borne a hole through wood. The detail of his hands resting on his feet are alive and real to me. In another painting, I used the title *Walking*, but I also saw him as St. John the Baptist. Questions concerning the subject will arise naturally during the process of painting; ideas come as a painting evolves, from the first sketch to the result.

As Jean Leon Gerome wrote to Thomas Eakins, after Eakins had sent him a watercolor of an oarsman rowing a single scull, to telegraph movement in painting you must take it at the beginning or at the end, not in the middle. In the *Resurrection of Christ*, movement is not shown at the beginning or at the end of the action but is caught in the middle. Many people have been unable to decide if the figure is going up or going down. But if you look closely there are clues. How is the figure's weight disposed? Where are the muscles tensed? Where are they relaxed? How is energy dispersed within the body?



Top left -- FC's *Two Figures with Red Background*, oil on canvas, 78 x 52 in., 1992. Collection of the artist. Jennifer Griffiths & Tom Johnson, models

Bottom left -- FC's *Meditation*, oil on canvas, 68 x 84 in., 1988. Collection of University of Richmond. Tom Johnson, model

Bottom right -- detail from *Meditation*

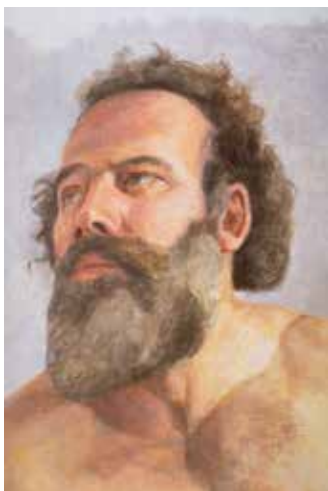
Top right -- detail from *Two Figures with Red Background*



FC's *Walking*
1988–1993, oil on canvas, 87 × 101 in.,
Collection of the artist.
Tom Johnson, model

It can be very useful to ask such questions of a work of art. If you spend time and empathetically take the pose on your own body, you may see that Tom Johnson and I conceived the figure in *Ressurrection* as ascending from Limbo. Yet, you may also legitimately surmise he is descending.

Although I did not plan it at the start, this ambivalence is a part of the painting. There remains in this painting a capacity for movement in a figure that is in your space. This frontal figure of Christ is anatomically functional – which as I have said means the painted figure is as capable of walking or scratching his head as you or I -- he is not locked into his position on the canvas. He suggestively can move and take another pose. This is not classical sculpture, a Polykleitan athlete or a Phidian god, nor is it a Titian or an Ingres nude.



Above -- detail from FC's *Three Figures*.
Peter Scherm, model

Below -- FC's *Three Figures*,
1992–1999, oil on canvas, 72 × 96 in.,
Collection of the artist.
From left to right, Peter Scherm, Jenni-
fer Griffiths and Genay Sundra, models

I first saw Peter Scherm posing at the League, his right side had been paralyzed from a stroke he had suffered in his early thirties. He only could grunt assent or dissent, yet we had ranging conversations on every subject imaginable. He was exceptionally sensitive and imaginative. When he saw the two figures of Genay Sundra and Jennifer Griffiths that I had already established in *Three Figures*, he immediately went into the pose on the painting's left. He sensed what it should be.

The *Three Figures* painting came about after a 1990 trip to the National Gallery of Art in Washington to see a major exhibition of Titian paintings. The exhibition inspired a painting that would be as close as I would ever get to doing an altarpiece. It began as a sketch on the back of an envelope and expanded to a painting 6' x 8'. A friend, the author and educator, Jill Ker Conway, looked at the completed painting and said spontaneously of Genay Sundra on the lower right of the canvas, "She's a goddess."





I would paint Genay three times. A force of nature, “the greatest,” she said of herself when recounting the astonishing beauty of her youth. She had started the first televised talk show in Harlem and was a friend of Johnny Mercer. She was someone

GENAY SUNDRA, MODEL

Clockwise --

Top-- FC's *Genay Reclining*, Oil on canvas, 39 x 72 in., 1997-1999.

Collection of the artist.

Bottom right-- FC's *Genay Seated*, 52 x 30 in., 1980.. Collection of the artist.

Bottom left-- FC's *Genay Sundra*, oil on canvas, 1980. Private collection.

with whom I could spend a lot of time and I think this comes across in my paintings of her; the forms, shapes, shadows, tones and rhythms of color hold endless possibility; they speak.

I have also done six paintings of Regina Hawkins-Balducci, a dancer who took up modeling after being sideswiped in a car accident. I have painted her from the front, back, and three-quarter views in the same pose, as well as reclining in *Reaching (Regina)* (1993 – 1994), and as a dancer. Her beauty exists on every level, physical, mental and moral. Regina's mother was African American and Polynesian; her father was English and Welsh. A self-taught artist who drew and painted the human body, Regina's mother "believed every human being, female or male, is work of art. Tall, short, young, old, thin, round or differently abled," wrote Hawkins in a personal essay she did for *Francis Cunningham: A Monograph* (5 Continents Editions).

Her mother's words were her credo in her background and served her well when she came to New York City in 1983 to begin a two-year scholarship with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The automobile accident ended her dance career after two seasons and sent her in the direction of fashion modeling and, eventually, to art schools and private drawing classes as a model, where I met her. Our shared concern for "seeing life with a nonjudgmental, unbiased eye," as Regina put it, made an ideal match for me. She viewed modeling as a performance and often said that being a model required 100 percent concentration and projection.

"When I was modeling for Francis I loved that he could see I was truly working and consciously thinking about keeping the pose animated. I lived the energy of those poses," she wrote. "I've seen the difference in an artist's paintings or sketches when they've had a model who takes a pose like they are a lump of clay, leaving it up to the artist to inject 'life' into the piece. With me, the pose is always speaking and fully engaged with an imagined viewer."

My paintings of Regina are in many regards my most classical, in that it was through working with her that I came to see the possibilities for taking Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* – his body arithmetically divided into two equal, matching vertical halves, head to toe – and merging it with the geometric and form-driven approach to figurative representation as seen in Greek sculpture.



REGINA HAWKINS-BALDUCCI,
MODEL

Left -- FC's *Regina Standing, Frontal*
Oil on canvas, 80 x 36 in., 2005-2005.
Collection of the artist.

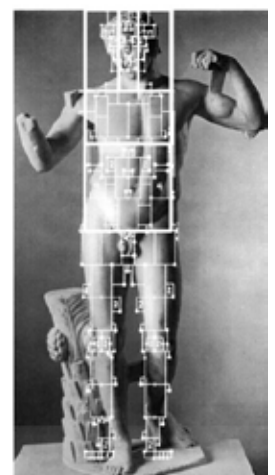
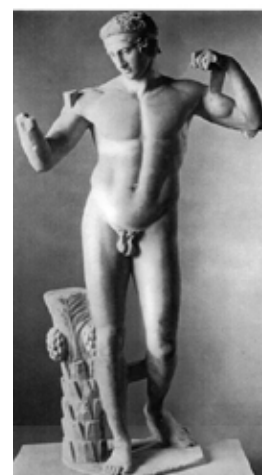
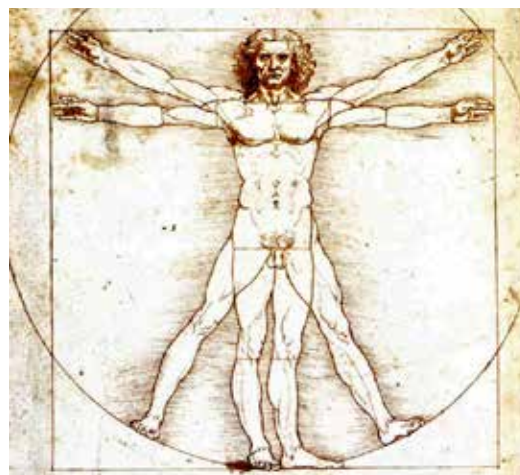
Center -- FC's *Regina Standing, Back*
Oil on canvas, 80 x 36 in., 2005-2007.
Collection of the artist.

Right-- FC's *Regina Standing, Side*,
Oil on canvas, 80 x 36 in., 2007-2008.
Collection of the artist.

Height met width in Regina. The world opened and I could see how a contemporary nude could be built on the foundations of the past. It may even occur to you that you yourself could be the subject for a nude; no one is excluded. This also may come as a shock. Every artist who uses a model would do well to have them pose both naked and clothed, to experience how demanding this work is.

Left -- Leonardo da Vinci's *Vetruvian Man*

Right -- Geometric Polykleitos — Donald E. Gordon's measurements at far right overlaid on the photograph of the Metropolitan Museum's *Diadomenos*





FC with model, Regina Hawkins in his
Manhattan apartment studio.

Photo: C. Christian Beels

*Today the gods and goddesses are
within the model, not imposed from without.
They are there, interior forces of mind and emotion,
transcribed into muscular tensions and relaxations
and ultimately into form.*

*These gods are in movement, never still,
while they wait to be seen.*

Chapter 7 *Finding Space*



photo: Janet Malcolm

One cold, damp winter evening at a Turkish restaurant after teaching all day at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, Barney Hodes slammed his hand on the table and exclaimed, “What if we just started our own art school?” It was like a crash of thunder. We both started brainstorming. What it would look like and where it would be and what we would teach and what the curriculum would be. We latched onto the name, The New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting & Sculpture.



Above -- Barney Hodes. self portrait, clay, 1977

At the time, BMAS was on very shaky ground. This was 1979. Its director wanted to dismantle the school to make room for more exhibition and storage space for the affiliated museum, which didn't make any sense. The school was highly respected; untold numbers of young students had dreamed of going there practically since its inception in 1941. Founded by Augustus Peck, the school was known for being open to all artists. Figurative and non-figurative coexisted side by side; classes for professional aspirants were as important as classes for Sunday painters and hobbyists. After the war, BMAS was perhaps the most distinguished art school in the country with a surpassing faculty that included Max Beckmann, Edwin Dickinson and a variety of painters and sculptors ranging from Donald Judd, Michael Baziotes and Ben Shahn to, in my day, Reuben Tam and Kendall Shaw.

Incredibly, all five directors of the Brooklyn Museum after the war and during Hodes' and my time, wanted to get rid of its art school and concentrate on the museum. As a faculty, we stood together and loudly and repeatedly challenged the administration. We ultimately failed, when, in 1985, its fifth director, Michael Botwinick, shuttered the school and, as feared, its studios and classrooms remained vacant for another ten years, but by then Hodes and I had built --and lost -- our own school.

Our school, the New Brooklyn School (NBS), incorporated in 1980 and two years later merged with Stuart Pivar's New York Drawing Association, becoming the New York Academy of Art (NYAA), which is still running. When Barney and I were independent and in charge of NBS, the school was to our knowledge the only one in America or Europe teaching life-size painting and sculpting of the human figure.

Sometimes in its literature the NYAA acknowledges that its origins belong to Barney and me, but a falsehood persists that Andy Warhol was key to the school's start, that it was he who inspired it. Indeed, Warhol may have inspired Pivar, his friend, to begin Pivar's New York Drawing Association, but the NYAA came straight out of Hodes's and my New Brooklyn School. In 2018, Holly Frisbee, director of li-

The New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting & Sculpture, Inc.



A New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting & Sculpture brochure.

brary and special collections at NYAA at the time, discovered boxes in the basement that were filled with records of the school's founding. When she unearthed Barney's and my names with our hand scribbled notes about curriculum, business plans, mission statements and potential faculty along with legal documents, she invited me to come and set the historical record straight with a public lecture at the NYAA.

"As soon as I started looking at the records of the New Brooklyn School," she said, "my reaction was that the idea you guys [FC and Hodes] had, the ideas you started with, were really kind of the seed that became the [New York] Academy [of Art]. And many of those ideas still really are the pulse of the Academy today. There were people in the administration who didn't treat you well, and then for the longest time no one even knew about you guys."

Holly was eager to mend fences and together we have. The past is past. My story about the NBS is worth telling, however, because it reflects instructively on the enduring challenges of making art and teaching art in America.

Barney and I centered NBS on the living model, which at the time was not the fashion, not by a long shot. John Russell, art critic for *The New York Times*, picked up on our mission to resurrect the model and wrote a piece about it, beginning with a description of what had happened in art schools across the country – even the Art Students League -- before we existed: “Quite suddenly, the model was gone, together with the pedagogic support system of anatomy, perspective and tonal drawing that had made her indispensable,” he wrote. “It turned out that there was a tenacious minority that hungered after an old-style art education, model and all, and refused to give up. That is the rationale behind the New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting and Sculpture.”

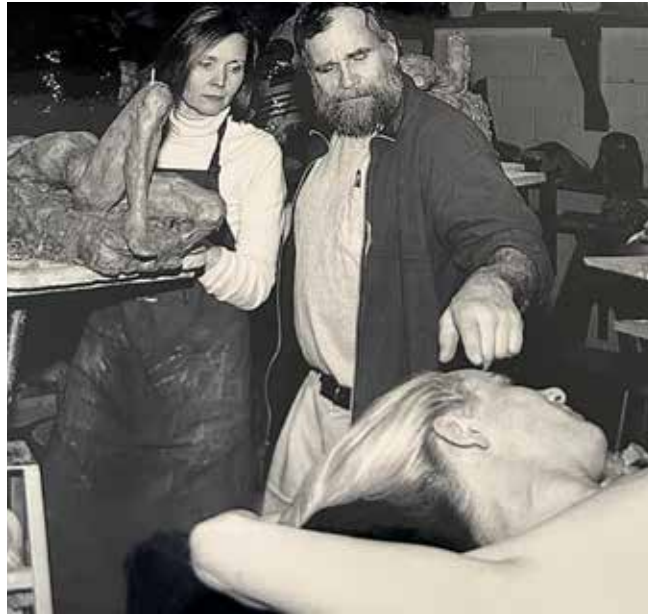
What else was different about us? We emphasized movement, multiple station points and shifting viewpoints. To my mind the single station point of Brunelleschian perspective which had dominated the Western nude since its discovery in 1427 had our culture in its grip. A station point is not just confined to art; it is an aspect of life. A station point is the point from which one views whatever one is looking at. The single station point with its rules, locates and freezes the body into its position on the canvas or in space if it is sculpture. It also freezes you, the viewer.

Barney and I were in search of how to loosen this cultural grip. We believed in, and practiced, overthrowing the fixed, the static – our figurative work was meant to move. We also wanted to liberate the viewer, so that our works could be seen from many station points and still read as true, not as ideals, but as real.

“For the student who seeks mastery of the objective forms of the human figure and his environment including landscape and still life, there is no place to go,” read our informal mission statement. “No art school or college where one can learn to make a hand that will appear to function as a hand. Learn to make a lower leg connect with the upper in such a way as to communicate the potential for movement and learn to treat the human figure as a human being rather than a collection of shapes.”

We created NBS to give students and selves this very “place to go.” Barney hired the anatomist, Salvatore Montano, to be on our faculty and they rented a room in a former Brooklyn public school, P.S. 9, which was affectionally known as the “Old Nine.” They had 15 or 20 students, all of whom were looking for more work in the

human figure. Bearded like Michaelangelo's Moses and with arms of roped muscle earned from his black belt in karate, Hodes's deeply engaged teaching style matched his impressive physique. Students loved him. He set up shop with Montano.



Barney Hodes in 2002 with his students and a model at the Art Students League where he taught for nearly 40 years.

A few months later I joined them with about ten students, renting another room for painting. Our school, for me, was my initiation to teaching the nude and more specifically, the life-size nude. Up until then, while I had always had a live model in my classes at the League and BMAS, the purpose of them was not to learn to

paint the nude as a subject, but to learn to see and paint whatever was in front of you using color-spots. If I had an advanced student who wanted to paint the nude figure, I usually sent them to Lennart Anderson. He, Aaron Shikler and Philip Pearlstein had come before me in New York, painting the nude toward strikingly different aims from ours at NBS.

Interestingly, although I have painted landscape and still life throughout my career, to this day I have never taught a class in still life and I have only twice explicitly taught landscape. This was true to my Dickinson roots. What could I teach but how to see? There is a purity to looking, to the act of seeing, that may be more quickly grasped with abstract painting than when any recognizable object has been represented. When everything concretely specific about the subject has been left out, as in a non-figurative painting, the shapes and colors can be seen for what they are and the negative spaces between and outside of the shapes become as important to the viewer as the shapes themselves. This degree of detachment from the “what-it-is” of the object is what I encountered so powerfully in the Dickinson class at the League and it enabled me, as it might any viewer, to see the geometry of bodies and objects abstractly on the canvas as segments of arcs and angles extending beyond the frame of the picture.



FC's ABSTRACTIONS

Top left and right -- FC's work from Sal Montano's class on the anatomy of movement. Ink on paper, 1981. Collection of the artist.

Bottom -- FC's drawing of the back of a model, "arc and angles extending beyond" the limits of the page. Charcoal on paper, 1981. Collection of the artist.

The challenges of the nude were ahead of me. I wanted movement: people balancing, falling, rising, meditating, praying and walking in my paintings. For this, I started taking Montano's class and eventually invited him into my studio to work with models in action. He also taught at Columbia University, and he would sneak our NBS students into his classroom where we would work from cadavers that the medical students had also used for their education.

The early days of the school bristled with cooperative energy. Settling into the Old Nine required sacrifice. There was no heat in the building after five o'clock in the evening and none on the weekends. I taught all day Saturdays in my overcoat and long johns. The model posed between two quartz heaters and wore socks. We froze and worked together in a common resolve.



FC's MOVEMENT STUDIES

Top left and right -- Polaroids of a model working on poses in FC's New York studio. Jennifer Griffiths, model

Bottom -- FC's action drawing in pen & ink from Sal Montano's class at NBS. Collection of the artist.

In my painting class, we started by concentrating on color-spots. Students Peter Colquhoun and Ephraim Rubenstein experimented with me, making comparisons of color-spot paintings -- mine and others -- with 19th century landscapes and still life, standing close to them and then many feet away. We noted the differences in viewing distance: how far away from the painting could the forms and space be seen and felt? These experiments confirmed there was a connection between sensations of space in a painting and color-spots.

I came to believe that the human eye perceives color-value differences in nature so subtle that the eye can discern between the silver-greens of a stand of white ash and the yellow-greens of a stand of maples seen from a distance of three or four miles. This visual process takes place in a painting, if the observed color-value relationships are maintained in the painting. This is what color-spots can do. We were dealing here, I believe, with a concrete advance in the language of painting, taking a natural property of human sight and making use of it to a degree not developed as necessary in the earlier painting techniques.



FC's NBS STUDENTS' WORK

Left -- Ephraim Rubenstein working on a male nude at his easel. He later sold this painting to playwright Terrence McNally (1938-2020).

Right -- Peter Colquhoun's nude, among his first ever, shows what could be accomplished in a relatively short time using FC's color spot approach. Private collection.

Below -- FC's *Tyringham Valley, East to Hale Farm*, 1979, oil on canvas, 20 × 60 in., Private collection

To the study of the nude, we brought every tool and skill, and proceeded, not by teaching formulas, but by asking questions centered on the model. How does this person's body move? What geometric form-concepts communicate tactile values in sculpture and in painting? What do the model's gestures mean? How does one make a body stand convincingly on the floor? What enables one to stand? How do the body's rhythms relate, one to another, and so on, for there are no end to such questions. We urged everyone to practice working from the model at a life-size scale. That is because any miscalculation in proportion or color value will show up on this scale. Colquhoun took to color-spots as few others have and his aesthetic remains the closest to mine. Rubenstein brought the eye in as close as he could get to the subject, and had an amazing capacity for realism and detail; he was and is, a gifted teacher, as well.

Faculty – including Augustus Mosca who taught form drawing, and anatomists, Alfonso Solimene and Montano -- took one another's classes. Students took from everybody. In addition to Colquhoun and Rubenstein, among them were C. Christian Beels, Bill Farmer, Robert Feinland, Ben Martinez, Celia Parker, Pearl Rosen, Susan Stahl, Richard Talcott, Marilyn Turtz and Lori Woloz. Richard Leto also occasionally attended.

Mason Harding, then the lawyer for Columbia University, was instrumental to the formation of NBS and our eventual incorporation. Valerie Mendelson, my former painting assistant at the Art Students League, whose color sense can make grown person cry, joined the managerial team, along with Rubenstein's wife, Sarah Rennie, a marine biologist, and Kalindi Akolekar, a family friend. They worked nights and at odd hours to formulate a three-year business plan with which to approach public and private institutions, as well as individuals, for funds. That took about a year.

In my opinion, the artist who most clearly embodied what we were after at NBS was Barney. I refer both to his life-size nudes and to his sculptures of heads. There are no specific viewpoints from which his work should be seen. As one moves around the bronze bust, *Mason Harding*, for instance, different aspects of his personality emerge. These change as one's viewpoint changes. From the front, there is intense intellectual concentration, from the back, bulldog determination. As one shifts position there are hints of cruelty, humor, insecurity and loneliness. My friend, the Israeli painter Pesach Slabosky, said upon viewing this sculpture after we had been to the Metropolitan Museum and seen the famous Leonardo drawing of water moving around poles in a stream, "Barney has sculpted the poles of personality".



Barney Hode's bust, *Mason Harding*,
bronze, 19" x 13" x 10", 1983.
Private collection



BARNEY HODES'S LIFE-SIZE
NUDES

Above -- *Reclining Female*, bronze,
c. 1983

Below -- BH's *Two Seated Males*, plaster,
c. 1984

It is the same with his nudes -- one takes them in by moving around them. When he taught, Barney had the model rotate a quarter turn every 20 or 25 minutes. Two or three times in a session the model would have made a complete revolution. This is what the students experienced from their station point. And so they incorporated multiple station points into their sculpture. This developed their ability to balance seeing and knowing -- their own sight with the knowledge of anatomy and form. The results were sculptures that are inimitable to that student, arrived at without a focus on style or by visually copying the model.

We had two exceptional anatomists at NBS in Montano and Solimene. Each with a lifetime of thinking and practice in the subject with hundreds of hours of working from the cadaver. Montano was at Pratt Institute, and Solimene at Juilliard, both were also teaching at Columbia University. None of these institutions would support their research in the anatomy of movement – we did. We worked together with our advanced students and started an advanced anatomy class in the subject. Solimene, after a few meetings, said that nothing he was doing in his movement class at Juilliard had provoked the kind of questions we were asking. He thought we were miles ahead of the game.

One perhaps can have some idea of the advances we were making by comparing the Montano form-concept of the spine with Robert Beverly Hale's. Hale would teach the spine, seen from the side, as a modified 'S' that curves in under the head, then out to accommodate the rib cage, back in again, pushing out the belly, and then reversing to terminate in the sacrum. That was the side view. Seen from the front or back, the spine would appear as a straight line. These form-concepts are descriptive and valuable for the artist, but also static.

FC's drawing of a pelvis, spine and thigh from Montano's anatomy class in which human cadavers were used. A foot is at the top left of the paper. Collection of the artist.



Montano conceived the spine as a coiled spring. Each vertebra moves under tension from the muscles. Montano had measured the degree of movement in each individual vertebra and determined the number of degrees each could move. The degrees of movement were determined by muscular action. Montano always approached anatomy and drawing from the inside out.

Solimene looked at the pelvis as a platform supporting the upper body, from which the legs dangled. He was interested in physics and shifting centers of gravity in the moving parts of the body. The pelvis is the center of action, the seat of movement in the body. Look at a baseball player swinging a bat. What happens to the dangling legs? The brain tells the pelvis to move and the platform tilts at an angle, throwing the weight of the body onto the back leg. The upper body compensates to maintain balance by dropping the shoulder that

supports the bat. With movement beginning at the pelvis, the entire body has become energized. The batter's head is turned to watch for the pitch. Everything is still. Then it comes in an instant – the pelvis moves and the platform tilts, transferring weight to the front leg. The body's energy releases, led by the pelvis, from feet and legs into the chest, arms, wrists and finally into the bat – a homerun! There is a great deal to think about when one analyzes the swing of a bat, a movement that happens in the flick of an eye.



An illustration of Montano's "spine as a coiled spring" is Carmen de Lavallade as Salome in "The Face of Violence," choreographed by Geoffrey Holder.

Photo: Lois Greenfield.

Everything I learned from Montano and Solimene resonated with my nearly 20 years' exposure to dance and theater, seeing performances as I did several times a week. Martha Graham informed my understanding of gestures' relationship to psychology; her choreography made me see that geometry can correlate with emotional states of being. Balanchine and Stravinsky expanded my appreciation of dissonance; through them I "heard" atonalities in the visual body. Barton Mumaw's spiritual energy could not be denied in the lines he made when he danced, by lines I mean trace your eyes like a pencil around his figure. Make a continuous line and then look at the scoop of space between his head and arm, his hip and arm -- they possess the most remarkable designs and proportions. The same holds true for Nala Najan or Carmen de Lavallade or Jack Cole or any number of extraordinary movers who crossed the Jacob's Pillow stage in Becket, Massachusetts. Having grown up in nearby Pittsfield and started going to the Pillow with my mother in the late 30s, I'd seen a lot of dance by the time I opened my own school.



An illustration of Solimene's pelvis as the "center of action," engaging the whole body is Mickey Mantle's powerful swing at bat in 1955. Watching him "you could literally see that every muscle in his six foot frame was converging to pulverize the baseball," said one commentator.

Photo: Marvin Newman

Barney and I encouraged our students likewise to make connections between visual art forms and disciplines by going to see performances and taking classes outside their métier, and we had extraordinary support at NBS from fellow artists in dance, mime and the theater right from the beginning. Corporeal mimes, Thomas (Tom) Leabhart and Daniel Stein, visited and lectured. Both had studied with Étienne Decroux in Paris and been his chief assistant at different times. Corporeal mime, of which Decroux was the inventor, is not the white-face pantomime we associate with Marcel Marceau and which most people think of when they think of mime. Corporeal mime is based on designs. Like certain forms of Hindu dance, these are designs of the body in space and they are not imitative in character. The designs are composed so that each one, as well as the transitions from one to another, can be seen and appreciated by the audience – they are timed slow enough to have an extraordinarily expressive impact.



Top left and bottom left-- Thomas Leabhart in *How I Was Perplexed and What I Did About It*, created by Sally and Thomas Leabhart, c. 1985.

Photo, top left: J. Burke
bottom left: Paul Martens

Top right -- Daniel Stein in his solo, *Inclined to Agree*, 1984.

Photo: courtesy of the artist

Bottom right -- Barton Mumaw in Ted Shawn's *The Dome*, 1940 at Jacob's Pillow, the pioneering dance festival founded by Shawn in Becket, Massachusetts in 1933.

Photo: John Lindquist

Tom and Daniel took their time with me and led me through Decroux's system of movement training; and in Tom's case, he also reinforced the practice of François Delsarte whose approach to gestural meaning was the underpinning of dancer and choreographer Ted Shawn, whose Delsarte lectures at the Pillow I had heard many times. Shawn had imparted his knowledge and interpretation of Delsarte to his student and partner, Martha Graham, who is credited with being the originator of American modern dance technique.

Then, in 1984, Steven Ringold, a model who I was painting at the time, introduced me to Joanna Sherman, Patrick Sciarratta and Michael McGuigan of the Bond Street Theater Coalition. They had recently formed the Interarts Colony & Workshop, a summer retreat for artists on a 65-acre estate in Palenville, NY, in the Catskill mountains. Within a matter of minutes, we were figuring out how we could work together. They invited me to teach a morning class in landscape for two weeks (with a repeat visit and exhibition in 1985). I, in turn, invited our NBS students to join us, where for \$250 a week they could stay in a private or semi-private cabin as members of America's first interarts colony in same part of the world where America's oldest arts colony had been formed by 19th century writers James Fennimore Cooper and Washington Irving, and Hudson River School painters, Frederick Church and Thomas Cole.



Left -- FC's *Stephen*, 1983, oil on canvas, 60 x 56 in., Collection of the artist



Right -- Poster for Palenville Interarts Colony, 1984



Richard Schechner, pioneer of performance studies at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, lectures informally to the Palenville Interarts members, including FC (in a khaki shirt and pants), seated at the center. Schechner's theory—that gesture embodies an idea and that “an idea embodied is the spirit of that particular world”—influenced FC's view that painting life-size figures is a form of performance. Video edited by Harrison Gish. Videographer unknown; 1984. Property of the Bond Street Theatre.

Bond Street Theatre described itself then as a “street theater” specializing in political satire in which movement and the body came first, before words. Formed in 1976, the ensemble (which would later earn a prestigious MacArthur award in 1990) combined elements of cabaret and vaudeville, mythology, ritual, circus arts and *commedia dell'arte*. To their summer retreat, they had lured one of their mentors, Eugenio Barba, who had translated Grotowski and ran his own esteemed theater company in Holstebro, Denmark, where he had also founded the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA). Accompanying Barba were eminent cultural anthropologists and experts in performance ritual, Richard Schechner and Victor Turner and his wife, Edith Turner. They joined Bond Street's summer faculty, a world class assemblage of cultural anthropologists as no other. (You can see them in this scratchy, but worthy, [video](#), holding the rest of us spellbound on the subject of religion and theater and human nature.)

In addition, jazz musician Dave Brubeck and his three sons and brother, Daniel, who regularly taught as a neighbor and good friend to Bond Street, would occasionally give performances for the whole Palenville community at the camp.



FC painting in the field, as he did in Palenville, but this 1979 photo is of him in Tyngham, MA. Photo: Janet Malcolm

Kitty came with me and we brought along Barton Mumaw, who by now had become a close friend and had agreed to teach the Bond Street crew. Michael Ballard, dance captain of the Murray Louis Dance Company, also became a resident at the retreat and conducted classes in the Nikolais/Louis Technique that were open to all.

The Palenville Interarts Colony prepared my students and me for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of painting. Sherman and McGuigan nicknamed me “Mr. Interarts,” and I wore the title with pride.

I shared the painting instruction duties with Allen Barber, a colleague from BMAS, whose work was in both the Philadelphia Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art collections. He conducted his class in a small theater with a stage and center aisle. We all had pads and one could draw in pencil, pen or a twig dipped

in ink -- it didn't matter. At one point he left the stage and walked, slowly, down the aisle. As he was coming toward me the gestural marks on my page grew until he was abreast -- then the page couldn't hold them. They then diminished, as he continued toward the door. It was an extraordinarily powerful graphic experience of the force of a body coming at you and then withdrawing, especially when compared with a body in motion at right angles to your line of sight or moving in a circle. It was Delsarte and Shawn in action.



Two of FC's premier coup landscapes
from Palenville

Left -- *Pine, Palenville NY*,
oil on canvas, 16 x 8 in., 1984
Private collection



Right -- *View Overlooking the Hudson from
"Mountain House", Catskills*,
oil on canvas, 12 x 14 in., 1985
Private collection

Ringold wanted me specifically to meet Torben Bjelke at Palenville. Bjelke had also studied with Decroux. He was a member of Barba's Odin Theatre and had traveled to Italy and Argentina for lengthy stays, living and performing in local communities. Bjelke taught Bond Street members and some of the rest of us to perform on stilts, sing out of our elbows and throw our voices "over North Mountain" – the mountain behind the Interarts camp. As painters, this may not have seemed immediately relevant, but the blinders fell, and, for my part, I could never return to painting the nude figure without having [the model set in motion](#), taking poses that were on their way to or from something. Like actors, my future models needed to ask why they were in the room and what was their motive. During this time, I insisted that "every

movement had a meaning,” to quote Ted Shawn, and that our challenge was to be true to the body’s intent in a painting, to acknowledge the ‘why’ of its action.



Left -- FC's *Josephine*
Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in., 1997-1998.
Collection of the artist.



Right -- FC's *Moment*
Oil on canvas, 108 x 70 in., 1989-2004.
Collection of the artist.



FC working with model, Jeff Burke, on the pose for Adam. The model's approach to gesture, motion, states of tension and weight placement determines the painting's emotional and narrative key and directly relates to Cunningham's objective. Together they developed the pose almost as a dance, which became typical of Cunningham's practice with figure painting. Video edited by Harrison Gish; originally shot by Will, 1985.

To these summers, there was a before and there was an after, because the day came when shortly after returning to the city in 1984, we were told on a Tuesday that the entire “Old Nine” building would have to close for long-term major renovations that Saturday. Hodes and I went out looking for another home and found a spacious room over a bar at 383 Pearl Street in downtown Brooklyn. We moved, carrying the life-size sculptures down the stairs on wooden doors and into the new quarters. We did not miss a class. We stayed in the Pearl Street studio that had the most nightmarish yellow paint on its walls for several months, painters and sculptors together, coping with sculpture dust everywhere and gunfire heard outside.

Rubenstein, then a young and extremely talented instructor, eventually found a more suitable place -- a raw loft at 13-15 Laight Street in Manhattan. We moved into the empty unheated space in the old Nelson Whitehead building and again resumed without

missing a class. We had *esprit* and grit and faith and vision. Eventually we expanded to two north light painting studios, a large sculpture studio, an exhibition gallery and a small office. The students and younger faculty helped with renovations, varnishing the floors at 5 a.m., hoping they'd dry before class started. We held open houses to raise money and attract new students. We were on a roll, we thought.

We applied to the New York State Council of the Arts for an education grant. In due course, someone who was connected to the Pace Gallery, then the most prominent modernist gallery in New York, came to observe us for the Council. She had no conception of what we were about, and, in all fairness, could hardly be expected to understand what we were doing in a day. We received a negative report. She couldn't accept that we treated our students and faculty as equals, urging students to teach and faculty to learn.

Our application was denied by a vote of eight to zero. When Harding went to explore further why we had been rejected, he reported there had been a note from Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery curators, who were members of the jury, saying they thought we would set art back a hundred years and should not only should be denied a grant, but be put out of business.



Class set-up at New Brooklyn School
in the 13-15 Laight Street loft studio
c. 1984

Such a reactionary response! Did the cultural gatekeepers feel threatened? Some people apparently had trouble seeing the value of taking human beings on their own terms, of elevating the living model, of being curious about how to push an evolution in American figurative work so that it is even more wholly American – an extension of Charles Hawthorne, Robert Beverly Hale, Edwin Dickinson and myself and others who came from the stock of mainstream of American realism. Influenced by Europeans -- Renaissance or modern -- cognizant of the Greeks, we at NBS embraced abstraction and advocated for a democratically structured school in which to train and be trained. Dickinson and I were both called magical realists at certain points. Rightly or wrongly wasn't the point, what I knew in my bones is that there was a way forward that was human-centric and could be lasting and real.

But I say this in retrospect, because the truth is we did not have our arguments down for public presentation. We knew who we were and what we were doing, but to raise funds and be given grants, you had to have the language, the pitch, the connections and budget sheet. We were new at this and wholly ignorant of running a business and, in my opinion, our ideas were too far out for conventional eyes and pocketbooks to grasp and support. Our friends did not understand our problems and

needs. They would lend us their ears and give us their time, but no funds. Society was different at this time. These friends, the women and wives who would eventually constitute our board, had previous experience on the boards of established institutions. One woman was head of the Macdowell Colony Board and another, head of the New York Society Library. Their husbands included a financier very high up at Citibank and lawyers in leading New York law firms. We asked if they could form a board for us or help financially when the NBS had no money to pay its faculty. They declined. In fact, they would only form a board when someone took over our assets and paid our bills.

This was the way society worked at this time. Women served on boards but did not have the financial freedom to involve themselves in risky enterprises such as ours. As for our male friends, Brian Urquhart, a close friend, who had been Secretary to the Secretary General of the UN from Trygve Lie to Kurt Waldheim, was on the board of MoMa. His father had been a professional painter but Brian was as ignorant of the underlying needs of painters and sculptors as a new born babe. Nor did he have the time to be on our board and at the same time do all that he was doing around the world to better our society. My wife and I loved our friends before, during, and after NBS, but they did not understand us when we said "...help, we can't pay our faculty or the rent and if we cannot pay we will have to close up shop." There was a powerhouse of a changed point of view towards human beings which they never saw. If what we were doing and exploring was outside the comprehension of our friends, it was far beyond the reach of institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts, the NY State Council for the Arts, MoMa, the Knox Gallery (after MoMa, the major public collection of abstract painting), and also private collectors of contemporary art, such as David Rockefeller.

We were teaching classes and trying to stay alive, pay our rent, faculty and models. The rent had gone abruptly from \$1200 a month to \$4000. Leo, our landlord, allowed a movie company to use our studios to help defray costs, but unfortunately, he could not talk his partners into saving what he called "my art school." We could not afford to stay. Our attempts to obtain corporate patrons and foundations had been unsuccessful. We were relying on a few private outside sources, but it was not enough. We were flat broke.



Stuart Pivar by Andy Warhol, 1977.
Instant dye diffusion transfer print
(Polaroid Polacolor Type 108), 3 3/4 x 2
7/8 in. (9.5 x 7.3 cm)

Credit: The Andy Warhol Foundation
for the Visual Arts

Failing all else, Barney called Stuart Pivar, who had visited us in “Old Nine,” after we had been written about in the *New York Times* by John Russell. Pivar, a plastics industry magnate, had started the New York Drawing Society, which at the time occupied one room in a basement on the Lower Eastside, with a faculty of one. The NBS had a much better loft space at Laight Street which we had significantly expanded and improved. Pivar had money; we had students, faculty and facilities. Would he be interested in a merge? He was.

On December 17, 1982, the three of us co-signed a contract transferring the NBS and its tax number into what became the New York Academy of Art (NYAA). Barney and I were to be directors of sculpture and painting for life. We would serve on the executive committee along with Pivar. His New York Drawing Society dissolved, as did our NBS – and along with it everything that Barney and I had been developing.

Pivar made no secret that he was out to kill every vestige of NBS and revive the stuffy, hierarchical 19th century academic tradition. David B. Lawall, curator for the University of Virginia’s Fralin Museum of Art, was Pivar’s mentor and advisor on restructuring our school. Lawall immediately got rid of the advanced anatomy class and with it, Solimene and Montano. Continuing to gut the faculty, he argued that our young instructors should work for nothing, as had been the custom in the French Academy. This effectively served notice to Colquhoun, Rubenstein and Robert Feinland, two of whom had been my students since high school and all three of whom, together with Mendelson, had been with me at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. Knock them out, starve them, take advantage of them, treat them as less-than studio apprentices – this was the message Lawall and Pivar sent.

To our horror, Lawall next proposed developing a line of “men’s and women’s wear in an Antique mode” – a direct quote from his memo. Such fashions (I imagined togas) would be sold in the school’s future art store and gift shop, and re-brand the school as Pivar desired. He put his faith in students learning to draw from plaster casts of Greek gods and goddesses and miniature Michelangelos rather than from living human models, who not incidentally must be paid. Casts were cheaper. Barney and I reeled from this affront and the willful blindness to our fundamental reasons for having a school in the first place. We declared a silent war and waited, holding our tempers to find a way forward that would be ours.

When Pivar announced he had leased the entire building on Lafayette and planned to operate the first floor as the American Museum for the Fine Arts as another potential source of income, the commercialism that Barney and I so gravely mistrusted and had tried to avoid in our lives had crossed the threshold and made itself repugnantly comfortable in “our house.”

The atmosphere darkened. Tension you could cut with a knife could be felt. Lawall wrote us explaining that he and Pivar were determined not to have the NYAA become like “all the other art schools in America [which] inevitably turn into recreational centers dedicated to any expedient of mediocrity.” Toward this end, he and Pivar proposed a vile school motto: “The NYAA is not an Art School. It is an opportunity to become an artist.”

I still cannot fathom everything Pivar and Lawall proposed doing and the whole-scale damage they inflicted in a short time. I stayed with the NYAA for another three years and Barney for four, handing in his resignation as co-director in 1986. The Board of the NYAA was on our side. When we resigned, its members did, too, as a united cohort that voiced its disgust with Pivar and Lawall’s direction. After that, Barney and I were erased from the official NYAA history. Pivar eventually was pushed out in 1994 by among others on the board, Russell Wilkinson, who Pivar had brought on early to serve in management. Pivar sued the NYAA over being maneuvered off the board; the dozen or so cases he brought against the NYAA, including this one, were thrown out. By then, his friend, Jeffrey Epstein, the now notorious sex-trafficker was on the NYAA board (from 1987 to 1994) and Eileen Guggenheim (who was married to Wilkinson) had been named dean of students.

The taste factor and along with it the moral plumb that Hodes and I cared so deeply about, had been irrevocably disturbed, and to this day it makes me feel sick and responsible for having supplied Pivar with what he called his “dream” and sacrificed our own.

The New York Academy of Art still exists today and awards a degree. Depending on where you look, Andy Warhol is still credited as having co-founded the Academy with Pivar. From what I understand, it has some of the strongest instructors in basics, but there is no class for life-size nude and no direction to the training except to get as many students as possible into galleries. The nude is practiced with the result being polish, skill and style. This is precisely what we did not want, but the fact that the nude is being done at all is to be encouraged.

What may be accomplished in a community like the NBS cannot be duplicated by an individual in a studio making art alone. It was a miracle that our NBS lasted three years. As I see it, the economic problems we faced are still endemic to being an artist in America. Artists must live, pay the model and pay rent. The nude, as Barney and I practiced it, was on no one's front burner, not even a back burner. What does making money have to do with knowing or caring about the language of art? The people who have money and on whom the arts rely in America are not usually artists; they shoot in the dark and they call the shots.

Barney died on August 11, 2023. He never had the financial means to cast his life-size figures in bronze. They are in plaster and, so, were easily broken while moving to different studios. Several of them are in cardboard boxes and my guess is that they will remain there, like the NBS documents and letters, until someone becomes aware of what they mean. Then they may be restored and cast in bronze. When that happens, someone also may decide to reconstitute the New Brooklyn School.



Photo: John Walsh

Epilogue



Barney and I were not the first to face the harsh financial realities of art in a capitalist society. I think Willa Cather, who is among my favorite authors, said it best when she wrote in a 1936 essay, *Escapism*, that “Religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin. Economics and art are strangers.” This is a comparatively new country without an art form of the nude, and we have always been about material well-being and material advance. At present, on every level, these concerns have taken precedence over community and moral and civil principals. I believe that will change.

A major turn away from the virtual and artificial to the real and actual will happen and happen soon. Abstraction and the current “freedom of expression” philosophies lack meaning today because they do not address the reality of what we are living in – the absence of humanity in human relationships and the looking to machines instead of each other.

We are crying out in every aspect of our lives for what is real, what is natural, for human beings, not for computer images of them. Do you want to fall in love with an AI image that you have designed? Bring on the flaws and blemishes, the unending surprise and beauty of a real person. This is what art can do. I believe we are more than ready to return to life and to seek love and at least respect our neighbors as ourselves and see humans as human beings. Our current life in 2026 is not a life of the idealized past or an ideological present. It is a life of the immediate now, with an urgent need for acceptance of the actual human being in our landscape and homes, using our hand-held tools and nourishing ourselves with real food that is still with life.

After leaving the NYAA, I never taught again, but turned my attentions to my own work, painting landscapes, still life and figures for another 35 years. Many of those new works were premier coup done in places far from New York or the Berkshires. I went six times to Israel in Tel Aviv as part of a group of painters that included Philip Pearlstein. Copenhagen, Denmark, became familiar a stomping ground. Scotland, Iceland, Bogliasco and Siena, Italy, as well as Maine and the American Southwest absorbed my attention.

Human nature and nature are my subjects. They have let me stand, resisting conformity in painting, to have new experiences, new truths, that might appeal to a public, and might not. I don't look at my life in the reflection of opinions. Time and space have been kind and given me this opportunity to write and see that culture and art are correctives to the pursuit of power and wealth. Why set my own rate? It is not for me to set or to be, as I believe artists are, a moral conscience for society. That is not why we make art. The paintings speak for themselves.



Above-- FC's final painting *Still life interior of studio*, Oil on canvas, 36 x 72 in., 2020. Collection of the artist.

Glossary

anatomically functional nude. The proportions of the figure are drawn/painted/sculpted to retain their objective proportions through multiple station points so that the figure, if alive, could move into another pose without falling down or apart.

anatomy of movement. How anatomy functions in motion and appears physically in the body and furthermore what it signifies on the expressive level.

artistic anatomy. The study of how the skeleton is put together, functions, and how and where muscles fit. In painting, they are rendered into geometric form concepts, and a three-dimensional illusion is created by means of light and shade. In sculpture, they are expressed in actual three-dimensional plastic forms.

“blue smoke”. Edwin Dickinson’s term for a certain atmosphere derived when an artist squints at an object and the object blends with its immediate surroundings such that a new shape is created; this “new” shape, painted on the canvas, is a marriage of the object’s foreground and background and it appears to give off smoke.

color-spots. Mixed pieces of color observed from nature (not to be confused with Seurat’s pointillism). Color-spots can be large or small of any size and shape.

color-values. The light and shade of a given piece of color.

geometric form concepts. Used when rendering parts of the body in terms of cube, sphere, cylinder or cone. There is a specific language about how to light and shade these form concepts.

golden section. A harmonic proportion that can be infinitely large or infinitely small, in which the short section is to the long as the long is to the sum of the two.

idealized nude. Nudes based on ideas of beauty rather than reality; all ancient Greek and Renaissance nudes were idealized.

key. Determines where the painter will work between the lightest light and darkest dark, the warmest warm and coolest cool.

monitor. The student selected by the instructor to arrive early to set up class and lead it on days when the instructor is not present, as scheduled. It is an honor.

moral plumb. The inborn sense in human beings of right and wrong; as much a part of us as the noses on our faces; the moral equivalent of the physical plumb. Only God's moral plumb is a true vertical and all-knowing; the truth for human beings -- our moral plumb -- is subject to constant pulls between right and wrong.

multiple station points. Necessary for retaining and coordinating the objective proportions of a figure; the artist physically and/or imaginatively moves around the subject (a figure, landscape or still life), viewing it from many different places.

objective proportion. The true proportion of an object seen and measured objectively.

perspectival proportion. The proportion that is seen from a single station point; the artist's/ viewer's eye in Brunelleschian perspective.

plumbline. A straight vertical line determined by gravity. Usually made with a weight hanging from one end of a red string.

premier coup. A painting completed in a single session. The whole canvas need not be fully covered in paint; it is always considered a finished work by days' end and conceived by the artist as a statement that could go on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's walls with stature equal to a work that takes months or years to finish.

proportion. The relation of height to width of a shape or object.

station point. Technically the location of your eye; in Brunelleschian perspective, it is the artist's eye.

Acknowledgments

I frequently told my daughters that painting came first before them. The truth is that I was determined to paint and have a family -- not just any family, but a good one. I married someone I loved and stayed married for sixty-eight years. My paintings and work were part of us. My gratitude begins with Kitty Cunningham, who died in November 2023, and our daughters, Sasha Anawalt and Katharine Rudbeck. Sasha did the heavy lifting on this memoir as editor, transforming it from early pedagogical notebooks, published essays, lectures and her interviews with me into a narrative that I hope sheds light on an American painter's life in New York in the sixties, seventies and eighties, as well as reveals the stages of my life as a painter. She pushed me into parts of myself where I had never been and gave me the room to be philosophical. To be able to do this at the end of your life with your own child is incredible.

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