

Hartmut Austen

Teaching Statement

My main goal in the studio is to engage students in an active process of dialogue, exploration and discovery that stimulates critical thinking as well as technical skill. For beginners, I set a rigorous schedule of projects that help students to understand the importance of visual inquiry, acquisition of technical skills and to establish critical criteria and goals. Starting a beginning painting class by having students prepare and paint a large-scale canvas, for example, forces them to experience the expressive power of color and scale. Painting is a physical act, and when done on a large scale, mere illustrational approaches are eliminated. I regard learning to paint as a matter of technical proficiency, process and risk-taking.

The two pillars of my teaching philosophy are preparation in terms of a series of projects and presentations laid out in a structured syllabus, and flexibility. I consider intensive preparation for a given course as crucial and stress four aspects.

First, acquisition of technical skill. This involves to get acquainted with tools, materials and processes that are needed for making something by using them, but include also safety concerns, proper handling and storage of works, and correct disposal of any harmful substances.

Second, visual literacy. This includes museum, gallery and studio visits, the identification of art periods and movements and readings to a given subject, as well as, discussions about works in the context of contemporary culture. I have increasingly made use of visual digital media in my teaching. Communicating with my students through Blackboard and Skype, the use of digital image banks such as Luna Imaging, Google Art Project for visual study in class is challenging, dynamic and exciting. One can instantaneously juxtapose images of works in different media and contextualize them in terms of history and contemporary visual culture.

Third, conceptual strategies. Advanced students develop concrete criteria to position own work within the contemporary context. I regard written and verbal articulation of experiences, observations and thought as an intrinsic part of the pedagogical process. In many classes, for example, I have students prepare a presentation about a topic of their choice (that may also have nothing to do with art) in relation to the course subject. Simple questions such as “what are the issues and/or artists that inform your work?”, “who is your audience?”; “why is this important?” have helped students formulate a viable perspective for their own work within the academic context and beyond.

And finally, formal experimentation. After technical confidence is established in the beginning courses, research based and dialectical approaches to making art can be pursued. This includes the relationship between intuitive and analytical strategies, traditional techniques and experimentation with new technology and materials. Also, I encourage students to not let grade or other considerations take precedent over experimentation with materials, interdisciplinary forms of expression and presentation. Contradicting ideas, thoughts and uncertainty are crucial occurrences in the creative process. In these situations, students critiquing each other’s work and promoting dialogue can help to overcome roadblocks, to develop perspectives and motivation.

In classes of all levels and subjects, I engage students through readings, gallery visits and group discussions. During the semester, I attend to the needs and development of students and adopt (depending on the theme/concept and the class dynamic) a more process-oriented and flexible direction. For me, the most effective teaching method remains one-on-one mentoring, where the student is encouraged to think more critically about their work. Asking questions becomes crucial, as opposed to providing answers.

