

ARTPULSE

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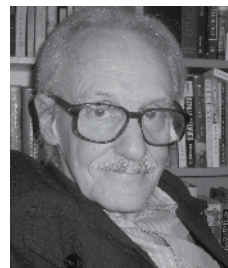
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A COMMON CORE

BY JON SEALS

“Those who can’t *do, teach.*” Few sentiments burn an educator quite like that cliché. Besides being offensive, it isn’t true. If it were, what would those who “can’t do” really be teaching?

No one can fault artists who struggle for a time when they assume the roles of teachers. But when the best teachers find the perfect balance between the two careers, teaching is not simply secondary to the practice of art. Nor is it a long-term pandering in the harbor of identity crisis, one easily transferred to students. Rather the best artist/educators, like rip currents, pull everyone in their path far past the shore’s safety and into the unknown expanse of the ocean.¹

The best teachers, instead of viewing studios and classrooms, students, and colleagues as distractions from work done in their own studios, see just the opposite. It is precisely *through* studio visits, meaningful relationships, and classroom environments that an artist can do even better artistic work. Great teachers and artists have much in common; they know how to absorb the best, worst, and most interesting experiences and transform them into complex, compelling ways that both challenge and affirm their students.

Recently, New Haven, CT has served as an interesting crossroads, showcasing artists who have influenced decades-worth of young artists who have themselves found success as artists/educators. Two recent New Haven exhibitions compelled me to consider the role of artist as educator, provoking new questions and providing examples of significant artists who led distinguished teaching careers.

These two exhibitions,—“Five West Coast Artists: Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Neri, Park, and Thiebaud” at Yale University Art Gallery (March 28 - July 13, 2014), and “William Bailey Paintings and Drawings” at FRED.GIAMPIETRO Gallery (May 30 - July 12, 2014)—have overlapped, as did the artists/educators they featured. William Bailey, from the East Coast, and David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, and Manuel Neri, all from the West Coast, correspond loosely in their years as teachers. Bailey was a professor of art at Yale from 1969 to 1995.² Out west, the Bay Area artists taught at a host of schools from the 1950s into the 1990s. Both groups brought the object/figure back into painting in new and interesting ways, swimming against the current of Clement Greenberg’s abstract expressionists and influencing hundreds of students through both their pedagogy and art making.

In the Bay Area Figurative Movement, the charismatic David Park inspired a group of university professors and artists to challenge the status quo. After a brief teaching stint in New England, Park taught at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) from 1946 to 1952 and then at Berkeley from 1955 to 1960.³ Park had been painting in abstract modes through the 1940s, but in an unlikely, vigorous artistic turn, he spearheaded a group that revived representational subjects and the physical world to explore the kind of exuberant color and brushwork used by many in the New York School.⁴

Nancy Boas, in her new book *David Park: A Painter’s Life* provides a landmark account of Park’s painting and teaching lives. “Park’s course descriptions,” she writes, “reveal his artistic aims as well as his teaching principles,”⁵ including his exhortations to stu-

dents to, “constantly look for what is meaningful to themselves, and try to present this meaningfulness to others,” and to “make working habits as genuinely simple, unselfconscious and vital as any process of nature.”⁶ Park’s magnetic teaching style lay in his combined grit and sophistication. This, partnered with his urgent, physical painting, attracted a wave of postwar GI Bill students that was filling CSFA’s rosters. Some were allowed to share his studio space; others set up shop outside his classroom. Still others were lucky enough to play in his band, named the *Studio 13 Jazz Band*,⁷ made up of fellow faculty, administration, and students. One notable student, Richard Diebenkorn, grew to be Park’s kindred spirit, each man playing a significant role in the other’s life.⁸

Students, faculty, family and friends all inspired Park’s insatiable drive to paint. During Park’s time at CSFA, something special was happening there, and it owed much to the people surrounding him, people who both affirmed and resisted his influence. Park’s influence was by no means monolithic. Boas cites Diebenkorn to point out that abstract painters like “Mark Rothko (who taught in the 1947 and 1949 summer sessions) and Ad Reinhardt (who taught in the 1950 summer session) provided inspiration for the CSFA students, he said, but ‘the revolution’ of the postwar period in the Bay Area ‘didn’t look like any of these guys in attitude or spirit.’” Diebenkorn recalled that Park and Bischoff “caught the enthusiasm of the students who were responding to these rather severe men. Staid Rothko, stuffy Still, careful, secretive Reinhardt had all these hang loose students . . . It was the looseness and the extravagance of abstract expressionism.”⁹

Still, Park’s devotees were legion. “His presence was extraordinary,” his student Howard Margolis explained. “He was very bright, but simple—the most effective kind of brightness. His greatness came through in the classroom. You sensed it in his teaching, and there it was in his paintings—the passion and honesty together.”¹⁰ This squares with Park’s own artist statements. In 1959 he wrote, “The very same things that we value most, the ideals of humanity, are the properties of the arts. The words that come to mind are many—energy, wisdom, courage, delight, humor, sympathy, gentleness, honesty, peace, freedom . . . I believe most artists are goaded by a vision of making their work vivid and alive with such qualities.”¹¹

The “Five West Coast Artists” exhibition captures how Park’s infectious pedagogy influenced a lineage of students. Early on were Bischoff and Diebenkorn, whose own legacies are profound. In turn, one of their prominent students was Manuel Neri, who went on to teach at CSFA and UC Davis until his retirement in 1990.¹²

Also retiring from UC Davis the same year was Wayne Thiebaud who taught from 1951 - 1990.¹³ When asked about his long tenure of teaching, Thiebaud said teaching was vital to his process, and a vital part of his teaching was showing students how to choose subject matter.

We talk about that, so long as the primary purpose is to make something really well made. The formal values are greatly stressed, and the subject matter must come out of



David Park teaching at the California School of Fine Arts, ca. 1949 (San Francisco Art Institute Archives) reproduced with permission from William Heick Jr.

that concern, or on top of that concern. The trouble with subject matter is that I think students often feel that there are certain subjects that are more important than other subjects. And in my judgment, the conventions and subject matter of any kind are always there for development, so that if they want to paint flowers they should be able to do that and to learn to do it in some sort of extraordinary way. So the subject matter, I think, is often tested so that they get away from any kind of sophomoric qualification of the subject and really dig into it in such a way that it really finally means something to them.¹⁴

Jock Reynolds, Director of the Yale University Art Gallery, organized the “Five West Coast Artists” exhibition. He also studied under Thiebaud at UC Davis and has expanded the legacy of artist/educator into his role of arts administrator. For the exhibit, Reynolds recreated the feeling of being in a classroom, with the gallery’s airy rooms, lit by skylights, and the printed anecdotes posted next to the paintings that set the room’s tone as a space for learning. One anecdote was by Reynolds himself:

I remember attending my first graduate seminar with Wayne Thiebaud, who looked out at his new crop of stu-

dents and explained that he and his faculty peers couldn’t teach any of us how to become artists, that we had to assume that identity for ourselves and get on with making work. Thiebaud added, almost cryptically, that there were some very practical things he could teach us that might be useful during our years at UC Davis. What followed was a remarkably lucid lecture on where to buy the best and cheapest salami, cheese, olives, coffee, fruit, bread, cakes, wine, and more in the region... he was sharing something more than a shopping list with us. He was giving his students direct insight into the very subject matter that was inspiring his own art: the frosted cakes, cream pies, lollipops, trays of herring and sardines, and other foods he transformed, through the skilled application of paint onto canvas, into tactile and sensuous visual representations. I took this first lesson at UC Davis to heart as a genuine gift, a true sharing of what inspired my professor...

While the West Coast artists reached for the object/figure in their art and their teaching, William Bailey pursued a similar course back east. Bailey’s early work, like Park’s, was abstract expressionist.¹⁵ But he later found inspiration in none other than



William Bailey in his studio, 2010. Courtesy of Michael Marsland. Yale University.

the humble egg as a way to experiment with the purity of form.¹⁶ After obtaining his B.F.A. in 1955 and M.F.A. in 1957 from the School of Art at Yale, Bailey taught there from 1965 to 1995, where he now holds the position of Kingman Brewster Professor Emeritus of Art.¹⁷ As a teacher he is beloved, and as a painter, he has work in major collections nationwide, including the Museum of Modern Art and the National Museum of American Art in Washington, and he keeps an active exhibition calendar. Like the Bay Area Figurative artists on the West Coast, he investigates formal qualities such as shape, form, color, temperature, and spatial relationships. Bailey, as Park was known to do,¹⁸ creates his paintings from memory or mental images, allowing room for viewers' interpretations and inserting himself into the work. But unlike Park, he does it without the abstract expressionist painter's athletic brushwork. That said, Bailey's paintings' are subtly active on the surface, including a tremendous amount of rhythm created by the dominant one-directional hatching of the backgrounds in contrast to the alternating dance of directional hatching that create each vessel and object. As the poet Mark Strand has noted,¹⁹ every object is perfectly in place within the composition, until one moves to the next painting in which the same or very similar objects are arranged differently to create new, perfectly placed compositions. Bailey's craft is remarkably intentional, and so I was almost surprised when, on closer examination, I noticed an edge of the painted table in *Terra Nuova*, 2002, left for the viewer to see the iteration. With paintings as carefully

calculated as Bailey's, this was no doubt an intentional move. I soon noticed several other subtle irregularities and after-the-fact alterations and iterations. I could also see his influence in the work of three of his former students: Hilary Harkness, John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage.²⁰ Moreover, in a very quiet way, I began to see connections to the likes of Park and Diebenkorn, both of whom allowed the viewer to see the act of painting in their work. Such work is an invitation to learn something about painting, as in a lesson—a teaching moment for both painter and viewer.

I spoke with Bailey about his teaching and painting legacy. At 84, he had a firm handshake and piercing eyes. I recognized his august intellect immediately, but it was delivered with a warm smile.

Jon Seals - Did teaching influence your paintings? How did your painting shape your teaching?

William Bailey - For my generation, teaching in universities was one of the few ways of supporting oneself while working as a professional artist. Almost no one, after the WPA, could survive on the sales of paintings. I took teaching seriously and tried to do it well. I can't say how it influenced my work but must point out that they are very different activities. As a painter I am totally involved in the world of the painting. As a teacher I'm responsible for the students' visual and intellectual development. I tried to awaken their talents and teach them to employ the technical and formal devices, which are a necessary part of the education of the artist.



David Park, *Boy Painting*, 1957, oil on canvas, 50" x 36". Courtesy of Hackett | Mill, representative of the Estate of David Park.

J.S. - What does it mean to teach art? What should art teachers be doing today?

W.B. - First, art can't be taught. A teacher should help students develop the capacity to discover what they need to teach themselves.

J.S. - Some professors stop teaching after reaching high levels of success with their own studio work. But after you reached that level of success with your paintings, you continued to teach. What kept you in the classroom?

W.B. - When I was financially able to do it, I reduced the amount of time I spent teaching. During my last five years, I continued to teach because I enjoyed the interaction with students and colleagues at Yale.

J.S. - Do you have any thoughts on balancing teaching, making art, and family?

W.B. - It's almost impossible to achieve a satisfactory balance. I found that I was moonlighting when I was painting and I was moonlighting when I was teaching. Each one took time away from the other.

J.S. - So there's no magic equation or solution on how to balance the time?

W.B. - I don't think so. People who have done it successfully, like Thiebaud, have always been a mystery to me. I don't know how he does *all* the things that he does, and he does them with such, I wouldn't say apparent ease, but he just doesn't seem to break a sweat. I feel more akin to

Diebenkorn because we are both anxious about getting it right, which is a great motivator. I don't sense that anxiety with Wayne.

When I asked Baily to share stories from the classroom, he was reticent, alluding to a teacher/student ethic that would not allow it. "I've been very lucky. I've had some very talented students and some students who went on to celebrity," he said with a smile. "They're not always the same ones."

I had the good fortune of catching up with one of Bailey's former students, Jennifer Toth, (M.F.A. Yale School of Art), Professor in Painting at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York.²¹

"William Bailey is a legendary teacher," she said. "I was very blessed to have been able to take his last figure painting class at Yale in the MFA program in 1995. He demonstrated such wisdom and knowledge of art and gave me a glimpse of the complexities, subtleties, and depths of painting. He influenced my art and my teaching style by helping me slow down and see moments of great painting in my own work or in students' work, and also to appreciate differences. He gave me the patience to see more carefully and slowly."

In Marc Trujillo's recent *Huffington Post* entry "The Influence of William Bailey," the painter Jenny Dubnau comments:

William Bailey really taught me how to paint, or, should I say, gave me the tools to teach myself how to paint. Style was never a particular preoccupation for Bailey: he taught formal issues in a spare, open and almost philosophical way. Form transmuted into meaning almost seamlessly. How you make space in your painting, how you use color to create space, was, for Bailey, the deepest incarnation of metaphor, and style flowed from that: he'd always talk about the "world" that your painting conjured, and that world was the metaphorical structure around which your meaning circulated. I also recall with fondness some of his quintessential questions: "Can I 'peel' this piece of paint 'off' the painting's surface? Can I 'press' into the surface of the painting?" In other words, how effectively are you building your space?²²

If for Bailey a painting may conjure a "world," what are its boundaries? William Bailey and David Park generate the worlds they want to see in their painting. But it's more than optics for both men. Through countless testimony of their lives and work, it is evident they also created the world they wanted to experience. I'm reminded of a specific story in which Park, in part, has been given credit for saving the life of Sam Francis. Francis was a veteran Park heard about who was seriously ill in the hospital with tuberculosis of the spine who had an affinity for art. Park paid several visits to Francis while he was in the hospital to talk about life, and art, quickly a friendship was born. Francis was no formal student of Park's, no son of a collector or wealthy patron, but Park would pay him weekly visits, coordinate a museum field trip, and bring in borrowed works of art from his friends to challenge and inspire Francis. Park expanded his artistic philosophies beyond the canvas, beyond the classroom, and sought out his own student to bring hope. And it worked. After a long friendship Francis was eventually healed. Francis said of Park, "He saved my life by getting me to paint pictures."²³ Park did not view art or teaching as



William Bailey, *Afternoon in Umbria II*, 2010-11, tempera on wood panel, 20" x 24". Courtesy of the artist, Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York and FRED.GIAMPIETRO Gallery, New Haven, CT.

distractions from the seriousness of life, but rather as a way to move through life. Francis would later describe Park, "He seemed to be a living example of the principle of brotherly love."²⁴

Prodigious artist/educators like Bailey and Park encourage us to challenge the status quo of the artist/teacher role—to imagine new ways to respond to the world (which may involve re-imagined strategies from the past), and to bring others along in discovery. Time invested in these deeply meaningful teacher/student relationships can change the direction of not only a young artist's life and craft, but of art itself as it continues to unfold. ■

NOTES

1. These sentiments come from my work in issue #19 of *ARTPULSE*, a short review titled, "The Sting of Art Education" of the exhibition titled "Five West Coast Artists: Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Neri, Park, and Thiebaud," that ran March 28–July 13, 2014 at Yale University Art Gallery. The intent of this essay titled, "A Common Core" is to expand and investigate concepts first presented in that earlier review.
2. Dorie Baker, "The 'made up' world of artist William Bailey." *Yale News*. <http://news.yale.edu/2010/12/10/made-world-artist-william-bailey> (accessed July 28, 2014).
3. Helen Park Bigelow, *David Park, Painter: Nothing Held Back*. Manchester, Vt.: Hudson Hills Press, 2009. 188-190.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Nancy Boas, *David Park: A Painter's Life*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2012. 111.

6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 180.
8. *Ibid.*, 96-103.
9. *Ibid.*, 116.
10. *Ibid.*, 116.
11. *Ibid.*, 211.
12. Bruce Nixon, and Maxwell L. Anderson, *Manuel Neri: The Figure in Relief*. Hamilton, N.J.: Grounds For Sculpture. In association with Hudson Hills Press, 2006. Xvi.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Wayne Thiebaud, and Dana Self, *Wayne Thiebaud: Fifty Years of Painting*. Kansas City, Mo.: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003. 5.
15. Giuliano Briganti, and John Hollander, "Introduction by John Hollander." In *William Bailey*. New York: Rizzoli, 1991. 16-18.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Dorie Baker, "The 'made up' world of artist William Bailey." *Yale News*. <http://news.yale.edu/2010/12/10/made-world-artist-william-bailey> (accessed July 28, 2014).
18. *The Figurative Mode: Bay Area Painting, 1956-66*. New York, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1984. 12.
19. Mark Strand, and William Bailey, "Essay by Mark Strand." In *William Bailey*. New York: Abrams, 1987. 32-34.
20. Karen Rosenberg, "Art and Design." *nytimes.com*. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26galleries.html?_r=0 (accessed July 28, 2014).
21. *Ibid.*
22. Marc Trujillo, "The Influence of William Bailey." *The Huffington Post*. *TheHuffingtonPost.com*, 13 Oct. 2014. Web. 24 Oct. 2014. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marc-trujillo/the-influence-of-william-b_5970074.html?utm_hp_ref=arts&ir=Arts>.
23. Nancy Boas, *David Park: A Painter's Life*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2012. 116.
24. *Ibid.*