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2012 Silver Circle Award

Since 1966, the Silver Circle Award has been presented to some of UIC's best teachers. Winners, who are honored at their college commencements, receive $500 and their names join a long list of distinguished colleagues. But what makes the award especially meaningful is its selection committee: the graduating seniors.

Dianna Frid

Photo: Roberta Dupuis-Devlin

Dianna Frid

Assistant professor of studio arts
School of Art and Design

Dianna Frid refers to two aphorisms to guide her teaching and her own practice of art.

The first is, "Art is what makes life more interesting than art," according to Robert Filliou, a French artist who was active in Fluxus, an international network of avant-garde multimedia artists.

The second is T.S. Eliot's reflection that "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

Frid notes that the same can be said for all art.

These and other literary texts help students think abstractly, she says, pointing out that no two people interpret a reading or assignment the same way.

"Students and I investigate these maxims textually, but above all through the exploratory practice of making things: drawings, paintings, sculptures, photographs or moving images and sound works," Frid says.

"Art viewing, and certainly art making, inform our intellects and our senses. Students discover that art encompasses the political and the personal."

Frid notes that the process of "paying attention and living analytically" makes people feel vulnerable, but is critical to art.

"Being in the midst of life without paying attention to its intricacies and subtleties is, in my view, a form of disengagement and potential alienation, and art teaches us to be engaged through our senses and our intellect," she says.

She asks her students "to get lost in the big, uncertain art field — to get uncomfortable, even. After all, an effort must be made to learn to uncover the meaning of something."

Frid was drawn to art as a child, exploring the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, particularly the symbolism-laden embroideries and weavings. She later studied anthropology, but switched to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

She eventually began exhibiting her art in New York while working at an "unfulfilling" ad agency job that convinced her to return to school for a master's degree in fibers and material studies.

She began teaching through a fellowship at the University of Chicago.

"Very few of my students were actually art majors, so the job taught me how to be an advocate for the arts and present it as a tool of inquiry. I still do that," Frid says. "I still learn on the job. Each group of students has a slightly different dynamic feel, and I cannot assume that I have it all figured out.

"One of the things that I have learned most is the importance of listening to students."