



ABOVE LEFT
Elephants and Birds
 by Albert Sangiamo,
 1988, charcoal and red
 Conté, 30 x 40.
 Collection Ellen Lesser.

ABOVE RIGHT
Bedroom
 by Haniya Ghazelah,
 2006, charcoal and
 pastel, 40 x 60. All
 artwork this article
 collection the artist unless
 otherwise indicated.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Untitled
 by Kent Miller, 2007,
 graphite, 18 x 40.



A Return to Drawing by Hand at MICA

At the Maryland Institute College of Art, fundamental drawing skills have long meshed with modern methods and pragmatic approaches to art careers. | **by Bob Bahr**

The tradition of drawing, with all its emphasis on careful mark-making and painstaking observation, is both respected and modified at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), in Baltimore. A lineage of instructors who revere accomplished draftsmanship infuses the modern methods at this art school, which from its beginning has found a way to blend classical drawing instruction with forward-thinking approaches to prepare graduates for careers in fine art or illustration and other commercial forms of art. Animation majors relish the life-

drawing classes that have been a staple of MICA since its inception, and students who plan to graduate with a drawing major can take courses focusing on conceptual art. The cross-pollination of various approaches to art leads to enrichment in surprising ways—and this has been a hallmark of MICA for decades. Albert Sangiamo, who founded the drawing foundation department at MICA in 1960, made hand-lettering a required drawing course for all students, and his intention was not to equip them with what was then an important skill for illustrators. “It was

“They come in slinging paint, but when they get serious, they decide they want their compositions to fit on the page. They want to make it look accurate, they want to know how to capture light.” —REX STEVENS



LEFT
Untitled
by Kent Miller, 2008,
graphite, 30 x 40.

OPPOSITE PAGE
After the Storm
by Jennifer Brakefield,
2007, charcoal, 32 x 20.

not meant as a tool for illustration,” says Sangiamo. “It was about learning to see and depict the positive and negative spaces that form letters and about learning the tools. Lettering was just another drawing course. Anyway, handwriting is drawing, when you think about it.”

Similar crossovers continue to occur at MICA, such as the increased use of sumi-e (ink wash) technique to shade drawings, an influence that Rex Stevens, the chairman of the Drawing and General-Fine-Arts departments, attributes to that material’s immediacy compared to traditional, labor-intensive methods of shading. “Students aren’t seeing hatchwork in their video games or animation,” says Stevens. “Sumi-e

has an immediate effect that working over with graphite doesn’t. It’s a process they are drawn to because it is ‘hit it and go.’ Young people these days see so many more images per second than I did at their age. Between YouTube, video games, TV, and animation, it’s all quick clips. We spend a lot of time helping them learn to sustain their vision. We say, ‘You are stuck in molasses, you are staying here, you are not running. Sustain your gaze.’”

The newest generation of students at MICA is surprising even Stevens—a devoted draftsman—with its interest in drawing. Until recently, new students seemed intent on scanning rough drawings and altering them in image manipulation software such as Photoshop.

Stevens even reports some students working from a photo of a still life on their laptop’s screen—when the actual still life setup was just a few feet away. “They’re so used to having a laptop—it’s a warming fire,” he says. “They are comfortable with it.” The new crop of kids uses technological tools, too, but they are interested in more. “The computer is like a toaster for them,” says Stevens. “Everyone knows how to use Photoshop. So now they want to learn hand skills, to have a tactile experience.”

LIKE TEACHERS in other art schools, MICA’s professors don’t just give, they get. Students bring new energy, ideas, and interests to the school and to the teachers, impacting the faculty’s





ABOVE
Fog Rising in Mountains
 by Jennifer Brakefield, 2008, charcoal, 20 x 32.

RIGHT
Studio Still Life
 by Mark Karnes, 2005, ink and wash, 8 x 9.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Tattooed Woman
 by Albert Sangiamo, 1978–2004, pastel and colored pencil, 28 x 22.
 Sangiamo prefers the Prismacolor brand of colored pencil, saying its waxier texture suits his working method.



When you graduate from MICA, you will have the skillset to become what you need to become."

—REX STEVENS

artwork. "It's exciting to be a professor at MICA because it is always growing and changing," remarks Stevens. "The quality of the labs and all the machines are always being updated. Yet there's still a need for the traditional. Both the old and the new are here—just look at our buildings and you will see it." Indeed, MICA's facilities include the Main Building, built in 1907 and suggestive of Renaissance architecture of Venice, and the Brown Center, a strikingly contemporary 2003 construction that is often one of the first things artists mention when the school comes up in conversation. MICA offers majors in experimental animation, video, interactive media, and environmental design, but the fundamental things still apply. "We are keeping paper," says Stevens. "We are keeping charcoal. We're using a wide variety of erasers. We don't draw on walls. The students respond to this. They come in slinging paint, but when they get serious, they decide they want their compositions to fit on the page. They want to make it look accurate, they want to know how to capture light."

It's not just a matter of all the majors at MICA at some point coming to the realization that the two required drawing classes in their first year of study were quite valuable. It's also about some of the most recent students deciding that drawing is important enough to major in. "Other majors are much sexier than drawing. But these days, hand skills are very popular in our school," says Stevens. All students have to take one class in life drawing (plus the two required drawing courses). But those with an interest can take it as many as six times, and they can choose from eight instructors. MICA is



set up to accommodate drawing majors interested in a variety of areas, as suggested by the list of elective courses in the sidebar on page 81. The increase in the options offered mirror a hunger for depicting the material world, something MICA's administration admittedly didn't expect. "The course on drawing trees filled up fast and closed right

away last year," Stevens points out. "Who would think students would be interested in drawing trees?"

The school is responding to the increased demand for this type of instruction. "In the past, we would have eight to 10 drawing majors here at any given time," recalls Stevens. "Now we have 28, and 18 incoming students have



TOP LEFT
Family Vacation
by Rex Stevens, 2007,
graphite 26 x 20.

TOP RIGHT
Blush
by Howie Lee Weiss,
2008, charcoal,
45 x 44.

Weiss used vine charcoal for this piece.

RIGHT
Untitled
by Kent Miller, 2007,
graphite, 30 x 40.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Studio Interior
by Mark Karnes,
2006, ink,
6 x 9.



About MICA

The Maryland Institute College of Art is located in Baltimore. Founded in 1826, it produces the most Fulbright Scholars among specialty schools in the United States, and its Fine-Arts program tied for 4th in *U.S. News & World Report's* 2008 rankings. For more information, visit www.mica.edu.



expressed interest in the drawing major. It's a boom, and we didn't see it coming. Drawing has always been low-key; the department was sort of a service provider for the school at large for many years. Then computers came along, and for a while, everything was about scanning a rough drawing and then touching it up for another use. But computers cannot take the place of hand skills. Plus, high schools now have high-tech equipment, and students come to us with that knowledge. When you get to MICA, it's time to learn how to draw and paint."

Students generally tackle the requirements and the foundation classes in their first year. In the second and third years, their major comes to the fore, with 16 credits of electives on their plate. Their senior year is consumed by a senior thesis, in which majors pursue the development of their art in a studio. The curriculum is arranged so that students have ample time to focus on this portion of the program. "The three years of undergraduate work prepare them to utilize all they've learned to explore their own territory," explains Howie Lee Weiss, the senior thesis director at MICA. "This is the time for students to find their own voice."

It's also the time to acquire important tools to allow them to efficiently pursue a career in art. "We push professional development in the fourth year, too," says Weiss. "We cover how

to handle galleries, develop a résumé, write biographies, and create a professional packet to accompany a strong portfolio. These packets can easily be transformed into a website. This is very helpful—I've had a lot of correspondence with graduates who have bothered to write me and say, 'I didn't enjoy it at the time, but thank you so much for having me do all that work.' That's the real proof."

One thing that MICA can't supply to students is motivation and tenacity. Stevens stresses that self-discipline is what will make the difference in their success at the school and later in their career. What MICA can do is provide a winning balance of traditional drawing technique and modern art sensibilities. It's what MICA's been doing for at least 50 years.

"You will graduate with the ability to render the figure and be very skilled in different techniques of drawing," states Stevens. "You will learn strong observational skills as well as the tenets of abstraction. At MICA, we are well aware of what's been in the traditional mode of drawing, as well as what's going on right now in the art world. Through the use of these approaches you can develop your own personal world."

"How hard you work when you get out of here is another thing," says Stevens. "But when you graduate from MICA, you will have the skill set to become what you need to become." ♦

About MICA's Drawing Major

The Maryland Institute College of Art offers a bachelor of fine arts degree with a drawing major that requires 126 credits designed to be accrued over four years, with a senior thesis dominating the work of the fourth year. A sampling of the electives available to a drawing major are listed below to give an idea of the breadth of the program.

- Abstractions
- Advanced Figure Drawing
- Advanced Illusionism
- Anatomy for Artists
- Color Media Drawing
- Dimensional Drawing: Process Time & Space
- Drawing Through Movies
- From Perception to Metaphor
- Interpretative Figure Drawing
- Introduction to Drawing
- Life Drawing
- Seeing Color
- Studio Drawing: 2-D for 3-D
- Studio Drawing: Animal Imagery
- Studio Drawing: Color
- Studio Drawing: Composition
- Studio Drawing: Conceptual Composition
- Studio Drawing: From Architecture
- Studio Drawing: From Masters
- Studio Drawing: Landscape
- Studio Drawing: Let There Be Light
- Studio Drawing: Nature
- Studio Drawing: Painterly Drawing
- Studio Drawing: Portrait
- Studio Drawing: Realistic Composition
- Studio Drawing: Still Life/Interior
- Studio Drawing: Sumi Ink
- Studio Drawing: Trees
- Watercolor Drawing