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Experiencing the World Through Making Art

Off the Cuff with artist-educator Deborah Brooks

BY GRACE MATSON JUN. 19, 2020 8:59 A.M.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEBORAH BROOKS

Deborah Brooks discovered that art is “a universal language of compassion.” She has taught the subject at Childrens’ Studio School in Washington, DC; Milwaukee’s Jewish Community Center; UW-Milwaukee; Alverno College and the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. She’s been teaching high school students at Greenfield High School for 13 years and is “obsessed with transforming their ability to experience the world through making art.” Off the Cuff caught up with her recently the challenges and rewards of teaching art.

How long have you been an arts educator, and how did that come about?

Teachers, education and art museums “transported” me while growing up. I shared the thrill of discovery through art with kids as a high school student. I taught recreation art classes as well. While studying for a Masters of Fine Art, teaching held the pattern of “being off to the side.” I received my degree in the late 1980’s and started teaching shortly after that.

You teach online courses, namely on Facebook, called Art without Fear. How did you begin this process?

By building a program for drawing and painting for high school students, I have figured out how to help students get started and become more creative. Working through negative mindsets and loving what they do is what it’s all about. Adults who feel they “cannot draw” and are “not creative” sent me on a quest to teach how to see like an artist. I’ve done this with all levels of students in person and decided to help more people with an online platform.

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Tell me about your work. What types of media do you use?

I paint to understand and make sense of the world. I use oil paints because when I begin, I don't have a solid idea of the finished piece. Oils allow for flexibility and change. But, when I travel, I work with drawing and watercolors, often on site.

What subjects or objects do you work on?

I'm interested in helping viewers feel pleasure and abundance, by observing light and shadow. I exaggerate with extreme colors and contrasts to heighten the experience of being present. One way of knowing I am successful is when a collector tells me how they now see the world. I strive to share the way I see things and create beauty as a practice of gratitude.

What is your biggest challenge in creating art?

Staying focused on one theme for a sustained length of time. I admire artists whose life's work is on one consistent quest. I have come to an arrangement to work in series, and dip in and out of various series as I explore a variety of visual concerns. It's like people with curly hair wanting straight hair, and the reverse.

What are the rewards of teaching and creating?

Since everyone is unique, learning student by student how to connect people to living through art is extremely rewarding. Also, hearing about the difference that taking art classes during high school made is wonderful. Seeing it each day is golden. Knowing that some students decide it was worth waking up for is a special place for me to be. Sharing the thrill of learning with students who never thought they could accomplish something is addicting. Art is courage and hope, not fear. It has fulfilled this role throughout time. Check out, "Art Without Fear" on Facebook and join in—it's for you.

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