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Artists Explore Motivation and Mystery of Inspiration

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Many consider inspiration to be the phenomenon that both motivates the artist and serves as the greatest intrigue of their work. Artist Ginia A. Davis explains, “The soul of art is inspiration.”

At Illinois Wesleyan University, two professors and two students were posed the question, “What inspires you?” The answers from School of Art Director Miles Bair, Professor of Art Kevin Strandberg, as well as art students Leeya Jackson class of ‘13 and Riley Blindt class of ‘13, revealed surprising similarities.



School of Art Director Miles Bair

Bair has painted for more than 40 years and teaches painting, art foundations and art theory and criticism. “There have been multiple inspirations in my development as a painter,” said Bair. “During the past 15 to 20 years my artwork has focused on landscapes and nature.”

For Bair, the woods are a great source of inspiration. “Any time I run out of ideas in the studio I head for places like Wisconsin, the Appalachian mountains, anywhere that’s green.” He then takes photographs of these places to capture a mood to communicate in his work.

Bair prefers to make artwork based upon what he has seen and added to with his imagination, rather than painting exact replicas of his photographs. “My winter paintings are created entirely from imagination. I just imagine what places would look like with snow and work from there.”

Travel has greatly influenced Bair’s work, from visits to various locations throughout the United States, Europe, and specifically Japan. Having spent much of the 1990s visiting Japan and focusing upon the Japanese aesthetic, Bair shifted from thinking about art in the traditional, Western view, to thinking about art from an East Asian perspective. “I think as people age, their inspirations change, and they gain more experience in the world which causes their work to change,” said Bair.



Professor of Art Kevin Strandberg shown working at the kiln.

Strandberg, who teaches and works in both photography and sculpture at Illinois Wesleyan, directed the 2011 IWU Spain Program in Barcelona. He feels artists need to take an active approach in experiencing the world. “I’m a big proponent of traveling. I think every undergraduate student should study abroad,” he said. For Strandberg, there is an appeal to exotic landscapes. “I’m particularly drawn to Barcelona because of the modernist structures –you can’t find that look anywhere else,” he said.

Strandberg’s initial draw to a place involves an overall sensory experience. “I’d like to think that when I look at a photo I have taken, I remember a certain scene with sense memories: the smell of frying donuts, surrounding noises, every aspect of a sensory experience,” he said. During the fall semester of 2011, a collection of Strandberg’s photographs taken in Barcelona were displayed in the Merwin and Wakeley Galleries. Many of the photographs were taken using a panoramic view and while panoramic images are generally displayed horizontally, Strandberg flipped them vertically. The resulting effect he described as having a feel of fantasy. “I’m not trying to depict reality, but to create a different landscape out of a simplified, natural setting. It’s an abstraction,” said Strandberg.

For 40 years, Strandberg has only worked in black and white film. This practice has also contributed to the feel of fantasy in his artwork by shifting the perspective to elements that often remain unnoticed. “There is a photograph I took of balloons being carried down a street in Barcelona. These balloons were very brightly-colored, and were I to have taken the photo in color, all the attention would have been centered on them, when the focus is actually on the narrowing perspective, the different shapes, the shadows,” said Strandberg.

Blindt, a bachelor of arts graphic design student from Morris, Ill., says she is drawn to the precision of the art form, preferring to work in black and white while using color minimally and simplistically. Blindt said she finds one of her greatest sources of inspiration in nature.

“I’m very intrigued by clouds and sunlight, and the shadows the two create. At sunrise or sunset, when the foreground is mostly black and shadowed, there are still those rainbow colors in the sky, but they don’t last very long. It’s very secretive,” said Blindt.



Riley Blindt '13

Although she describes her style as realist, without much embellishment or interpretation, Blindt is still very inspired by abstraction. “So much of nature is attached to this ephemeral factor, and the fact that the clouds are always shifting and changing. It’s hard to convey that feeling, but it’s something that constantly inspires me.”



Leeya Jackson '13

portraits hoping to find one that looked liked me and never did. It was a daunting realization but also a very inspiring one.”

Jackson noted that studying in Florence, a city with profound artistic documentation of Italian historical events, has motivated her to showcase her hometown of Detroit in her artwork. “I realized I want to document major events in Detroit’s history,” said Jackson, with the largest etching she has created to date based on her grandfather’s description of the 1969 Detroit riots.

“Meaning and motivation is essential to artwork. In order to be committed to something, I have to be inspired by it,” she said.

Jackson summarizes the role of inspiration not only for herself, but also for other artists, as extending far beyond the individual artist’s work. “On some fundamental level, every artist has to be inspired by another. No child would draw a heart had they not seen a picture of one before. I would never have picked up a paintbrush if not for the painting that hung in my living room. Art itself is dependent on the present and the past inspiring the future.”

For Jackson, a bachelor of fine arts printmaking and painting student from Detroit, Mich., identifying her source of inspiration has been a gradual process. Jackson found that through studying abroad in Florence, Italy during the fall semester of 2011, she was led on a journey of artistic and self-discovery.

“A year ago, I would have said my artistic inspiration was ‘the beauty in nature or color.’ Once I visited the Uffizi Museum in Florence and looked through the artists’ self-portraits, I was hit with a realization,” she said. “There are no well-known, African-American female artists. I’d walked down a corridor filled with hundreds of incredible self-

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