

Architecture Students Resist the Emotional, and End Up Falling in Love

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

Sue Ferguson Gussow is a 61-year-old woman of cheerful countenance who wears hats. Most of them are large, have wide brims and are made of felt. At first glance she looks like the sort of vaguely Bohemian suburban matron who rejected fashion but couldn't quite escape it. What she does not look like is anyone else at Cooper Union, the college of art, architecture and engineering off Astor Place in lower Manhattan where she has taught figurative drawing for 26 years and is treated with something close to reverence.

She teaches not artists but architects, who have been taking her course since 1980, when John Hejduk, the dean of Cooper Union's School of Architecture, decided that his students didn't draw well enough and that the way to get them to improve was to make them draw human figures. He reached into Cooper's art department, snatched away Ms. Gussow and declared that no student could receive an architecture degree from Cooper Union without her course in freehand drawing. Since then, every aspiring architect at Cooper Union has sat in Ms. Gussow's classroom, pinned his or her charcoal sketches on the wall and been subjected to one of Ms. Gussow's "crits," which are best described as a combination of Socratic dialogue on the nature of art and reminiscences about her career



James Estrin/The New York Times

Sue Ferguson Gussow appraising her students' drawings at Cooper Union.

as an artist, into which are mixed equal parts of sharp-tongued criticism of the work at hand and warm support of the student's intentions.

If Ms. Gussow is not typical of art teachers, she is not typical of artists either. She has worked quietly, out of the pressure

cooker of the art world, since graduating from Cooper Union nearly 40 years ago. Her paintings and drawings, most of human figures, have been acquired by a smattering of collectors and museums, but she has never had a one-woman show in a New York gallery, in part because she has never been

A drawing teacher shows how space can be defined by the human figures in it.

comfortable promoting herself. She once got as far as calling a major gallery, but after the receptionist put her on hold, she hung up.

Last month Cooper Union, to thank her for teaching several generations of architects that there are things in the world other than straight lines, gave her the show that commercial galleries never did, putting on view 69 charcoal drawings, oil paintings and pastels, most of human figures, made between 1956 and last year.

If there is any theme to her work — she mostly paints her friends, her students or the man with whom she shares a loft in TriBeCa (she has been divorced twice) — it is to use the art of composition to provide insights into human sensibility. Her art is strongly visual, designed for the pleasure of being looked at, not to make a polemical or a political point. Her figures are poised in space, their positioning often telling us more about their character than their facial expressions do.

Her training in the 1950's was in Abstract

Expressionism, and while she was always more comfortable as a figurative artist — "I kept waiting for the god of Abstract Expressionism to drop favor on my plate, and it never did," she said — it is not hard to see the effect of her beginnings. The lines of some of her reclining figures could be the lines of a Franz Kline, and even where no direct connection to Abstract Expressionism is visible, all her work is notable for the extent to which it seems implicitly to acknowledge modernism; it makes no attempt, as the work of some figurative artists does, to pretend that the revolution of modern art did not happen.

"I never did work that represented a nostalgia for an earlier time," she said in a recent conversation. "I always wanted to paint figures, not abstractions, but I also wanted to deal with the here and now. I wanted my figures to feel psychologically modern." Her figures often seem to be looking far away, as if engaged in haunting thought; they are all introspective, and even the ones who are painted or drawn in pairs or groups seem somewhat solitary. Yet this is not an art of alienation; Ms. Gussow's intention is much more subtle, less troubling: she seems to be pondering the paradox of privacy within community, and aloneness within groups, and most of her figures appear content amid their musings.

Another of her subjects is architectural space, which she rarely develops in detail

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but manages to portray with a remarkable degree of precision. The positioning of her figures on the canvas, their direction and stance, is in many ways the most eloquent thing about her work. It tells whether space is open or enclosed, sharply defined or generic. Some of her figures take charge of space and others slink into it; some seem conscious of space and others are all but indifferent to it. Paradoxically, it is often those figures who are reclining or in another informal position who command their spaces most powerfully.

"She intuitively constructs space, which is why she is such a great teacher of drawing for architects," said John Jay Iselin, president of Cooper Union. "But she also teaches students how to transfer emotion to a drawing. She wants them to draw what they feel, which architects don't often enough have a chance to do. And like all great teachers, she can be unrelenting. She reaches for the gut."

The other day, on the seventh floor of Cooper Union, in a classroom filled with northern light, Ms. Gussow sat in a metal classroom chair surround-

ed by 19 students who had been told to choose a painting by Cézanne, Vermeer or another great artist and interpret its tones in the form of a charcoal sketch. She looked hard at a still life pinned on the wall.

"There's nothing really wrong with that composition; it's just kind of thin," she said to the student. "I mean, it's all there, it's just that you're just not making any bold moves either for it or against it. Tell me, what were you trying to do?"

"I had a good time with Cézanne, I felt like I was painting it," said the student.

"Do you mean that when you paint you feel like you could do anything, but when you draw you have to get everything correct?" Ms. Gussow responded. She went on, warming to one of her favorite ideas: "The world of objects is seductive, seductive to us all, but you have to remember that the point of painting is not just to catalogue objects but to make of them a composition, to push space around by weaving an abstract tonal pattern. When you draw the objects in a still life, it is not so important what they are as where they are. Vermeer and Cézanne are not trying to make each object clear; they are trying to orchestrate them into an-

Pulling architects away from the rigid geometry of their training.

other compositional meaning."

With that she moved on, telling the next student that his gestures were not bold enough, that his rhythms were nice but that he was too fearful of risk. Her greatest joy, it would seem, is in pulling architects away from tight, rigidly geometric forms of expression that their other training drives them toward.

"They are stuck with me, these architects, but it is a marvel to be teaching people who haven't done much drawing," she said. "They have patience, they are less obsessed with making it fast than the art students, who say only, 'Please, God, let me have a show before I'm 30.' Architects know they have more time."

Cooper Union is full of stories of architecture students who tried to get exemptions from her course, saying it was irrelevant to architecture,

were told no by the dean, and ended up liking it so much they took an optional advanced class the next year. "How you draw is an extension of how you think," Ms. Gussow said. "Architects learn to think spatially, and freehand drawing is part of that," a lesson, she said, in how freedom and discipline are irrevocably bound.

Ms. Gussow is insistent that her students learn drawing in a traditional way, working only freehand. A prominent architect who taught at Cooper Union once lobbied Dean Hejduk to have her teach formal perspective, saying it had a much more direct connection to architecture. The dean's response: "Does Sue Gussow go into your studio and tell you what to teach?"

"It is a curious thing to be facing the millennium and teaching something that is seemingly so unnecessary," Ms. Gussow said. "But I feel very strongly that there are certain activities that are necessary to civilization. It is necessary to sing, to dance and to draw. My earliest memories are of having a crayon in my hand — I don't remember a time when I didn't draw. I feel very grateful that I have made out of this a life of my own choosing."