

Atelier

A photograph of two women in an art studio. The woman in the foreground is wearing a bright red jumpsuit and is focused on adjusting a piece of dried, fibrous material on a large, dark, textured artwork. The woman behind her, wearing a black top and glasses, is looking on. The artwork is a large-scale piece with a complex, layered texture of dark purples, browns, and golds. The studio background shows shelves with various art supplies and a sign that says 'NIARSKI'.

On Teaching: Deborah Winiarski

Stephanie Cassidy



Deborah Winiarski, *Lines Written: Rose III*, 2017, fabric, encaustic, oil, pastel on panel, 20 x 16 x 3 in.

Stephanie Cassidy

Your development as an artist began long before you discovered the medium of encaustic. Did you start with paint on canvas or were you always drawn to using other materials?

Deborah Winiarski

I have always been drawn to working with a variety of materials. I grew up in a home where there was always some sort of painting, building, or creating going on. My

parents had a wood shop in the basement of our family home.

When I first came to the Art Students League, I worked primarily with collage and paint. Over time, I started working on a larger scale, with acrylic, papers, and sand on canvas. I would work flat and splash thin washes of paint, looking to create a depth of field within the layers and layers of color.

Early on, my knowledge of encaustic had been limited to Jasper Johns's paintings and the Fayum portraits of ancient Egypt. I had

never considered encaustic for my own work until I saw my first translucent encaustic painting where the wax was not heavily pigmented, and you could see through to the layers below. I found that intriguing. I started researching encaustic in print and online, eventually finding Joanne Mattera's book *The Art of Encaustic Painting: Contemporary Expression in the Ancient Medium of Pigmented Wax*. I began to teach myself. For a few years, while I was still learning, I was working separately in both acrylic



and encaustic. Working in both mediums became increasingly unwieldy, aside from the fact that acrylic is not compatible with encaustic, so I decided that I had to choose between the two. I've been working exclusively in encaustic for about ten years.

SC So you just started experimenting, working mostly on your own and without a teacher?

DW Yes. I was figuring it out for myself, using several references as a guide. From the beginning, I was making my own medium. Now I also incorporate commercial paint.

SC How did you begin to think of yourself as an artist, one who could teach?

DW I first came to the League not that long ago, around 2003, but for years prior I had been requesting a League course catalogue and marking up its pages. There was something within that kept me from entering. I suppose it was fear. But once I finally walked into the building, I felt a huge weight lifted. Here was a community that believed in the same things I believed in. You didn't have to defend or explain yourself or what you were creating. People worked in all different ways. I found it very exciting that here was a place grounded in a belief in the importance of self-expression and respect for the human spirit. I studied at the League for only two years. It just took that long to affirm for myself I had it within me to do this on a professional level.

The affirmation that I received at the League gave me the confidence to see possibilities. I was encouraged to leave the classroom as soon as possible and leaving was the most significant benchmark to becoming an artist.

"One of my most important goals as an instructor is to help students clarify what they are looking for in their own work. It is within this constant clarification that a student may begin to develop a distinct and unique visual voice."

SC How did you feel when you received that message?

DW It was unexpected, but then I realized it was meant in the best possible way. I knew that the best thing I could do for myself as an artist was to be out on my own.

SC In the weeks after you left, as you became untethered from the classroom routine, how did you forge your own creative agenda and find new work rhythms? I think it is a transition most artists experience.

DW Before leaving the League, my mentor conveyed the idea of "throwing out the sofa," literally and metaphorically. If you truly believe in something, you do whatever it takes to make that something happen. I've heard it said that one should be able to make art in a closet. Clean out the closet and that's your studio. I began to make changes in my life based on those ideas of what I needed to do.

The thing about being in the studio by yourself and not having a mentor to rely on is that you have to really be present with the work. You have to really look and listen to what the work is telling you. It was frightening and thrilling at the same time. Another challenge was discipline, which I sometimes struggle with even to this day. Having a studio in your home is luxurious but also distracting because there are always things to pull you away.

SC When you left, did you find that you immersed yourself in the wider world of art outside of the League, in the city or online?

DW At first I looked a lot. I would go to the museums and to Chelsea often. But while there was some wonderful work in Chelsea, there was some I also wondered about. Now I believe that one has to be selective in what one sees. Seeing too much or trying to see everything can bring distraction, disillusionment, and even despair.

SC Compulsive looking might also interfere with seeing your own work clearly and make you unduly susceptible, consciously or not, to influence.

DW Right, too much influence can be a dangerous thing. Once an artist starts creating to appease something other than his or her own desires and preferences, they are sunk. I advise students that they should have two sets of ears. There are the outside-the-studio ears and the inside-the-studio ears. When they're outside the studio, they may hear wonderful things and perhaps not-so-wonderful things about their work. They're going to see questionable and confusing things that make them wonder. But it's important not to let those things into the studio or into their heads. Once at the studio, they should wipe their feet at the threshold and focus only on what it is they need to see. This can be a real challenge.

SC What is a painting day like for you?

DW Since I work with wax, there's a lot of heat involved, so first I turn my palettes on. My main palette is a hot box consisting of a large anodized aluminum plate that's heated from below. Using both molten and solid wax, I create my imagery on the heated plate, pressing in fabrics that absorb the imagery and color. Basically, it's a monotype process. I do that in large batches. Once the printing is done, I begin to make compositional decisions, cutting and sewing the fabric. I then use these sewn elements in the final composition on the panel. Mine is a multi-step process. I work afternoons, noonish to 4 or 5 p.m. about four days a week.

SC Mixed media is a broad field. You must have students in your classroom working on myriad things simultaneously. What do you do as an instructor to help them?

DW I love materials. I try to keep up to date on new developments in materials and media. There are students in class working with metal, wood, paper, plastic — with so many different materials. In mixed media, the challenge is to transform the materials sufficiently so that they as a whole serve the statement of the artist. If materials aren't transformed sufficiently—put together in a way that identifies the creator and clarifies statement, then the work becomes more



Opposite page: Student Linda Cool with Deborah Winiarski. *This page:* Deborah Winiarski at work with students Rosa Rivera (top) and Daniel De Raey (below).

about the material, and the statement can be lost.

I talk with my students primarily about the formal aspects of their work: composition, color, line, form, movement, texture, etc. — the things you can actually see. I find that my teaching involves a great deal of listening. I ask my students many questions and listen to their answers very carefully. One of my most important goals as an instructor is to help students clarify for themselves what it is they are looking for in their own work. It is within this constant clarification that a student may begin to develop a distinct and unique visual voice.

I work with each person individually. Since the mixed media room is small, when I'm speaking with one person, everyone's listening. But it's the same type of conversation over and over again even though one person may be working with wood, another with paper, and another with paint. Most conversations are rooted in bigger issues than what glue to use. We do discuss the technical aspects of what they're doing, but more often than not the conversation turns to the bigger issues of being an artist. I don't much discuss statement with students, only enough to help them clarify whether the materials and composition are serving their statement in a clear way. I never try to talk students into doing something. In fact, I tell them not to listen to me or anyone else — only to themselves.

SC What are some of the best qualities you've taken from your mentors that you try to bring into the studio as an instructor?

DW One of the greatest things I learned from my mentor is generosity. There was a generosity and honesty to my mentor's teaching that I found very profound. Also, I

learned from my mentor the value of taking each student seriously and working with each person as an individual. When I first came to the League, I was listened to and taken seriously. This made a huge impact and was vital in my development.

I try to emulate these same qualities with each of my own students.

SC Do the open-ended discussions you have with students affect your own work?

DW Students don't know what struggles I'm having in my own studio and they needn't. That's for me to work out on my own. But sometimes something will come up for one of them, and we'll have a

discussion aloud in class. The conversation can result in a clarification for me about something I was questioning or struggling with in my own work. That happens a lot actually.

SC So outside of your studio, your teaching and work with students keeps you connected to your own work.

DW Absolutely. It goes back to the idea of generosity. I do my best to give my students my all, but in the end get back so much more. I often say to students that art is a way of life—a way of being. The act of creation can be life affirming and life changing. It's certainly has been for me.

