

Teaching the next generation

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Montclair artist Fern Bass
inspires her students to
expand their artistic vision
and learn 'how to see'

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Fern Bass, an artist who loves teaching art

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OF THE MONTCLAIR TIMES

Montclair artist Fern Bass found success in the New York art world early on. After graduating from Pratt Institute, she worked for many years as art director of a fashion magazine at Fairchild Publications, and as an art director in the promotion departments at Conde Nast and The New York Times.

But somehow it wasn't enough.

"It was fun for a number of years," she told The Times. "I got to travel to L.A. and all over California on fashion shoots. It was exciting coordinating photographers and models, fashion stylists and hair and makeup artists."

But for Fern, after 13 years, the fashion industry began to lose its luster.

"I knew I couldn't continue doing what I was doing," she recalls. I felt I had a lot of energy but it was plugged into the wrong socket. My values were changing and I longed to shift my career into something more meaningful. I wanted my energy to move out in directions that would go beyond my own life, but was clueless as to what my next step would be."

RETURN TO PAINTING

And so, after a hiatus of about 20 years, she returned to painting. Fern studied with Montclair artist Miriam Beerman, who helped her uncover the artist



Above, Montclair artist Fern Bass looks over a portrait by one of her teenage students, Sally Cole, age 13, who'll be an incoming freshman at Montclair High School in September. Below, wearing a bright red smock, Sam Meyerowitz, age 4, has fun immersing himself in a swirl of color during an art class for pint-sized Picassos.

that lay dormant inside all that while. "It was exhilarating to return to my first love...painting...and it all rushed out of me with great intensity," she pointed out.

Fern was extremely productive, and painted all the time – quickly developing a body of work of which she could be proud. But as much as she loved to paint, the practical side of her nature told her that she wasn't going to make a living at it.

"In spite of my diverse background in art, I still had to figure out a way to make a living at it," she realized.

Over the years, Fern had become friends with Andrey Tamarchenko, who was then director of the Nandi School of Art in Montclair. "We would often



paint together and do a lot of talking about art,” she said. “One day he asked me if I would like to teach at his school. I had no experience, but I knew I liked kids and it seemed fun...and so I said ‘yes.’”

THE GRAND EPIPHANY

“Then came my grand epiphany,” she said. “I fell in love with teaching.”

Fern had finally found the very thing she had been searching for all those years. “This was where I could devote my energy, and receive a meaningful return on my investment. And even get paid for doing it,” she quipped.

Fern worked as an instructor at the Nandi School for three years before starting her own backyard art school. Now she teaches painting, drawing, and mixed media to children, teens and adults, and runs a children’s art camp in the summer.

She also runs a fashion program, where students learn fashion design and illustration, as well as sewing, pattern-making and fabric draping. The students put on fashion shows and presentations at the end of every semester and have their clothing lines evaluated by a panel of fashion coordinators similar to Project Runway. They also take field trips to New York’s Garment Center, where they shop at Mood Fabrics, a place where the Project Runway designers shop.

“I have a wonderful fashion designer who teaches the fashion classes,” Fern said. “The program is really very exciting and draws students from all over the state.”

ACQUIRING SKILLS

She also feels that the skills acquired in the process of learning to draw have many other applications. “Studying drawing builds character,” Fern said. “It helps students develop the ability to tolerate frustration and develop discipline and patience. It is a humbling experience. There is no instant gratification.”

Fern believes that you need to stand at your easel and endure the state of being a beginner. “It’s a blow to your ego, which is a good thing,” she pointed out. Every beginner wants to draw like Michelangelo in the first half-hour of their drawing class. “But, I tell them, ‘Talk to me after your first 100 drawings,’” she said.

According to Fern, it also helps to be passionate about art. “Passion is very motivating,” she said. “There are many skills that are learned in the process of creating a work of art. Learning about composition and the design of a picture is learning about structure – and learning about structure has many applications that go beyond making art.”

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

For Fern, the whole creative process is a mystical journey. “When you are in the state of creative flow, you feel a heightened sense of being alive,” she pointed out. “It is like an altered state in which you lose all sense of time and become one with the task in front of you.”

She explained that when you get to a place where the painting you are working on is “painting itself”, mostly what you need to do is get out of the way and allow the energy to flow through you and onto the canvas. The best case scenario is that when you are done, you look at what you’ve created and say, “Wow! I did that?” when you surprise yourself, and come from a place that is deeper than your conscious mind, you create in ways that you never would if you had consciously tried to.

THE JOY OF TEACHING

Fern finds it to be a wonderful moment when the student’s own unique, quirky individual self begins to pour out through the work. “Once there is a level of mastery, a student’s aesthetic personality begins to be reflected back to them,” she explained. “Their own unique approach begins to fall into certain patterns and they begin to identify their own personal

style.

“Making art is such a great feedback system,” she said. “You get to see yourself reflected back to you and are surprised and delighted by your own emerging artistic self.”

But in order to get to that place, Fern notes, you need to master some skills. And the biggest one is “learning how to see.”

LEARNING TO SEE

“The most gratifying aspect of what I do is creating the right conditions which allow my students to learn ‘how to see,’” Fern said. “I am talking about a direct perception of what is in front of them, which is harder to grasp than it sounds. It’s like the process of meditation. It necessitates slowing down, quieting the mind, and focusing on deep concentration.”

Fern explained that initially students draw what they think an object looks like. “It takes a while to make the switch from the logical and linear left brain to their intuitive, spatial and holistic right brain,” she said. “Drawing actually is a skill that can be quickly acquired once the switch occurs.”

For Fern, the study of drawing and painting enhances a student’s ability to see, and therefore enhances his/her ability to be more aware and alive.

It sensitizes and allows the student to take in more of the abundant beauty that surrounds him/her,” she went on to explain. “I love the idea of increasing sensitivity and of opening people’s eyes to beauty.”

In coming up with themes for her summer art camp, Fern chooses subjects that inspire and excite her. “If I’m excited, I know the kids will be,” she said. “I either choose an art movement, like German Expressionism, or a period in history, such as Medieval England, or an indigenous culture’s art form, such as Aboriginal art.”

This summer, the theme for one of the camp weeks is “Passage to India.” The kids will look at images

of Hindu gods and goddesses, learn about their attributes, their stories and how Hindus use these archetypes to help them in their lives. Then they will come up with their own myth and list attributes and create their own god or goddess.

“I try to give my students a round experience, so I will play In-

dian music throughout the week,” Fern said. “And on the last day of camp, we all put bindis on our foreheads, order Indian food, and have a feast.”

Fern contends that the natural world around her excites and inspires her. And her objective, she admits, is to share their passion and

excitement with her students.

Enthusiastic and dynamic, Montclair artist Fern Bass is indeed an inspired art teacher and mentor – a teacher whose goal is to enable her students to expand their artistic vision and learn “how to see”.