

# ARTIST TEACHER INSTITUTE 2015

"To us, art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks."

Mark Rothko



Theresa Kennish

Oil Painting with Kit Sailer

July 26, 2015-August 1, 2015

**" So, like a forgotten fire, a childhood can flare up again with us."**

*Gaston Bachelard*



Opening Day/Taking Risks: Who can say what is a risk from each person to the next? For me, a general educational teacher at my first day at aTi, Artist Teacher Institute for oil painting, felt like a huge risk. I have always had a passion for art, and in particular, painting. However, I chose to pursue education as a career, keeping the artist side of me as more of a hobby, on occasion. Attending a program like this felt completely out of my comfort zone. Exciting, yes, but very much a risk. One of my goals was to come away at the end of the week with ways to incorporate painting and creative projects in all of the subjects areas in my teaching. On a deeper level, I wanted to paint with oils and see if I could light a little fire within myself to paint on my own.

The Sunday evening orientation and dinner at Stockton College's Main Campus was welcoming, delicious, and informative. I felt the excitement from the presenters as well as my fellow participants that something great, something wonderful, was about to begin. I met some great people at my table and enjoyed staying in contact with them through the week to see their progress.

## Day 1: "Painting is just another way of keeping a diary." Pablo Picasso

Our official first day of painting began at 9am on Monday, July 27th in Stockton's Arts and Science building. I have to admit it gave me a certain thrill to be in an art studio, trying something that had always seemed a distant dream I could pursue later in life, perhaps retirement. I also realized with this thrill came some nervousness. What if I wasn't able to handle the course? Or worse, what if I wasn't up to snuff with my painting abilities? What if I couldn't paint what I was hoping? It struck me that I was taking a big personal risk.

The class began with the instructor, Kit Sailer, letting us each pick our easel and place in the room. The studio was a grand scale room that allowed the five participants, as well as the instructor, to have our own space while being connected in a circle formation. Kit had an upfront, direct and friendly style. She immediately presented the syllabus, materials and set-up of the palette with energetic efficiency.

This was followed by the introduction to our first assignment, a still-life set up in the middle of our circle of painters. Kit demonstrated the outline, placement and size of shapes of the still-life to get us started. The still-life was a green watering can, red mug and a white vase. I was surprised to learn that I was to fill in the canvas from back to front, dark and light shapes. Even with some basic knowledge of oils, this was a new way to look at starting a painting, a painting that was to be shared in the final show at the end of the week. My first risk!

Although at first glance, this assignment didn't feel that risky. A few brightly colored objects placed on a colorful material seemed rather a gentle task at first. However, I found myself frozen for the first few minutes. Could I do this? How would I compare to the art teachers around me, already at work? What would this risk tell me about myself as an artist and as a student? Even with Kit's model painting and demonstration, it was a slow and nerve-wracking start for me. We worked until our lunch break.



The afternoon session started with a fantastic brush stroke and blending demonstration. I started to relax incrementally. I found out that I loved working with wax as a medium and that fan brushes did have their uses besides being a fun shape. My classmates and I were getting



to know one another. It was a great group of people.

Kit added to her demonstration of the still life. When I returned to my easel, I felt a shift. Suddenly, I had an idea how I wanted to handle this risky starter assignment. I needed to give myself the same freedom to create I would have given one of my students. I let myself be childlike and free and just enjoy being in this wonderful space with these wonderful people. The risk disappeared and I was suddenly enjoying what I was doing.

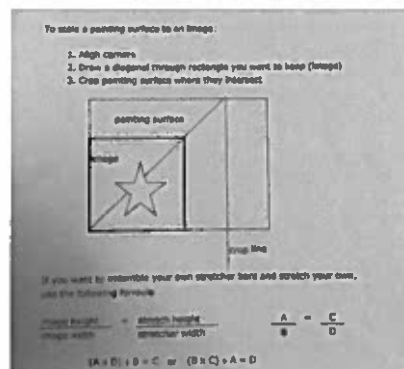
Although this piece is still a work in progress, it did allow me to warm up, stretch a bit, and work through my fears. What a fabulous and remarkable opportunity to grow as a person, as a teacher and as an artist. I left feeling thankful and somewhat surprised by the level of freedom I felt after painting this still life.

My favorite part of this painting was the shapes and colors. My interpretation of the still life was very different than what was actually in front of me but I found that I was ok with that.



## Day 2: "The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt."

Tuesday, July 28th started with a scale layout demonstration. I found this particularly interesting since I had painted with minimal planning in the past. For the first time, I could see the benefits of creating a template, comparing the proportion of a canvas to a reference photo. I could suddenly picture how much more accurate I could be with such a plan. Kit had common sense approaches to handling reference photos that were a different shape to the canvas. By using a yard stick on a diagonal to both photo and canvas lined up in bottom right hand corner, an artist can crop or add to the overall design and composition as necessary.

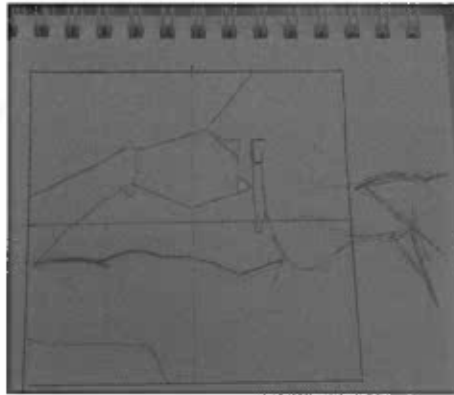


We also discussed the big questions: What size? Shape? Color? Value? Giving thought to all of these basic drawing reminders allow for a better composition and in turn, a better painting. Kit also included tips on layering paint from back to front of canvas, dark to light, as discussed on Day 1. It was starting to sink in a bit more as I relaxed into our schedule and class. These traditional approaches were suddenly freeing and feeling like a path to follow.

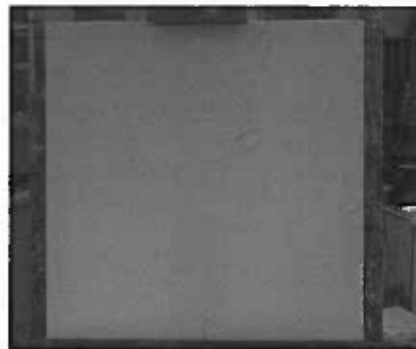
We looked at canvas choices and options as well as looking through reference photos and deciding on our plan for our second painting. I had intended to use one of my own photos, something familiar and "safe." Once again, trying to minimize risk. This felt important and I didn't want to mess it up by overshooting my own abilities and skills. But oddly enough, none of what I had brought felt right. Kit offered her stockpile of reference photos. And suddenly, there it was! But, oh no, it wasn't some lovely pastoral scene or a picture of a flower. Rather, it was a raw, vibrant photo of an African woman, shiny with sweat and oil. Not your average portrait, considering that I had not even considered a portrait. This was way out of my comfort zone, such a huge RISK. What was I thinking? Then it hit me; if not now, when would I ever be in a situation to take such a chance to try something new? Suddenly, I didn't care about whether it was too hard, too strange, too difficult. I had to do this, I wanted to do this. I would give it what I had and see what I was capable of doing. A certain amount of risk suddenly made it seem exciting.



I began my layout sketch, using the scaling techniques, creating a four-square template and folding the reference photo into a four-square as well.



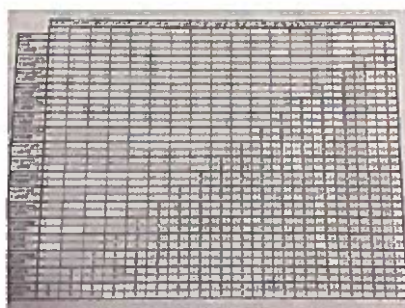
The sketch easily translated on the 20x20 square canvas I chose for the painting. I was on my way and genuinely excited.



The class decided to lunch together and start using the time to discuss whatever we couldn't fit during our class hours. These art talks were one of my favorite parts of the week!! I loved getting to know Kit, Colleen, Nicoletta, Donna and Nelson on a personal level. Everyone was so open and friendly and interested in what we were doing. We discussed framing and options for less expensive types of framing, all of which were news to me.

The afternoon continued with a discussion of color theory, including the basics of the color wheel, relationships with colors and reference book options. This review was helpful. Kit also suggested, as possible homework, to each create a color mixing chart of paint colors and color

combinations from our palette choices. She also created the template for each of us to use and fill in with our samples.



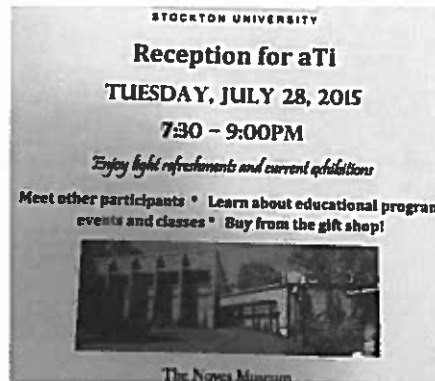
We finished the last few hours filling in our canvas sketches with color. The time went much to quickly. I found myself tapping into a deeper part of myself, aware that as I allowed myself to take a risk, my painting was taking shape naturally and freely. Using Kit's suggestions of painting back to front, light to dark, I began to fill in the shapes of the painting.



We wrapped up painting promptly at 5pm to attend the evening's festivities at the Noyes Museum of Art. The museum opened its doors for us from 7:30-9pm for a reception and refreshments. While checking out the art at the museum, some lively discussions began about how artists set themselves apart and make their art stand out. It was a lovely evening and it gave the participants a chance to meet each other as well as meet the coordinators of this aTi



program in a fun and relaxed setting. Everyone connected with this program was excited,



supportive and enthusiastic.

### Day 3: " Every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures." Henry Ward Beecher

As the third day began with an early start to work on the color-mixing chart, I realized how in the past, I had let self-doubt make painting feel like such a risky venture. It seemed a very opportune time to let go of this old pattern of thinking and see what was possible from this point forward. With this in mind, the class began with a discussion of trite, traditional, and innovative images for reference materials. (Trite =overused. Traditional=classic. Innovative=advanced, original.) It took me less than a minute to mentally go through previous chosen images, for this program as well as other times, and realize much of what I had chosen was trite or overused. As Kit was speaking, I could feel the shift in perception of looking at images of my own as well as other artists. In a way, it was like seeing things for the first time. My lens for viewing art would now be completely different. How would it change my paintings? What a great comparison to teach children in art and all subject areas! We were given an assignment to take a word (or image) and give an example of trite, traditional and innovative. It

was certainly compelling and the ideas were already swirling as I jotted them down to ponder at a later time.

The class was given time to continue on our previous day's paintings until lunch. I viewed my painting, using my new lens of awareness for subject matter, and decided I had chosen well, it felt like an innovative choice. I decided to push the envelope a bit and use some of the skills I had learned so far and began to experiment with wax to thicken the paint for the background and to use the palette knife for application.

Our lunch talk that day centered around keeping an inventory of paintings as a body of work is created. This inventory can help with organization with gallery shows and sales of future pieces, which a few of my classmates and Kit had experienced. Contracts and the wording of contracts were also discussed. The business side of selling art suddenly seemed extensive. However, the common sense approaches discussed at the lunch table made it seem doable.

My favorite part of that day proved to also be the most challenging. We entered into the afternoon session with a tutorial by Kit on skin tones, mixing paints for skin tones, lights and darks for faces. She made it look so easy! I was especially interested since my choice for a painting was a photograph of a woman's face. I figured I would look over my notes that evening and experiment a little on my own and test out all the strategies Kit showed at my leisure. I was in for a surprise because Kit had scheduled a model, Dave, the studio manager, to come in and sit for us immediately following the tutorial. And not only were we to create a painting of skin tone values but we were to be timed! Twelve or so minutes, followed by a brief break for the model and then twelve more minutes. Twenty-four minutes?! How was I going to manage that? I was pretty sure it would take me twelve minutes just to mix the paint!!! It didn't seem likely I could complete the assignment and panic set in. I almost put down my brush. But Kit walked by my easel, calm and giving words of encouragement to the class. I thought again, if not now, when would I get this opportunity to try this again, to be the student? With that thought, I began to paint.

The time flew by and at the end of the time I was pleasantly surprised and pleased by what I accomplished. I had done more than I had thought possible and the challenge of the assignment had helped me break through some of my barriers. And most surprisingly, I had had fun! I loved it! Who knew?! The timing of the experience was pivotal for this assignment and it certainly would be the start of some future lesson, on some level, for my students. The satisfaction at the end was noticeable. Although the piece was not finished, I was happy with it.



Day 4:  
quickenings,  
you into

"There is a life  
that is  
action, and



force, an energy, a  
translated through  
because there is only

one of you in all time, this experience is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost." Martha Graham

Thursday, July 30th began again, early, with determination to complete as much of the color-mixing chart as possible. I loved the quiet of the studio at that early hour before class began to allow myself to slowly gather my thoughts and feel the paintbrush in my hand. It had a very meditative quality, almost yoga-like in its intention to just be in that moment. I planned on finding ways to start my future mornings with such a grounded feeling.

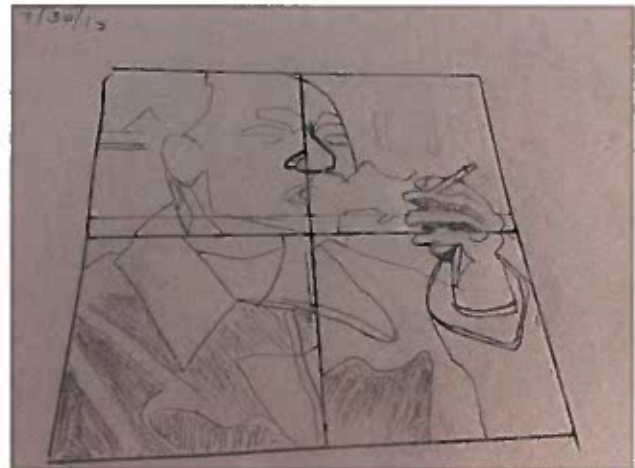
Kit had a fabulous, creative warm-up that added to the experience. On this day, we chose two slips of paper from two separate bags, one holding words that were subjects and the other holding words that were action or verbs. We then, privately and timed, created four sketches representing both words in some pictorial way. When time was up, we shared our pictures and guesses to see if we could figure out our classmates words. This activity showed how first ideas are not always the best or most innovative. With a little more thought, one idea can grow into something amazing. The activity was very insightful. Once again, the timing of



the activity forced me to really focus and it became like a creative game. I bookmarked this idea as another I could introduce to my students in the future.



Fully awake now, I was ready to start my next painting. My previous day's painting needed to dry a bit in some spots, so this was the perfect time to begin again. The choice was much easier than before,



incorporating all I had learned so far that week helped in the decision-making process. I was drawn to a photo from my own stockpile of images that I hadn't paid attention to before. It was another picture of a person, a man this time. He was a perfect contrast of light and dark

and his hand placement with the addition of a cigarette and smoke seemed innovative and challenging. I was ready!

Our lunch discussion ranged from mosaic to other possible aTi grants. It was very interesting to hear a classmate tell about his experiences with Kit as an artist in residence. I was able to meet some of the administration involved in the project and the energy and excitement was clearly felt. The mission to bring creativity and art into the classroom while anchoring into standards and curriculum seemed a natural enough goal, certainly innovative!

After lunch we had a glazing tutorial which I found very useful for both of my paintings. Taking the minimal amounts of paint and mixing with liquin or even wax allowed for softer, more subtle color options. It would also be a good option for both of my pieces due to the need for subtle shading around the faces and body.



I stayed later to put in the background of the now dry first painting of the woman. I wanted a look that was more industrial, thicker, unusual. I used the palette knife as I planned as well



as wax as the medium in the paint. I laid several colors down on the canvas at once and dragged the knife through the surface to incorporate the paint. I was happy with the results.

**Day 5: "What art offers is a space-a certain breathing room for the spirit." John Updike**

Our opening exercise for our last full day of class was about abstraction. It seemed to have a different definition among all of the members of the class. My own interpretation of abstraction was that it was a way to change an image. Jackson Pollack is a good example of an artist who used abstraction. Kit offered up many different ideas for exercises to explore an idea through abstraction. I intend to try using a few, such as painting with only the largest brush, closing my eyes, and making my own tool to apply paint. I think children would benefit from these types of activities, especially making their own art tools! This would be a great STEAM project for this year.

We then presented out homework, trite vs traditional vs innovative. I had a great time looking up images for my topic: candy. I started with trite pictures, round, colorful shapes to candy canes and "eye candy" examples. I was impressed with all of my classmates ideas and creativity. Donna had amazing containers, Nicoletta had impressive Italian still life paintings and

Colleen had innovative tattoos that were mesmerizing. However, Nelson's large viewfinders of landscapes were my favorite. Each had a sketch on the outside, hinting the object inside. Students would find this type of assignment very exciting!



The rest of the morning became an intense push to finish as much as possible. I continued to put in darks and lights as well as glazes, switching back and forth between paintings. Kit encouraged me to connect my paintings with a commonality in the background so I used a similar method of applying thicker paint, mixed with wax, and applied with the palette knife to the second painting. It connected both pieces in a subtle and creative way. My only real issue was realizing my week had passed all too quickly and I would miss my time in the studio!

***Last Day: Your work is to discover your world and then with all your heart give yourself to it."***

### **Buddha**

Saturday, August 2nd began as calmly as all the other days. I came in early to work on the color-mixing chart. We gathered one last time to put closure on our week's work. We discussed different ways to describe paintings, both positive and negative. For example, vibrant, bright and depth were positive attributes while gloomy, muddy and underdeveloped were less desirable. Being aware of this type of terminology would be helpful in a self critique.

Each of us took a turn working with Kit to place and prepare for our presentation. It was a busy morning as we prepared our work and what each of us would share for the presentation.



The final presentations were a fantastic event. All of the six classes, from drawing, printmaking and oil painting to photography, kinetic sculpture and poetry had a chance to shine. Such talent!!

I enjoyed my turn to present, showing color-mixing chart. It was very exciting to see our week's work showcased on the wall of our studio. I was amazed at what we had accomplished in just one week!

I also really enjoyed seeing the incredible, innovative work by all of the participants in the other classes. Everyone did an amazing job and I was truly impressed with all of the effort and talent. Itz was inspiring!!

The organizers for the aTi program are fantastic and have my sincerest gratitude. I feel very fortunate to have met so many wonderful people. Kit Sailer, my instructor, will go down in my



personal history as one of the best teachers I have ever known. She is a master teacher and I hope to continue my education of oil painting with her in the future.

I look forward to continuing with my oil paintings and taking all I have learned back into the classroom for my students this year. It feels fortuitous to be a teacher who gets to be a student for a week and I am thankful for all the reminders this week gave me. I am very grateful to my district and supervisors who were so supportive and who were truly excited for me to have this opportunity and experience. I look forward to taking all the gifts this week has afforded me and seeing where it will go. Thank you, aTi!

