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Lyme Academy of Fine Arts: An Atelier Making its Mark



Above: The Wier Studio at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts. Photo: Caryn B. Davis.

Lyme Academy of Fine Arts (LAFA), after completing a reorganization of its programs, has just finished its first trimester with a flourish. Enrollment for core students is capped for the coming fall, and most of them, who wrapped up their classes recently, have received permission to continue working in their studios throughout the summer months.

The re-emergence of LAFA, after severing ties with the University of New Haven and taking a hiatus, has proved timely and fortuitous. Its current co-directors and new staff are all serious working artists committed to the atelier's original mission, and its student body is already demonstrating it is eager for the rigor of this place.

The institution was founded in 1976 by the sculptor Elisabeth Gordon Chandler, who saw the need to offer students a structured and sequential approach to drawing, painting, and sculpture.

LAFA's new co-directors, Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gulpide, have embraced Chandler's original ideas, and integrated them with their already extensive experience in establishing the U.S. branch of The Florence Academy of Art in Jersey City, N.J., and teaching at the New York Academy of Art.

"Amaya and I feel that there has always been a demand for skills-based learning, particularly in the arts; however, throughout the 20th century, institutions that traditionally focused on skill and figuration followed cultural trends, and moved away from technique, becoming more conceptually focused," Sokol commented recently.

"That transition meant that students seeking a traditional foundation in drawing, painting, and sculpture had to seek out their education either in private studios of working artists, or in smaller academies. As awareness has grown, so has the popularity of schools, like the Lyme Academy, where one can still choose to learn the grammar of art before going on to make poetry," he added.

Sokol is acclaimed for his meticulously crafted and psychologically astute portraits, Gulpide for her layered and painterly drawings. Their works have been exhibited widely throughout this country and abroad. They and



other core faculty members juggle their teaching with their art practices.

During their first year, in the institution's north-lit studios, students have progressed in a sequential, systematic approach first taught in the Renaissance academies of Europe and, later, at Paris's École des Beaux-Arts. Next year, students will build upon their observational and analytical skills and apply these methodologies to painting.

Why has the atelier movement taken hold throughout the country? For one thing, tuition costs may clearly be a factor. For another, according to the Arts Renewal Center (ARC), the foremost and only vetting service for representational art schools, "It is a well-known fact that few, if any, of the college and university

art departments of today can provide the kind of genuine art instruction sought by ever-growing numbers of students and aspiring young artists. Even with ideal conditions, ideal faculty, adequate studio space including natural north light, large class sizes pose formidable obstacles to the kind of individual attention committed art students need," ARC asserts.

Ateliers like LAFA are committed to ensuring that their motivated students will leave with burnished skills and paying jobs.

Core classes have been running from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. five days a week over the current school year, Mora Rowe, LAFA's executive director reported recently. This winter found Rowe putting the finishing touches on the institution's art supply store on the day of our meeting: it has been designed to serve as a place of inspiration as well as a repository for the tools of the trade. Quarterly exhibitions in LAFA's galleries, like this winter's championing of the work of Lennart Anderson, and ongoing lectures and workshops, will further conversations with the community at large. And the institution's intimate class sizes are well-suited for in-studio demonstrations and individualized critiques. Students who choose to pursue their studies at the Academy past the second year may stay for a third and fourth year of advanced study, Rowe added.

Kimberly Monson, LAFA's director of continuing education, an award-winning sculptor, teacher as well as a LAFA graduate, took time recently to speak about the institution's part-time programming. This summer many young artists will explore LAFA's approach in one-week sessions staggered throughout the summer.

Above, from left: A Core student working in their private studio. Courtesy of Lyme Academy, de Gerenday's Fine Art Materials and Curiosities Store at the Academy. Photo: Caryn B. Davis.

Below: Co-Artistic Directors, Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gurrpide. Courtesy of Lyme Academy.

"I just love the fact that we have a core program that you apply to, and then we have a curricular community program that you can enroll in. I love that people can come here and find the quality is the same. The philosophy is the same."

"At the heart of this mission is the desire to make top instruction accessible to people drawn to art at various times and levels. Mastering skills can be pursued at a pace that matches a person's place in life—by beginning with workshops," she said.

Behind the scenes, Monson reports, the pace last year was frenetic, yet suddenly the results were clear:

"There were students observing models on their model stands, lessons were happening, and there were pencil shavings on the floor. The tape marks were back where everybody was marking their spots; the still life setups were in the room and the clamp lights were in. And we [thought]... We did this. This is happening."

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Lyme Academy of Fine Arts
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