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Bringing Classical Realism to Children, An Interview with Emilio Longo

How were you introduced to skill-based art training?

My initial exposure to skill-based visual arts training was in 2011. I was a first-year art student in a technical and further education (TAFE) program and quickly learnt of the lack of instruction available, in regards to traditional drawing, painting and sculpture. I started to carry out research via the internet and slowly, I discovered several skill-based art schools abroad, which had lineage to pre-twentieth century visual arts pedagogy.

The work of students' who attended these schools had a lasting impact on me. Further research was carried out, which helped develop my knowledge of the curriculum, principles, methods and ideologies of pre-twentieth century art. In time, I was fortunate enough to make contact with a number of Australian artists who had trained in skill-based art schools. Through sharing their stories, they helped me understand that there are limited opportunities to receive skill-based training in Australia and this ultimately helped me come to terms with the instruction I was receiving in my TAFE program. At this time, I recall feeling a desire to do something about the status of skill-based visual arts training in Australia.

Have you been classically trained?

I have not received any classical training in a skill-based art school (academy or atelier). The formal training I have received is; Diploma of Visual Art, Bachelor of Fine Art (Visual Art) and Master of Teaching (Secondary Art). The institutions I attended were governed by postmodern and contemporary art ideologies that supported a "conceptual" approach to art making. However, I am appreciative of my time in these institutions, as they helped me develop the capacity to think critically, question standards and provided me with a good understanding of post-twentieth century art history.

In regards to classical training; I am an autodidact for the most part. The majority of my knowledge has been gained through museums, books, articles, blogs, videos and reaching out to fellow art students, artists and artist-teachers.

What inspired you to propose such a seemingly radical idea?

As mentioned previously—early on in my training, I felt a desire to do something about the status of skill-based visual arts training in Australia. Having gone through art school myself, I knew that the doctrine which most universities uphold is antithetical to skill-based training. Therefore, I began attempting to teach myself the principles of academic draughtsmanship. Through my efforts, a rudimentary skill-based drawing curriculum was conceived. This was my initial effort to address the lack of skill-based training in Australia.

When I reached the final assessment for my Master's, I chose to complete it via research. I felt as though my training to this point, had given me enough experience to begin highlighting some of the shortcomings of contemporary visual arts education. I also noticed that the Victorian Visual Arts Curriculum F-10 (which all primary and secondary schools abide by) is nonspecific and fails to stipulate an academic drawing and aesthetics curriculum. I saw this as an opportunity to advocate for a National academic drawing and aesthetics curriculum. Essentially, this involved creating a skill-based drawing curriculum which outlines the principles that should be addressed for teaching academic drawing. However, the method that is used to address the principles is up to the art teacher. The aesthetics curriculum is based on familiarising students with pre-twentieth century artworks and ideologies, as a strategy to help them penetrate the meaning behind early works of art.

How was this idea received by your advisers?

My supervisor (Dr. Kathryn Coleman) was supportive of my research question and provided me with constructive feedback, throughout the course of writing my thesis. She very much believed in the Victorian Visual Arts Curriculum and supported the fact that it is based on the "child as artist model". In fact, I recall her humorously saying; "the post-structuralists are going to hate you!". She appreciated the idea of an ordered and structured historical drawing curriculum and acknowledged the merit in teaching the high ideals of the past, through the aesthetics curriculum. Her main concerns were regarding how such a curriculum could be presented in the 2017 Victorian classroom, and she wanted to know more about how the techniques gained are transferable to life skills and career choices.

Other discussions I had with lecturers acknowledged the complexities of presenting such a curriculum in our contemporary era. I was told to be cautious and not conflate the study of aesthetics and art history. Some lecturers believed that contemporary art does have a criteria in which it can be assessed, however, they were quick to lament the fact that the study of art history had been removed from some university art programs. Another lecturer encouraged me to question how the youth of today will relate to the rigour of the drawing curriculum and the ideas proposed in the aesthetics curriculum. All feedback was accepted, respectfully.

Have you found any secondary school attempting to include skill-based art education?

I have yet to come across skill-based art training being implemented by any secondary, or primary school. Although, I have heard that some schools offer drawing as a stand-alone subject and others that actually set drawing tests for students. In saying this, observational drawing is generally taught in all schools that offer Art, or Visual Communication Design as a subject. However, in my experiences the instruction students receive is quite fragmented; usually stemming from right brain drawing exercises proposed by Betty Edwards and blind contour exercises created by Kimon Nicolaïdes (which I believe are both valid).

Do you think it can be taught in conjunction with standard contemporary fine arts training?

This is a challenging question. I think the theory behind skill-based art training and contemporary art training are somewhat opposed. On the one hand, skill-based training is essentially concerned with developing students' dexterity, procedural fluency and self-efficacy in creating fine drawings, paintings and sculptures from life. Ultimately, students are carrying out investigations into the processes of visual perception—they are learning to see.

On the other hand, the concepts of “training” and being a “student” in contemporary art education becomes problematic. Training in this sense, has more to do with the digital realm; learning to use Adobe Creative Suite and such. It involves training students to exhibit their work, through becoming acquainted with writing proposals, applying for grants and approaching galleries. Students are essentially encouraged to “unlearn” and become artists from day one. Anything in regards to technical instruction is usually considered to be “assumed knowledge”. Also, the idea of “seeing” in contemporary art education is interpreted metaphorically; students are encouraged to become “decoders” of the philosophy and meaning behind contemporary visual stimuli—to deconstruct it and then re-present it in a way which is theory ridden, or autonomous—similar to the way a semiotician works.

Only after we learn of the differences between the two forms of training, can we come to a conclusion as to whether they can coexist in one setting. I do not believe this is possible without creating some friction. This reason, along with time and assessment is why I proposed for skill-based training to be addressed through non-formal learning in secondary schools.

Many find the two ideologies to be at odds, do you?

Throughout my own experiences, I do find the two ideologies to be at odds. There is the lingering issue of skill-based training being far too conservative and passé and therefore, contradicting the contemporary art doctrine of progress. This in and of itself has created somewhat of a raging cultural war; the traditionalists vs the progressives, if you will.

The references given to pre-twentieth century art history through contemporary art, usually takes the form of appropriation and “art world” representational art relies heavily on the use of photographic references. Many artists who attend skill-based art schools have come from university art programs; some completing their degree, others leaving before graduating. Today, an art student is faced with a decision; should they attend a university art program, or a skill-based art school? Ultimately, making this decision forces the student to choose one over the other.

The temperament of art students attending university art schools is also different to those attending skill-based art schools. The former seems to be more alternative and experimental, the latter being traditionalists who are more inclined to give precedence to Classicism as opposed to Modernism. Students attending skill-based art schools have the advantage of being surrounded by others with beliefs aligned with their own, therefore they will learn through social constructivism. If this same student was attending a university art school, they would be in the one percent of students who are interested in traditional art and consequently, they would be forced to constantly defend themselves.

We sincerely thank Mr. Longo for sharing his work with us and look forward to a future where skill-based art training is available to children just as English, Math, and Music are.

To read Mr. Longo’s full thesis visit:

<https://skillbasedart.weebly.com/skill-based-drawing-and-aesthetics-in-secondary-visual-arts-education.html>