

Turning Students Into Artists at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

Students, alumni, and faculty of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts say the school is distinctive for its harmonious blend of fundamental skills and atmosphere of freedom—the ideal combination for an artist. **BY TINA TAMMARO**

Students learn more than just how to physically make art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia.

“Our school encourages each individual to really think like an artist as opposed to just becoming a good art student,” says figure painter and Academy instructor Renée Foulks. This approach, coupled with the school’s traditional emphasis on the fundamentals, makes it fairly unusual. Indeed, everyone that is affiliated with this institution, whether alumnus, current student, or instructor, raves about its uniqueness.

No one is told there is one way to teach something or learn something; there is a lot of freedom for both students and teachers. Students make art every day. The teachers are here to push each

student to another level, to give guidance and feedback but not to judge. The Academy offers all the things that a young artist needs: constant access to the model, lots of healthy competition, a private studio during the last two years of study, a world-class museum just down the hall, and an extraordinary faculty known for their commitment to students and for the stature and quality of their own artistic work. What the Pennsylvania Academy offers is a place to become an artist.

This Philadelphia institution is an American treasure and was recognized as such by President George W. Bush when the Academy received the 2005 National Medal of Arts. Founded in 1805, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts is America’s oldest continually operating school of fine arts and museum. Although many assume that this institution has a

Justin Undressing
by Njideka Akunyili, 2007,
charcoal, 64 x 40. All artwork
this article courtesy Pennsylvania
Academy of the Fine Arts,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.





OPPOSITE PAGE**Female Figure**

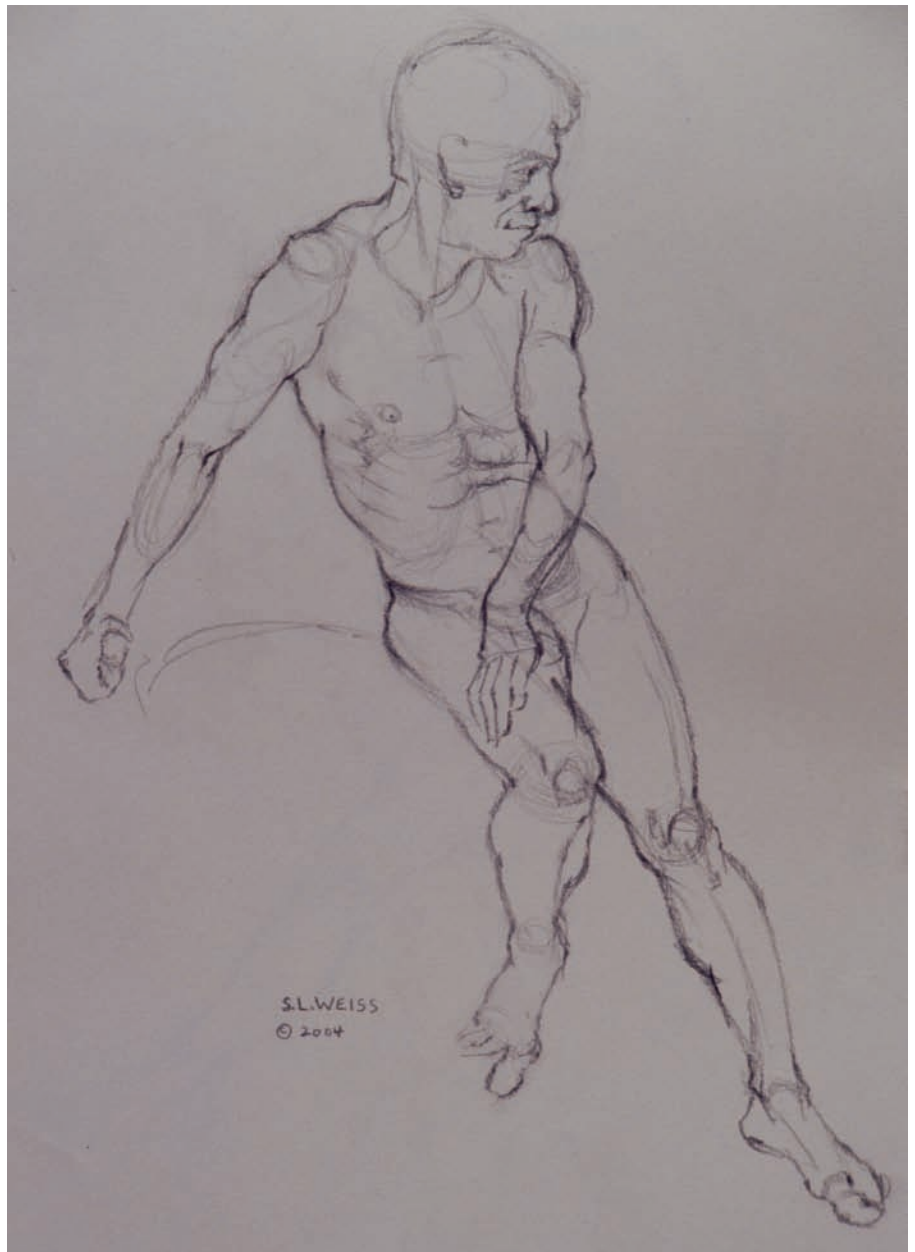
by Al Gury, 2001,
charcoal and pastel on
toned paper, 24 x 18.

RIGHT**20-Minute Sketch**

by Steven Weiss, 2004,
charcoal, 17 x 11.
Collection the artist.

dogmatic approach to art, the professors and students say this is not true. “The Academy has never subscribed to the idea that there is one way of seeing,” explains Al Gury, the chairman of the painting department. “But vigorous training is essential. The strength of the Academy rests on drawing, which is stressed in all four majors.” The school is one of the few institutions in the United States to have never stopped using the human body as the center of its instruction. It has always felt that focusing only on technique or the newest trend will not give a student the background needed to become an accomplished artist or innovator. There are always standards, and there will always be a group of artists who try to overthrow those standards. But some things remain constant. If we look to the great artists of the past and present, whether it’s Rembrandt, Van Gogh, De Kooning, or Ellsworth Kelly, we see that all have developed their perceptual skills and rich sense of design through continuous drawing and a solid grasp of the art that preceded them. The artistic training at the Pennsylvania Academy follows this model, beginning in a traditional manner but offering modern and post-modern ideas as the students are ready for them.

“The Academy has always been an exciting combination,” continues Gury. “On the one hand it retains traditional curriculum and academic principles. But it has always been very responsive to and involved in the contemporary art world. The Academy has always embraced, along with its traditional basis, the strong important trends that have come about since the mid-19th century, and the faculty has reflected this. Thomas Eakins was an important innovator and set new standards as a professor at the Academy in the 1870s. Then Daniel



Garber, an American Impressionist, and Arthur B. Carles, one of America’s great painterly modern artists, brought to the students a love of Impressionism and Modernist abstract issues.” The current faculty ranges from classical painters, sculptors, and printmakers to artists exploring contemporary art in all media. Essentially, the Academy has always felt it necessary to bring important trends of artistic thought to its students—but not in a trendy way. Njideka Akunyili, a student from Nigeria, points out, “If you come to the school and walk around or come to the end-of-the-year exhibition of students’ work, you will see that the students have excellent training and have the freedom to go in any direction with it.”

About two-thirds of the first-year students are straight out of high school, and the other third span a broad range of ages and backgrounds. Akunyili, for example, has an undergraduate

degree in art from Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania. “I could have continued at Swarthmore and earned my master of arts degree, but I could not have gotten the training I received here anywhere else,” she says. “With this much practice each day from live models, I have improved so quickly. I could have just started painting in my own studio and spent the next 10 years working hard to learn what the teachers here will teach me in two years. There is such a variety in what the instructors offer, so in the end I have so much.” The teachers

are impressed with the students as well. Foulks has taught at other schools, “but the intensity of the student body—the burning desire they have—really blew me away when I first began teaching here,” she says.

The atmosphere of freedom is strengthened by the structure of a well-honed program and proactive teaching. “We have an intense studio immersion the first two years that is very skill oriented,” says Gury. Then in the third and fourth years, the students move into their own studios. They begin

moving toward building a body of work through upper-level classes and the close mentoring of faculty critics and guest artists.” In the first year, the students concentrate on working from the figure and are given an introduction to each area of focus at the school: drawing, painting, sculpture, and printmaking. Art-history classes are an important part of their first-year studies. Doron Langberg, who is a second-year student from Israel, described the first-year as being large in scope, and the second year one in which students choose their area of focus. But Langberg points out, “Drawing is a refined way of saying something, and even in the third and fourth year you have to take a drawing elective. It is the basis of everything.” And although the students will study landscape, still life, and perspective, the figure is the foundation of most of the studio work, even in a basic color course in which students explore a vast array of palettes, from a traditional earth palette to triads and on to impressionist or pointillist approaches. Foulks loves that the students concentrate so much on the human body. “The figure is so loaded with meaning that you never get bored,” she explains. “We don’t frown on anything. If a student begins to explore conceptual work or multimedia, we find artists who will help them push their work along.”

The students may draw from a cast collection that includes more than 125 plaster statues collected by the Academy since it opened, most of them cast directly from the antiquities in the 19th century. First-year students take cast-drawing classes that teach



Student Drawing

by Joseph Lozano, 2006, pastel, 30 x 24.



Bridesmaid

by Michael Grimald, 2011, charcoal, chalk, and enamel on paper, 40 x 30.





LEFT
A student draws from a cast in the Academy's collection.

BELOW
This hall houses some of the 125 plaster casts owned by the Academy.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Student Cast
Drawing of Laocoon
pastel, 24 x 18.



them time-honored drawing methods. Advanced students often return to cast drawing for practice and to keep them grounded while they explore other complex aesthetic issues. The collection is housed in the studios on the first floor of the Academy's historic landmark building and includes casts of the *Venus de Milo*, marble reliefs from the Parthenon, Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* and a huge replica of *David* (formidable, at 3,000 pounds and 17½ feet tall), the *Belvedere Torso*, and *Winged Victory* (given to the Academy by the French government when the school first opened.) The students draw from them but also render them in oil and sculpt from them in wax and clay.

The Academy's studios were designed for painting and sculpting the nude and for portraiture. In the 1870s, the firm of Frank Furness and George Hewitt designed the Academy building at Broad and Cherry streets. They received expert counsel in planning these rooms from the faculty, including Eakins. "Their advice ensured that the studios were outfitted with large, high north-facing skylights," says Patrick Connors, an instructor at the Pennsylvania Academy. "This enables students to properly investigate the fall of light on the life model and in the cast halls. In illusionist art, light is the true subject matter, hence, its depiction is crucial." Many of the first-year classes take place in these grand and beautiful rooms.

The museum is conveniently located in the same building. "I go to the museum during class breaks and lunch breaks to get inspired," says Akunyili. "I go when I have a problem and I get stuck. I can look at how the

RIGHT

Mark

by Peter van Dyck, 2006,
charcoal, 24 x 18.

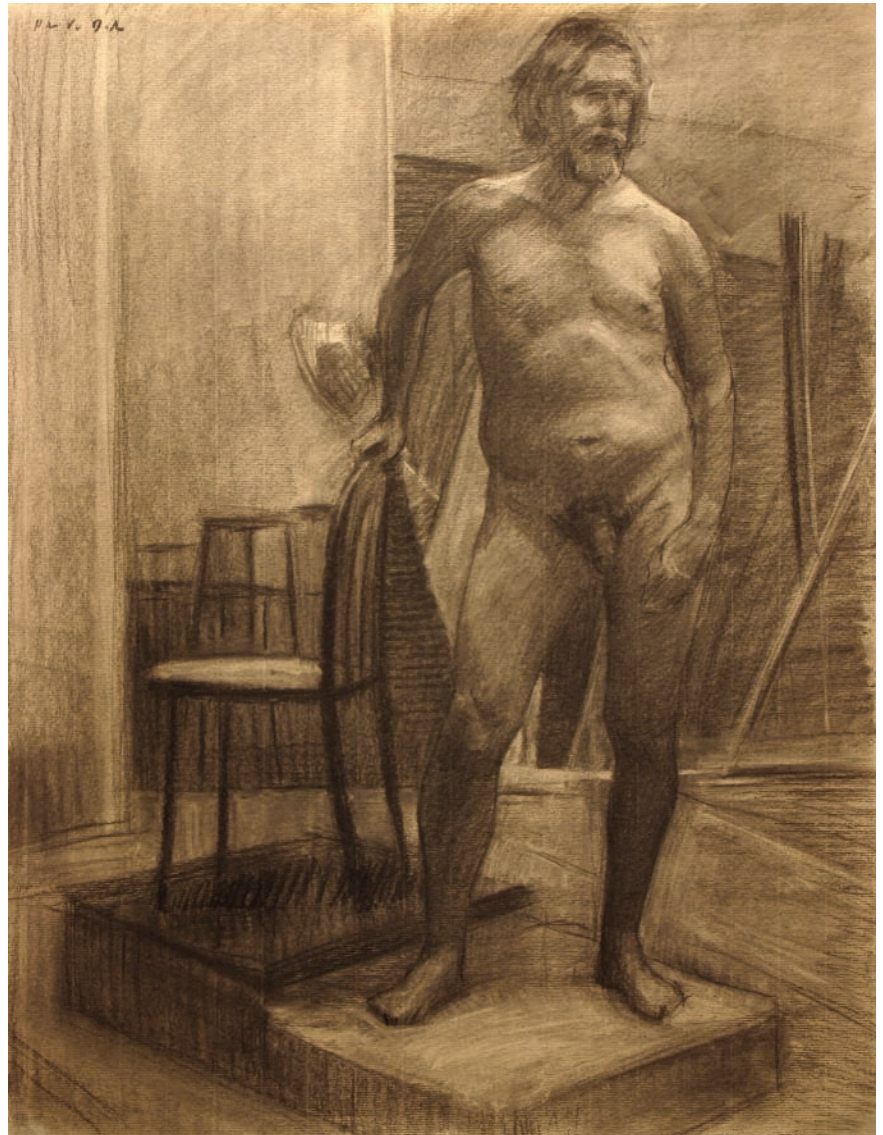
OPPOSITE PAGE

Student Drawing

by Cheryl Smith, 2007,
charcoal, 24 x 18.

great painters of the past solved problems.” Many of the instructors help the students realize the importance of being a school and museum combined. “I talk to them about how important a resource the library and museum is,” says Foulks, “and I encourage them to look through the vaults, to see the paintings and drawings that are not currently on display.” Sketchbooks and drawings from such artists as Cecilia Beaux and Thomas Eakins are available for the students to study on a daily basis. “The museum registrar will lay out paintings or drawings for them to look at and copy,” Gury says. “The whole institution encourages the students to do this.”

“The artists are bombarded by ideas they receive in their 200-level classes,” says Foulks. “They get a solid year of basics and then are introduced to so much more in the second year. Their first year focuses on skill work, depth and perspective, working with the figure in a number of classes, and doing some landscape, interior, and still life work as well.” In 200-level drawing courses there is no prescribed approach. Each instructor tries to do two things that are vital for students to become more advanced artists: solidify all the academic drawing skills they worked on in the first year, and expand this technical knowledge to ideas about expression and content. The students pick from an array of instructors who focus their classes in slightly different ways. For example, Scott Noel says he tries to present a kind of digest encompassing a range of approaches to perception, a way of looking at Western draftsmanship from the 15th century to the 19th century from sculptural drawing by artists such as Pontormo and Raphael to the painterly draftsmanship of Velázquez and Manet. “I try to teach them to think through perceptual problems by discussing various historical



perspectives, such as open form versus closed form. Open form explores light and shadow, how light picks out a form in space, whereas closed form isolates the volume of the body from the ground in a sculptural way.” Jan Baltzell likes to focus on how to “create space and not be totally object-oriented,” she describes. “I have a posed model about a third of the time. Sometimes we’re even outside—we might go to Reading Market, where there is a farmer’s market, and the students are invited to begin adding color notations to their drawings.”

The Academy also offers an intensive yearlong anatomy course for second-year students. It is a required course for all drawing majors, taught by anatomist and illustrator Roberto Osti. As former instructor Steve Weiss explains, “All the students have an Introduction to Anatomy lecture during the first year. But anatomy is not enough; they must learn to apply it, to understand proportions. It helps them simplify and not be overwhelmed as they begin studying human form. There is also an upper-class dissection program at



Hahnemann University Hospital. Only some students are chosen for that. It gives them a real appreciation for the beauty and grandeur of the body, which is mechanically very elegant.

“Studying the model is a way to study more complex forms,” Weiss continues. “In still life the forms are mostly symmetrical, and you don’t deal much with foreshortening. In figure work the body is both symmetrical and asymmetrical, and foreshortening is constantly in play. I studied with Robert Beverly Hale, and he really knew how to look at Old Master drawings. He talked about how they wrestled with putting three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface, how they made the figure pop off the page, and how artists think.”

Another unique drawing course available at the Pennsylvania Academy is Animal Drawing, taught by Peter van Dyck. The class focuses on fundamental structures and basic animal anatomy. However, animals are not known for sitting still, so it also teaches students to handle movement and make rapid aesthetic and drawing decisions. Instructors try

More on the Academy

Although the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts offers bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees, painting department chairman Al Gury says that some students choose the Academy’s certificate program instead. “Many who come here already have degrees from other schools, or they don’t want degrees,” he says. “They want to come here and concentrate just on art making and not have any academics except art history.” But PAFA students have options. Many of them elect to participate in the coordinated program with the University of Pennsylvania, allowing them to work toward a B.F.A. from the university if they wish. Any student can apply for this any time after their first year. Many wait until they are done at the Academy to do their work at the university since the course work at the Academy is demanding and takes up most of each day, particularly in the first two years. The State of Pennsylvania has also granted approval for the school to offer bachelor’s degrees. This program allows students to take their academic classes at the Philadelphia facilities from a newly established liberal-arts department.

Admission to the Academy programs is competitive. In addition to an academic review of candidates’ credentials, the admissions committee examines each applicant’s portfolio to ensure a high level of drawing skills and creativity. “We need to see that you are not a beginner,” says Gury. “The portfolio can include paintings or work in other media, but it is the drawings we are concerned with. Do they have a basic grasp of perspective, depth, and tonality? We assume that when the students get here they are going to go to a whole new level, but we want them to be beyond the beginner stage when they arrive.” Members of the staff are willing to look at drawings before students apply and give pointers on how to improve their entrance portfolio.

There is no age limit. Some students are just out of high school and others are 50 years old. The Academy is looking for artists who have some aptitude and an intense desire to work hard and get better.

A few years ago the Academy expanded into a new facility, while still using the historical building for many drawing classes—in particular cast-drawing classes in the magnificent rooms that are filled with casts of ancient sculptures.

For more information, visit www.pafa.org.

to bring in as many different animals as possible, even going so far as bringing horses up the freight elevator for students to work from. Having the chance to draw exotic animals, predatory birds, and reptiles—studying hair patterns, hooves, noses, and claws—makes students think about proportions, how bones and forms fit together, and how drawing these elements are different from working with human figures. The history of animals in art—a major feature in all cultural traditions—is another focus of the class.

During the third and fourth year, each student is assigned his or her own studio. This is not a tiny cubicle but a room with a door that closes—a place to be quiet and to create art. “I think they timed it right,” says Akunyili. “I am in the last semester of my second year, and I’m beginning to feel the itch to get into the studio and do my own work. After two years of studying from the model I have been given enough tools to do something with it. When I finished my undergraduate work at another school I didn’t feel confident to start working on my own. After two years here I am ready to get to work.”

In the last two years of study students are required to work with at least three critics each semester. They can choose from a lengthy list of critics, who are very eclectic in their approaches as artists. This year the list of 16 critics includes well-known artists such as Sydney Goodman and Randall Exon. Each critic visits the student’s studio at least once a month. “The mentoring between students and critics is essential to their growth,” says Al Gury. “They are not picked just because of their reputation. All the critics are chosen for their ability to be good critics. They have to be good mentors and good at challenging and guiding the students in a one-on-one setting.”

“It is difficult in the third year to go from the more structured program of the first two years to having a lot of time in your studio,” Baltzell adds. “How do you become an artist in the studio? This is what the critics address first—how to make that transition.” The critics also help the students prepare for a big student exhibition at the end of each April. This tradition is more than 100 years old. During this annual event, outstanding artists receive awards for foreign and domestic travel, tuition remission, and cash prizes.

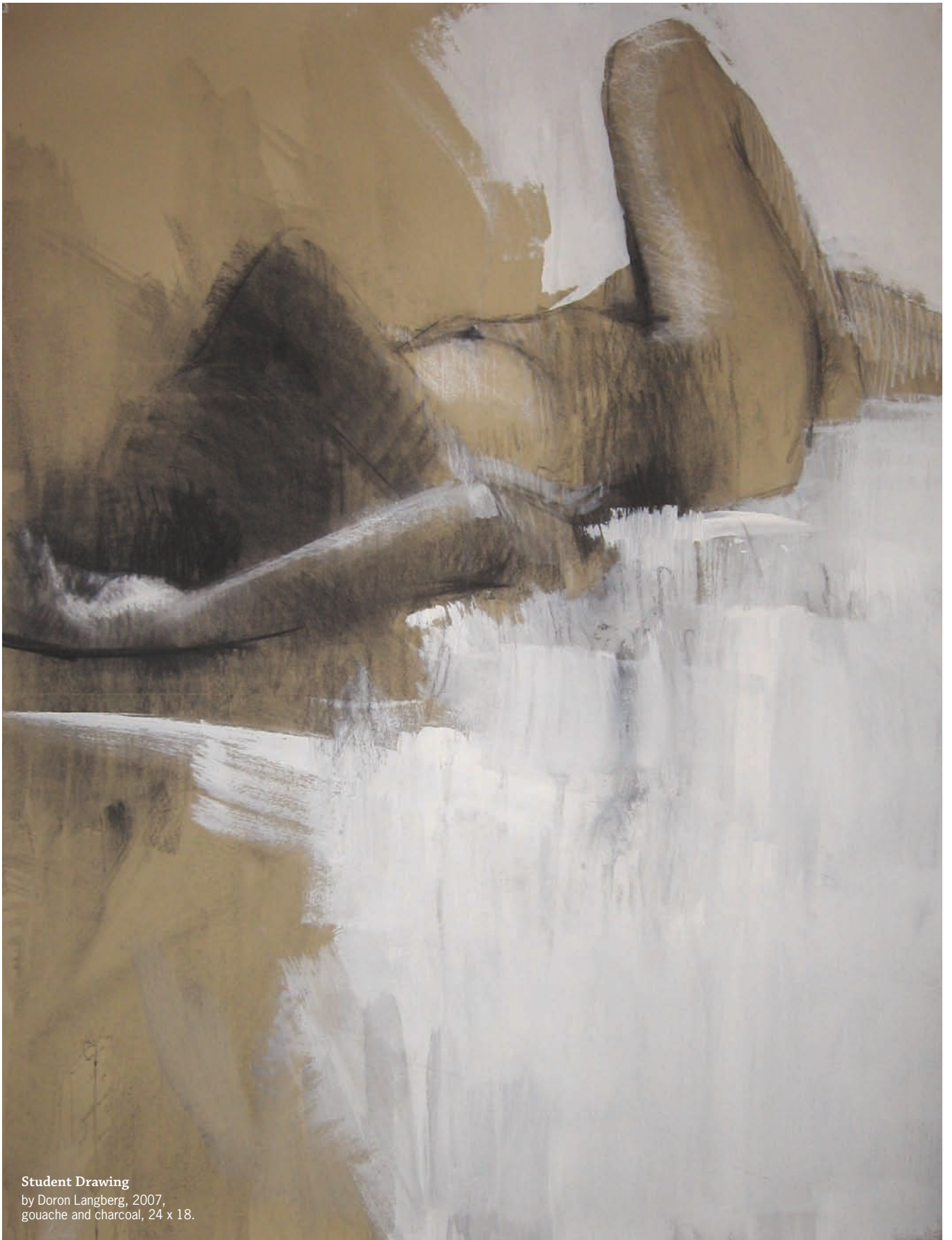
And if all this is not enough, each week visiting critics are also available for additional critiques. Foulks finds the visiting-artist program to be vital to the students. “I am dizzyed by the amount of

ideas that flow through this school,” she says. “It’s not possible to get to all of the offerings of our visiting artists even if you wanted to.” Comments Langberg, “At every step you are exposed to different people. Some instructors only work with students in certain years, so each year you have fresh eyes on your work.” In such an environment and with such a wide range of stimuli from the faculty, the visiting artists, and the rich museum and gallery culture of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts continues to be a treasure that has inspired numerous artists for more than 200 years. ■

Tina Tammaro is an oil painter specializing in figurative work. She has been a lecturer and writer on painting and art history for more than 20 years. She teaches oil painting in her studio in Cincinnati.



Testaccio
by Michael Grimaldi,
2007, graphite on
paper, 27 x 19.



Student Drawing
by Doron Langberg, 2007,
gouache and charcoal, 24 x 18.