

## Line Drive



### **Professor/Artist Advances Drawing on Campus and Across the Country**

**By Bridget Conn**

**Photo by Matt Rose**

Virtually no child is a stranger to a box of crayons, so drawing is a logical first step on an artist's path. High schools and colleges, where drawing is frequently a basic requirement before taking other art classes, embrace this familiarity.

While many artists use drawing for simple sketching and move on to pursue other media, Tamie Beldue is an avid supporter of drawing as a medium in its own right, as seen both through her art and her work as Assistant Professor of Art at UNC Asheville.

"I rarely paint," states Beldue. "I am more interested in the mark-making of drawing than the tonality of painting." She creates portraits in graphite pencil, working with both family members and strangers. The works' skill and level of realism are enviable to most. And although at their core, they are drawings, they owe a debt to photography and sculptural materials in intriguing ways that make them truly her own.

"I'm not a photographer — my lighting setups are a little ridiculous,"

she says, laughing. But the first step of her process involves placing the sitter so she can capture her facial features and expressions through photography. These moments are in no way posed, but rather come about through conversations. She may sit with her model for hours simply talking, getting her at ease so her personality and unique gestures shine through long enough to capture by camera.

Choosing from dozens of photos, Beldue begins the process of creating a portrait that is a combination of these, rather than working from any one single photograph. "Portraiture is about more than math and drawing plumb lines for me. It's about trying to capture a living, breathing person." The result may not be a face looking straight at the viewer, but perhaps a head fully turned, focusing on a ponytail or even an article of clothing.

Beldue continues to direct the viewer's eye by harnessing another tool — encaustic. Experiencing a resurgence of popularity, this ancient form of painting that borders on sculpture consists of beeswax mixed with damar resin, combined with colored pigment. In this case, however, she adds no pigment, and its creamy white translucency is used as a surface coating for the drawings, creating an ethereal haze over parts of the image.

Beldue began using encaustic when she first moved to Asheville in 2008. "It was admittedly a little scary at first to take a drawing that I had labored over for weeks and cover it in wax," she says. The process became a crucial step in her "Tangible Identities" series, most recently on view at The Artery in the River Arts District last fall. The body of work focuses on what details become identifying factors of someone's personality: the way a person wears her hair, how she walks, or a look in her eyes. Layers of encaustic obscure details in a dreamy fog, playing off of the otherworldly blank backgrounds.

Other features remain perfectly clear, sometimes as a reflection of Beldue's level of knowledge of that person. While her husband's portrait is largely unobstructed by wax, on another image, a woman, every feature is blurred out except a single earring.

Her dedication to drawing is reflected in her professorial accomplishments, as well. She established Drawing as a separate concentration from Painting in the UNCA Art Department (the two are lumped together in most academic programs). She also founded *Drawing Discourse*, a national juried exhibition to showcase the evolution and variety of drawing media in the contemporary art world.

Gaining popularity in just four years, the current exhibit, on view at UNCA's Tucker Cooke Gallery through early February, has drawn more than 1000 submissions nationwide. The show brings Asheville acclaim and exposes students and the public to dozens of innovative artists.

While the duties of academia may seem like a burden to some working artists, Beldue wholeheartedly embraces the lifestyle. Even before she received her MFA in 2005, she taught for many years in the Columbus College of Art & Design in Ohio. "I loved teaching from the start — I knew early on I wanted to do it. Verbalizing the steps of creativity to students helps my own creative process as well."

She also speaks of her freedom to create work that is always meaningful to her. "I don't really do commissions — I want my work to be for me, and not have to worry about whether I am pleasing a client. Teaching allows me to make artwork on a level that is thoroughly satisfying."

This is not to say that making art happens easily for her. As a wife, the mother of a six-year-old son, a full-time professor, and an artist who's constantly challenging herself with technical mastery, the balance is precarious.

Regardless, drawing is crucial to Beldue, who has moved into a new experimental format of breaking her portraits into various planes, a nod to the photographic start to her process. Artmaking always finds its place — "it simply has to happen."

***Tamiebeldue.com***



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