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SCHOOL OF ART PROFESSOR DEBORAH REMINGTON

ARTIST, COOPER PROFESSOR

The Impact of the Teaching Artist: Remembering Deborah Remington,

Professor of Painting and Drawing, The Cooper Union School of Art.

By Claudia Giordano Lasky, A'76

One of the most critical challenges of a fine arts education is figuring out what to do with it. In this respect one might say that..."many are called, but few are chosen"...that is, for career success.

Beyond graduate school is a long and complicated road that may or may not lead to such "success", depending on one's definition of a successful life in the fine arts. Teaching, a noble profession, may or may not be a true calling for many gifted and talented fine artists.

Having had the opportunity to be taught and guided by many excellent teaching artists, and to continually learn, explore, and revisit my own fine arts education – as both a practitioner of "life long learning" and purveyor of such – my fine arts experience was profoundly centered on the relationship between being both the fine arts student and the fine arts teacher.

For over 30 years Deborah Remington was a fine arts professor with the majority of her tenure spent teaching at The Cooper Union School of Art. The impact of her teaching in terms of art making and thinking critically informed not only my painting and drawing practice but perhaps, even more significantly, how I eventually developed into a teacher of fine arts to young people.

Having belatedly stumbled upon a notice of a recent exhibition of Professor Remington's work, I was inspired to revisit my former professor's legacy and, in retrospect of over 40 years since my initial contact with her at Cooper in the 1970's – when she was a new painting professor and I was a young, developing painting student – reflected upon her impact as both an artist and a teacher. My curiosity tweaked, I contacted and was invited to meet with the curator of her Trust for a piece for the Alumni newsletter.



Deborah Remington and four of the founders of the 6 Gallery, San Francisco, 1955. Photograph Courtesy of the Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts

The Deborah Williams Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts

Around about the time, in the mid 1980's, that Margaret Mathews-Berenson decided to make the leap from the relatively secure field of publishing to her first love – fine art – as a curator and art advisor – she crossed paths with a contemporary painter and kindred spirit at a Soho art gallery opening. That seminal friendship, lasting over decades and many more art openings, was the foundation for what is now the Deborah Williams Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts, and Margaret Mathews-Berenson is the caretaker-curator of the artistic legacy of Cooper Union's very own Professor of Painting and Drawing, the late Deborah Remington.

I was graciously invited to meet with Ms. Berenson at her beautiful and art-filled residence on the upper east side after contacting her via the Trust's website; what provoked this contact was, oddly, the "Approval Matrix" page of the August 10-23, 2015 issue of *New York Magazine*. At the upper left corner of 'Highbrow Brilliant', regarding the closing of the Chelsea gallery Wallspace, I found this: "...but at least the thoughtful final show, of **Deborah Remington**, was a critical success."

The voice inside my head

Having just missed what turned out to be quite a critically and very positively noticed exhibition <http://www.artcritical.com/2015/08/24/john-mendelsohn-on-deborah-remington/> of a carefully curated twenty-year chunk of Professor Remington's work, I was bereft but determined to learn more, because, well...Professor Remington looms large in my youthful art student psyche. I can still hear the tone and timbre of her voice in my head, the strong, consistent, and tough critiques that she tended to her young developing painting students, and how she was able to open a window and show you where to go – which was where you needed to go – with an unwavering nudge. Professor Remington was no-nonsense and in her own unflinching manner, consistently raised the bar. She pretty much pulled no punches. No long-winded personal stories of past escapades, but sharing her process and technique, yes, and generous in that. Giving you tools to use, yep, telling you what you should think about your work, nope. You had to do that work.

In conversation with Ms. Berenson I discover that was also Deborah's *modus operandi* for any visitor to HER studio. She expected the viewer to bring something to her work, not the other way around which made for some “prickly” situations as Ms. Berenson recalled. That prickliness was a big part of her personality which engendered, at least to my mind, a huge amount of respect. You did not take Professor Remington's good graces for granted. I was always excited as well as nervous for our weekly “crits.” What remains strong in my memory are the one-to-one sessions, where Professor Remington pushed you a little further, made you confront your habits, and challenged your assumptions about what you were doing. Making you a better artist, a better thinker, a better creator. Good tools for living too.

An artist's life

Throughout her life Deborah Remington made many wise choices to support her career and her lifestyle as a working painter. She invested in property, taking residence and eventually ownership of her light-filled floor-through Soho loft on lower West Broadway which was her home and studio, and which she built from scratch back in the 1960's, as well as acquiring a stone-foundation country home in Chester, PA where she spent the warm months every year. An avid horticulturalist, she proudly raised coffee trees in the loft, and gardened at the country house. She lived the ideal artist's life, teaching at Cooper Union from 1973-1997, and then later at NYU. She printed colored lithographs at the Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque, NM. Her youthful connection to Japan was one of the things she shared with her painting students at Cooper, and her technique of using sumi brush and ink as an “exercise” remains, for me, a “go-to” impulse whenever it's time to...loosen up and get drawing...

She did not marry or have children; in later life a cousin – Craig Remington – found her through an ancestry site. He became her heir and trustee of her estate, and is one of the four members of the Trust's Advisory Board, along with Ms. Berenson, Cheri Smith, an artist and her former studio assistant and, in later life, her caretaker, and Phyllis Landau, the attorney for the Trust.

An Oral History Project has been underway and includes videos of people from many areas of the artist's life and career, including students, curators and dealers, friends, and colleagues.

Her memorial was held at Cooper Union with the support of School of Art Professors Margaret Morton and Dore Ashton in 2010.

The artist's legacy

In later years Professor Remington experienced health issues and was producing drawings that dealt with body/skeletal imagery, which have never been shown publicly – yet. There are also more of her huge paintings that have not been shown to the public and are waiting to be seen. Exhibits that are upcoming are listed in the Trust newsletter which can be found on the [website](#).

Deborah Remington saved *everything*, including reams of her student artwork! Her personal archive of her correspondence and documents of her exhibitions, is now at the Special Library for Women's Studies, Special Collections and University Archives of Rutgers University Libraries. A selection of her hand-colored lithographs, produced in her student days, are now in the collections of several museums.

There are approximately 1200 works in the Trust's collection, and a publication is currently being considered. Ms. Remington worked up to 2009, and her last major exhibition was in 2001. The Trust is supported by the late artist's estate, and each year makes an annual donation to a non-profit institution.

A star is reborn, history reclaimed

Jay Gorney, who curated the latest exhibit held at the (now closed) Wallspace Gallery in Chelsea, and who was director of the Pat Hamilton Gallery which represented Ms. Remington, was among the last to visit her studio before her passing.

What is most exciting is the renewed interest in the work of a “semi-forgotten” painter. Seen with new eyes her hard-edged, cerebral, and “mechanistic” imagery is attracting a new audience who can relate to her works from a 21st century visual mindset. At the same time museums such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, Wooster Art Museum and San Antonio Museum of Art, are recognizing her historical importance – with more major museums in the pipeline – as an artist of her time, one emerging from Abstract Expressionism, Minimalist, Hard Edge, and “California Luminosity” influences, developing her own unique, paradoxical, hard-to-define symbolic style.

Often mentioned in reference to feminist and woman's art of the 1970's, Deborah Remington as much as she was a trailblazer, did not identify as either a feminist or a “woman” artist. She rejected the idea of being “ghettoized” and refused the idea that she should be seen as anything other than a painter on par with any other painter irrespective of gender. While her imagery might evoke some connection to certain female centric motifs, the fact is her iconography is directly related to her interest in heraldry, specifically the heraldic shield that is embedded with family history, the meaning of this imagery and how identity is seen and represented. In this respect one might be able to make a connection with some of the tenets of feminist art but not in the “obvious” sense.

What the future holds

Dealers and collectors are expressing interest, and her work has increased in value. There is interest in her archives. Can a monograph be in the works, I asked? Yes, there has been serious interest expressed in that future project as well.

And, the Trust is expanding – in addition to making short edited clips of the Oral History Project available on the website, an expanded version will be made available to educational institutions.

A new website, social media on Instagram and Facebook, more exhibitions, and a chronology, are all in the works. Hopefully we will connect Cooper Alumni with the Trust in future events and projects involving the Cooper community.

So what exactly happens to an artist's legacy? As she demonstrated in both her life and in her art, Professor Deborah Remington was both innovative and methodical. The slowly applied, thin layers of paint technique – which resulted in the luminous depth and glow of color of her paintings – requiring absolute discipline – and drying time! – for her multiple works in progress – (painters will know what this means) – showed her capacity for patience and planning. As she worked so she lived. We are fortunate that her legacy lives on under the equally careful and forward-thinking watch of the Trust, as well as the very personal and faithful curatorship of her dear friend Margaret Mathews-Berenson.

Deborah Williams Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts

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Margaret Mathews-Berenson is an independent curator, art educator and advisor with special expertise in contemporary art and photography. She founded her own business in 1984 following a career in museum work (at the Philadelphia Art Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art) and in book publishing. Since then, she has advised collectors and curated numerous exhibitions for museums, galleries and non-profit institutions throughout the United States and abroad. Formerly the director of The Drawing Society and editor-in-chief of *Drawing Magazine*, she is an accomplished writer and has contributed numerous articles to a variety of art journals. An enthusiastic art educator, she has taught at New York University, the International Center of Photography, Christie's and the 92nd Street Y. Through her tour company, Art Today, she offers specialized lectures, tours and international travel opportunities. She currently serves as curator and manager of the Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts, which is dedicated to advancing the career and supporting the legacy of Ms. Remington.