

TEACHING Karen Gergely

Graceland has given me the opportunity and autonomy to grow as an educator and administrator. I think I've always drawn energy from and been fairly confident of my ability to engage students in the classroom. I'm able to deliver rigorous curriculum while cultivating a true sense of honest and supportive community in the studio. But the past five years has been a time of radical adjustment as we all had to pivot to meet the demands of the pandemic, and at Graceland, navigate through and rise from a demanding academic restructuring and loss of faculty lines and programs. All these events have given me opportunity to really reflect on how we spend time together in the studio classroom how to make our moments together more meaningful. We've redefined our curriculum to streamline offerings for maximum student gain.

On a foundational level, I revised our introductory courses, rewrote the curriculum, and made major adjustments in the way in what I offer content and how it is delivered. When I meet with perspective students, I emphasize that form, craft, and concept are taught in concert with each other in our program, which is not always the norm in foundational level courses at other institutions. I promise them that their work will not look like their instructors' work, but rather an elevated version of the work they plan. I hold true to these claims and start this process vigorously in our foundational courses. I recently transformed the boilerplate "2D Design" course into "Making and Meaning," and "3D Design" to "Surface, Space, and Time." These courses are in their second year running and have already yielded more complex solutions to projects both formally and conceptually and are making a difference in the work our sophomores are making after taking the first iteration of the course last year.

I am a big advocate for inviting visiting artists to interact with our students. In the past few years, this has primarily been through zoom and gallery exhibitions and artist talks on campus. These visits range from artists and professionals talking about their work, their process to becoming a full-time artist, business models, plans, publishing, and even how to do their taxes as independent artists. The art world is large and small at the same time, and I'm lucky to be able to trade services with friends to do this and fairly compensate artists to interact with our students. Looking forward to taking our students back to the cities for more one on one interactions with artists in their studios as travel becomes more accessible.

For about six years, I implemented the high impact practice of Reacting to the Past (RTTP) into my Renaissance to Modern Art History class. In this practice, students are assigned roles based on and informed by classic texts. We play a game called Art in Paris: 1889, which explores Impressionism and the World's Fair of 1889. Students become Monet, Van Gogh, Mary Cassatt, Renoir, Degas, and Seurat (among others) for three weeks to fight for freedom and liberation from the French Academy! During the game, class sessions are run entirely by students, while the instructor guides, advises, and grades the speeches and papers students have given and written throughout the game. Because the students took to the game so willingly, I started to integrate more of these games. One student wrote in their comments that "the game was so incredible for me that I did extra art history," which I consider a win. My students and I worked on writing two additional games, one on controversial art in the 90's and the other on the

photographer Sally Mann. I'm really proud of this work and hope to find a way to utilize more of these games in the future.

As a mandated reduction to credit hours in our majors, I made decision to offer two comprehensive theme-based art history courses rather than the three chronological offerings we had. One course focuses innovation and politics in art, and the other empathy and justice, each working through two-week units on a topic and includes works from the past through now. As most art history textbooks are chronological and focus on the Western cannon, this restructure opened the door for a wider range of artists from all over the world to be studied and has proven to connect students with the "why" behind why we study art history. It has proven to be more relevant; students have been able to make stronger connections between the work and their lives, and we are able to focus more on diversity, equity, and inclusion. When artists we study look like our students, they make deeper connections, and more growth can happen. Additionally, I've traded memorization tests for essays, papers, and art making in these courses. I've seen a larger investment and deeper critical thinking due to this switch. As the course grow and evolve, I think these changes will yield more complex critical thinking for our majors and non-majors and will hopefully be something that stays with them and instils a pattern of life-long learning. I really love teaching these courses and have encouraging responses from students so far.

In studio courses like Painting and Printmaking, I train students to understand the ins and outs of the medium and process so well that by the time they are making work they really care about, we can spend time digging into concept and problem-solving, rather than struggling with method. I want my students to know the process so undeniably, and fail at it so many times, that when things go wrong, they know how to course correct themselves. This is an empowering move for students as they host silkscreen workshops for their peers and organize murals on campus without me by their side. We also partner with other departments. In 2019, Melinda Leoce's percussion ensemble preformed "Space Junk," an 8-minute work for a concert and my drawing class created an animation to be played during the work. A similar collaboration with the 2023 percussion ensemble had the drawing class create a drawing score for the musicians to play in their concert in the round.

As my teaching philosophy notes, I believe learning happens best when it occurs in a supportive community. I work hard to cultivate a safe and bold space where trust and truth are centered, and real and authentic growth can happen. My courses rely on deep discussions. I ask my students to question assumptions and reflect on their own artistic practice and societal impact. I utilize a flipped classroom model where our time together is one of reciprocal learning. I am an encourager and an enforcer of studio rules and deadlines. I challenge students to take big risks, fail big, prepare for problems that don't exist yet, and develop solutions for how artists will help save the world.