

Art in Process: In the Studio with Tom Stanley

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PHOTOS BY TOM STANLEY



TOM IN HIS FIRST FLOOR STUDIO AT WINTHROP

Imagine it's your first year of college at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. You're undecided about a major, though you're passionate about creating art. You walk through the arts building, looking for inspiration, hoping there's a gallery, but expecting to see the usual classrooms, lecture halls, and offices. What you don't expect to see is the chair of the department at work on his latest series of paintings right there in the first floor hallway.

The artist is Tom Stanley, chair of the Department of Fine Arts at Winthrop since 2007, having joined the faculty in 1990. He works across various media, including painting, drawing, and large scale public art installations that are often created in collaboration with sculptor and fellow Winthrop professor Shaun Cassidy. They are both currently working on public art projects for CATS, with Tom's focus on the LYNX Blue Line Extension – Tom Hunter Station near UNCC. Tom worked with students from the Hidden Valley neighborhood in Charlotte to incorporate their images and ideas of "home" into design elements for the station.

It's fitting that Tom's art studio is close to the entrance of Winthrop's stately brick McLaurin Hall, while his faculty office is tucked away at the back of the top floor. Tom wants students and visitors alike to understand that art is not some lofty concept that belongs only between quotation marks, on gallery walls, or in erudite conversation. Art is work. Art is making and doing and sharing; and, as a profession, art is as rigorous and rewarding an endeavor as any other.

“When students are starting out, they often want to talk about the why behind what they create,” he says. “While that’s important, I try to teach them that authenticity also comes in the making of the art. Focus on the process first, then the philosophy.”

Tom’s geometric style uses very few colors – mostly black, white, grey and the occasional accent of red or blue. His repeated use of sharp angles and meticulous lines reflects his interest in mechanical drawing and his early days working in a machine shop with his father. Some of his work, such as the paintings in his “Floating” series, involves the use of a bold, dominant image that draws in the eye, only to become subordinate to the intricate lines, shapes or symbols that surround it. He often uses the sgraffito technique, which is a process of scraping away paint to reveal previously painted layers below.





“Room 116” (l) and “Room 112” (r) from the “Modern Motel” series. Each are 30” x 22” acrylic on 300# watercolor paper.



TOM’S CURRENT WORK IN PROGRESS, AN UNFINISHED 12-PANEL ACRYLIC ON CANVAS PIECE THAT HE OFTEN WORKS ON IN THE HALLWAY OUTSIDE HIS STUDIO.

Tom works on several pieces in a series at a time, bringing his works in progress to the hallway walls and hanging them in different combinations. This sharing of his process instructs students, while generating useful dialogue with viewers at an early stage. It also allows him to experiment with color and composition, as the shifting position of each piece or panel sparks its own kind of conversation. Tom has always been drawn to this way of arranging and rearranging images, creating what he calls a “free floating visual narrative” that can be used to elicit a variety of emotional responses.

“I start with a small idea and see where it goes,” he says. “This appeals to me more than focusing on one big concept. My work is not political. It grows organically, it evolves.”

Whether his work is created by brushstroke or is inked by hand, he is careful to work on one section at a time. In some areas, he applies and then burnishes tape to ensure that colors don’t travel. In other areas, he allows for more spontaneity in the composition. He likes this tension between the hard edges of the prescribed mark and the softer, unpredictable strokes that he places next to them. His recent “Modern Motel” series, acrylic on 300# watercolor paper, illustrates this process.



UNTITLED PAINTING, 2012, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 47 X 47 INCHES

The sources of Tom's artistic inspiration are varied, coming from personal or collective memory, from iconic images he encounters, or from a desire to explore a particular problem. Perhaps the most influential artists in Tom's life were two men he considered personal friends, Edmund Lewandowski and Clyde Eugene "Gene" Merritt.

Although Lewandowski, a former department chair at Winthrop, had retired by the time Tom arrived at the university, he became Tom's mentor. Lewandowski was well known for his contribution to the "precisionist movement" in art, which involves the exploration of American industrialism and its iconography, and the absence of the human form.

Merriitt was a self-taught artist from Rock Hill, whom Tom met after watching him sit in a local diner creating line art drawings of politicians and pop culture figures. Tom was so intrigued by Gene's humility, talent and dedication to his art, that he worked to bring his work into galleries in the Southeast and in Paris. Gene passed away in the spring of 2015, a loss that Tom considers an emotional "marker," something that will no doubt show up in subsequent work.

Tom has always been intrigued by the work of the "Outsider," or the unknown folk artist, and continues to look for opportunities to share the work of these artists in the gallery setting. He connects this to growing up in the boarding house his mother operated in Concord, NC. There, he not only met people from the South, but from all over the world. He says these hard working people – blue collar workers, artists and artisans – helped him discover beauty and significance in the most ordinary places and situations.

He reminds his students that the potential for art exists all around them, and that they should keep an open mind about their creative vision for a project. He tells them that if they are creating, they are learning.

"I know that when I'm doing something, I do it because I have to," he says. "If it goes in the wrong direction, I feel it and change course. That's better than living with something that doesn't feel right. This is the risk of making art."

And, he points out, the emotional response created in the viewer is what makes the risk worthwhile: "There are commonalities to be found in how we see things and what we believe. In art, there is a human quality that we can all relate to on some level. I'm trying to tap into that."

By bringing together images that are both familiar and foreign, concrete and nuanced, Tom Stanley is able to step back and let these connections occur to each of us in our own way.

Tom Stanley is the chair of the Department of Fine Arts at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. Born in Fort Hood, TX and raised in Concord, NC, Stanley received a BA in art from Sacred Heart College; and an MA in applied art history and MFA in painting from the University of South Carolina. He has served on the faculty of several colleges and in curatorial roles at galleries throughout the South. He shows his work extensively throughout the southern US and Europe and is currently at work on a new series of abstract paintings for future shows at the [Hampton III Gallery](#) outside Greenville, SC, and [if Art Gallery](#) in Columbia, SC. For an exhibition history and details on select paintings and public art, visit Stanley's [faculty page](#) and his page on the [if Art Gallery blog](#).