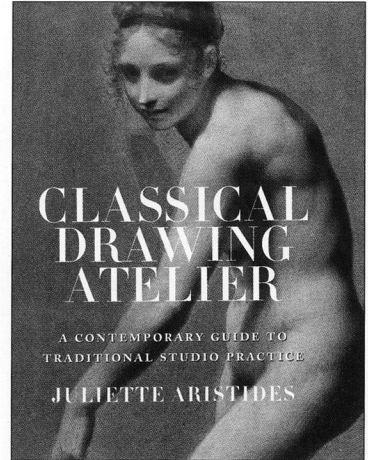


Classical Drawing Atelier: A Contemporary Guide to Traditional Studio Practice by Juliette Aristides. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2006. 144 pages. Over 100 illustrations in color. ISBN-13: 978-0-8230-0657-1. \$29.95 hardback

Review by Gail Leggio

This is a beautifully produced book, juxtaposing historical and contemporary works in a way that bolsters the author's claim that the program she advocates is rooted in "timeless principles." Color reproductions are crucial to a drawing book, even when a majority of the drawings are monochromatic. In a painting the architecture of the composition can be grasped through even a rudimentary illustration, but drawings are the record of an artist's intimate touch. We lose their immediacy and subtlety if we are denied gradations in tone, the color of the paper or prepared ground, the warmth or coolness of the restrained palette. Juliette Aristides, who studied at the National Academy of Design, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and several private ateliers, is currently the instructor of the Aristides Classical Atelier at the Gage Academy in Seattle, Washington. Her book has a didactic purpose, providing a rationale for the revival of the nineteenth-century atelier model, in which students spend a period of years with a master artist. She follows the traditional progression from copying historical paintings and casts of classical sculpture, through working from live models. The book ends with a series of step-by-step lessons for drawing a sphere, copying an old master (starting with a faintly Cubist blocking out of forms) in both line-for-line and more interpretive versions, rendering a cast of a classical sculpture, simplifying the planes of the human figure and creating a portrait. There is an element of both manual and manifesto in this layout. But, throughout the book, it is the evidence of the eye that sells the argument, beginning with the dustjacket. On the front is *Standing Female Nude* (c. 1810) by a master of academic drawing, Pierre-Paul Prud'hon; on the back is one of Aristides' own drawings, *Sutherland 3: Resting* (2005), a radically foreshortened view of a muscular bald man, showing how traditional skills can be applied to an edgy contemporary subject.

The book is divided into four sections: history, principles, subjects and theory into practice. The text is straightforward and matter-of-fact. Aristides makes her argument clearly and economically, but she lacks the eloquence of



a John Ruskin or even the contemporary writer John Berger. This is a report from the front. “The ideas presented in this book,” she writes, “reflect the way that I was trained and the way I train my students.” Like many of those working in the classical realist camp, she rejects the mid-twentieth-century institutionalizing of a modernist pedagogy, pointing out that the great avant-garde artists of the early modernist era benefited from the same teaching regime—and often the same teachers—as their more academic contemporaries. A striking full-page illustration of Edgar Degas’s *Study for the Semiramis*, in gouache with watercolor highlights on luminous blue paper, supports this point beautifully. The teaching of drawing, as a skill and a discipline, was certainly out of favor in mainstream arts institutions in the latter half of the twentieth century, although recently there has been some soul-searching about the inspiration-first, skills-later (if at all) model. (See “Art Schools: A Group Crit,” *Art in America*, May 2007.) Aristides is a true believer in the effectiveness of the old system, with a progression from drawing, including a good deal of copying, to painting in grisaille, to painting in color. Like a poet who chooses to work within the constraints of the sonnet form, she finds the atelier course anything but stifling: “Mastering the basic principles of art does not limit expression, distinctiveness, or personal freedom in our work. Rather, it strengthens these qualities by giving them structure.”

Classical Drawing Atelier should figure as an important document in the history of the contemporary atelier movement, but it doesn’t stake out a great deal of new ground, philosophically or art historically. There are cursory introductions to design principles, focusing on the Pythagorean idea of the Golden Ratio and the Fibonacci sequence in natural growth patterns. The text comes alive, however, when Aristides analyzes the linear underpinnings of images, selected from a refreshing variety of sources. Examples include an Ichirakutei Eisui woodblock print (1798), a Mannerist angel (c. 1527–28) by Pontormo and an elaborate Rubens drawing, *Study for the Fall of the Damned* (c. 1614–18). Noting the way the Baroque master anchors his cascade of bodies along a pattern of diagonals, she sums up: “although the falling figures might be in chaos, the work of art is not.” This is the kind of astute observation that makes joining the worlds of the working artist and the art historian seem like a very sensible idea. With studio arts students cut off from the legacy of the past and fledgling art historians immersed in the arcana of theory and influence studies, there has been too little dialogue, for the last half century, about what Aristides calls the “building blocks of art.” For centuries, artists copied previous masters, not simply out of reverence for their elders, but to learn how they manipulated forms. It’s good to see this perennial resource being tapped once again.

Much of the text has the whiff of the working studio, with basic advice about the process from the initial blocking of forms, an intuitive and relatively abstract exercise, to measuring. “Once the block is complete,” she writes, “the

artist can begin to undergird this subjective rendering with the structure of objectivity through the process of measuring.” Aristides is careful to assure readers that the apparently mechanical methods of measuring—she cites three common kinds, comparative, sight-size and relational—are not designed to produce rigidly correct drawings. The goal is to avoid “unintentional proportional errors.” Measuring does not guarantee some sort of metaphysical harmony. It’s an artist’s tool, training the eye “to ensure that the only distortions in a drawing” are those the maker “deliberately created.” A century ago, this point would have been unnecessary to make, but it is worth articulating. Whenever styles or skills are revived, a new self-consciousness becomes part of the way the legacy is framed for a new audience. Aristides is not completely uncritical of contemporary realism, although she participates in the broad representational-renaissance movement. Her tone is gentle, but there is an implicit caution in some of her observations: “In order to regain some of the language of picture making achieved by past masters, we have to strike a balance between the desire to achieve a breathtaking realism and the willingness to subordinate single objects into larger abstract patterns for the sake of the whole image.”

The text of *Classical Drawing Atelier*—a mix of basic principles, practical atelier tips and arts scene commentary—could be encompassed in a paperback manual. But this book becomes truly persuasive through the beauty of its illustrations. The most compelling of these are by masters from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century; cast copies and figure studies from Beaux-Arts ateliers are obviously still part of that continuous tradition. Yet some of the contemporary work goes beyond well-intentioned effort. Jacob Collins, Michael Hoppe, Randolph Melick, Michael Grimaldi and Ellen Eagle all look strong, and Steven Assael’s *Ulysses*—with its haunting blue and taupe coloring over graphite—is the real thing. Ranking the effectiveness of these images tells us something about where we’ve been and how far we have to go.

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