The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Phyllis Shafer: Figure Studies*, an exhibition by artist Phyllis Shafer, at the Western Nevada College Bristlecone Gallery from January 10 – April 20, 2022. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.*

– drawing
– sensual
– intellectual

Phyllis Shafer's Figure Studies

The exhibition showcases figure studies – drawing and paintings – made by Phyllis Shafer while she was teaching figure drawing and portraiture at Lake Tahoe Community College. They weren't intended for exhibition, but for in-class demonstration – all the same, they offer a wealth of pleasures.

They also form a record of encounters – between artist and model, and also between the students in the room, observing that interchange (ornamented with notations, stressing one point or another in the margins). Shafer and I had a wide-ranging conversation about the exhibition, which forms the basis for this essay. We talked about her teaching philosophy, her classroom approach, and the way these exercises connect with the work she's known for – her exuberant, expressive paintings of the Western landscape.

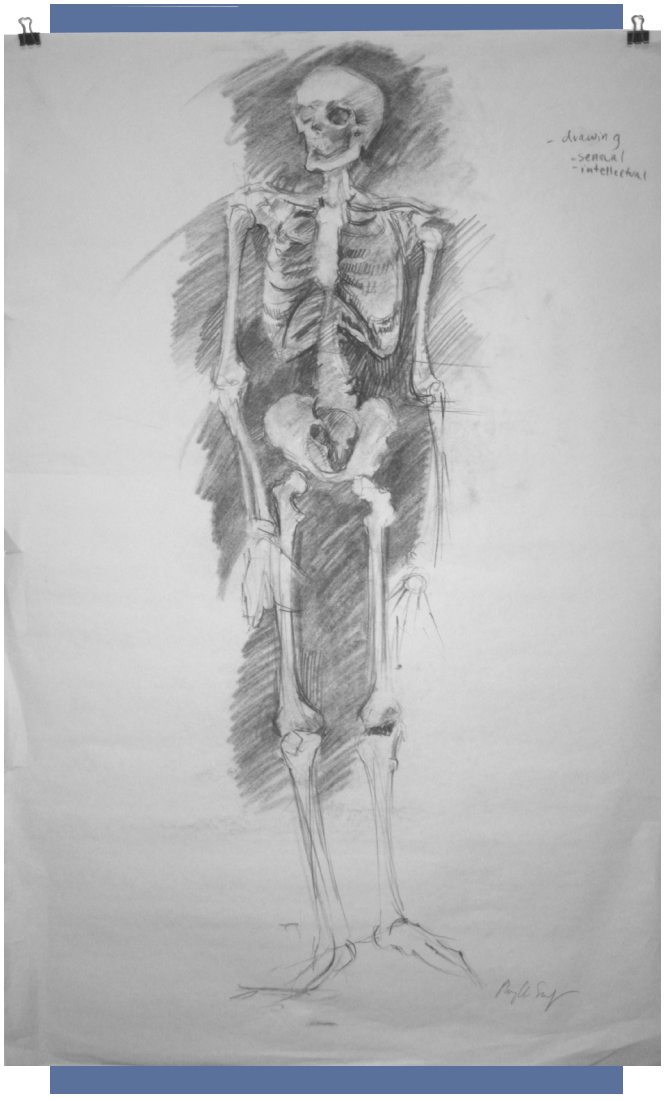
male head portrait [matted], pastel on paper, 7"x9", 2015;
photo credit: Paul Mudgett

To begin with, I'd like to suggest the variety of studies on display are all vitally connected by a common impulse – Shafer's attempt to close the gap between what students think they see (clouded with the ideograms and stereotypes of habitual perception) – and what the world actually, marvelously and unexpectedly contains.

As she told me: "It's so important to just get them to see. If anything is like an umbrella for my 27 years of teaching, it's getting students to see. There's something so beautiful in just becoming more perceptually aware of the world around you – all the nuance and all the beauty in that."

Anatomy of a class

Shafer's own training in the late 70s, at a State University in New York, really didn't prepare her for her own teaching at Lake Tahoe Community College (a position from which she has just retired). She went to school in an atmosphere where figurative art was being downplayed in favor of more conceptual approaches, and art faculty were regarded more for their exhibition record than for any pedagogical expertise. "There was an absence of any real strong teaching in terms of technique. It was more: 'Make it personal! Make it big! And I'll be in my office working on my career.'"



vine charcoal on newsprint, 36"x24"

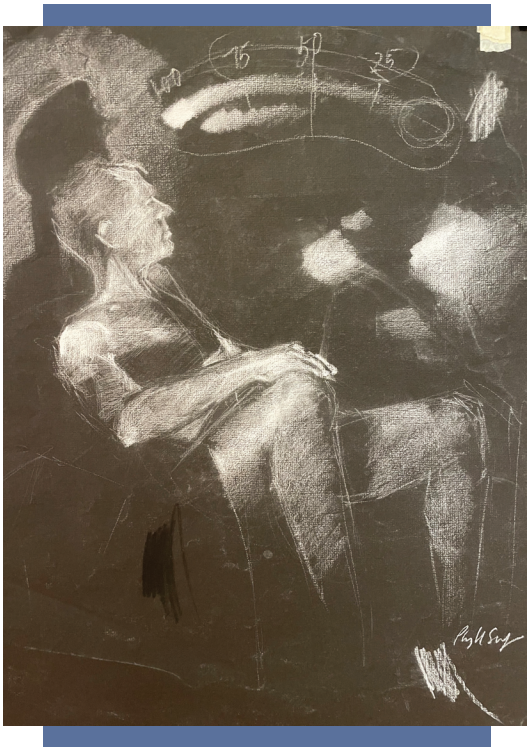
The other pole – concentrating on technique so narrowly that drawing and painting fall into a formula – didn't appeal to her, either. She brought much more specific technique to her classroom than what she was given, but never wanted student work to clone the style of the teacher: "I wanted to give my students a solid foundation in technique, but I also wanted them to have the latitude to find their own path and their own meaning – their own content within that."

To give a sense of how Shafer's figure drawing classes went, here's a bit of a breakdown. The figure drawing would usually begin with 15 to 20 minutes of quick thirty-second gesture drawings of the model, using vine charcoal and newsprint. As a note to those who haven't used it, vine charcoal is a light charcoal stick, which easily glides and smears across the paper – perfect for capturing quick impressions, and easily adjustable. If a line doesn't fall right, it can

be erased or smudged elsewhere by the side of the hand – no need to dig in with a gum eraser. Though vine charcoal drawings are fragile and impermanent – a stiff wind could literally carry much of the detail away in a gust or two – Shafer loves the feel of it: “Vine charcoal on newsprint is like chocolate and red wine.”

The rapid gesture drawings functioned as a method of getting-into-focus, and grounding. “It was just a way of loosening [the students] up, and also getting them to forget about everything that was going on – to get kind of get ***here***, now… I said to them – you know, some of the most brilliant things that you will do will happen in these thirty-second or sixty-second drawings – because you’re beyond control, you’re responding so quickly.”

After that beginning, the model would take a break, the easels would be turned around, and they would all review the drawings. Part of the conversation, here, would be directed toward getting the students to actually see the value in what they’d just produced. Shafer would sometimes invite more seasoned students to draw from the model, while the rest of the students observed them – “At a community college you’ve always got 18-year-olds right out of high school, with maybe very little experience. And then you’ve also got community members – some of them will be fabulous artists in their own right. So you have these Aces in there, and I would have everyone come over to their easel and say – all right, you do a 30-second drawing while we watch. If they didn’t mind that, it was a great learning tool.”



pastel on paper, 25.5”x19.5”;
photo credit: Paul Mudgett

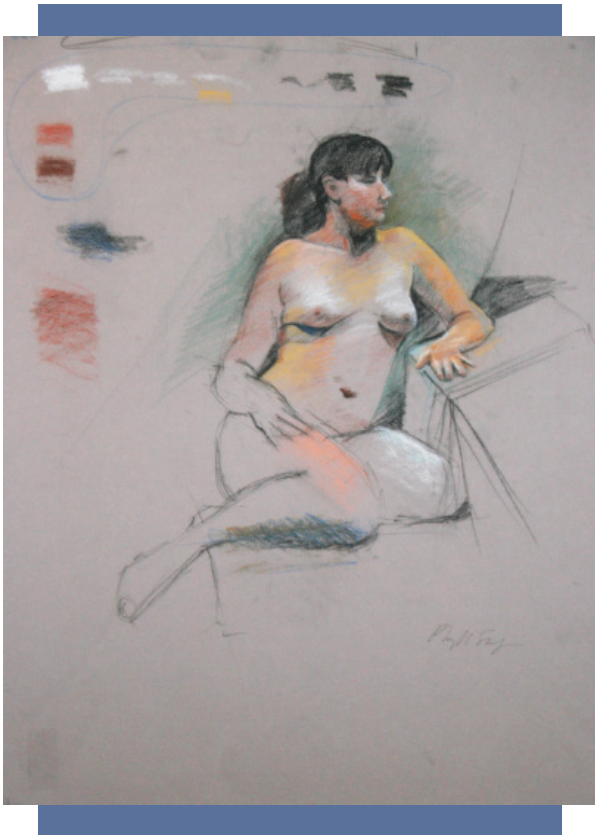
From there, Shafer would focus on the lesson of the day, spending 15-20 minutes drawing from the model and talking. There would be a small, focused topic for each class – treatment of musculature, of shading – introduction to techniques for abstracting the structure of the body into simpler geometric forms – examinations of value, or color. And over-arching concept for her pedagogy in drawing from life – and a guiding concept for her own practice – is being aware of (and alive to) the spectrum between measure and gesture.

Oversimplifying, “measure” corresponds to all those markers of position that relate one element of the body to another – and “gesture” corresponds to the expressiveness of form. “It’s like a continuum, and you have to find the sweet spot between these two extremes – because if measure is taken too far, your drawing has this kind of antiseptic, clinical kind of look about it, even though everything might be accurate. Whereas if you go too far toward gesture, you lose the whole reason to have a live model – you might as well just stay at home and do whatever you want.”

One of the things I enjoy seeing in the drawings and paintings on display are the notations, and traces of demonstrations – several of them appearing as continuums, notational spectra of color or value. They mark out extremes, and then all the little stair steps between them. In some drawings, these continuums float like thought bubbles over the heads of the models. There's something faintly humorous about it – as though the figures are calmly contemplating the materials from which they've been conjured.

Models and students

When I asked whether students bring a sort of idealization of the human form into the classroom, in their minds – dragging in the legacy of Greek statuary, with the human form toned and sprung into some heroic action or signifying gesture – she said certainly so. Even if it were possible to do a figure model casting-call for Adonis and Aphrodite, Shafer wouldn't be interested in it: "I instituted an attitude of all bodies are beautiful and all bodies are worthy of being looked at." In fact, one model she struggled with was a yoga instructor: "She got into her pose and she wouldn't relax into it. She tried to hold her body in this rigid way that made drawing her an absolute nightmare. I kept saying – just relax! I'm so sensitive to whether [the model is] happy or not. If the model is really in pain, it works its way into your own drawing."



pastel on paper, 25.5"x19.5"

Bodily ideals, in fact, had a way of interposing themselves into students' sight – one of those instances where there's a gap between what one thinks one sees, and what is actually present. "I did have students that were really enamored with the Greek ideal, and when there was a paunch they would minimize it. And I was like, 'Now wait a minute, look at what's really there – go back to measure.' In my mind it's more interesting to try and do justice to what you're really seeing."

Put another way – the body, for Shafer, is less interesting for how it can provide a structure for idealization, than for what it can express. She suspects she has the models do more seated poses than usual, because for her there's something expressive in the way bodies communicate when at rest. "The model's body, the way they carry themselves, the way they settle – there is so much emotion in how people hold their shoulders or their spine. And maybe that means more to me in the end than anything else – a kind of sensual response to what the body is saying."

Regarding Shafer's drawings, the care she takes in looking is evident. Less directly visible is the care she took in crafting those moments – providing a setting and an atmosphere where the encounter between artist's eye and figure's body can occur in a genuine spirit of collaboration. It's a spirit cultivated in contrast to her own experience as a life drawing model, when she was a student. "I worked as a nude model because it paid two dollars more an hour than working in the cafeteria… there was no regard for my privacy, and it was all male teachers." Young guys – not actually taking the class – would wander in on the pretense of looking for a hammer or some other tool they'd "accidentally" left in the painting studio.

Shafer begins her classes using men as the subject. "I always hire male models for the first two weeks, because there's always going to be those 18 to 20-year-old guys who want to take a figure drawing class so that they can see young nubile female bodies… That's sort of an initiation that they need to go through."

She set very specific ground rules. "I really set it up so that you pay absolute respect – or you leave. I would say – all right, nobody walks up to the model. When the model's on the podium you don't go up and say 'Your hand should've been over here' – I'm the one who touches the model." Occasionally boundaries had to be set in the other direction: "On the other hand, I had models that would come down on break – they'd put socks on and walk around the room nude, and I had to tell one – 'That makes the students nervous – so you need to put that bathrobe back on.'"

Body and landscape

Part of the novelty of this show is seeing another dimension of a painter with a well-developed style. Shafer is, of course, a pre-eminent interpreter of the Western landscape – and while animals have appeared in her canvases, I've never seen a human figure in one. The absence of the human figure is, I think, part of her paintings' potency – while there's often something riotous in her palette and in her sense of form, there's also an emanation of profound peace that would, I suspect, be troubled by a human presence. The landscapes are shrouded in a quietude of self-sufficiency – they don't need human habitation, or even acknowledgement, to "complete" them.

pastel on paper, 19"x25"; photo credit: Paul Mudgett

A kind of analogical thinking connects landscapes and bodies, when she's teaching bodily structure – how the skeleton provides a sort of orientation to the body. "I liken it to when you're out on a hike, and

you see an outcropping of rocks – that's like your hipbone, it comes out to the surface – and you see it, and it's a landmark, and you can use that."

While the human body isn't materialized in her landscape paintings, the paintings are very much records of an embodied encounter with place. "There's definitely a physicality to painting outdoors… I certainly feel it in my body; I'm not just slumped with a hand in my pocket. There's an energized feeling – I feel more energy in my torso – that has something to do with the way I paint, and the way I grab onto the landscape."

Her landscape paintings are interpreted landscapes, but not invented ones. "I haul my crap out there, and like to start my paintings on location… I like being outdoors; I like the directness of that information. But I'm also playing with it, and I'm maybe leaning into some of the gestural elements that I see in the land.

"If a model has got all their weight on one leg and they're throwing that hip into this nice contrapposto pose, you feel that, you try to get it… I do the same thing when I'm out there painting directly from the landscape. [In the classroom] I would be getting the students to see what the gesture of the pose was – what the essence of the pose was. I would say – feel it in your own body, even put your weight on that same leg… I feel the same way when I go out trolling for landscape compositions. I'm feeling the essence of the gesture."

pastel on paper, 25.5"x19.5"

I asked her to define "gesture," in terms of landscape, in a little more detail. She talked about the way a tree bends, or the way a bowl might curve up into a knoll. It's all movement, just not applied to a human time-scale. Though her landscape paintings are very animated (even dead white branches or rocks bulge or heave with a kind of restless vigor), I never get the sense Shafer is trying to impute human qualities to them – where a hill might stand for an elbow, or a pool of water an eye – or the geologic repose of a mountain range might stand for a pacific, vast exhaustion. The animation in her work is, more simply, acknowledgement of movement – vegetal exuberance, the twist and whirl of rock through seasons and space. It is gesture imbued with a patience that surpasses human capacity – except though art, where the stillness of Shafer's images gives us the illusion that we can perceive it in a way that's nearly congruent with its own native pace.

Eye workout

There's a degree of vulnerability in Shafer showing off these works – teaching and learning exercises – to a general public. How does Shafer rate these drawings and paintings herself? She told me (with an excess of self-criticism): "A lot of [the drawings] are really substandard." The main value she sees in them, I think, is not some demonstration of mastery – but that they trace a genuine development. "I learned. I really did learn. I got better.

"I really taught myself while I was in the middle of teaching."

In some way this exhibition serves a similar purpose to Shafer's classes – it communicates the pleasure of attention. It's the attempt, as Shafer puts it, to "get your eyes to turn on – and catch yourself when you're being deluded by your own brain." She went on: "I always tell [my students] – you know this is the best high, and you're not even damaging your body, or doing something illegal. Think of all the shmucks out there that are missing so much of this visual world! I always tell them – you're going to leave the room, and your eyes – it's like working out a muscle – you're just going to be on overload when you leave here."

Chris Lanier
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Phyllis Shafer

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