

## **Porter Commencement Address: “Erased de Kooning Drawing”**

Melissa Gwyn, Thursday, June 10, 2010

Weeks ago a student with an ambition for her project that threatened its very completion, paused from her work to ask if I had advice for a graduating senior. I'm afraid that at that moment I drew a blank. She finished her paintings by the deadline and ought to feel a great sense of success at this point of closure or commencement.

Success is an appropriate subject to discuss at this moment when we are assembled here to acknowledge and applaud the achievements of Porter College Students. And, I do. I am impressed by the “collective you.” I can say that because I know many of you. But since I was asked to speak on a subject I'm familiar with and if I am to speak with any authority then I ought to discuss something less glorious and summarizing than success.

So anyway, back in the studio when asked an important question I offered absolutely nothing. What advice about the future can I, with a life full of mistakes, offer this young artist? What words might lessen her anxiety in these uncertain times? What could I say? I simply drew a blank. Now, I teach drawing but I don't mean that “drawing a blank” thing literally; but in my mind's eye, I saw this kind of white void. That blank may sound familiar to the studio artists in the crowd. It's like the newly gessoed canvas, or the uninflected page for a drawing. For the writer it's the illuminated display of an empty word document.

For me that void is the place of memory and revision. Sometimes that void or blank feels like apprehension, and other times possibility.

In one of my previous jobs, one of many that preceded this one, I taught young kids in Brooklyn and the Bronx. In their classes we drew, planned and prepared for the practice of painting. In the final week of instruction each nine year old received a palette of soupy colors. When the culminating moment of painting arrived many in the class were paralyzed by the possibility of the opportunity. They'd hold their loaded brush just inches from the canvas, frozen by their desire to get it right with that first stroke. When they'd anxiously request my assistance I'd take their paintbrush clutching hand and nudge it so the brush would land with an awkward splat on the page. “Now you are painting.” They'd almost always proceed to paint with a spirit of pleasure and industry, relieved that they'd started the process with the very thing they dreaded - a mistake.

Artists have to come to terms with mistakes. We have to make some bad art in order to make something good. In my own practice I prefer the paintings that begin horribly and move towards resolution through days, months and sometimes years of revisions.

Earlier I talked about the emptiness of a blank page. Here's another example: the troubling lack of ink on one's first resume.

My early resume was notable for inspiring humor. My career trajectory included cubicles, restaurants, health facilities, basement cottage industries and even a Magic Kingdom. What an erratic line my twenties would make if one were to plot my path. I landed all the wrong jobs and yet each offered a privileged view into a unique culture. Each point on my trajectory required something that wasn't comfortable or germane to me. Each job made it necessary for me to reflect and ask myself, "who am I in this role?" My erratic line charted an irregular continuum of experience accumulating content, the material for later revisions.

One of the artist's tools of revision is the eraser. I like the kneaded kind. You can pull on it like taffy as you step back from your work. The accumulated pigment on a kneaded eraser seems to disappear as you pull at it. It's a pleasant activity for your hands while you critically apprehend your work.

An artist, Robert Rauchenburg used an eraser to reduce a drawing to the blank white of an empty page. In 1953 he asked the painter Willem de Kooning for a drawing to erase. De Kooning gave him one of his good pieces covered with all kinds of pigment. It took a month for Rauchenburg to make "Erased de Kooning Drawing." You can see it at SFMOMA. For years this piece has been interpreted as a younger artists' challenge to the dominant artist and movement of that time. I've always interpreted his gesture in that way.

When I was at SFMOMA with my Senior Studio students I asked them "Who's going to make the next Erased de Kooning Drawing?" They seemed to know what I meant.

The dominant art movement hasn't been Abstract Expressionism for a long time. The dominant art form isn't painting either. The art practice is more dispersed. And yet, there are and there will be prevailing voices. Sometimes when those voices sound a little too uniform and dominating I get impatient. I start to wonder, who *is* going to make the next "Erased de Kooning Drawing"?

And now I want to ask that question of you before you leave to plot your own erratic path: Who is going to apprehend with a critical eye the next dominant movement? Who will have the temerity to debate and revise the dominant discourse of their time?

I'm sure I don't have the answer. I'm still drawing a blank.

I only see before me, as I behold all of you,  
the brightness of possibility.