



In the south of France, the founders of Studio Escalier give students the practical tools and clear thinking needed to create excellent representational work.

STUDIO ESCALIER:

A Vision of "Contemporary-Classical" Instruction

by A'Dora Phillips

In the small medieval town of Argenton-Château in southwestern France, Studio Escalier, an intensive studio art school founded by three American painters in 2002, has quietly begun to assert its presence. The local home-decorating boutique has begun to stock the school's art supplies, while the end-of-term summer student exhibition has become an annual event on the town's cultural calendar. The former mayor's residence in Argenton-Château is now the studio-residence

of Timothy Stotz and Nicole Michelle Tully, two of Studio Escalier's founders. Its timbered, 1,100-square-foot studio space hosts a revolving contingent of 12 international art students.

From its inspiring location to its intense daily regimen and structured curriculum, Studio Escalier aims to provide its students with a focused and transformative artistic experience. Summarizing Studio Escalier's three-month residential programs, which include a daunting 360 hours of figure study, Stotz remarks, "Our programs allow more than enough time for an open-minded person to apply himself, build new eyes, make big leaps in

understanding, and have a new visual experience." Although co-founded and jointly taught by Stotz, Tully, and expert draftsman Anthony Ryder, the visionary behind Studio Escalier is clearly Stotz, the school's director and the owner of a rich and varied artistic résumé.

Stotz received an M.F.A. degree in painting from the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, and a B.A. degree in fine arts from Randolph-Macon College, in Ashland, Virginia. He received additional instruction at the Ecole Albert Defois, in France, where he worked under Ted Seth Jacobs, and at the New York Academy of Art, in New

York City. From 1999 to 2001, Stotz studied painting in Madrid on a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship. He has taught at the University of Pennsylvania and at the Seattle Academy of Fine Art. Stotz's varied experience has come into play in the development of Studio Escalier, where he has worked to create an environment that is both challenging and supportive.

The students of Studio Escalier are introduced—one principle at a time—to the well-organized variables that constitute a realistic representation of three-dimensional nature in two-dimensional space. For six hours a day, five days a week, students work from live models

Rounding Study No. 1 (Fast Turns)

by Timothy Stotz, 2002, oil on linen, 18 x 12. All artwork in this article collection the artist's unless otherwise indicated.





ABOVE
Rasedo Imitating an Ingres
 by Timothy Stotz, 2000, graphite,
 18 x 13. Private collection.

RIGHT
Rasedo Imitating an Ingres
 by Timothy Stotz, 2000, oil on linen, 16 x 12.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Glare
 by Timothy Stotz, 2001, charcoal,
 19 x 25. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW
The Swimmer
 by Timothy Stotz, 2001, charcoal, 22 x 30.

under the watchful gaze of their instructors. The first half of the program is devoted exclusively to drawing, while the second half of the course is focused on painting. New concepts are typically introduced on Mondays and are reinforced in a variety of ways throughout the subsequent week. By addressing in isolation issues such as the hidden curve, blocking in a well-proportioned figure by sight, and properly gradating paint, students begin to identify areas of visual experience that they may have previously overlooked. It also allows them a chance to assess their own personal strengths and weaknesses. "Many of our students have admitted that they questioned our approach of simplification and intensification at first," says Stotz. "Then, on the



second or third Friday, they made sudden connections and breakthroughs on very small concepts that allowed them large freedoms in what they could organize, see, and paint."

The artistic self-analysis emphasized at Studio Escalier is aided every step of the way by Stotz, Tully, and Ryder. In daily one-on-one critiques, the instructors help students determine the impediments standing in the way of their progress, and guide them in transforming their weaknesses into strengths. Although the ultimate goal of all three instructors is the same—giving students the tools to make breakthroughs in seeing and understanding—Stotz feels that they each have something unique to offer their students. As the problem-solver of the group, he is adept at helping students to successfully apply new principles to their work. Ryder, on the other hand, is a natural philosopher, a unique artistic voice, and a flawless technician, according to Stotz. Tully's gifts as a composer and colorist allow her to be extremely clear and concise in her instruction.

Little time is wasted at Studio Escalier. On the first morning, brief introductions and a program overview are immediately followed by the launch of the intensive six-week drawing curriculum. From the first exercises onward, students are encouraged to develop habits that will lead to a concentrated, inspired, and insightful study of nature, the representational artist's ultimate teacher. Students are told that measuring visually,



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—TIMOTHY STOTZ

Judy

by Nicole Michelle Tully, 2001, oil on linen, 14 x 11.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

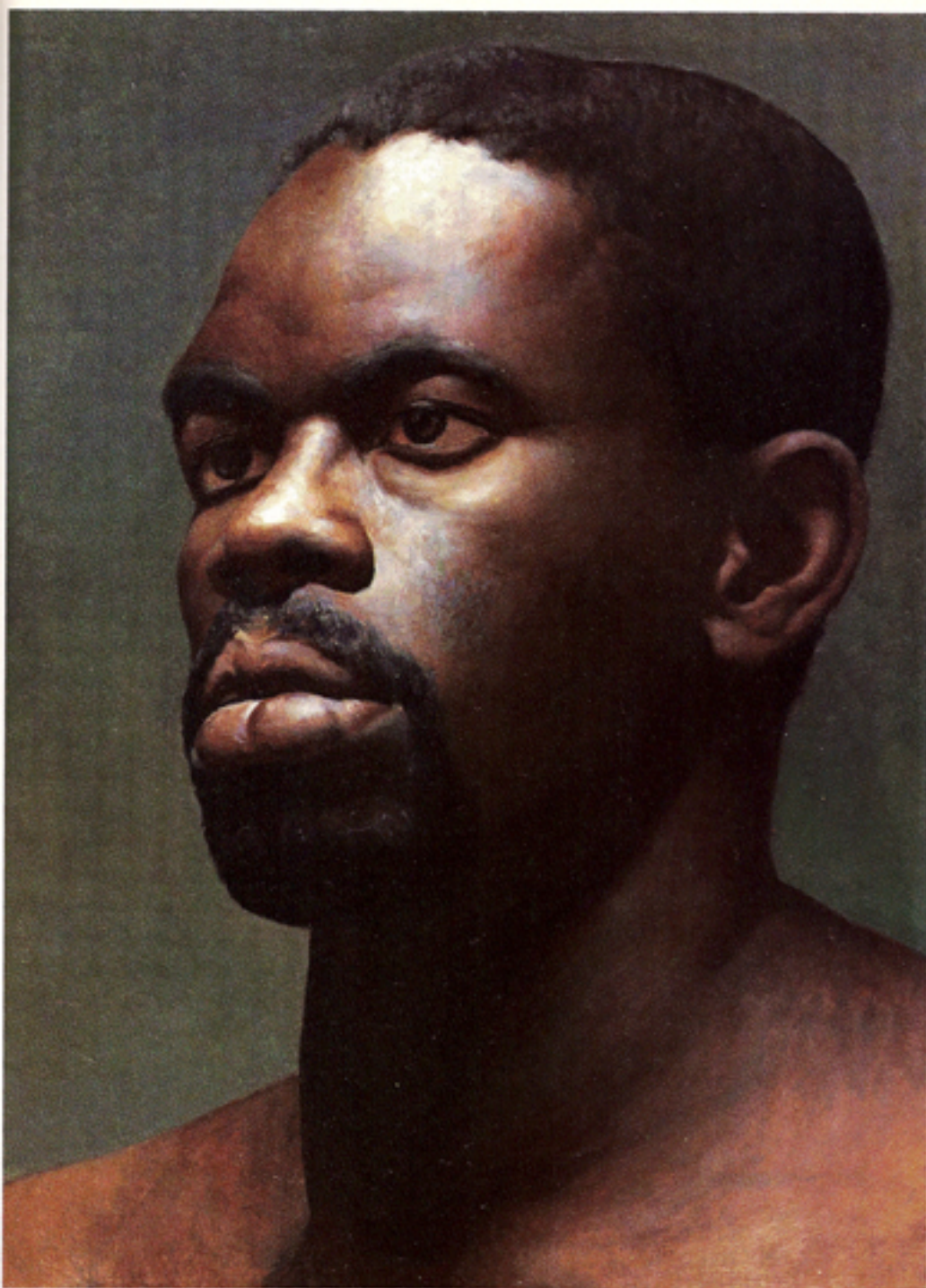
Reclining Figure
by Anthony Ryder, 2001,
oil on linen, 18 x 24.
Collection Anne and
Larry Hall.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

The Farthest Room
by Timothy Stotz, 2000,
oil on linen, 23½ x 31½.
Private collection.







ABOVE
The Eastern Classicist
(Lancelot Bourne)
 by Timothy Stotz, 1998, oil on
 wood, 12 x 9. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Philosopher and Poet
 by Anthony Ryder, 1998, graphite
 and white chalk on gray paper,
 25 x 19. Private collection.

A finished painting or drawing is not the ultimate goal of the program. Instead, the instructors prefer to focus on giving students the tools and confidence needed to investigate nature, assess their own painting techniques, and create more vital images in future practice.

rather than with tools, and developing a seamless connection between the eye and the hand are vital to the creation of "living" works of art.

With students repeatedly reminded of the life force of the model in front of them, they are taught to look for the fluid grace of the pose and capture it within the first few minutes of drawing. This provides a living foundation for the drawing.

Elements of two-dimensional design follow, including the blocking in and the study of the physical characteristics of organic life. After those concepts have been mastered, students move on to the study of three-dimensional design and are taught to see the action of light upon complex forms, and to describe its effects in an accurate and organized fashion on the picture plane.

At the end of the six-week drawing curriculum, a final extended pose of 50 hours allows students to synthesize their newfound awareness of forms and design into a unified drawing process. They are encouraged to approach this final drawing in the same spirit of open-minded investigation and discovery in which they would have undertaken earlier, short-term studies.

Following a one-week break, the focus at Studio Escalier changes to painting. In order to develop the confidence, directness, and virtuosity needed for working in oils, the instructors devote several weeks of this curriculum to studies that teach students to key and shape the light, to see the speed of a form's turn, and



ABOVE

Magdalena

by Nicole Michelle Tully,
2002, oil on linen, 12 x 10.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

**The Entrance
(Christine Patten)**

by Timothy Stotz, 2000–2001,
oil on linen, 11 x 17.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Yuko

by Anthony Ryder, 2001,
oil on board, 12 x 10.
Private collection.

to apprehend color in terms of value, hue, and chroma. Students experiment with toned canvases, develop a method for chromatic underpainting, and practice single- and multiple-pass painting. As in the drawing segment of the course, the goal of the painting section is to help students learn how to achieve an accurate rendering of visual reality. Students are therefore encouraged to use a prismatic palette, which allows a close color match between the painted image and the visual experience. The recommended palette at Studio Escalier contains 20 colors, including an array of earth tones, cadmiums, and cobalts.

Painting a portrait or a figure from life, which unifies all the elements taught in the course, is the final exercise of the program. Students begin their efforts with a three-hour poster study in which they evaluate the emotional impact of their initial vision. Students then work to block in the composition on a white canvas with charcoal. This session, which can last up to three hours, is followed by a session devoted to chromatic underpainting. The underpainting technique taught at Studio Escalier advocates the use of a thin, transparent wash of turpentine and paint for covering the canvas in broad, but accurate, washes of color. As Stotz is quick to point out, the technique is not unlike the one used by Ingres and David. It is a useful tool for perfecting the drawing, studying composition, and prepping the surface for wet-in-wet painting.



Painting dark to light and wet-in-wet, students first articulate the broad action of light by looking beneath surface details for the large underlying roundness of the form. In the second painting segment, students revisit the work to explore the more subtle forms of the human body.

Although students are given the opportunity to attempt finished work in the extended poses of the course, finishing a painting or drawing is not the ultimate goal of the program. Instead, the instructors prefer to focus on giving students the tools and confidence needed to investigate nature, assess their own painting techniques, and create more vital images in future practice.

The students of Studio Escalier's 2003 programs



were enthusiastic about what they took away from their time in France. "At the end of the summer I was able to define my real problems and to understand the way I need to work in order to solve them," one student remarked. "This gave me a sense of direction that I had needed for a long time." Other students cited their honed observational consciousness and the ability to break down the painting process into manageable steps as the most useful tools gleaned from their work at Studio Escalier. Students also appreciated the specific exercises that they were given over the course of the program, particularly those they could continue to practice at home.

If Studio Escalier provides practical tools and inspires the clear thinking

STUDIO ESCALIER: PAINTING EXERCISES

Because identifying the tonal range of the largest forms in the visual field is critical to successfully expressing light in a painting, several days of the Studio Escalier intensive program are devoted to **poster studies**. In these small sketches, usually done in one three-hour session, the visual field is separated into component shadow, dark light, and lightest light masses. Then, an average color for each is mixed and added to the canvas, and its effect on its neighboring colors is compared to nature and adjusted until it seems correct. This establishes what the instructors call the emo-

tional key of the painting.

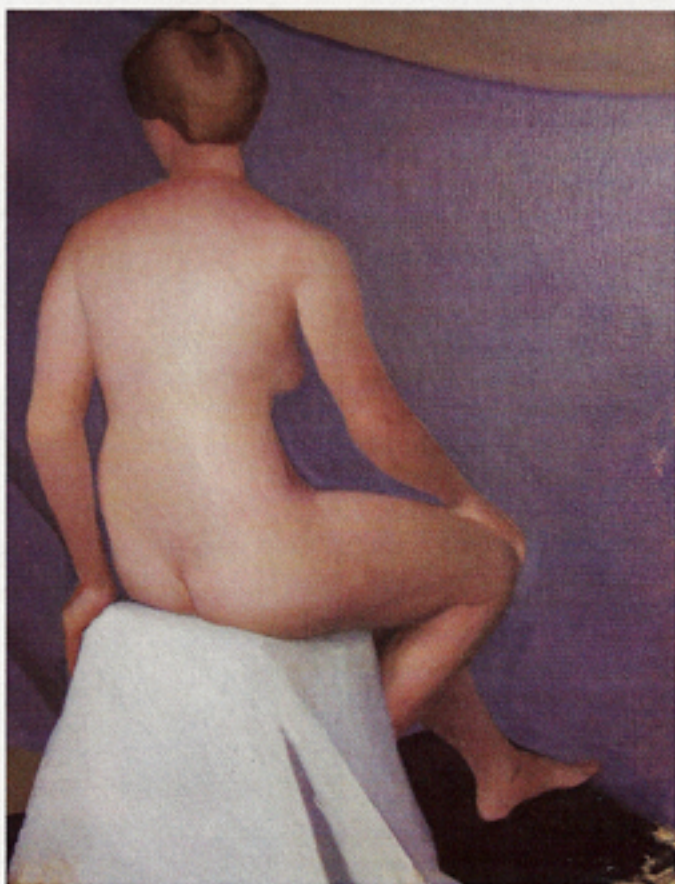
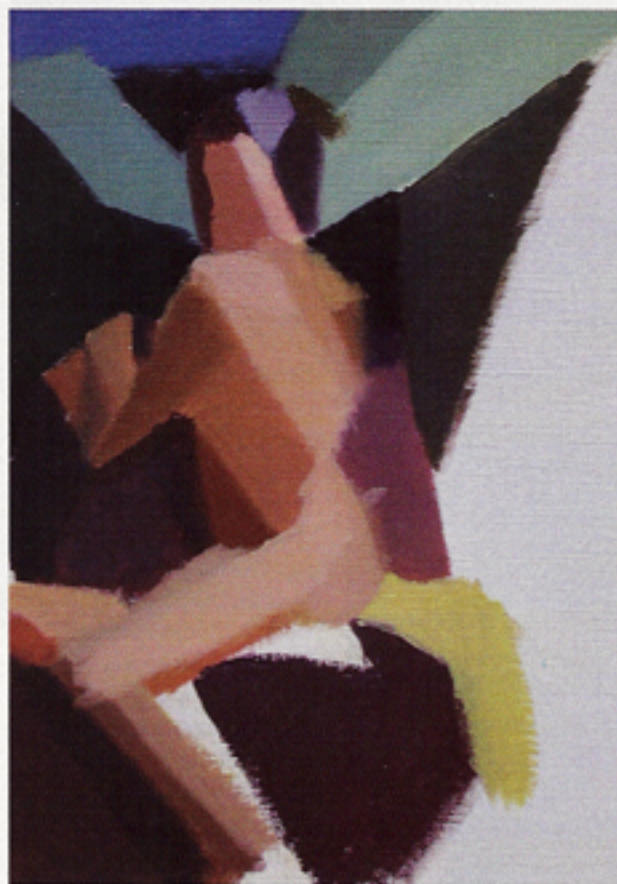
The **rounding study** is aimed at looking past details to see the large, underlying roundness of each major mass in the human figure. Students are directed to conceive of the head, torso, hip section, and limbs as eggs, and to determine their orientation in space relative to the direction of the light. With instructions to "smooth down the figure," students work to gradate the average poster values of the figure's masses (from dark to light), in keeping with the range they observe. As the gradation of contrast changes according to the artist's relative position to the model

and the light source, students are encouraged to move around the model to study the amount of light with respect to their changing vantage points.

Chromatic underpainting helps train the eye to see tone as a component of color. Using a thin mixture of turpentine and paint, students cover the canvas in broad washes, with the aim of getting as close to the true value and color of nature as possible. As it is very easy to scrub out and make changes to a chromatic underpainting, this process essentially allows one to draw with color and assess issues of proportion, composition, and form

before painting wet-in-wet.

The instructors' **wet-in-wet** exercise, or "working out of a base," has two requirements: always mixing enough paint to leave behind a value gradation on the palette (a base) as they paint the turn of a form, and working each new stroke into the previous one on the canvas, visually and physically fusing their decisions about the fall of light along the way. Students at Studio Escalier are told to mix an ample quantity of paint, which promotes experimentations "in commanding a physically thick, mainly opaque, direct, one-shot paint surface," as Stotz says.



RIGHT

Rachel (Color Wash)

by Nicole Michelle Tully,
2004, oil on linen, 7 x 5.
Collection the artist.

BELOW

Rachel

by Nicole Michelle Tully,
2004, oil on linen, 7 x 5.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT

Rasedo # 5 (Poster Study)

by Gary Rawson,
2004, oil on paper, 8 x 6.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT

Rounding Study No. 2

by Timothy Stotz, 2002,
oil on linen, 20 x 16.



necessary to successfully empower students to paint on their own, Stotz has achieved his goal. In 2005, Studio Escalier will begin to work toward Stotz's greater vision: To bring top representational artists to Argenton-Château to offer instruction in sculpture, and to build a contemporary-classical international figurative-arts residency program. An artist-residency program accommodating as many as 14 contemporary painters,

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draftsmen, teachers, and lecturers at a time is planned for the school starting in the summer of 2005. The result, hopes Stotz, will be an "art-colony atmosphere."

Applications for admission to Studio Escalier's programs are available online at www.studioescalier.com. For additional information, contact Timothy Stotz at info@studioescalier.com. ♦