

LIFE SESSIONS

Painting in a group adds a new dynamic to what is usually a solitary pursuit

By Laurie Balliett

It's 6 p.m. on a Monday. I'm one of a dozen artists positioning our easels around the perimeter of Paul Schulenburg's Eastham art studio. Setting up is choreographed chaos: we all organize our palettes, position solvents and mediums just so, select brushes, secure aprons, and usually indulge in a little catch-up chatter. The plein air painters are easy to spot. Masters of efficiency, these Eagle Scouts of set-up and break-down are independent souls ready for whatever nature might throw at them out in the field.

In the center of the room, a reclining nude makes a few adjustments to her pose. Some for comfort — she will be holding this pose for three hours, with five-minute breaks throughout the evening — and some finessing that the artists request, a slight repositioning of a hand or a foot, or the tilt of her head. From our various vantage points, we're all looking for some good



Schulenburg's three-hour study.

highlights and shadows and angles, making mental edits and quick composition decisions, eager to get going and not waste any of this valuable time with a live model. She is thin, and the sharp curve of her hip bone reminds me of the arch of a sand dune. I am primarily a landscape painter.

Like many of the other artists here, I attend Schulenburg's figure sessions for practice.

Since 2008, Schulenburg has been inviting artists to share his space. He starts preparing for the evening sessions around noon, he says, "coming up with a scenario for the model; setting it up; rearranging the



Cape vocalist Cerise Bynoe strikes a pose for host Paul Schulenburg and other artists at one of the Monday night sessions.

Ron Schloerb/Cape Cod Media Group

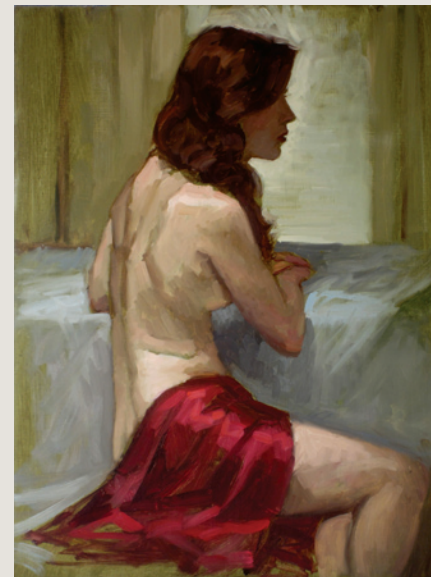
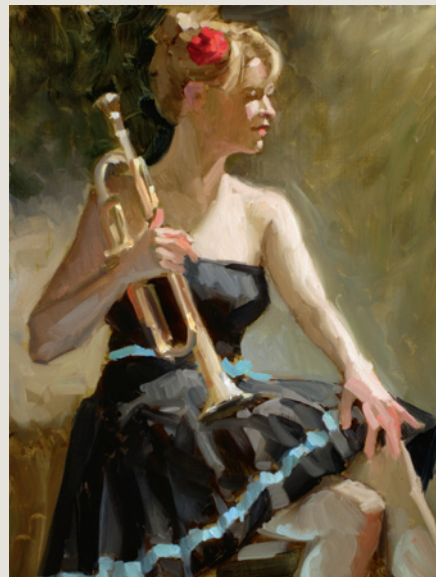
track lights; moving furniture and cleaning." The studio is a nicely converted, good-sized garage just yards from the house where he lives with his wife, Pharr, also an artist, who shares the studio with him. He had attended other group figure sessions around the Cape, but found them lacking.

"There was no music or food, or you couldn't talk, and I wanted to do what I like and so I thought, 'I'll just do it myself,'" Schulenburg says.

He started out with good friends and fellow painters Jerome Greene of Provincetown and Peter Kalill of Eastham. Now, some 15

artists attend regularly, out of 90 on Schulenburg's email list. The number of names has grown over the years, mostly from word of mouth or meeting people in galleries. And he's got a long list of models as well.

Just like the artists he invites to his studio sessions, Schulenburg loves the cama-



Schulenburg has a significant collection of figure studies from his group life sessions. “People are difficult to paint,” he says, and the practice helps him with his other paintings that often include figures. All of his work has a narrative quality, he says. He likes

“a little mystery,” so even when there’s no figure in a landscape, a cityscape or an interior, he’ll include something that implies a human presence. Schulenburg and several of the other artists in the group are represented by Addison Art Gallery in Orleans.

raderie. “It’s interesting to be among like-minded people,” he says, noting a similarity to musicians collaborating. “Of course, we don’t all work on one piece, but we work together, creating from the same source and interpreting it in different ways.” Schulenburg also has a group of friends that likes to travel and paint together. Sometimes up to a dozen guys will go somewhere for 10

days or so and just paint — mostly plein air. “It’s like a hunting or fishing trip,” he says, “except we paint.” So far they’ve gone to Maine, Provincetown and Mexico.

When the model is situated, Schulenburg sets a timer for 20 minutes. Music that he has selected via Pandora is eclectic enough to keep everyone happy. He is such a thoughtful host that if someone mentions

a particular artist they like, we’ll probably be hearing their music at a future session.

When the timer goes off, the model holds the pose for a few moments to allow folks to finish a critical stroke or dab, and for somebody to put pieces of tape in key spots so that the model can return to the exact position after the break. A table at one end of the studio holds a pitcher of water, a few bottles of wine and some cheese, crackers and olives. There’s also a bowl for contributions to the model’s fee and the heating and maintenance of the studio. Mingling and discussing each other’s work is fun, but when five minutes are up, we’re back to business. Some nights resemble a painting party, with high energy, lots of talk and laughter; others are more serious and quiet.

It’s 8:40. Taylor Fox of Orleans sits on a pillow, painting a lifelike rendition of the model. Jerome Greene cracks a joke as he works a small canvas. Greene makes it his goal to have a completed painting by the end of each session, and he does. “I want to capture the immediacy of the three hours, and I want to fill the whole canvas,” he says. “I don’t want to end up with a vignette; I paint whatever is in the background.”

Orleans artist Rosalie Nadeau paints

with pastels. Mashpee artist Cleber Stecei has chosen to do a portrait this night. Andrea Petitto of Harwich works with a palette knife. She was about to give up oil paints altogether, unable to tolerate the solvents needed for brushwork, when she realized painting with a palette knife could solve the problem. It opened her up to a whole new technique that serves her well. Wellfleet’s Steve Kennedy works on intensifying color in his background. Beside me, Karen Ojala, who keeps a studio in Dennis, uses

an eight-inch butcher’s knife to apply paint to an oversized canvas.

I stand back a few feet from my painting and look at the piece I am not satisfied with and about to wipe out, when Ojala pulls out another large butcher’s knife.

“Here, try this,” she says, arming me with a potentially deadly weapon. Artist and instructor Robert Henry suggested using the tool in a class she is taking from him at the Provincetown Art Association.

What the heck — I pile paint on the

knife and in one large movement, I glide my arm, the blade and the paint across the dune-shaped hip on my canvas. It feels good, and suddenly I am having fun with the painting again. From across the room, Schulenburg tells us that he scraped his last figure three times before deciding he liked it. It’s reassuring to know that even someone of his caliber wipes out paintings.

There’s a range of skill level among those who show up for the life sessions, Schulenburg says. Some beginners, some



Kely Knowles

Orleans artist Rosalie Nadeau watches over the shoulder of Taylor Fox, also of Orleans.



Robert LaPointe draws with compressed charcoal and white chalk on toned paper.



Steve Kennedy photos

Foreground: Jerome Greene. Back, left to right: Ron Lindholm, Snefrid “Sissi” Sneve-Schultze and Peg LoPresto.



Ron Schloerb/Cape Cod Media Group
Andrea Pettito of Harwich uses a palette knife to apply paint.



Kely Knowles
Maryalice Eizenberg is one of several plein air artists who attend the life sessions regularly.

intermediate and some professionals who have been in the business for quite a long time, showing in and even owning galleries. "It makes me sad when someone says they are too intimidated to come and paint with us," Schulenburg says.

During the three-hour sessions, artists

really challenge themselves. For me, it is the place where I push into my discomfort zone, forcing growth in my artwork. It is where for over a year, I have found solace in sharing the act of painting. We have all attended regularly, through emotional ups and downs, allowing the complexities

of the outside world to fall away while we focus on the model and the canvas.

Schulenburg sums up the whole experience nicely: "Wow," he says, "we all get to do this together!" ■

Patti Bangert contributed to this story.

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Eastham artist Dale Michaels Wade began painting at Paul Schulenburg's studio three years ago. Inspired by the diversity of work resulting from each session, she set out to plan a group exhibit.

Paintings and drawings by 22 of the artists who participate in the live model sessions will be displayed in the show, "Figure Out." A reception is scheduled for May 31, and a live group figure painting session will take place on June 9. It is here folks can wander in and get an idea of the dynamics that happen when artists paint next to one another.

FIGURE OUT

May 29 - June 16

Cultural Center of Cape Cod
307 Old Main St.
South Yarmouth

■ ■ ■

Reception: May 31, 5 to 7 p.m.

■ ■ ■

Group figure painting
demonstration
June 9, 4:30 to 7:30 p.m.

Participating Artists: Laurie Balliett, Shawn Dahlstrom, Maryalice Eizenberg, Taylor Fox, Jerome Greene, Lila Sevida Grilli, Steve Kennedy, Kely Knowles, Robert LaPointe, Ron Lindholm, Terry Lindholm, Peg LoPresto, Susan O'Brien McLean, Rosalie Nadeau, Karen Ojala, Susan Overstreet, Andrea Pettito, Paul Schulenburg, Sissi Sneve-Schultze, Cleber Stecei, Ewa Tomasian, Dale Michaels Wade

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