

PASSAGES

ROBERT REED (1938–2014)

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Robert Reed.

***HE ASKED US** to do drawings with coffee and tea, then paused and asked us in his most serious voice to consider what would happen if we added cream and sugar.*

—Wiley Kestner, Yale University student, 1998

The passing of Robert Reed, a professor for almost fifty years in both the undergraduate and graduate programs at Yale University, is a great loss. A great loss not only for his wife, children, grandchildren, friends, students, and colleagues; not only for the fact that he was the only tenured African American ever in the Yale School of Art; but also for education itself as a profession, a concept, and a calling.

Reed's significance as an educator does not diminish his accomplishments as an artist. A steadfast geometric painter, his work is included in the collections of such venerable institutions as the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia (to name a few). Bob, as he was known to many, fulfilled his role as a professor by placing his artistic ego aside—a notion that has become foreign, forgotten, overlooked, or simply unfashionable in art education today.



Robert Reed, *Cabbage*, 2000, collage, 20 x 16". Courtesy of David Findlay Jr Gallery, NY.

Much has been said of Bob's demanding teaching style. He famously expected his painting students to produce twelve paintings and his drawing students to produce fifty drawings by the second class. In addition, students were to attend a kind of weekend art boot camp at Yale's Norfolk campus, where they worked from morning until night. He accepted no excuses for any work not fully done. Most apparent was that his methods displayed his belief in the

connection between hard work and success. What was perhaps less obvious was his understanding and investment in his role as a mentor. You never found Bob in a public review making a show of his career, his knowledge, or his ego. More often than not, he remained rather quiet. He shared his wisdom willingly and rigorously in private. It did not happen in the hallways, a bar, or a restaurant. It was not confined to a class session, a semester, or a year. It was delivered personally with empathy and respect. It was not for show but for forming a dialogue, a conversation—extended, for sure—a foundation for a teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher relationship, one that continued and developed over time. Bob’s was a role that was not a choice but a given: professor as mentor. In his position as professor he deeply understood it not to be about him but about “us.”

Success in academia is so often measured in preapproved career checklists and awards. Bob had many of these, but they seemed to matter less to him than assisting and bearing witness to the progress of his students and colleagues. As a professor, he measured his own success by the success of those of us he had mentored. I am happy to say that I am one of the many who benefited from his generosity.

Twenty years ago, I met Robert Reed in a gallery in Charlottesville, Virginia, where I was exhibiting my paintings. He introduced himself, and a conversation began that led to many wonderful years of my teaching alongside him at Yale. As a very green professor, I watched all the notable artists I worked with for clues on how to be a better teacher, but I could not read Bob, due to the very private nature of his approach. I now understand how he embraced the role of the professor as mentor, something I still find difficult to consistently practice.

Education is ultimately a conversation: a process of sharing, supporting, relating; in essence, a group activity. Bob understood this and resisted the impulse to make it into the singular, me-me agenda we see in so much of contemporary culture.

In the years since leaving Yale, I remained in touch with Bob. His continued support and belief in me as an artist and an educator never wavered. With each correspondence, I was reminded to try harder to be a more effective teacher and mentor. And even as I do strive to follow his example, I am sure that the hole Bob has left in art education will be very hard for all that follow to fill.

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