

EXHIBITIONS

BEN LONG: REALITY AND ALLEGORY

The dramatic, realist paintings of Asheville artist Ben Long are featured in a new Museum exhibition that includes works spanning more than thirty years, some of them completed at Long's North Carolina studio just in time for the showing in Greenville.

Growing up in Statesville, North Carolina, Ben Long (born 1945) was exposed to writing by his father and art by his grandfather. At the University of North Carolina he majored in creative writing, but left one semester before graduation, heading for New York City to study art at the Art Students League. It was the late 1960s, and America was waging war in Vietnam. Long joined the Marines, hoping for an appointment to the Combat Art Team, but he spent most of two tours in Southeast Asia leading an infantry platoon. By the time his goal was realized, his service was nearly over.

“When an artist is dealing with realism or figurative work, one needs to find the right aesthetic tone and that’s difficult to do. You have to be very careful not to be illustrative. You have to be careful not to be too particularly narrative.”

Ben Long

As a young boy Long loved to draw, especially the human figure. After Vietnam he apprenticed for eight years to Pietro Annigoni, a noted realist painter in Florence, Italy. With Annigoni as his mentor, Long dedicated himself to rigorous formal training in the craft of painting, both in fresco and oil.

Today, Ben Long is among America's most highly regarded traditionalists,



Ben Long, *Brook's Apple*, 2004
oil on canvas on wood panel, 30 x 22 ¼ inches
Collection of the late Marcus Durlach III and his wife, Dr. Dana Durlach

Ben Long: Paintings & Drawings
through February 7, 2010

especially acclaimed for his work in fresco for churches and public buildings in the Carolinas. Fresco painting, which involves working directly on wet plaster, reached its heyday during the Renaissance and is usually associated with religious subject matter. It has been one of Long's ambitions to develop an audience for fresco painting in this country. His paintings in the lobby of the Bank of America Corporate Center in Charlotte are the largest secular frescoes in the United States and consist of modern allegories about the human condition.

Long is also an accomplished easel painter who renders penetrating likenesses and classical-style nudes in contemporary settings. Just as his work in fresco requires planning and preparation, his figurative work is the result of many hours of preliminary drawing.

He sees his portraits as the result of a working partnership with the sitter: "You're not just painting a person, but rather capturing the spirit and essence of a particular individual. All the qualities that make a person, that's what you are painting. If they are 'with you,' and attentive to your needs as a painter while painting them, you are apt to have a very good picture. Yet if they are distracted and always attending to matters at hand, such as picking up the phone or trying to conduct their business, it does not work."

He maintains that the complex figurative tableaux he creates are the product of visual tension and atmosphere. There are no storylines, he insists. The artist leaves it to the viewer to ascribe meaning.

In 2000, after his apprenticeship in Italy and an extended period in France, Long settled in Asheville. Two years later he spearheaded the founding of the Fine Arts League of the Carolinas, a non-profit art school for drawing and painting, which focuses on the traditions and techniques of the Old Masters. That same year, Long was awarded the Distinguished Alumnus Award by the University of North Carolina.

Ben Long: Paintings and Drawings demonstrates the artist's remarkable talent for rendering the human figure in compelling and meaningful ways. It was organized with assistance from Ann Long Fine Art, Charleston, and Ben Long Fine Art, Asheville.

Martha R. Severens
Curator



Ben Long (center) at the reception that offered Association members a preview of the exhibition *Ben Long: Paintings & Drawings*.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

I'm interested in putting the figure in space in ways that are ambiguous but at the same time have a mysterious hold to it. I do not look for a story line. I leave it to the viewer to interpret that. Sometimes it seems as if there's a connection between people who are talking to each other, whispering to each other. But I paint them separately. My main focus is on figures, placed in spatial tension rather than by a narrative.

ON WORKING IN EUROPE

I think the mental and spiritual activity (helps one) feel engaged by the reality of the time, the history of it. The workers are really proud of their work. It lifts the effort (of drawing and painting) from an academic insistence to an awe of what's around you.

ON TEACHING

I like teaching, passing on the information I see that they desperately need. The basis is teaching the true fundamentals, the anatomy. It is amazing that many people do figure drawings and want them pretty rather than correct.

2010 COURSE WILL PLACE REALISM IN CONTEXT

Realism—the accurate depiction of nature—has challenged the skill of artists since classical times. Beginning in January, Museum Curator Martha R. Severens will lead an art history course that explores the various forms of Realism, touching on such artists as Jan van Eyck, Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio, Courbet and even the Impressionists. The class will meet in the Museum theater for slide presentations and discussion, coupled with gallery exercises that feature the work of Andrew Wyeth, contemporary realist Ben Long, and *PhotoRealist Watercolors: The PieperPower Collection*. The course will also include a visit to the Bob Jones University Museum & Gallery at Heritage Green to look at portraiture.

The course will meet from 3:30–4:55 on Wednesdays, January 13 through March 3, 2010. It is offered through OLLI (the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute of Furman University, formerly known as FULIR). Costs include a \$25 annual membership fee, plus \$40.

To register, go to <http://furman.edu/olli> or call 864/294-2998 for a registration brochure. All registrations must be mailed or delivered in person. There is no online registration.