

Wendy Artin '80: Making an Art Form Out of Life

By Laura Lewis



Wendy Artin '80

As Wendy Artin '80 paints outside her villa in Rome, she tries not to let the constant chattering of passersby on the street distract her. It's a task, she admits, that's easier said than done.

"Italians have lots to say," says Artin, laughing. "I try to let their voices float over my head like music. If I could, I would paint outside all day, everyday."

Painting what she sees—be it the simple beauty of a bell pepper sold at the local farmers' market, the divine archways of classic Roman architecture, or the acrobatic poses of her models—is Artin's specialty. A world-renowned figurative artist who has lived, studied, and shown in dozens of major cities around the globe, Artin presents simple subjects with such technical sophistication that they look as if she hardly sweats over them at all. Though in truth, that is exactly what she does.

"Artin paints day in and day out, sometimes working on the same view, or the same statues, or the same dilapidated fountain over and over," says Adele Chatfield-Taylor, President of the American Academy in Rome. "You have the feeling that Artin has studied what she has chosen to paint and composed it in her mind, so that when she arrives at her destination, she can simply jump in."

Her impressive studies of the human body garner her as much praise.

"To watch her work is to watch a master," says artist Eric Fischl, a contemporary. "She gets all the anatomy, all the movement, and imbues her subjects with a luminosity that is the special light of Rome."

That light will shine in Boston this month, as Artin opens an exhibition of charcoal drawings of life-size nudes and watercolor paintings of various landscapes and still lifes entitled *Esprit de Corps*. The exhibit will run from November 2nd to December 9th at the Gurari Collections gallery in Beacon Hill.

For Artin, the show will mark a homecoming. The BB&N alum grew up in Cambridge, where her mother transformed the family home into Artin's very first gallery. A decision, Artin realizes, that was crucial in shaping her life's passion.

"My mother made the floors linoleum (so I could sketch on them) and plastered my drawings all over the house," she says. "My parents were so supportive. As a child I loved to draw, and unlike most children, I just never stopped."

In turn, Artin's parents exposed her to as much art and music as possible—the family traveled to European cities, and TV wasn't allowed. She was 9 when she took her first art class at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. By junior high she was drawing live models in neighbors' living rooms.

On Artin's nudes:

To pose for Wendy is a strange and beautiful revelation of the form that light takes on a person, of the memories that are evoked by each position of the body. A position can express a state of mind, or the recollection of a faraway image, or a purely physical memory, which sometimes returns to you when you least expect it. They have made me feel more positive towards my body, because although the beauty of her paintings is the fruit of Wendy's art and of her way of perceiving reality, they show how many different facets that which is called beauty can have, and how much beauty is indeed made of light.

—Laura Riccioli, model

I have the sensation that we are writing a poem together, and I learn to be patient, to listen to the time of the drawing, the time of the pose. It is a profound exchange, made very pleasant by the concentration, by the music, and also by the breaks between the poses during which, a bit stunned, as though coming out of a long dream, we remember who we are.

—Tamara Bertolini, model

"I would work into inky washes and stark brushstrokes with a stiff brush dipped in turpentine," Artin says. "One of my preferred subjects was statues on buildings, their inanimate obscurity giving me freedom to imagine and paint the people who had been the models, the idea for the statue, the light, the gesture. Real people I would try to see either as epic statues, or the way their mothers did."

A visit to the cast hall of the New York Academy of Art inspired her current love of life-size portraiture.

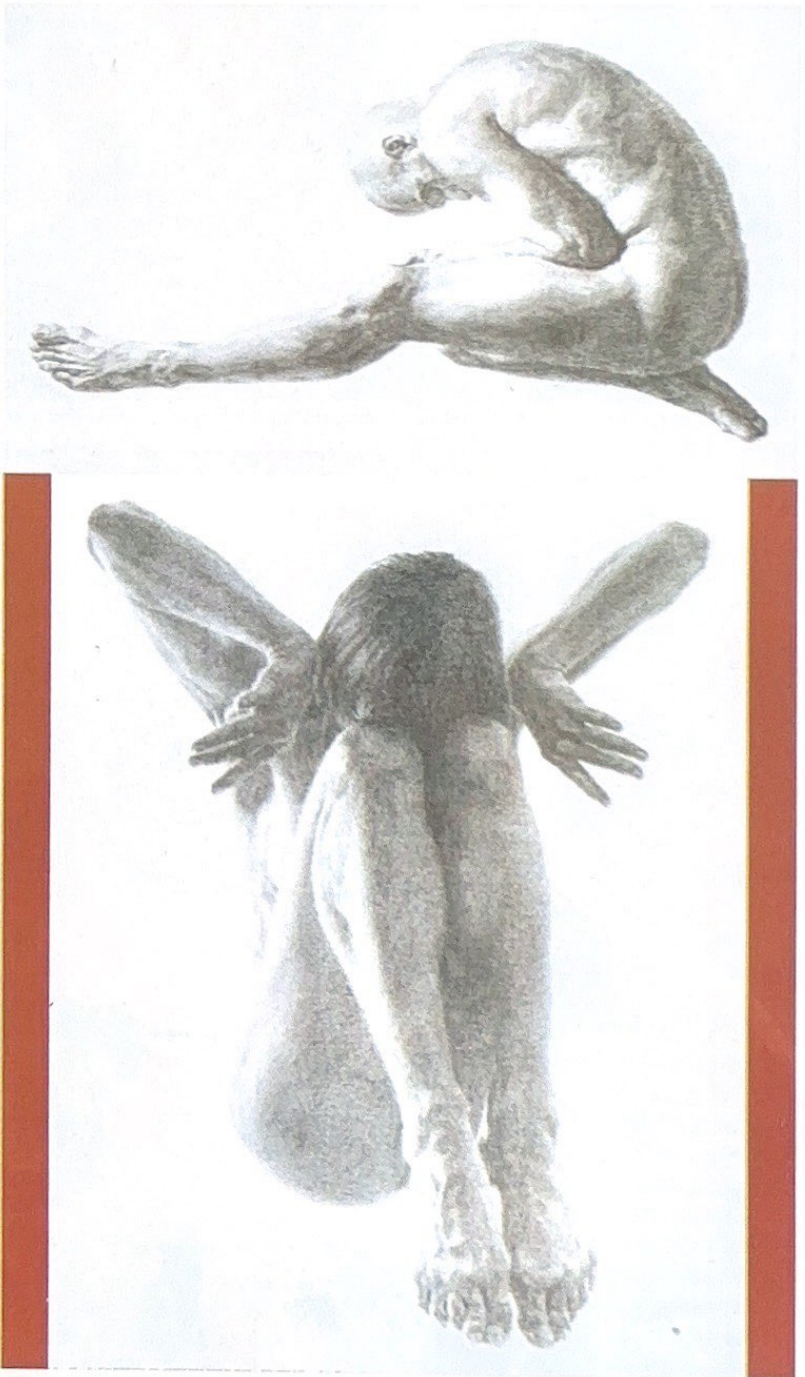
"I wanted to do big beautiful drawings that nobody does any more, using the charcoal like a paintbrush, that 'pop out' in three dimensions," she says.

The life-size nudes featured in the Boston exhibition "are my models eternalized in an instant of immobility, as epic statues," says Artin. "I try to have the mark move over the paper as though it's moving over the surface of the figure. There are no lines; the edges need to always be able to breathe. I love the way the charcoal clings to the surface of the paper."

After a stint as a graphic designer and oil painter in New York City and travels to Mexico and Guatemala, Artin settled in Rome, where she and her husband have two small children. As she balances family and her rising career, Artin may find the urban landscape to be her greatest inspiration yet.

"She travels by bicycle with a slim folder of equipment slung over her shoulder and alights in one of the city's great piazzas, as though it had been built specifically for her eye to behold," says Chatfield-Taylor, of the American Academy in Rome.

"I went to Rome to look at statues and walls, spent months painting an English street person, and finally discovered that when in Rome, one paints Rome," says Artin. "To paint and draw figuratively is to pay tribute to the beauty that I see."



Her favorite BB&N "class" was her Senior Project, where she took high-level art classes at the Museum School full time. "The highlight of my week was the muscular overlays in Anatomy with Joe Capacetti at the Museum School. I stayed awake late nights drawing," she remembers.

Her education in art continued at the University of Pennsylvania, where Artin discovered "mass drawings," in which the artist covers an entire page with charcoal, then rubs out their sketch with a soft eraser. ("I still love the way it makes the pencil or charcoal be the atmosphere, gently dissipating light.") Spending her junior year abroad in Paris, she studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, in the drawing studio of the famous painter Férit Iscan, who always had two live models.

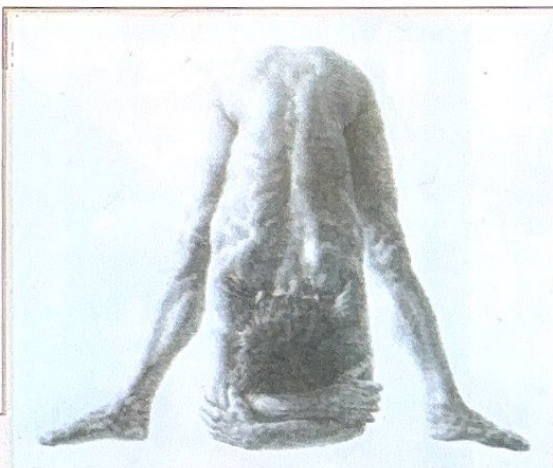
Twice a week, Artin's teachers treated students to coffee and critiques, encouraging them to experiment with mark-making and their own takes on light and atmosphere, rather than rendering straight detail, Artin says.

"The first summer in Paris I wanted to paint my own souvenir street scenes to bring home, and ended up with a lot of atmospheric drawings of French cars," she

says. "The car series eventually led to my wall series, and many years of sitting on sidewalks and painting, trying to capture the urban landscape.

"The Boston Public Library has two of these early street paintings, a typically French Blue Door (1987) from Paris, and an inky taxi from the yellow cab repair yard below my Cambridge apartment (1987)."

Artin later spent five years at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston in the Master's program, studying mostly with acclaimed teachers Miroslav Antic and Lou Gipetti, and teaching a figure drawing class of her own. While there she also began to work in transparent oil paint on rabbit-skin glued paper, trying to recreate the effect of monoprints without the press—in layman's terms—of greasy paint smeared stylishly over a smooth surface.



On Artin's landscapes:

How stunning then are Wendy Artin's dancing, flowing, liquid renditions of these Rocks of Gibraltar! While there is no doubt that the massive statues will ever move again (even though their subject is action and movement), Artin's images on the other hand would seem to be in constant metamorphosis and might take different poses were we to blink.

—Stephen Harby, Architect



On Artin's watercolors:

Many people draw, and draw well, with charcoal, watercolor, pencil, ink; but few people draw well with paper itself. The ability of an artist to allow the paper to afford light to a subject is one of the great under-used aspects of contemporary drawing. When it happens, it means that the artist is seeing the subject within the space of the paper itself, which is a potentially deep and lively space, as Wendy Artin proves in her masterful work.

—April Gornik, Artist