

Larry Thomas on Art and Education

You might say retiring Dean of Academic Affairs Larry Thomas grew up at SFAI. He has spent a full generation at the school: as MFA alumnus (Printmaking, 1979), Printmaking Department Manager (1980–81), Faculty (1983–94), Chair of the Printmaking Department (1992–93), Dean of Academic Affairs (1994–2005), and Interim President (2001–03). During all these phases in his academic career, he has remained an exceptional teacher and leader, and, above all, an artist. In this wide-ranging interview, he talks about his passions for drawing, painting, and printmaking and his esteem for the Institute—its history and present and future challenges, and his own.



On Art

Victoria Cooper: How did you get interested in becoming an artist? How far back does that interest or self-knowledge go?

Larry Thomas: As a child I loved to draw. I remember drawing from an early age and really becoming serious about drawing once I reached high school, where there was, in those days, an art program. I was fortunate enough to have a high school teacher who encouraged my interest in drawing and introduced me to the idea of attending art school. I grew up in the rural South—all of my family is from Mississippi—and I wasn't exposed to the various educational and urban cultural experiences and opportunities that many students have today. After high school, I applied for and received a scholarship to a small arts college in Memphis [at that time, The Memphis Academy of Art; now, The Memphis College of Art] and, after graduating with a BFA degree, I traveled around the country and eventually ended up in San Francisco in the 1960s. When I decided to go back to graduate school to work toward an MFA degree some 12 years later, I applied to SFAI, was accepted into the Printmaking program, and completed the program in 1979. And somehow, I've never really left. Coming to SFAI in the mid-1970s opened a new world for me. It allowed me to have art as the primary focus of my life, with a greater depth of purpose and a more serious commitment of time and energy.

VC: Your focus here at SFAI was in printmaking, and you've done a lot with etching and engravings. Why were you attracted to this medium?

LT: It's hard to say, but printmaking in so many ways is just another process or another way of drawing—using metal plates, acids, and inks to achieve graphic images, as opposed to paper and pencil, charcoal, or crayon. I'm also attracted to the physicality of the printmaking process—that is, primarily etching and engraving. In general, the various printmaking techniques are delayed processes, requiring several or many steps before realizing the ultimate result of one's effort. This way of working allows for careful consideration and demands thoughtful decision-making, in a sense it's a contemplative or



above: Larry Thomas, teacher, with students; and Larry Thomas, Printmaking studio manager, with Gordon Kluge

right: four etchings from Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, an artist's book made in collaboration with Chuck Hobson

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meditative process of making images. Also, the materials are very sensuous to me. There's the smell of the ink, the feel of the paper, the dampness of the blotters, the pressure of the press, the action of the acid ... all very seductive in some strange way; both physically appealing and technically challenging at the same time. Certain technical skills are required as well as a knowledge of the medium's history—all deeply satisfying to me.

VC: Do you work in different media for your printmaking—wood, metal, etc.?

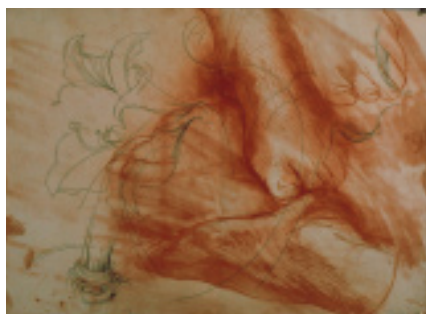
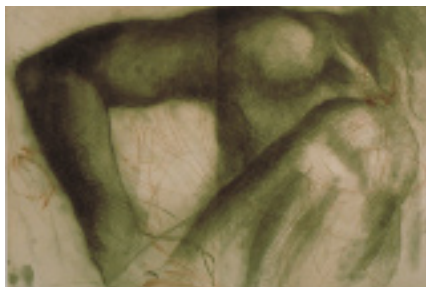
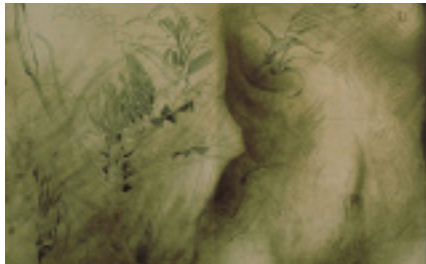
LT: I work primarily with metal plates, either zinc or copper, and various techniques of intaglio, which denotes images, lines, textures, or marks produced beneath the surface of the plate. The various intaglio techniques include aquatint, dry point, engraving, hard and soft-ground etching, spit bite, etc.—all produced in different ways and each with a very different result. Ultimately, the plate is inked and printed on an etching press, transferring the image to paper under great pressure.

VC: Isn't it true that you are actually having to imagine the finished image in reverse, right to left, left to right?

LT: Yes. But it sounds more mysterious than it really is. There are many artists, for instance, who have mirrors in their studios, so they can see an image from a different orientation or opposite from the way in which it was drawn or painted. We are always testing our perceptions, seeing everything from a different vantage point, so it's easier than you would think to work in reverse. One becomes used to the fact that the image is reversed once it is printed; it's merely an inversion. Of course, if one is using text, then that's a different set of considerations.

VC: Didn't you work on a book project with fellow printmaker Chuck Hobson here in the mid-1990s?

LT: Yes, the book was Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*. Chuck had made a translation of it into English, and he had planned on developing illustrations for





the book himself. We spoke about the project, tossed around different ideas, looked at drawings that I had been working on from the live figure, and, ultimately, he asked me to collaborate with him on the project. It's one of many fine, limited-edition, artist-book publications that he has produced through his press, Pacific Editions. This particular project was an extraordinary experience for me. It was very much a collaborative project, working with Chuck, Kay Bradner from Katherine Lincoln Press, Donald Farnsworth from Magnolia Editions, Andrew Hoyem from Arion Press, and a group of three SFAI students over an entire summer.

The images that I provided were each composed of two separate plates; engravings of plant forms superimposed and printed in various colors over soft-ground etchings based on my charcoal drawings of the human figure. We had quite a production process during that summer. While the students were printing the edition of the figurative plates, I was working on the engraving plates to be overprinted once the editions were complete. The colors of the inks simulated the materials and textures of the original drawings—charcoal, conté crayon, pencil, etc. The juxtaposition of the sharp, crisp lines of the engraved plant forms printed in contrasting inks over the soft, smudgy etchings of the human figure printed monochromatically gave a very subtle, luscious effect. There's a copy of the book in our library.

VC: How would you describe your inspiration for your work and the intention behind your work?

LT: Over the years, most of my work has been based on a personal investigation and narrative; I've worked with images that echo or reflect various aspects of Native American culture, in particular the Choctaw-Chickasaw culture, which is part of my heritage and a subject particularly important to me. In my work of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, certain images kept recurring. My interest seems to be in the old traditions and the commitment of those traditions to prose or verse: the mythology, rituals, dances, and various paraphernalia associated with rites and annual observances—all somewhat universal symbols, yet specific to the culture as well.



above left: *Mortuary Vessel*, 1990, charcoal on paper, 42.5 x 60 in.

right: *Temple Light I*, 1990, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in.

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One recurring image for me is that of a boat, canoe, or vessel uncovered or unearthed as if from an excavation site. I made large-scale drawings using raw-earth pigments and oil paintings with this as the central image. The images emerged from layers and layers of ground pigment embedded in the surface of the large sheets of paper; the images are pulled from the dark, dense layers of color into the soft, subtle light of underground chambers. The vessel form was variously interpreted as both a funeral pyre or a mode of transportation from one world to another; a transformative form symbolizing change, transportation, and spiritual rebirth. Other recurring images are the wing and the solitary black island hovering on the horizon of the sea—again, both reflecting a sense of time and transformation.

And then, of course, my drawings made from the human figure have been a great and wonderful distraction for me during my tenure as dean. I find drawing directly from the live model like making music; the focus must be complete, and nothing else is allowed to enter. Drawing from the live figure is also a great test of perception and observation for me. I worked for years on a weekly basis in a private studio with others drawing from the model, each model more unique, wonderful, and mysterious than the next. I've made hundreds and hundreds of drawings from models over the past ten years or so. It's one of my great pleasures and luxuries, working from the figure.

On Teaching

VC: Did you teach anywhere else besides SFAI?

LT: Yes, I taught evening drawing classes at Santa Rosa Junior College for several years right after completing my graduate work here at SFAI, and then I taught drawing, painting, and printmaking for five years in the art department at Stanford during the late '80s and early '90s. I have also been a guest lecturer or visiting lecturer for short periods at numerous art schools and colleges across the country. Each place, each school, or university art department is different from the others. A university tends to have a greater cross-section of students, whereas an art school like SFAI has a more focused student body; that is, one focused primarily on the studio practice of art and not offering majors among a wide array of subjects often available on a large university campus.

However, the liberal arts component of the undergraduate program at SFAI has been significantly broadened and infused with rigor during the past decade. Students working toward their BFA degree understand the importance of the liberal arts component of the degree and have risen to the challenge of producing a writing portfolio along with their studio portfolio. Perhaps more than ever, today's students must be prepared to be articulate about their work, be armed with a knowledge of the art history informing their work, and have an ability to understand and address the cultural and social contexts in which today's artists work.

VC: What sort of student do you think the Art Institute attracts?

LT: During my tenure as dean, I've had opportunities to see many other programs and institutions and have made many visits to art schools over the years. I've also interviewed faculty and students at various art schools, and I believe I have a rather broad grasp of the differences between the various schools and

the students they attract. What I've noticed is that this school is quite different from other art schools and, consequently, attracts a different kind of student. This may sound strange, but there is a particular texture to our school, a culture that has informed and has been informed by what takes place here in this particular studio environment. There is a seriousness, an expectation of independence, a challenge, a relentless questioning and debating that takes place here. All these qualities are actually palpable and often tangible. There is also the great legacy and the great history that seem to literally permeate the walls of this great institution. I don't use the word 'great' lightly. This is a great institution, unlike any other you will visit. The educational experience that is offered at SFAI has a resonance, an echo, if you will, that resounds not only within the school itself but also beyond, in the wider community of contemporary art.

SFAI attracts students that are interested in an intense experience, in working with a group of faculty, very often on a one-to-one basis, that provide a challenge to them and push them beyond where they are or even thought they could be. We seem to exert a pull for a certain kind of student who isn't afraid to take risks. I've found that our students go beyond our expectations and come up with very interesting alternatives. They challenge us as teachers and artists. They ask, "Why? Why are we doing something this way?" I found this on our winter trip to Oaxaca this year. The trip was centered on three specific media—clay, wood, and print—yet one student wanted to make a film. So he found a postman and followed him around on his postal route for a full day, photographing the locals and scenes from this vantage point. I understand that it is quite a wonderful film. The teacher, Mildred Howard, and I were there to facilitate the students' interests, not to impede them. That's our job: to provide the atmosphere and the structures where students and teachers can come together to express their ideas and investigate things together.

VC: What do you think students want from their experience here?

LT: Students come with certain expectations of the educational experience and of the resources to support those expectations. It is our responsibility to make certain that the environment we provide is conducive and supportive to these needs and expectations. Students need technological resources, not just a classroom to work in; they need an engaged faculty who understand the complexities of their lives. They need library resources and exhibition opportunities; they want to work and study in an arena that is safe for exploration and experimentation, yet challenging and rigorous; they want to develop their craft, their work, and to feel confident that their efforts are taken seriously. They also want a well-rounded educational experience, one that combines the studio experience with academic rigor to be better prepared as professional artists once they complete their studies here at SFAI.

Students today need equipment, facilities, housing, and opportunities for work/study that will make their college experience an integrated and successful one. But, as I said, they also expect a quality education. Here at SFAI, they'll be pushed, encouraged, inspired, demanded of, or challenged in particular ways that they probably wouldn't find at another school. Students who come to SFAI expect to get the most out of their experience here; they take their education very seriously; they take advantage of the opportunities that are provided to them. You have to remember that there are many important and amazing artists who have come from this school. I doubt they would have been of the same caliber had they gone to another school.

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above: *Night Passage*, 1985, charcoal and dry pigment on paper, 80 x 128 in.

On Leadership

VC: You've been a teacher, a dean, and a president at SFAI. What propelled you into all these roles?

LT: I have always found great pleasure and satisfaction in teaching. Taking on an administrative role was not in my plan; however, given the circumstances that led to my appointment as dean back in 1993, I chose to meet the challenge presented to me at that time. I felt confident that I was capable of contributing more and, ultimately, that I would be able to make a difference in the role of dean. Taking into consideration the fact that I had been on the faculty for eight or ten years prior to my appointment, I realized that I had developed a good working relationship with my peers and that, given the opportunity, we could work together to make necessary changes in order for the school to move forward.

The previous dean, Keith Morrison, had recently left to become the dean of the creative arts program at San Francisco State University. The president here at that time, Bill Barrett, and the board of trustees decided to look within the ranks of the faculty for a new dean. Ultimately, I was appointed to the position for a period of only five years; that has now turned into 12 years.

I also served as interim president during a two-year period following Ella King Torrey's resignation. During that two-year period, I worked with Lorne Buchman, who served as the CEO of SFAI, and Chuck Collins, Chair of the

Board of Trustees. I must say, both Lorne and Chuck were invaluable to the leadership of the school during that period. I am so grateful for their support, encouragement, and wisdom.

At the beginning of 2004, Chris Bratton was appointed president, and I returned to my former position as dean. As you know, Chris has brought a renewed spirit to the institution during his first year at SFAI. There are new curricular initiatives, a new leadership team in place, plans for developing new programs and expanding the curriculum into new areas—all things that bode well for the future of SFAI. SFAI is now on the threshold of a new decade, infused with enthusiasm and inspired leadership.

Even though an administrative position was not in my original plan way back in 1993, I have received great satisfaction in my role as dean. Taking on such an important position has not only been a great honor and privilege for me, but it has also been immensely rewarding in ways that one could never imagine.

VC: What have been the achievements you'd like to be remembered for here?

LT: Well, I'm most proud of the academic successes we have made during my tenure as dean. The new Summer MFA Program was established four years ago with great success, meeting the projected goals each year and leveling out at the size and scope initially intended. This program, led by Pegan Brooke, is the only program of its kind on the West Coast and has served an important student population previously underserved. Additionally, this past year we instituted the new Centers for Interdisciplinary Study, a major curricular initiative that significantly broadens the educational program at SFAI and repositions it for the next decade. The establishment of the Design+Technology Department (formerly the Center for Digital Media), led by Paul Klein, represents a major innovation for SFAI. The new Digital Imaging Lab, initially established through the efforts of Jack Fulton and the Digital Darkroom, and its role in providing the highest quality digital print processes for students and artists in the community, is another important accomplishment. The establishment of the writing program supporting undergraduate liberal arts students is yet another significant achievement; the new Center for Individual Learning, which provides a writing lab and individual tutors for students with special needs, is another important addition to our academic programs. Also, very important to the future of SFAI, we successfully completed two re-accreditation reviews, one with the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) and another with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). These reviews represent significant institutional planning, self-review, and assessment.

There is still much to be accomplished but, looking back over the past decade, I am very pleased with all the progress that has been made collaboratively and with the various changes that have been put in place to better position our programs for the future and for the competitive market.

VC: What experiences are especially memorable for you?

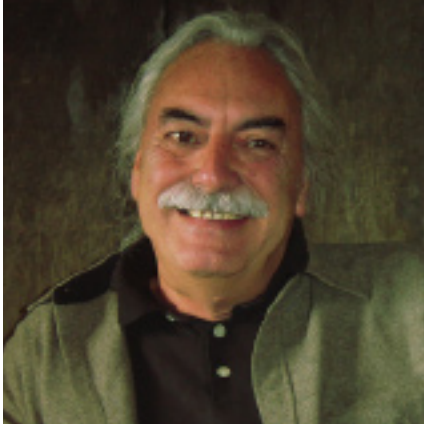
LT: I was fortunate to be invited to participate in several studies reviewing the development of educational programs in other countries. One was a project funded by the Ford Foundation which took a group of about 25 professionals

New Scholarship Fund Honors Larry Thomas

SFAI is proud to announce the 2005 launching of the Thomas Scholarship Fund in honor of retiring Dean of Academic Affairs Larry Thomas. Dean Thomas led the San Francisco Art Institute for over 12 years, presiding over the school's commitment to challenging the traditional notions of creative excellence, critical thinking, and the role of the artist in contemporary society. He had also served on the faculty at SFAI and is a graduate of the school (MFA, 1979, Printmaking).

An advocate for diversity as a fundamental value of the Institute, Dean Thomas was particularly attentive to the goal of creating and supporting a diverse creative community. The Thomas Scholarship is intended as an encouragement to those students who—whether because of race, ethnicity, gender, or economic circumstance—have had limited educational opportunity in the arts.

Students will be identified for consideration through the Institute's national and international student recruitment program. Applicants will be evaluated through an interview process on two criteria: their capacity for critical thinking and potential for creative accomplishment.



The scholarship is awarded annually in the amount of \$12,500 to two (2) incoming undergraduate students and is renewable for up to four years for a total of \$50,000. In addition, Thomas Scholars will be paired with faculty mentors for the duration of their term of study at the San Francisco Art Institute. Faculty will be carefully selected as Thomas Scholar Mentors based on their demonstrated commitment to supporting the values and ideals that have exemplified Dean Thomas's tenure at the Institute.

For further information about the Fund and how to contribute to it, please contact SFAI's Vice President of Advancement, Lisa James, at 415.749.4582 or ljames@sfai.edu.

from the fields of art, music, dance, folk traditions, crafts, etc. to China to evaluate and study a new university-based program being implemented to ensure the preservation of the traditional arts, crafts, music, and dance of the various tribal cultures in the southern Chinese province of Yunan. This was an extraordinary experience, working with professionals from all parts of the world to evaluate a program of enormous importance for the future of the traditional crafts and arts of this region of China.

Another important project was the invitation to assist in the establishment of a printmaking facility in Amman, Jordan through the National Museum of Art. I worked with students and professionals setting up a new facility to enable the teaching and production of fine prints through the museum. I was part of this project over a period of several months, and was able to establish significant connections and friendships in the Middle East through this project. Another aspect of this same project involved the evaluation of the fine arts program at the University of Damascus, Syria, an ancient university steeped in tradition and extremely insular in its approach to art and artmaking. This was perhaps one of the most interesting and rewarding experiences I have had during my tenure as dean.

Finally, closer to home, I've been very pleased to be a part of establishing various partnerships with SFAI in the San Francisco Bay Area through internships and collaborative arrangements with several arts organizations, including the Exploratorium, San Francisco Center for the Book, Arion Press, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Bay Area Video Coalition, Film Arts Foundation, Headlands Center for the Arts, etc., all of which benefit our educational programs at SFAI.

On Retirement

VC: What does the future hold for a retired Larry Thomas?

LT: I have many projects that have been "on hold" in my studio, which is outside of Fort Bragg in Mendocino County. I'll be working on those projects, doing a residency in Oregon in the fall, and becoming more involved with the Alliance of Artists Communities, a national board with member organizations representing over 250 residency programs throughout the US. I'm also involved with the Alliance of Artists Communities in Montana with my friend Anne Appleby; the Alliance provides opportunities for graduating MFA students from SFAI as well as other schools across the country. There will not be a shortage of projects for me to work on after leaving SFAI.

But first, I'm planning to take a solo trip as a symbolic acknowledgment of this moment in my life. It might very well be a trip to the desert, which has always been a healing, inspiring, and rejuvenating place for me.

I know I leave the Institute in good hands. We have named a new dean [Nigerian-born curator, commentator, and critic Okwui Enwezor], and we have new executive leadership in our key areas: academic planning, marketing and communications, human resources, institutional advancement, finance, and enrollment. We have a growing Board of Trustees and major curricular initiatives under way. I am confident the San Francisco Art Institute of the future will be an amazing community of artists and leaders, as it has been since 1871.

—Interview conducted by Victoria Cooper