

Wild Horses

A Professor's Passion for Art and Education

By Paul Tumarkin, UA External Relations

It's Monday at 1:10 in the afternoon in Sheila Pitt's undergraduate art class, Relief Printmaking.

"Are you sure you want it to look like a clock? Is that too literal?"

Pitt, University of Arizona School of Art professor challenges her undergraduate studio art student, Mora Kelleher-Smith, as they contemplate Mora's latest sketch. Pitt taught the first freshman art class Kelleher-Smith took, Drawing 101, and is now teaching her last art class before she graduates.

As they look together at the image, a complex pencil rendering that resembles an abstract clock tower, Pitt challenges Kelleher-Smith's thinking, forcing her to consider her perspective and think more deeply about her subject.

Pitt then moves on to another student. "How about you?"

Kelsey Dieterich, another undergraduate studio art major, holds up her page, dominated by a round, whimsical face colored green with a stitched-on grin. "I feel like they're drawings from my subconscious," says Dieterich. "They're pure to me because I don't know what they're going to be. I think it'd be cool to make a print of it and do a collage of a bunch of little ones. Once I got started I had a million ideas."

"I love that idea," Pitt says. "What about doing it as a print of you with these images all around it?"

Pitt sees to the core of the Dieterich's idea – that the faces are reflections of the artist's mind – and helps her bring the truth to the surface. As she moves around the room, working closely with each individual, you focus on her quiet manner and the direct, no-nonsense way she challenges each student's thinking.

While you took notice at first, you now don't think twice about the fact that she is in a wheelchair.

In the winter of 2008 while riding her horse, Donovan, he tripped, sending Pitt over his head, breaking her neck and stretching her spinal cord, leaving her paralyzed from the neck down. Since then, she has undergone

surgery and two years of hard rehabilitation. The progress has been slow and difficult, but her determination, like her creative passion, is paying off. Today, Pitt can make small motions with her left hand, allowing her to steer her chair and begin creating art again.



Prior to her accident Pitt did woodcut printmaking, an art form that requires strong, steady hands to create detailed cutouts in wood blocks. Now, she sketches images with the help of her computer, a tablet and a stylus. Once she creates an image, an assistant prints it and makes it into an etching on a plate, which is then used to make the final print.

“When I started, my arm wouldn't go where I wanted it to go,” Pitt says. “My lines were all diagonal. I could only change lines by turning the image. Today I can draw, but they're kind of weird lines. They're a little erratic, but that's where I'm at. I'm working in small scale.”

While her earlier work focused on images of horses, her art today reflects her experience as a quadriplegic, combining themes of pain and frustration with a determination to move forward. She has two pieces in a show in California, another in a Boston Printmakers Association touring exhibition, and more in an international show in Bulgaria.

“It's beginning work,” she says. “The content is just starting to be developed. I'm using the images as a visual diary. It's all about what's happened.”

Pitt describes her work as not easy, occasionally satisfying, and generally frustrating. But her resolve is absolute. Today, using braces and a walker, she can now walk the length of a football field.

She has by no means faced this challenge alone. She attributes her successful return to a dedicated, caring support team. People like Art School Director Dennis Jones, her part-time assistant Aaron Miller, and the team at the [University of Arizona Disability Resource Center](#) have all played key roles in making it possible for Pitt to come back, ensuring that she had the studio assistance and resources she needed to not only teach, but start creating artwork again.

“The support from the faculty and my family when I was first injured was so overwhelming that it put a lot of pressure on me to get better,” she says. “It was more important than I ever realized that it could be. I couldn't disappoint everybody. I had to get better.”

One of those people who Pitt hasn't disappointed is Mora Kelleher-Smith, who will graduate this May with a double-major in studio art and Spanish.

“I decided to major in art specifically because of Sheila Pitt,” she remembers. “At the beginning, I thought she was really hard, but her confidence in me has given me confidence in myself. She has taught me that I can always do better.”

