

Bonnie Sklarski

Professor of Fine Arts

Bonnie Sklarski grew up in the country outside Buffalo where at the age of 10 she received a scholarship to take art classes at the Allbright Knox Center at the University of Buffalo. She took classes there until she was 15. She credits this for her first real eye-opening exposure to life outside her rural upbringing and to her first awareness of art as something you could do and as something to aspire to. When Bonnie was old enough, she would take a bus into the classes on Saturday mornings and afterwards would wander around the bookstores and shops in Buffalo. She loved the sense of urbanness. She had a teacher there who had gone to Pratt in New York and this led her to apply for and receive a scholarship to Pratt. Bonnie went on to attend the Yale Norfolk program and she went to Brooklyn College for her M.F.A. These early experiences helped her to realize how effective a teacher can be and how exposure, encouragement, and inspiration can help a young person down a path he or she could not have earlier imagined.

Bonnie started teaching at Indiana University in 1970. She was the first female tenure-track professor in painting and eventually, with Joan Sterrenberg, the third woman to get tenure in the whole department. For women who came of age studying with a ratio of about five-to-one male-to-female professors, female professors like Bonnie stood out and were sources of inspiration.

The '70s and '80s were a period when many M.F.A. programs across the country were just coming into being and certain departments developed a reputation. IU's painting program was known as one of the best figurative painting programs in the country. Bonnie, who was exhibiting her work at Schoelkopf Gallery, a leading figurative gallery in New York, was one of the reasons for the school's reputation.

When Bonnie came to Indiana, she had never been to the Midwest and she imagined wide-open plains and also that Indiana was further west than it really is. At her interview she told Jim McGarrell that she "wanted to see the prairie dogs." She found, as have many who have come here from a coast, that this is actually a great place to work and a great place to try to define the art world in one's own terms, with a little bit of healthy distance and skepticism. She also found it a rich environment intellectually. Coming from an art school background and being at a university brought her a sense of the richness that a liberal arts education can offer to someone interested in fine art: that ideas gleaned from the study of literature, philosophy, and science can fuel the studio work.

Bonnie has developed expertise in areas where there is a body of knowledge that can be passed on. Her anatomy class has been legendary and almost a rite of passage for anyone who has studied at IU. Part of what motivated Bonnie to study and teach anatomy is her dedication to trying to find for herself universal truths, a sense of art resting on foundations. The fluid knowledge of anatomy is a hard won thing. Anyone who has

studied it knows how elusive it can be. Bonnie's ease with the subject and her ability to share her knowledge while making it fun are going to be irreplaceable. Bonnie has also initiated courses in portrait painting in which she delved into actual techniques and palettes that have been used through the centuries. She put together a composition class, which is a study of how artists invest their paintings with meaning through the way they put their paintings together. And more recently she has developed a watercolor class for the graduate students.

Although she did not find prairie dogs when she came out to Indiana, Bonnie did find the quarries. Her desire to understand the landscape she is painting led her to take classes in geology, which she considers to be for the landscape painter what anatomy is to the figurative artist. Her early figurative paintings show a fascination with this landscape and with her study of geology. They also show her fascination with the idea of origins.

As a landscape painter Bonnie has pursued terrain of difficult and exotic proportions. She is a great admirer of the nineteenth-century American Luminist painter Frederic Church. In 1973 she followed his route through South America, painting landscapes at each of the spots that he painted as she went. In 1976 she was hired by the Arabian American Oil Company to paint the Arabian Desert. On that trip she also painted in Iran and Afghanistan. She has made painting trips to the western United States and to Chile. In 2004 she went to Scotland. These have been physically arduous journeys, quests almost, to get an empirical understanding of her subject matter.

Bonnie's rich sense of landscape led to a number of paintings in the '90s that made a connection between the figure and the landscape in a metaphorical sense. These are serious paintings but they are not without an undercurrent of humor. A version of Dionysus is subtitled *Undergraduate Education*. The idea is that Dionysus represents both the constructive and destructive forces needed for creativity. Obviously Dionysus is the typical art student.

Anyone who knows Bonnie even slightly knows she is an avid gardener. Bonnie's more recent paintings have been floral and botanical paintings. The kinds of archetypal ideas—growth and decay, life's transience, a love of science and myth—are as present in these paintings as they were in the landscapes, but the setting is more intimate, and in some ways more tactile.

So in conclusion I would like to thank Bonnie for having tended her garden with us. Hopefully it has strong roots at this point and we will be able to continue to make it flower.

~Eve Mansdorf