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Kitchen Sink Theory: Ken Kewley

Posted on [March 29, 2016](#) by [LIZ AYERLE](#)

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"The statements, 'You cannot make it up' and 'You must make it up' are both true. We must let both guide us. What we put down on our paper are real things that we can adjust just as we adjust objects in a still life."

~Ken Kewley

Sample of student work – Day 1

Recently I had the opportunity to take a weekend workshop with Pennsylvania artist Ken Kewley hosted by the painting department at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Kewley is known for applying paint with a palette knife in broad flat expanses of color and more recently for his work with paper collage. The workshop was called *Observing Abstraction, Constructing Subject* and that is just what we did.

If you take a workshop with Kewley, come prepared to work the steps and work hard. He began day one with a quick introduction to a few simple tools and then we got right down to business.

Comprised of a series of exercises the workshop takes you from simple line drawings all the way through cardboard sculpture. Each task calls for a slightly different approach to composition progressing from one focus to another, for this reason Kewley is a stickler for the rules. Over the course of two days we examined scale, line and color working with a pen, straight edge, circle template and swatches of painted paper. We started with simple 1" x 1" linear compositions then moved onto 2" x 2" collages, sketching the figure, sculpting the figure and finally sketching and collaging from both our work and the work of fellow students. At each stage we were asked to work and then rework in a constant examination of color and shape.

Liz's cardboard sculpture and collage from the sculpture. (Day 2)

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My favorite parts were the lunch breaks when Kewley sat us down for slide presentations. While munching on sandwiches from Tableau (<https://www.pafa.org/visit/pafacafe>) we were treated to Ken's unexpectedly charming stop motion animations often set to the soundtrack of his daughter Clara playing the viola. These videos featured line drawn figures rotating, a childhood flip book of the artist's dog and *101 bunches of grapes* (images of grapes cropped from works by George Braque (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Braque), one of Kewley's favorite artists)

Pulled from Kewley's mind, *Kitchen Sink Theory* (below) is an animation that perfectly illustrates his way of thinking through composition in just two short minutes.

(Video by artist Ken Kewley shared with ProximityArts.org)

Although my work is very different than Kewley's, I came away with these and many other valuable lessons.

- When making art you should think through composition in terms of basic shape before progressing on in too much detail.
- Any work can be brought back to life if you react to what is there and don't become overly attached to individual elements.
- Possibilities are limitless. You could work for a lifetime with nothing more than a straight edge and pen and still have a fulfilling art career.
- Working from life can mean a lot of things.

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It doesn't hurt that after only two days we each left with hundreds of small individual pieces. *Observing Abstraction, Constructing Subject* pushed us to create and react without over thinking, a lesson all artists love to re-learn from time to time.



Image from www.kenkewley.com

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For more reading on Ken Kewley's work check out the artist's website (<http://www.kenkewley.com/>), Ken Kewley – Notes on Color (<http://paintingperceptions.com/ken-kewley-writings-on-color/>) from paintingperceptions.com and Notes on Color and Composition (<http://www.powersofobservation.com/2014/01/ken-kewley-notes-on-color-and.html>) from Powersofobservation.com or through the Gross McCleaf Gallery (<http://www.grossmccleaf.com/artistpages/kewley1.html>).

Article by Liz Ayerle – For more about Liz see our contributors page (<https://proximityarts.org/contributors/>).

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