

A Day in the Life of an Artist

WENDY SHALEN

By Wende Caporale

Later this month, Prince Street Gallery in New York City will feature the work of Wendy Shalen in an exhibition titled *Family Matters*. What is particularly intriguing is how the artist explores figurative work using a wide variety of media. Shalen's work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions since 1980.

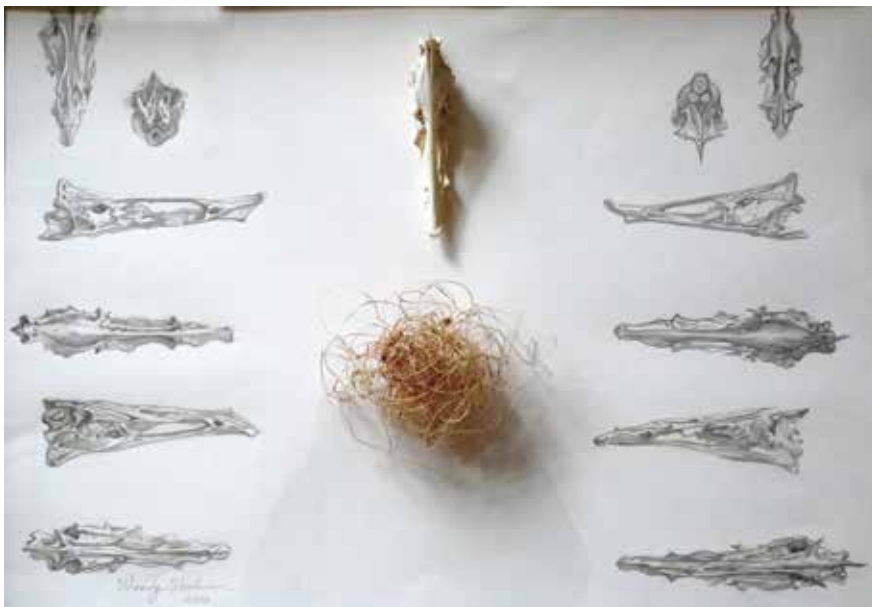
She was educated at Brandeis University in Massachusetts and Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois, and spent her junior year in Paris immersing herself in the study of art history and French while traveling extensively. She particularly became enamored of the work of Degas and Ingres both of whom would later influence her work. It was at this time that the nucleus of Shalen's interest in art began to take shape while she simultaneously developed a lifelong passion for the culture and history of France. She has returned

many times to study including the most recent experience at a workshop at Studio Escalier in Paris. Her figurative drawings done with limited color are delicately beautiful. At various times during her career Shalen has also studied at the Art Students League, National Academy and in private workshops in New York with Robert Beverly Hale, Harvey Dinnerstein, Burt Silverman, and Daniel Greene.

The drive up the hill through a natural landscape reveals a large, beautiful home. Shalen and her husband, Stephen, a retired lawyer, moved here after raising their twins, Samantha and Luke, in the Bedford area. Their home is decorated with items from their diverse travels and original art their family has collected. In the study are paintings that were part of Shalen's parents' collection as well as a lovely group of small, colorful landscapes

that I am surprised to find were done by Shalen in oil using a palette knife. This is only one of the surprises I will encounter as the afternoon unfolds. Although Shalen is known for her figurative drawings, her work also encompasses still life, landscapes, abstraction and multimedia works.

As an art history major, Shalen acknowledges influences formulated particularly during her junior year abroad in France. When she returned after her period of study, she transferred to Brandeis University to continue her education and to be closer to Stephen, who would later become her husband, while he pursued a Harvard law degree. At Brandeis, this coincided with working on two theses; one on Roman fresco paintings from (the Villa dei Misteri) Boscoreale and another on Greek funerary urns called white ground lekythos. The year following graduation, Shalen taught art to seventh, eighth and ninth graders outside of Boston using studio art techniques with art historical references. When she and Stephen later moved to New York City, she taught at The Birch Wathen School (now called The Birch Wathen Lenox School) teaching classes in French, photography, ceramics, drawing and interdisciplinary humanities. Passionate about bringing history and art together, Shalen created the humanities class so the students could learn about the history of art and studio techniques for each period from pre-history through the 20th century. She encouraged students to simulate the ancient techniques: cave paintings on sandpaper, sugar cube pyramids, Greek vases utilizing the Achilles Painter's contour line and copper foil stained glass windows. Shalen recalls "I taught Roman, Southern and Northern Gothic and Celtic calligraphy while students studied Roman lettering, medieval and Irish illuminated manuscripts...it was such an inspiring class to teach and develop!" Shalen would eventually become the head of the department, teaching at Birch Wathen for six years before having



Washed Ashore, silverpoint on prepared paper, skull, nylon fishing line, 14½ x 21½"



Menemsha Reflections, Self-Portrait, pastel on paper, 28 x 17"

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twins in 1980. When her children were very young, she studied privately and simultaneously offered classes at local art centers in New York and Connecticut.

The inspiration for her current show began with her 101-year-old mother who has Alzheimer's, which requires 24-hour care. Shalen recalls her mother's larger-than-life personality, which now seems part of a distant past. Her father was an amateur artist whose work inspired his daughter. Shalen's intent to create beauty in these works is evident in the masterly manipulation of techniques to represent the various members of her family. We enter the dining room where many of the works for Shalen's upcoming show are framed and stacked against

the walls. There is a vibrant watercolor of Samantha cradling Mia, the Shalens' first grandchild. Two life-size companion portraits are of the artist's parents around the time of their marriage. These works represent a departure for the artist, who mainly works from life. Nonetheless, these portraits are infused with the understanding and sensitivity that only comes with experience. There is a drawing of her son, Luke, and another of Stephen holding their daughter, Samantha, as an infant. Downstairs in the studio, the artist pulls out a large folder of figurative work that she had done at a recent intensive workshop at Studio Escalier that includes several exquisitely rendered figures in varying degrees of finish. Shalen's

formal education has been ongoing while her curiosity had led to continually exploring new materials and techniques.

The studio encompasses the entire lower level of the house with sliding doors overlooking the lake. The vast studio has work stations for the variety of materials Shalen employs and it includes space for her private classes. For the exhibition *Family Matters*, the work includes graphite on paper, etchings, lithographs, silkscreen, watercolour paintings, silverpoint, monoprints and handmade papers. She acknowledges that it is challenging to select the right medium for a specific project. Her other area of concern is that with so many influences, she hopes the body of work appears cohesive. Shalen credits Hans Hofmann's book

Search for the Real with providing the context in which she finds her aesthetic. With my curiosity piqued, Shalen leads me to the area where she is experimenting with handmade paper embossed with designs utilizing her grandmother's lace. The artist patiently attempts to explain the process that seems both delicate and complicated. She further experiments with creating collages that include bits of lace, paintings and drawings. Showing me a stack of old watercolor paintings, she will recycle them by shredding and processing the material in a blender with water and formation aid to create a pulp. This material is laid on a screen and dried using a vacuum and a drying box. Other variations of this method yield beautiful handmade paper landscapes the artist prepared by using a turkey baster filled with tinted pulp to create arbitrarily colourful paintings that she dries outdoors. Leading me to another area, the artist shows me copper and Plexiglas plates on which she has drawn to produce several different drypoint etchings that will also be in the show. Her intention is to produce a series in each medium.

Another subject that the artist recently explored was what she refers to as her environmental work. She became aware of garbage thrown out of cars on local roads and was additionally chagrined to see waste strewn on a pristine beach on Martha's Vineyard early in the morning and later realizing that it was washed out to sea. The artist feels "we're destroying the environment by our actions" and wanted to create a series to bring this subject to the forefront of the public's attention. Her *Trash Series* involves still lifes interspersed with nature. One features a bird's skull surrounded by fishing net, which she found on a beach on Martha's Vineyard. Another work suggests the terrible damage left by the BP oil spill. Shalen's intent was to create "strong drawings that make a statement." What she finds appealing is the contrast; the juxtaposition of beauty and what is repellant made beautiful through design and composition.



Samantha Focused, silverpoint on prepared paper, 14 x 10"




Dawn, pastel on paper, 19 x 25"

For many years, Shalen maintained a rigorous schedule teaching drawing and painting; Saturdays at the Vytlačil Campus of the Art Students League and two additional days at their headquarters in New York City. In addition, she taught at Silvermine Center for the Arts in Connecticut, held classes privately in her studio and arranged specific workshops. She has since tailored her schedule to focus on classes at the Art Students League; a five-day per week class, which she attends two evenings with monitors there the remaining three days. She chose to work Monday and Thursday evenings, which allows her those mornings and two consecutive days in her studio to do her own work. Shalen's considerable energy is also reflected in the development of four- and five-day workshops at the League. These include: French Inspired Drawing (in the studio

from a model and in the Metropolitan Museum's Drawing Study Room), Portfolio Development Workshops in Self-portraiture and Landscape Drawing & Painting in Central Park. Upcoming: July 7 to 10: Landscape in Central Park, and July 14 to 17: Self-portraiture, which also includes a visit to the Metropolitan Museum to draw from master landscapes and self-portraits. Another area of emphasis for Shalen has been her work with students toward portfolio development, which has been an ongoing pursuit. Most of her private students have been admitted to the colleges of their choice as undergrads or graduate students in many of the most prestigious art institutions. She has found their gratitude, especially after they have begun their programs, to be particularly rewarding.

With the upcoming Prince Street Gallery exhibition, Shalen has spent every

waking moment developing the concept *Family Matters* and trying to decide how to create a cohesive body of work using such a variety of techniques. This is what she finds particularly challenging as she agonizes over the work and how best to reflect her intention. To see more of her work, visit www.wendyshalen.com. 

Wende Caporale is a highly successful artist whose portraits are always in great demand. Her biography and list of awards and accomplishments runs to many pages. As you'll read in this ongoing series, Wende's proactive approach to work and life make her the ideal columnist for the subject every artist has to face on a daily basis.

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