

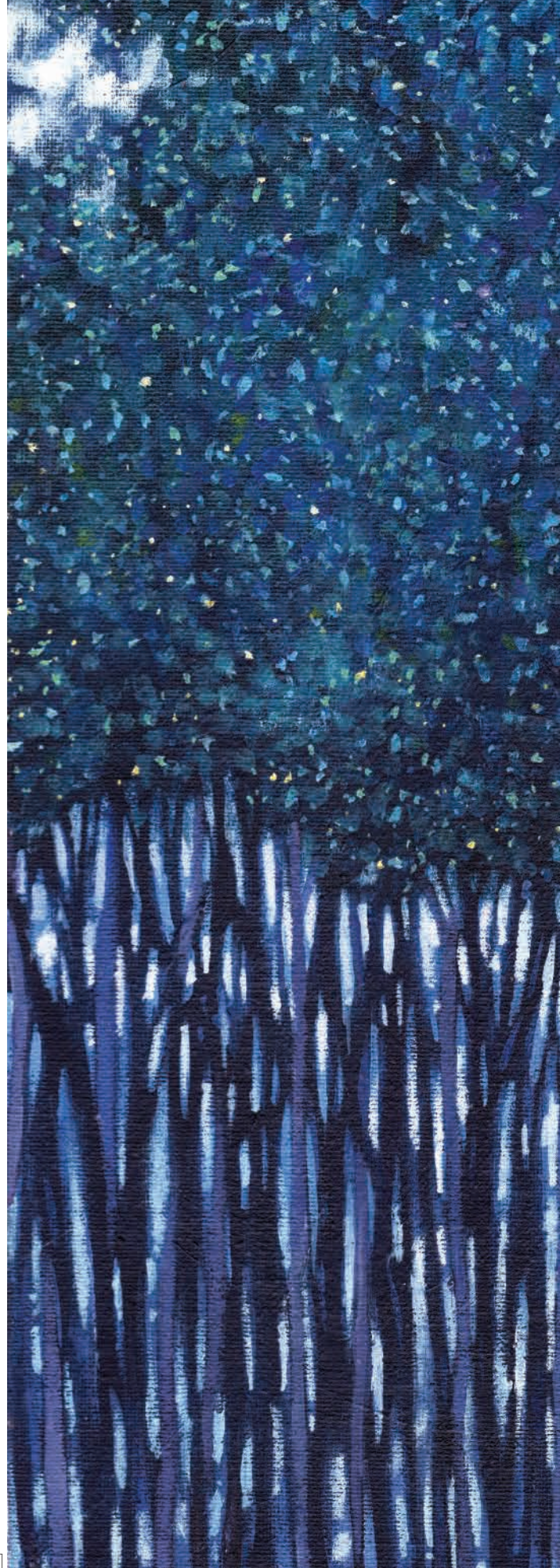
BY GIGI ROSENBERG

It all started seven years ago, when Matt Fussell, then a high school art teacher, recorded one of his classroom demonstrations for his students. He wanted to show them how to paint a portrait using oils so he filmed himself painting his daughter. He burned DVDs of the demonstration for his students so that year after year, they all saw the same demo. When he tired of burning DVDs, he built a website where he uploaded the demonstration videos so his students could access them online.

THE VIRTUAL ART TEACHER

TAKE YOUR TEACHING INTO THE WORLD

[1] *Blue Trees #7*, 2008, by Greg Houston. Acrylic on canvas board, 12" x 16". Copyright © 2008 Greg Houston. Used by permission of the artist. [2] Matt Fussell prepares a new video. [1]





One day, when his site crashed because of so many downloads, “that’s when I knew I was going somewhere,” said Fussell, whose audience has expanded far beyond those first high school art students. Then, when people started asking to watch the videos in a specific order, he developed courses, and in 2010, the Virtual Instructor was born.

Two years ago, Fussell quit teaching to devote himself full-time to online art instruction at virtualinstructor.com. Two of the reasons for his success are that he’s the only teacher, and he offers instruction on a variety of subjects including colored pencil, pastels, oil painting, portraiture, landscape and still life.

In 2012, Fussell launched a membership program and since then has had about 7,000 members with the number of paying members ranging from 4,000 to 5,500 at any one time. The same year, he added a weekly “live” lesson to the mix.

“The first time I did a live lesson, I’m pretty sure nobody was watching,” Fussell said. “Over time, more and more students started showing up.” You can catch his live lessons now at 8 p.m. EST most Thursday evenings.

Because of his teaching background, Fussell was able to design his courses to cater to people with different learning styles. In addition to the instructional videos and the “live” classes, he offers e-books to accompany each course. The e-books contain stills from the class and written instructions for those who prefer to read a lesson. For teachers who are members, he offers PowerPoint slides, handouts and student examples they can use in their own classrooms.

“You have to understand your audience,” he said. The live class is for “people who want to see every mark and hear every comment.” Others prefer a shorter class that’s been edited down from a two- or three-hour process, and some like to learn from a book.

Running your own business as an online art instructor is not for everyone. “I work nonstop,” Fussell said. By mid-September, he had already produced 10 videos just since the beginning of that month. He does everything himself, from the shooting and editing to creating the e-books. He also offers a “Members Minute,” where members can write in or audio record a question for him to answer. On Wednesdays, he posts a critique of members’ work.

Fussell still gets nervous a few minutes before his live classes because he never knows exactly how the class will go. Also, in his home studio, sometimes the dog barks, or one of his three children, ranging in age from 1-12, yell in the background, bugs fly in. A few times, a light has fallen.

But even the mistakes that can happen in a live class can be used as learning experiences, he said. “When you’re live, you have to have the confidence that the demonstration is going to work out. And when they don’t work out, it’s OK to say, ‘I wish I did this. Or I don’t like this.’” When you’re a professional artist “it’s a



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constant battle deciding if what you’re doing is working or not,” Fussell said. Showing the mistakes and disappointing results in a live class benefit students as much as the perfect results.

When Fussell began the membership program, he charged \$19.95/year for access to all his materials. As his program grew, he’s increased fees to \$19/month or \$97/year. He lets prospective members opt for a trial membership (\$1 for seven days).

He offers the trial membership, he said, because “it’s hard to explain all the content. The only way to show people is to have that trial period.” If

you join after the trial period, you can download the videos, an important feature for people who live in areas with spotty Internet connection where live streaming isn’t reliable.

BREAK IN AS A VIRTUAL TEACHER

Starting your own business isn’t the only way to become an online instructor.

Abstract artist Debora Stewart (deboralstewart.com) was working as a middle school counselor and art teacher when she decided that she wanted to make more income from the art career that she’d always nurtured



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3 *Creeper Trail*, 2014, by Matt Fussell. Oil pastel on paper, 11" x 7". Copyright © 2014 Matt Fussell. Used by permission of the artist. 4 *Firmament*, 2015, by Debora L. Stewart. Acrylic on canvas, 30" x 30". Copyright © Debora L. Stewart. Used by permission of the artist. 5 Debora Stewart poses for photos to go with her instructional video. 6 *Security Blanket*, 2013, by Matt Fussell. Graphite on illustration board, 13.5" x 11.5". Copyright © 2013 Matt Fussell. Used by permission of the artist.



but never pursued full time. She sent a book proposal to North Light Shop Books (part of F+W Media Inc.), and they published her book, *Abstract Art Painting*:



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Expressions in Mixed Media, last April.

The book led to her pitching an instructional video series that was produced by ArtistsNetwork.tv (a division of F+W Media) and included four classes on different aspects of abstract painting: for the beginner, with flowers, with portraits, and one exploring composition and color in abstract art.

To prepare for the video shoot, she planned each lesson and then worked

with a producer over the phone to shape and review the lessons. Then, Stewart recorded herself in her own studio practicing the demos. At F+W Media headquarters, they filmed one lesson per day for four days, and then on the last day, they filmed an interview with Stewart that prospective students can watch.

Stewart received a flat fee for the shoot and receives royalties dependent on how many of her videos sell. Stewart has since quit her teaching job at the middle school and now travels the country teaching workshops at art centers and societies.

To market her workshops, she advertises in *Pastel Journal* (An F+W Media magazine) and posts to social media. Both the book and the instructional videos are also excellent marketing tools for booking and filling her workshops.

Like Fussell, Stewart was an experienced teacher before she became an online instructor. "I enjoy seeing people have

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aha moments and telling me that at first it was a mysterious process, but now they know how to get started and go about it," Stewart said.

ArtistsNetwork.tv videos can be purchased individually for \$16.99 or accessed with a monthly membership fee of \$19.99 or yearly membership fee of \$199.99.

ARTISTS CAN PITCH OR GET DISCOVERED

Illustrator Greg Houston (greghoustonillustration.com) wasn't looking for work as an online instructor when a colleague at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) referred him to Craftsy (craftsy.com), a company that produces and sells online classes on many arts and crafts subjects including painting, drawing and photography.

Houston pitched two ideas to Craftsy, and they chose to have him teach a seven-part series titled "The Imagined Landscape in Acrylics." Houston holds a BFA from Pratt Institute and had

taught illustration at MICA since 2006. He's won awards from the American Advertising Federation and has years of real world experience as a professional illustrator for magazines, film and the music industry. But he had never thought to leverage his experience in a virtual classroom.

"The shoot was one of the best working experiences I've ever had," Houston said. They shot the series in two and a half days. The crew was helpful and supportive so "it was hard not to do well," he said.

To prepare for the shoot, Houston had several calls with a producer where they shaped the lessons and then did a run-through over the phone. After the shoot, Houston was consulted on choice of music, editing, and the open and close of the video.

Houston received a flat fee for the recording and agreed to answer questions online at Craftsy for a year. In addition to the one-time fee, Houston receives a royalty check every quarter based on a percentage of how many of his videos sell. In the past year, he's had almost 2,000 students take his course. Craftsy instructional videos sell individually for between \$19.99 and \$49.99.

This fall, Houston and two colleagues opened The Baltimore Academy of Illustration (baltimoreillustration.com), where they're considering adding online instruction to the mix so they can reach out to more students.

Azara Golston, the acquisitions editor in the painting category at Craftsy, spends her days fielding pitches from prospective teachers and actively looking for instructors. The best candidates, she said, are experienced teachers who are already running workshops and have an active social media network. The ideal teacher "is someone comfortable getting up in front of people, who can perform and understands how to keep the flow going," Golston said.

Preparing to shoot a video at Craftsy is about a three-month process, Golston said. "At each phase of the process, we have a specialist working with the teacher to narrow the focus and keep it at the right ability level."

Craftsy staff work with teachers to help them clarify the key points in each lesson and plan the lesson to fit the students' level, which ranges from beginning to advanced. Then, the instructor creates a concise lesson outline from beginning to end. The lesson includes demonstrations,



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variations of a technique and troubleshooting.

The final script is not word for word but “it’s a detailed skeleton structure,” Golston said. During the shoot, the instructor then elaborates on the outline, which allows for moments of spontaneity.

Teaching an instructional video is “great for someone who feels confident and understands where they fit into the broader context of painting and feels secure about where they are,” Golston said. “It’s also a great opportunity to get your name out there and put yourself

in front of people who are passionate and want to learn more.”

When Golston looks for teachers “above all else we’re looking for people who are passionate about what they do and have dedicated a significant amount of time to finding their own voice, perfecting their own voice and who deeply understand their

materials. Do they love it? Have they loved it for years?” These are Golston’s considerations when evaluating potential online instructors.

The preparation process is time consuming, Golston said, but then once the video is made and the first flood of online questions subsides, instructors can enjoy passive income.

MAKE A PRACTICE VIDEO

If you’re interested in testing the waters as a teacher of an instructional video, one first step would be to plan a lesson

on a specific topic. (For ideas, you can browse the websites of the companies mentioned in this article.) Then, set up your tripod, a simple video camera and shoot a lesson in your studio. Make sure to get a few angles: you talking to the camera and close-ups of your easel or desk. You could stream live on YouTube or you can edit it, post it and share it on social media.

Stewart said that making a first practice video is a great way to test the waters. “See what kind of reaction you get,” she said. “How do people respond?” If you like the experience and receive positive comments, it may be time to pitch your idea to an acquisitions editor. **PA**

Gigi Rosenberg is the editor of Professional Artist. She’s also an artist coach and the author of The Artist’s Guide to Grant Writing (Watson-Guptill, 2010). She’s been a guest commentator on Oregon Public Broadcasting, performed at Seattle’s On The Boards, and been published by Seal Press, Poets & Writers, and Psychology Today. For the latest, visit gigirosenberg.com or reach her at grosenberg@professionalartistmag.com.