

Special Topics: Al Aire Libre

Course Information

Course Title: Al Aire Libre

Course Section Art 3307

Course location: El Paso and surrounding environs

Course Meeting Times: Fridays 11:30am - 5:20pm

Instructor Contact Information

Instructor's Name: Tom Birkner

Instructor's Office Hours: M/W 11:00am-12:pm and by appointment

Instructor's email: tabirkner@utep.edu

Instructor's Phone: 747-7839 (office), (917) 902-2059 (mobile)

Instructor's Introduction

Tom Birkner, B.A. Rutgers University, M.F.A. The Pennsylvania State University, is an Assistant Professor of Art and a recent member of the Department of Art faculty. Tom previously taught at Drew University, Madison, NJ and at Parsons The New School for Design in NY and Paris. His paintings are widely exhibited and he is represented by Paul Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco, and Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe.

Course Description

Al Aire Libre takes painting out of the confines of the studio and places it in the world. With the cityscape as its central subject, painting will take place outside in various locations throughout El Paso. Each week will be in a different location.

Work is based on direct observation, however, a significant aspect of that observation is how it is interpreted in individualized ways. As the complexities of the world surrounding us are rich with meaning, the intention of this course is to see and represent that meaning through subjective perspectives. In other words, there will be a live interface between you, your painting and the world; how that relationship emerges should be as unique and varied as the way you see it.

Potential Outcomes

The importance of what will be covered forms a long list. Here are some of the things you can expect this course to offer:

It will enliven your experience of painting.

It will make you notice the world around you.

It will force you to accommodate changing conditions.

It will introduce color that is alive.

It will show you light that is physically real.

It will afford you the chance to race against the Sun (you'll understand soon enough)

It will give you the chance to watch a freight train go by.

It will get you out of the habit of painting while sitting.
It will produce marks that are born of chaos.
It will improve your focus.
It will introduce the element of chance.
It will teach you to work quickly.
It will let you see that failure is OK.
It will also possibly reveal successes that at first seemed like failures.
It will engage you in a practice that few take seriously in high art circles.
(which is exactly why we should do it)
It will bring a unique perspective to your work in the studio.
It will offer you an awareness of the movement of time.
It will challenge you to consider the concept of 'motion'.
It will develop your sense of memory.
It will be totally frustrating.
It will, for a little while, make you, painting, and the world become one.

Course Justification: There are a limited number of sources to base imagery upon. Direct observation, mediated imagery, and the imagination are the three primary means. Of the three, direct observation is of great significance because it deeply informs the utilization of the other two. And of the options for direct observation, working outdoors, *Al Aire Libre*, offers incredibly rich possibilities.

To highlight those possibilities, this course would not be merely a course in landscape painting. It will be structured as a course on how to see. How to see the changing temperatures of light, the constant flow of movement, the feeling of wind, the impact of sound, the mood of places, the activities of people, the passing of time. It is, in fact, a way to learn to see the world.

What is particularly important here is our location. The *Paso del Norte* region has qualities not many regions have. Ordinary experience is not simply that. Here the local is also global. Everyday life can also represent an epic story of civilizations facing each other, of rich and poor, of a future not of the technological glitz of Silicon Valley but of a working class that struggles against tall odds. But these things are only a part of the equation. And perhaps too political.

What might really matter is the light, piercing at any time of day, or the majestic skies that carry it. Maybe it's the history embedded here. Maybe it's the harsh sublimity of the desert, the backdrop of literary and cinematic masterworks. Maybe it's simply the aging city itself coupled with the trappings of contemporary life. Maybe it's the freight trains. Maybe all of these things combine to make El Paso an outlier, an extraordinary place. We should stand on its ground and paint it.

So the primary justification for this course is it gives you the chance to learn some of the most important fundamentals of painting - and see the profound world right in front of you while you do it.

Course Intensity Level: Highly rigorous.

Course Requirements/Assignments

To excel in this course you will need to do one painting per week. These works should be of a manageable size, 20 inches in width or less.

One large-scale painting, 40 inches or more in width, is expected as a final project. This project will be the equivalent of three weeks of work.

The above requirements come to a total of twelve paintings.

Variations on the above requirements are to be discussed, and will be allowed if there is a good conceptual justification for any changes.

Expect to work a minimum of 4 hours per week out of class time.

Critiques

There will be weekly commentary for everyone while the work is on-site and in progress. There will be one end of semester critique during finals week. A mid-term critique is optional and will occur if desired.

Supplies and Necessities

Will be discussed at length on the first day of class.

On-Site Safety

Will be outlined in a separate handout. Please read that document carefully.

Grading Standards

Grading will be based on cumulative effort, improvement and quality. Number grades will be given to core projects. This helps you know where you are. The number breakdown: **100-95 = A, 94-87 = B, 86-76 = C, 75-70 = D, 69 or lower = F.**

Tentative grades will be given at mid-term. Final grades will be determined by an averaging of project grades. Because skill levels vary, evaluation will be influenced by improvement on an individual basis. A basic outline of grading priorities is as follows:

Weekly Paintings	60%
Final painting	30%
Unsuccessful works, false starts, and whatnot	10%
Effort/Participation/Improvement	10%
Total	110%

Effort might only count for 10% in the outline above, but actually it counts for everything. Everything you get out of this class will be determined by what you put into it. Your effort means a lot not only because it shows you are trying, but also because the more you work the better you will get at painting.

Grading Guidelines

F - Failing grades are given for required work that is not submitted and for incomplete final projects. Make-up work or completion of projects after missed due dates may be permitted only with the approval of the instructor.

D - Projects loosely adhere to the class learning outcomes and the minimum terms of assignments. Work receiving a “D” grade displays a clear lack of effort. These kinds of projects will also put forward obviously minimal efforts in exploring ideas and visual possibilities.

C - These are average projects. They will demonstrate some success in engaging with the assigned material or subject. The project will show that the student can identify and work with key concepts and has a nominal grasp of class instruction and basic painting principles. Projects will display some effort in the area of critical thinking through attempts at developing the final image. Typical of a C project, however, is the project not succeeding in pushing beyond average notions of effort and visual acuity.

B - These are very good projects. The B project does everything a C project does, but offers a completed image that is visually interesting and displays clear effort. What also distinguishes a B project is the student’s ability to offer a unique insight and ask questions of themselves. There will be several possibilities explored in preparatory studies that lead to a final outcome. These projects are well-executed, creative versions of the class assignment.

A - These are exceptionally good projects that go above and beyond expectations and requirements. They demonstrate substantial effort and achievement in the areas of critical thinking and art making. They also demonstrate considerable technical skill, originality and present something vital to the viewer. In short, the A project is art.

Course Policies

Attendance, punctuality, participation and appropriate class conduct are considered performance criteria for this class. Failure to perform to required standards will result in strong grade penalties and can cause failure of this course.

Attendance Policy:

- Each student is permitted 1 absence during the semester without penalty. Students with more than 1 absence should consider dropping this course and retaking it at a time when the student can commit the proper attention to the course. **Please note: This class meets once per week for six hours. Missing one day is the equivalent of missing two.**

- Each unexcused absence after 1 will result in the final course grade being lowered by 1 full letter grade. 3 unexcused absences will result in your being dropped from the course.
- Excused absences are defined as documented illness or serious illness or death in the immediate family.
- Coming to class late or leaving early is regarded and graded as being absent. All students are required to attend class on time and to remain in the class the entire time. Entering class late and leaving early is disruptive to the learning environment.
- Coming to class unprepared or attending class and not working is regarded as absent.
- Information missed during an absence is the sole responsibility of the student.
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Course Participation:

- Participation in all discussions, critiques and class days is required for this course.
- Utilization of class time is required and necessary
- Projects executed solely out of class will not be accepted.
- Participation in the collaborative environment of the studio is essential to the successful completion of this course. It's also more fun.

Class Conduct:

• Sick Policy

If you are not feeling well, or if you are sick, then you should not come to this class under any circumstances. You should instead seek medical care, and/or recuperate at home. Email me or call me when you are able and let me know the circumstances, and I will help you to catch up in class when you are feeling better. If you are pregnant, or have other physical issues such as allergies to dust, respiratory issues, anything that I should be aware of, please inform me of this immediately, and we will work to make you safe and comfortable. If a family member is ill, and you need to care for that person, please email me or call and let me know what your situation is.

• Guests

Guests are not permitted at any time during class. Please tell your friends, family members, partners, that they may see you before or after class time. You are expected to remain in class at all times, and may not step-out to visit with guests during class. You will be held responsible for adhering to this policy, and I will give you one warning. After that, I will ask you to leave class and you will be counted absent for that class period.

• Cell phones and tablets

Please turn off your phones during class time. You will be asked to leave if your phone goes off during class, and be counted absent for that class period. No texting.

• Music

Ear phones are allowed while working, but not during class discussions. Use one

earpiece. Make sure you can hear the environment around you. Music systems in the form of a boom box are not permitted in class.

- Studio Hours

The PNTG studios will be open for your general use during normal business hours. On evenings and weekends, the UTEP police will have your name and student ID number, and if the studio is closed, you may call them up and they will come over to the studio and let you into the building/class rooms. The UTEP police number is 747-5611.

- Studio Safety

Some aspects of painting can be hazardous if proper precautions are not taken. The most important thing to remember is to keep your hands clean. All safety procedures will be explained to you throughout the semester, and every consideration has been taken to create a safe environment for you to work in. If you are pregnant, or have other physical issues such as allergies to dust, respiratory issues, anything that I should be aware of, please inform me of this immediately, and we will work to make you safe and comfortable.

- Cleanliness

You are required to clean up your area when you are finished working. Please take all of your tools, materials, etc. away, and leave no trace of your day's work behind.

- Personal Safety

For both spirit and safety, it is highly recommended that you come to the on-site locations with others from the class. **DO NOT TEXT AND DRIVE.** If you're late, I already know it, so just get to our work site when you can. When we are working on location, everyone must be fully aware of their surroundings. Be keenly aware of traffic. Know who is around you, and keep within reasonable distance of others. Please keep a cell phone with you, with my number at the ready. If you feel unsafe for any reason, you should call me, or the UTEP police immediately (747-5611). Please inform me if there is a problem, and I will address it immediately.

- Work Removal

You may store your paintings in the PNTG studios. Finished works must be removed by the date set and posted near the end of this course. All works left in the studio after this date will be disposed of. All materials, canvases, etc. will become the property of the PNTG studios after this date.

Late Assignments, Make-up Work and Exams

Late assignments, make-up work, and make-up exams are only afforded in the case of an excused absence by arrangement and approval of the instructor.

Incompletes, Withdrawals, Pass/Fail

- Incompletes or "I" grades will be considered for students completing satisfactory or better work and having serious legitimate situations beyond their control

- requiring additional time to complete the course requirements. All “I” grades are at the discretion of the instructor and the approval of the Department Chair.
- Students hold full responsibility for withdrawing from this course if that procedure is elected. Withdrawals must be completed on or before the final date to drop a course with a “W”. Students missing this deadline will be issued a grade for the performance in the course.
 - ART 3307 is a grade-based course and is not available for audit or pass/fail options.

University Policy Statements

Cheating/Plagiarism: Cheating is unethical and not acceptable. Plagiarism is using information or original wording in a paper without giving credit to the source of that information or wording: it is also not acceptable. Do not submit work under your name that you did not do yourself. You may not submit work for this class that you did for another class. If you are found to be cheating or plagiarizing, you will be subject to disciplinary action, per UTEP catalog policy. Refer to <http://www.utep.edu/dos/acadintg.htm> for further information.

Disabilities: I will make any reasonable accommodations for students with limitations due to disabilities, including learning disabilities. Please see me personally before or after class in the first two weeks or make an appointment, to discuss any special needs you might have. If you have a documented disability and require specific accommodations, you will need to contact the Disabled Student Services Office in the East Union Bldg., Room 106 within the first two weeks of classes. The Disabled Student Services Office can also be reached in the following ways:

Web: <http://www.utep.edu/dsso>

Phone: 915-747-5148