

# Special Problems In Painting

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## **Course Information**

Course Title: Special Problems In Painting  
Course Section PTNG 4341  
Course location: Fox Fine Arts, Room A455  
Course Meeting Times: M/W 4:30-7:20 pm

## **Instructor Contact Information**

Instructor's Name: Tom Birkner  
Instructor's Office Hours: 11 am - 12 pm and by appointment (Prospect Hall 130)  
Instructor's email: [tabirkner@utep.edu](mailto:tabirkner@utep.edu)  
Instructor's Phone: 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 three-year member of the Department of Art faculty. Joining UTEP from the San Francisco Bay Area and a long-time resident of New York City, Tom previously taught at Drew University, Madison, NJ and at Parsons: The New School for Design in NY and Paris. He has been painting and exhibiting both nationally and internationally for 25 years.

## **Course Description**

*Special Problems In Painting* is a studio course driven by the student's interests and instincts. One fundamental difference between the fine and applied arts is the freedom of the artist, in this case the painter, to define what their work will be about. *Special Problems* intends to direct students toward this challenge so their paintings are no mere accident, but the result of a passionate, philosophical inquiry. Great painters create a painted universe, a cosmos of painted imagery that revolves around a core of convictions. The intention of *Special Problems* is to help define, and most importantly, to depict those convictions in a world of paintings.

Progress through the semester will be directed toward originality. Independently driven work is expected. Research and utilization of source material will be central to exploring pictorial and philosophical possibilities. The nuances of how paint conveys meaning will be a central and constant topic. A greater understanding of painting's historical and contemporary place will also be a focal point.

## **Course Goals and Objectives**

1. To develop independent themes. 2. To explore the interrelationships of meaning and painterly style. 3. To turn the nuances of painterly style and independent themes into a distinctive, painted iconography. 4. To build that iconography into a world of paintings with visual flair and either personal or social relevance.

Objectives toward these goals include:

- Establishing an objective yet heartfelt sense of core values
- Directing your painting skills toward the depiction of those values
- Deepening your awareness of painting's historical and contemporary role

- Working in a committed and disciplined manner
- Pushing your paintings to a higher level of visual awesomeness

The Ultimate Goal is to create a series of paintings that transcend words and speak for themselves.

### **Course Outcomes**

With the successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Instinctively use multi-faceted image sources
- Lay the foundations of a personalized iconography
- Apply painterly skills to suit your intentions
- Paint in a manner that illuminates, not merely depicts, a given subject
- Rely on your own critical judgment
- Turn that critical judgment into an independent worldview

### **Course Requirements/Assignments**

The semester's output will be determined on the first day of the course. Thematic direction will be presented in written form by the second week of classes. Revisions to this statement should be expected throughout the semester as ideas evolve. Work will be equivalent to the studio hours of any studio course. However, this is a minimum requirement. To excel, students should approach this course with a commitment that surpasses previous studio courses.

A total of twelve paintings will be due at semester's end. 11 paintings are to be worked on throughout the semester. They can be a combination of assigned or independent ideas, but these paintings should have the coherence of a series. One large-scale painting, started at the course's mid-term, will serve as a final. This painting is expected to be ambitious and highly accomplished.

The formation of a personal Image Library will also be a requirement. The library is an essential aspect of the course. This will be discussed further throughout the semester. All related studies, notes, painted sketches and other preparatory work will be considered in your final grade.

### **Gallery Walks**

On Mondays, classes will begin with a presentation of images from contemporary art galleries, museum shows and other sources. This is a mandatory aspect of the course. They will start promptly, so if you arrive late you will miss the talk and be recorded as late.

### **Critiques**

There will be three critiques. Group critiques will occur at Week 5 and the final critique. Individual, one-on-one critiques will occur at Week 10. This format will replace the traditional

mid-term/final critique approach. This change is being made to help with time and deadline management.

You are expected to have new paintings for each critique. Paintings must show enough progress to be discussed and taken seriously. Also, to encourage you to develop paintings throughout the semester, all grading will be informal until your final grade. However, any student may privately ask for a verbal assessment, which will also be given during the Week 10 critiques.

### **Grading Guidelines**

Grading will be based on cumulative effort, improvement and quality. Because skill levels vary, evaluation will be influenced by improvement on an individual basis. A basic outline of grading priorities is as follows:

11 series-based paintings	60%
1 large-scale final painting	20%
Image Library and preparatory work	20%
Effort/Participation/Improvement	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>110%</b>

Effort might only count for 10% in the outline above, but actually it counts for everything. What 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. As Confucius said, “One cannot expect rewards until the difficult parts are mastered.”

**IMPORTANT NOTE: Besides the 12 painting guideline, another way of judging your semester’s achievement is by hours. Your production should equate to approximately 135 hours of work. That’s 90 hours of in-class time and 3 hours per week of work outside of class.**

### **Grading Standards**

**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 the expectations and requirements set forth in the 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.

**Besides the 12 painting guideline, another way of judging your semester's achievement is by hours. Your production should equate to approximately 135 hours of work.** That's 90 hours of in-class time and 3 hours per week of work outside of class.

### 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 3 absences during the semester without penalty. Students with more than 3 absences should consider dropping this course and retaking it at a time when the student can commit the proper attention to the course.
- Each unexcused absence after 3 will result in the final course grade being lowered by 1 full letter grade. Absences after the first 3 can be excused only if the first 3 absences are excused.
- 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.

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 - USE OF PHONES DURING CLASS IS NO LONGER ALLOWED.** Please turn off your phones during class time. No texting. You will be asked to leave if your phone goes off during class, and be counted absent for that class period. If there is some reason you must use your phone, please notify me BEFORE class, and or use your phone during break.
- **Music - Earphones are allowed while working, but not during class discussions.** Music systems in the form of a boom box are not permitted in class. Anyone caught listening to emo-pop will be considered absent.
- **Studio Hours - The studios will be open for your general use.** UTEP police will have your name and student ID number. If the studio is closed, you may call them up and they will come to the studio and let you into the building/class rooms up until midnight. 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 work area when you are finished working in the studio.** Please put all of your tools, materials, etc. away in your lockers, and wipe down tables, easels and sinks. Do not leave paint or mineral spirits on the floor. **Close all jars containing mineral spirits and put them in the flame retardant cabinet in Studio A457. Put all rags with solvent on them in the red, flame retardant trash cans with lids.** If you have difficulty cleaning up after yourself, then you will receive a special tutorial on how to clean up after class.
- **Personal Safety - For both spirit and safety, it is highly recommended that you come to the studios with others from your class.** If you must work alone, late at night, please be sure to let someone know where you are, and please keep a cell phone with you. If you feel unsafe for any reason, you should call the UTEP police immediately (747-5611). There is a studio phone for your use. Additionally, if you would like an escort to your car at night, please call the UTEP Police department, and they should accommodate your needs. Please inform me if there is a problem, and I will address it immediately with the proper authorities.
- **Work Removal - Finished works must be removed by the date set by the instructor 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 studio 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.
- PTNG 4341 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