

## Stories in a Time of Truth-Telling: A Student-led Round Table with Mary Graham and Audrey Howatt

by Daniela Segovia



Image created by Mary Graham

### *Student Roundtable Discussion: Stories in a Time of Truth-Seeking* Wednesday, March 10, 2021

A student roundtable discussion led by Audrey Howatt and Mary Graham.

“During this past year, I’ve been thinking a lot about stories, the archetypes we are brought up with, the ones we relate to and those we no longer live in alignment with. In a time and culture that has drifted far away from oral centric story telling, and continues to do so, in the age of social media sound bytes and instant gratification, how do we tell stories in a way that people can connect with? Specifically as artists, we have the ability to speak in a variety of ways, and our opportunities for telling stories is our power. If stories are defined as opposing ‘truth,’ how do we combat the ways in which history is so often inaccurate to our felt and lived experiences? How do we use archetypes to lend themselves to a higher understanding of ourselves? What myths can we tell ourselves to shape the future?”

—Audrey Howatt (*Drawing and Painting student*)

One is born and bestowed with a myriad of stories. One can harbor these memories, histories, fables, and poems all while existing and allowing one’s own story to be built. The space of creating narratives allows us to pick up new journeys, leave behind those that no longer serve us, and merrily stop participating in consistently recurring themes that are present in our lives. Emotional, euphoric, even melancholic feelings stand within our lived experience. All these profound conversations can be found in painting classes, more specifically within the student body. Last week I joined a student roundtable led by junior CCA artists Audrey Howatt and Mary Graham. They both tackle the human figure in profound and inventive ways whether that be bringing ancestors to the present or referring to the technological advances of our present day. The Zoom call was, in all honesty, a very comfortable and vulnerable series of discussions about current events, chosen communities, and mortality. The Chair of the Painting Department Linda Geary, Program Manager Ingrid Wells, and Professor Keith Thomas, painting teacher at CCA, joined the Zoom call and conversed around the theme of “Stories in a time of Truth Telling.” Since I am familiar with the painting department I felt it was a safe space for many to communicate their grievances, explain moments of clarity and acceptance of the current times.

Understandably, the time of Covid-19 has impacted all of our lives and communities drastically for the foreseeable future. Learning to navigate modern technology as well as continuing friendships, mentorships, and class relationships has come with its own battles, but ones that we can surpass. I believe that is why I felt the gregarious environment flowed seamlessly, beginning with introductions and a discussion of our favorite books at the moment. The list of favorite books circled topics eerily prevalent to popular contemporary subjects, offering the reader a chance for profound introspection: Octavia Butler’s complex stories of humanity’s existence and demise; James Baldwin’s *Fire the Next Time*, which tackles racial tensions in America as well as ambivalent and oppressive forces that inspire

change; Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, in which the reader is encouraged to live a life with a breadth of emotions and challenges such as love, creativity, nature, and sexuality. And within all these books and flying testimonials, Mary recommended the film *War Photographer*, a 2001 documentary/world cinema film that follows war photographer James Nachtwey as he captures the mundane reality of war. This quickly reminded me of the minutes between class crits, running to and from class, those waiting outside for the bus to Oakland in front of A2, or even moments on the bus. This roundtable was filled with philosophical explanations of our lives and why they are written the way they were, or the maternal familiarity of what our overarching cultures can have us identifying with. I even jumped in on the subject of dreams and Professor Keith explained how he often compares sleep and death. In both cases, one's eyes are closed, yet in our sleep we are clearly alive, therefore we should keep these states of being as closely linked as possible. Don't underestimate the dreamstate, Professor Keith cautioned, it may be the conclusion to many questions.

As Audrey explained, stories may be divisive, piercing, emotionally draining, and eventually inaccurate. As individuals we take on our own narratives: who we are to ourselves as well as how others perceive us. We begin these journeys of discovery, unearthing the truest, rawest, and most exquisite forms of ourselves from our perspective. And in storytelling, we are bestowed the creations of authors and often create our own ideas of why things happen. Aamirah, an individualized student at CCA studying printmaking, textiles, and graphic design, said "I'm starting to understand that everything comes in waves, and it has its increments of time whether it disperses or revisits. I've done a lot of sitting with myself and understanding the language and interests that I have as a natural person. As Covid is starting to ease up, the way I engage and experience others is definitely a different experience of when I go home and sit with it myself and how it impacts my mental [state] and habits." For me this experience was mutual; interaction feels self-examining. I recognize the group of people I surround myself with has adjusted, narrowed, and become more intimate. A pandemic like the one we are experiencing has affected all of our narratives, whether that be through loss, personal growth, or natural separation.

Together as a community of artists, we all had the common feeling of clarity and confusion in regards to introspection. We all have our own conditioning, questions, and answers to life. None of us are wrong in those ideas either; in the end we can all learn from one another and even take some advice we've learned with a grain of salt. During this conversation, we tapped into thoughtfulness and reflected on the ways of society. Time to ourselves seems to make all the difference when it comes to seeing the world: with time to reflect, we can see the social, economic, and political factors that divide us. Audrey discussed how we as women should encourage each other to strive for a life of agency and acknowledge ways to make our lives better for ourselves. We as women too are powerful, and touching upon hard-hitting topics such as race, misogyny, and inequity can truly make our art blossom like never before.

Stories teach us about moments we can learn and grow from. They also provide opportunities to talk to fellow artists about their personal experiences and finding common issues we all face. Even telling stories about issues we faced alone can make you feel like your voice is being heard. The Student Roundtable became a place of solace, one where students and teachers alike recited their favorite book quotes, as well as lived experiences through this pandemic, and how it has affected the way we navigate life. We all are determined sooner or later to be the change we want to see in the world—that is a huge mission to have. Whether it be emotionally or externally, in this time of great change, we have all evolved as a generation and as beings.

**Student Roundtable Discussion: *Stories in a Time of Truth Seeking*** was organized by the CCA Painting and Drawing Department, and led by **Audrey Howatt** and **Mary Graham**.

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