

# CCFA Guest Blog Posts

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Blog posts by Maïke van Wijk for the now defunct Chicago Contemporary Figurative Artists web site:

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# Observations of Marc Dennis' A Day in the Life Exhibit

*May 2012*

Marc Dennis' A Day in the Life exhibit is a vibrant collection of paintings that takes us through various stages of of life. Childhood, adulthood and death are represented in symbols and objects of various paintings.

All paintings had a vibrancy that pulled me in, but they also evoked a challenge to how I perceive figurative art. Each has a note of the passing of time juxtaposed with the colorful representation of familiar objects.

“Boing Boing” drew me in because its collection of dolls and stuffed animals reminded me of my own childhood room. The butterflies also resonated with me. However, I did not have cracked skulls among my toys, and suddenly this seemingly innocent painting jars me into considering the fleetingness of life.

That provocativeness emanates throughout the exhibit. The stark realism of each individual object evokes admiration, yet the viewer is called to not just appreciate the painter's talent and skill (some paintings seemed three-dimensional), but also ponder the juxtaposition with violence and death amidst beauty.

The Carl Hammer Gallery is displaying Marc Dennis' A Day in the Life exhibit through June 2. <http://www.hammergallery.com/>

# Artist Pop Up at Paola's Vinum

June 2012

Since joining the Chicago Painters and Artists' Meetup Group <http://www.meetup.com/ChicagoPainters/> last September I've become aware that figurative painting is still a vibrant art form today. Recently (June 2), five emerging figurative painters exhibited at Paola's Vinum [www.paolasvinum.com](http://www.paolasvinum.com), a Spanish wine bar in the South Loop.

Curated by Jennifer Yang, the show brought together landscape and portrait paintings with themes ranging from historic masters to contemporary scenes. Eager to create a broader community for local artists through the Meetup group, Jennifer achieved just that as art appreciators gathered around art, discussed techniques, and took advantage of the wine bar.

INSERT PaolasVinum popup.jpg

*CAPTION: A one-evening gallery pop-up at Paola's Vinum*

Jennifer Yang [www.jen-yang.com](http://www.jen-yang.com), currently studies at Ravenswood Atelier. She is a graduate from the School of Representational Art, and also studied at the Grand Central Academy. Her work is informed by gender theories, current political situations, imaginary scenes, her love of people, and the European masters.

INSERT JenniferYang.jpg

*CAPTION: Squash, Precious, Female Nude Study and Male Nude Study by Jennifer Yang*

Also taking inspiration from old masters was Brett Edenton <http://edentonstudios.com/>. Brett specializes in portrait, figure, animal and still life painting as well as charcoal portraits and figure drawings. He studied at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Brett also apprenticed with several Philadelphia artists and has taught painting and drawing at the Schuylkill Academy. He hosts open studio sessions with a model at least twice a week at his Albany Park neighborhood studio.

INSERT BrettEdenton.jpg

*CAPTION: Spring, copies after Rembrandt, Sir Gerald Kelly, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Vermeer by Brett Edenton*

Also paying homage to historic portraiture was Christina Caruso's [www.carusogallery.com](http://www.carusogallery.com) Elizabeth. A modern touch was evident in Showgirl. Christina has been painting and drawing for more than thirteen years and spent three years at a traditional European painting atelier. In addition to portraits, Christina reflected her connection to the earth in her landscape paintings.

INSERT ChristinaCaruso.jpg

*CAPTION: Christina Caruso's Death Mask, and select landscape paintings*

Piotr Wolodkowicz [www.piotrart.com](http://www.piotrart.com) is also drawn to landscape and nature paintings. He started his art education in Poland and continues to learn in the U.S. He has had solo exhibitions at the Ukrainian Museum, Atheneum Theater, and the Office of the Attorney General. Piotr hosts monthly group exhibits at his studio gallery, Phantom Galleries

[phantomgallery.blogspot.com/2012/02/phantom-gallery-chicago-opening-space.html](http://phantomgallery.blogspot.com/2012/02/phantom-gallery-chicago-opening-space.html).

INSERT PiotrWolodkowicz.jpg

*CAPTION: Field in Maine After the Storm and Summer Evening in Galena by Piotr Wolodkowicz*

Jason McPhillips [www.studiomcphillips.com](http://www.studiomcphillips.com) incorporates natural objects in his still lifes, exhibiting his *Time in Three Parts* triptych as well as *The Shell*. Each of the flowers in his work have meaning relating to the past, the present and the future. He also offers giclee prints of his work. Jason's intuitive approach to his subject leads to meaningful discoveries for himself, while leaving room for the viewer to draw their own conclusions.

INSERT JasonMcPhillips.jpg

*CAPTION: Time in Three Parts and The Shell by Jason McPhillips, with Showgirl by Christina Caruso*

It was lovely to chat with these talented young artists, and to see that figurative painting still holds a place in the modern world of photography and computerized graphics. Equally important is that venues like Paola's Vinum strive to support the arts and seek to host pop-up galleries on a regular basis. I look forward to more events like this around Chicago.

# A Visit to Vitruvian Fine Art Studio

*June 2012*

A few months ago, the Chicago Painters and Artists' Meetup group <http://www.meetup.com/ChicagoPainters/> paid a visit to Vitruvian Fine Art Studio. Vitruvian <http://www.vitruvianschool.com> offers drawing, painting, sculpture and anatomy classes. "We teach students how to sculpt the human figure from the inside out," said Melinda Whitmore [http://www.vitruvianschool.com/instructors/melinda\\_whitmore](http://www.vitruvianschool.com/instructors/melinda_whitmore).

Melinda Whitmore teaches sculpting and portrait painting classes, while partner David Jamieson [http://www.vitruvianschool.com/instructors/david\\_jamieson](http://www.vitruvianschool.com/instructors/david_jamieson) focuses on still life painting. Our group of 13 visitors was given a tour of the studio and we admired the beautiful sculptures.

Sculpting classes range from 8 weeks for the skeleton and 8 weeks for the muscles to 4 weeks for laying muscles on a pre-purchased skull. No prerequisites are required for any of the classes, and individual (private) sessions can be scheduled as well.

David gave us an overview of his painting process, including sketching and a value study to ensure the correct color composition. "Painting a bowl is a lot more complicated than you think," said David.

Because most classes are taught at night, David and Melinda have invested in ensuring a good lighting system for their models and students, with an overhead lighting system for a model, and small light boxes for individual still life vignettes.

As our group of painters and artists munched on snacks and poured ourselves wine a discussion arose about color theory. "Art sometimes can be frustratingly subjective. This [color system] makes it quantifiable evidence," said Melinda.

We were introduced to the Munsell book of color [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munsell\\_color\\_system](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munsell_color_system) which offers paint chips to help artists with matching the right color to a subject. "Think about color as a three-dimensional space: value, hue and chroma. Any given color represents a different location within that space," said David.

If you are looking at getting your sculptures and painting anatomically correct, this definitely is the studio for you. Vitruvian Fine Art Studio is located at 1735 N. Ashland Avenue, Second Floor, Chicago, IL 60622. The Class schedule is listed on their web site: [http://www.vitruvianschool.com/all\\_classes](http://www.vitruvianschool.com/all_classes).

# Navigating Artist Crowdfunding

November 2012

Crowdfunding is gaining momentum as a new way of receiving startup capital. Business startups, artists, and organizations are able to raise funds through a website to put toward a specific project. Several web sites specialize in this, as listed here:

<http://www.practicalecommerce.com/articles/2853-13-Crowdfunding-Websites-to-Fund-Your-Business>. Unlike a loan, those who donate can choose from a menu of perks, but once those perks have been provided there is no further claim to the business/project investment.

It is hard to determine which of these web sites has the highest success rate for artists. Recently, Artist Lauren Levato determined that USAProjects offers an audience dedicated to supporting the arts, with numerous artist funding operations supporting its cause.

Created by United States Artists, a nonprofit grantmaking and artist advocacy organization, the USAProjects fundraising arm requires that participating artists have already been a grant recipient of a grant to demonstrate their dedication to an artist career. As the recipient of a [Vermont Studio Center Fellowship](http://www.usaprojects.org/organization/VERMONT) <http://www.usaprojects.org/organization/VERMONT> in 2006, Lauren qualified. She found out about this crowdfunding site through porcelain artist Beth Cavener Stichter <http://www.followtheblackrabbit.com/> who successfully raised funds for her project.

Three of USAProjects's fellows were just awarded MacArthur Genius grants <http://www.macfound.org/programs/fellows/> (granting them an unrestricted \$500,000 each).

Lauren's project is called *Wunderkammer: A Year of Curiosities* [http://www.usaprojects.org/project/wunderkammer\\_a\\_year\\_of\\_curiosities/](http://www.usaprojects.org/project/wunderkammer_a_year_of_curiosities/). The project includes exquisite self-portraits that show all kinds of intricate details in the hair and stomach of each woman. Based on old anatomical pop-up books, each pencil-drawn lady represents a true or imaginary story about Lauren and her personal history, yet conjures up our own imagination.

All donations are tax deductible because they simultaneously support artists' projects and the nonprofit mission of United States Artists: to invest in America's finest artists and to illuminate the value of artists to society. In addition to the tax deduction, USAProjects also matches the funds, essentially doubling your donation to artists.

Per USAProjects, a total of 75% of all projects successfully fund. This compares to success rates of 45% at similar sites. More than 500 artists have posted projects that have raised over \$3 million from more than 20,000 individual donors. Each artist is assigned a coach who helps with developing the budget and project materials, reviews updates, and mentors the artist throughout the process.

You can support the Wunderkammer project by donating here: [http://www.usaprojects.org/project/wunderkammer\\_a\\_year\\_of\\_curiosities/](http://www.usaprojects.org/project/wunderkammer_a_year_of_curiosities/)

Lauren's menu of perks includes:

- \$25: a hand written thank you card and monthly photo/video updates - both physical and digital delivery
- \$50: a digital book of the "Self Portrait as..." Series, a series of drawings inspired by 16th C. medical illustrations
- \$100: hand detailed miniature gilded porcelain goat's legs
- \$250: hand detailed porcelain rib cage, gilded or black, your choice
- \$500: an original small moth drawing
- \$1,000: an original "Self Portrait as..." drawing
- \$2,500: your own hand built Wunderkammer box, full of sculpted porcelain animal and anatomical parts that feature in the work and an original drawing

In addition to these perks alone, everyone who donates at least \$5 by Friday, Nov. 16 by 7 p.m. (Central time) is entered into a raffle to win fine coffees from bowtruss and intelligentsia, surprise items from G-Spot and Early to Bed, original art by Ellen Greene <http://artbyellengreene.com/home.html> or by Rory Coyne <http://coyneart.wordpress.com/>. You can get 1 ticket for \$5, 5 tickets for \$25, and there is a limit of 10 tickets for a donation of \$50 or more. The raffle is at 9 p.m. Friday night, and items will be shipped.

While the grant is unrestricted, Lauren's funds will go toward creating handmade frames with porcelain embellishments, and will also fund her studio time for more creations. Video updates on the Wunderkammer project will be posted at the Hioctaneredhead Video channel <https://www.youtube.com/user/hioctaneredhead>.

# The Self as Chamber of Wonder, Lauren Levato's Wunderkammer Exhibit

January 2013

Figurative draftsman Lauren Levato just opened her show *Wunderkammer* at Packer Schopf Gallery <http://www.packergallery.com/history.php> to high attendance and much admiration.

Literally translated as ‘wonder room’ Lauren takes the concept of 16th century cabinets of curiosity and applies them to her self: “the intersection of wonder and memory and how the body itself becomes a Wunderkammer, amassing all manner of mysterious and confounding issues, dramas, revelations, and dilemmas.”

Having resisted self-portraits for years—the idea of it made Lauren angry—a breakthrough during the summer resulted in *Self Portrait as St. John the Baptist*, which references her family’s religious background as well as St. John’s subsistence on locusts [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_the\\_Baptist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Baptist). Inspired by historical anatomy flap-books <http://www.medgadget.com/2011/08/animated-anatomies-exhibition-of-historical-anatomy-flap-books.html>, Lauren ‘outlined’ her body, and then added embellishments and symbols on her head and in her womb (a play on logic vs. intuition, perhaps?).

“They are elaborated reflections on the consequences of a series of self-recognitions.”  
~ Daniel Maidman

The self portrait series references Lauren’s personal history and her relationships to people around her, but also addresses the broader spectrum of communal lore, his(/her)story, legends and the symbols associated with those. One reference she recommends is Barbara G. Walker’s *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Womans-Encyclopedia-Myths-Secrets/dp/006250925X>). Some drawings also acknowledge historical art work such as *Saint Lucy* by Francesco del Cossa ([http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Francesco\\_del\\_Cossa\\_-\\_Saint\\_Lucy.jpg](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Francesco_del_Cossa_-_Saint_Lucy.jpg)) in *Self Portrait as Siamese Saints* (which also references St. Apollonia), or medieval tapestries in *Self Portrait as Capricorn*.

“Each of these paintings is a sentence:’ I am Lauren Levato, and I am [ ] and [ ] and [ ] and that involves [ ] and [ ].’ ” wrote the *Huffington Post*’s Daniel Maidman, which is a great starting point from which to approach this show.

Knowing the chronological sequence of when each drawing was created, there is an evolution from just adding a single color to each portrait to adding more range as the portfolio evolved. From the fifth drawing, *Self Portrait as Siamese Saints*, each subsequent portrait has at least two colors, up to four. The latter three (*Hex*, *Caul*, *St. Ursula*) are also the most vibrant, potentially a reflection of Lauren embracing color more and becoming bolder in her self(-portrait) expression as well.



*“But while much of Levato's work can be read as an effort to edit and control, she is also an exemplar of the dizzying freedom that awaits when you simply let go.”*  
~ Sarah Nardi

The meaning behind each portrait also appears to go from micro to macro, an evolution of Lauren’s relation to her nuclear family to people outside her family, and her place in this world as a self-contained, empowered woman, willing to embrace all aspects of her self—whether as legendary and glorified saint or prophet, or as the vilified hex and thief in the night. Lauren is happy to share these layers of meanings with those who ask, but also encourages each individual to approach her portraits from their own reference point.

*“Your interpretations are correct if only because they are your own and I want the viewer to have them.”*  
~ Lauren Levato

Packer Schopf Gallery is located at 942 W. Lake St Chicago, IL 60607. The exhibit runs through February 16, in addition to three solo shows: *Wilderness of Mirrors* by Andréa Stanislav, *Psychedelic* by Bruce Riley, and *Zodiac* by Deborah Baker. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 11:00am to 5:30pm. [www.packergallery.com](http://www.packergallery.com). Out-of-towners can peruse the online Wunderkammer exhibit here: <http://www.packergallery.com/levato/>.

This show marks the first exhibition of Lauren’s *Wunderkammer: A Year of Curiosities* fundraising project from November 2012 (which exceeded its goal at \$12,243 with 108 supporters [http://www.usaprojects.org/project/wunderkammer\\_a\\_year\\_of\\_curiosities](http://www.usaprojects.org/project/wunderkammer_a_year_of_curiosities)). Additional works around the idea of body as wonder, memory, and curiosity will be forthcoming throughout 2013.

Lauren’s website is [www.hioctaneredhead.com](http://www.hioctaneredhead.com), and you can follow her very active Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/LaurenLevato>. She will be creating all the Wunderkammer perks for her contributors in the near future, and plans to teach another drawing workshop in late Spring or Summer. She is also exploring solo shows in other parts of the country.

Wunderkammer press coverage includes:

*Parthenogenesis: Self-as-Symbol in Lauren Levato's 'Wunderkammer'* by Daniel Maidman who describes Lauren’s work as Tarot: “Our path with her art is an experience of the intellectual and emotional texture of Levato's journey. We see her walking. We do not see, entirely, where she walks.” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-maidman/lauren-levato-wunderkammer\\_b\\_2421438.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-maidman/lauren-levato-wunderkammer_b_2421438.html)

*How Lauren Levato went from drawing insects to drawing herself* by Sarah Nardi: “the self-portraits are loose and fluid, the work of an artist just discovering a subject and giving herself plenty of space to evolve.” <http://m.chicagoreader.com/chicago/blogs/Post?basename=how-lauren-levato-went-from-drawing-insects-to-drawing-herself&day=03&id=Bleader&month=12&year=2012>

*First Exhibits of 2013 Open* by Paul Klein referencing Lauren as “one of Chicago's favorite daughters.” <http://www.artletter.com/2013/01/first-exhibits-of-2013-open.html>

*In Sync with Lauren Levato* by Sergio Gomez who believes it is “important to support a hard working Chicago artist pushing herself and raising to a new challenge in her career.”

<http://sergiogomezart.wordpress.com/2012/12/11/in-sync-with-lauren-levato-interview/>