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Balancing Skills and Creativity

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Balancing skills and creativity



Nils Lou offers some advice to Molly Miller '07 during a class in the James F. Miller Fine Arts Center.

Nils Lou may be an art professor, but he claims he doesn't teach art.

He says he is more of a gardener in his Linfield College studio classroom. He does some weeding, adds a little fertilizer and then watches with amazement at what his students grow.

"Being creative is about surprising yourself," Lou said. "It's about being playful, and taking internal risks. Teaching is about creating a space for the students where they basically learn by themselves. I tell my students two things: 'This is a class about failing because when you take a risk and you fail, you are more likely to analyze what went wrong than if you had been successful. The other thing I want you to realize is that I'm being paid to teach, but it's the last thing I do because I can't teach you. It's impossible.'"

Lou is anything but a fraud. A professor of art at Linfield since 1987, he has been a working artist for more than 50 years, constantly stretching himself and exploring new techniques and avenues of creativity. His work can be found in over 30 public and institutional collections as well as private collections. He is the author of dozens of publications, including *The Art of Firing*, a ceramics book now in its fourth edition. He has mounted numerous exhibitions, including six in 2004 alone. Over 20 years ago, he and two other artists built a replica of an authentic 8th century Korean anagama, a single chambered, wood fired pottery kiln, which is still used today. To add to his

achievements, he was named this year's Edith Green Distinguished Professor for his strong commitment to the education of his students.

Although Lou teaches primarily in ceramics and three-dimensional design, he is also a sculptor and painter. His latest collaborations are with Wisconsin artist Karen Terpstra, in which they combine the female figure and the horse in ceramics, paintings, drawings and large sculpture.

After completing his bachelor's and master's at University of Michigan, Lou taught at Hamline University in Minnesota from 1961 to 1970 and then worked as a studio potter full-time, first in Minnesota and later in rural Willamina. When a full-time teaching position opened at Linfield in 1987, he was eager to get back into the classroom.

"I always liked connecting with the students," Lou said. "When you are a studio potter, it really limits your creativity because you start thinking about product instead of process."

Lou firmly believes that art cannot be taught. "We certainly have composition rules and processes we discuss with students. We can talk about balance, we can talk about light, dark, texture and all kinds of things. But they are only useful when they are handled in some unique way."

Teaching art is a balance between building foundational skills and pushing students to create authentic art vs. ordinary art.

"Ordinary art is the art of imitation, with a product in mind," Lou said. "The authentic is something that comes from inside and it develops because there is attention to process. The medium speaks, the clay speaks, the paint speaks. It says choose me. And what happens is something fresh, new, innovative and original. I want students to recognize the difference."

Lou can easily document his growth and development as an artist over the past 50 years. His art most often changes as he seeks the elusive power of connecting with another person.

"When you make something authentic, it has the power to connect in this quantum way to another person, to their consciousness. If it is powerful enough, they reel in the impact of it because it connects, it evokes memory, it evokes something inside them. It's not necessarily why artists make art, but it is one of the reasons. The other is that we are fundamentally makers of things. We like to assemble, we like to organize and we like to put things together. That's what composition is, there is a rightness to its organization."

— Mardi Mileham