

A Little Competition Is a Good Thing

By KELLY COMPTON



This past June, a dormant phase of American sculpture education reopened during the unusually intensive modeling competitions held at two lively institutions devoted to figurative art and traditional methods of making it.

Founded in 1976 by the artist Elisabeth Gordon Chandler (1913-2006), the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Connecticut, is a forerunner of Manhattan's Grand Central Academy of Art (GCAA), which was established two years ago by the painter Jacob Collins (b. 1964) as a unit of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America. In June, each school set aside five consecutive days and one spacious studio for a dozen talented competitors to sculpt a full figure from a live model. The Grand Central contestants worked for a total of 40 hours on their own 32-inch high figures, while their Connecticut counterparts labored for 28 hours on figures ranging from 30 to 36 inches in height.

This physically demanding and psychologically charged approach is inherited from the *concours* employed at Paris's Ecole des Beaux-Arts and other art schools worldwide (including America's) until the 1960s. Such contests were seen as the most effective way to measure proficiency, and often enabled prizewinners to refine their skills through direct study of classical precedents in Italy or Greece.

At both Lyme and Grand Central, mastery of the human figure mattered most to the judges, who also considered clarity of form, simplicity of action, balance, and dynamism. They also watched for the proportion and form of the figure to be classical in spirit, as well as anatomically accurate and structurally clear. Beyond these factors, the interior life, formal rhythm, and expressive poetry of the works were compared. Given the brevity of the contest, surface finish and detail were deemed of secondary importance.

In Manhattan, judges Jacob Collins, Stephen Perkins, and Anthony Visco first selected a dozen competitors from a pool of 50 applicants, all of whom were either advanced students or professional sculptors. (At Lyme the applicants had to be aged 18-39.) Grand Central's top honor (\$10,000) went to Sue Chism who, coincidentally, earned her BFA at Lyme and now teaches at the Lyme Art Association nearby. Collins noted that Chism's piece "brings together anatomical clarity with a simple rhythmic line and graceful gesture." GCAA's second prize (\$3,000) went to Kate Brockman, its third prize (\$2,000) to Brian Kramer, and honorable mentions to Julia Levitina McGeehan and Philippe Faraut. The other competitors at GCAA were Jiwoong Cheh, Casey Eskridge, Steven Lord, Virgil Oertle, Amelia Rowcroft, Chris Waddell, and Rick Weaver.



PHILIPPE FARAUT AT GRAND CENTRAL ACADEMY
WITH MODEL JOHN FORKNER BEYOND

At Lyme, the 13 competitors and one alternate were chosen by National Sculpture Society members Aldo Casanova, Tuck Langland, Gwen Marcus, and Dan Ostermiller, though the competition itself was judged by their colleagues Nina Akamu, Neil Estern, and Carter Jones. The top prize of \$1,000 went to Melinda Whitmore, the second prize of \$750 to Julia Levitina McGeehan (who had already won an honorable mention in New York), and the third prize of \$300 to Joo Hee Bae. Their fellow competitors were Darren Beistle, Casey Cohoon, Matthew Collins, Karen Cope, Chad Fisher, Madhu Jalli, Remy Jambor, Lisa Nonken, Adam Reeder, and Patrick Stephenson, with Adam Matano as alternate.

This re-emergence of the *concours* method reveals something profound about contemporary art in America today. Despite our "anything goes" *zeitgeist*, evermore young artists hunger for rigorous technical training, even as they recognize the centrality of the human body and the timeless challenge of reproducing it correctly. Theoretically, nothing could be more dreary than a room crowded with 36-inch sculptures of the same model, until one looks closely at how each artist has gone about solving the problems of making that figure live. Once gained, these baseline skills can be applied in almost any area of artmaking, and will surely enrich our field for decades to come. ■

Information: Grand Central Academy of Art, 20 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036, 212.730.9025, grandcentralacademy.classicist.org; Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, 84 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, CT 06371, 860.434.5232, lymeacademy.edu