



Photo by North Light Books

Dean Nimmer artist profile

Dean Nimmer is an abstract artist, teacher, author, drummer, . . . and a non-conformist. His unique style and personality are evident in his artwork and in his teaching. A self-proclaimed art preacher, he encourages unconventional processes and spontaneity. Though he has technically retired from teaching full time, teaching and writing about art are "art lifelines" for him that are still a big part of who he is. We hope you are inspired by his art and artful life.

Your inner eye is your internal selective guide that determines not only what you see, but also how you see it. Think of looking through a virtual telescope in your mind that searches for invisible forces, energies, and auras that only exist in another dimension and time-space.

Cloth Paper Scissors: You've won several national awards for your teaching, including the Distinguished Teaching of Art Award from the College Art Association; the Distinguished Alumnus Award for Art and Art Education from the University of Wisconsin, and the Community Art Educator of the Year Award from the Massachusetts Art Education Association. What drives your passion to teach?

Dean: I retired as professor emeritus from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston more than 10 years ago, but I get so much inspiration from teaching that it would cut off one of my art lifelines if I stopped.

Over my career, I've taught every age bracket, from kindergartners to Masters and PhD candidates, and found all of it rewarding in many ways. It's like giving out permission slips to create, and every time a student understands the gift that that is, I'm rewarded tenfold.

I teach a range of classes in a night-school program at Holyoke Community College, but I'm particularly drawn to teach introductory classes in drawing and painting. It's a tough job to teach novice artists—some of whom have never picked up a pencil or brush—the techniques and concepts necessary to paint and draw with confidence. But the hardest part is instilling the actual desire to make art after my class is over. I think of making art as a primal human instinct, a kind of non-religious, but spiritual daily bread, that's been lost to the ravages of cell phones, computers, hand-held games, and the lack of time to invest in making something creative for yourself. I guess I'm a new kind of art preacher, spreading the gospel according to Nimmer, and my congregation is growing very day.

Cloth Paper Scissors: You once made 1,000 drawings in one year. Why was that an important milestone for you?

Dean: One of the best ways I know of to keep yourself focused on creating art is to become engrossed in making a series of interrelated works that you carry on for an extended period of time. Starting in 1996, I began a series of 1,000 drawings to do in a year as a kind of marathon to push myself to create as many images in different ways to stimulate my own creativity. I set out to challenge some of my own art hang-ups, such as obsessing about finishing pieces, repeating the same compositions, using the same colors, and letting myself be blocked by not knowing what to do next. My 1,000-drawing project made a huge difference in changing these bad habits into a productive work ethic that I use all the time.

Working on a series doesn't necessarily mean making artworks that look alike. To the contrary, works that are part of a series can be vastly different from one another and still make sense together. This project is an on-going endeavor that is always there to prod me into new possibilities for making art.

Cloth Paper Scissors: Do you keep sketchbooks? If so, how do these figure into your art practice?



"Still 5"

Dean: I don't keep traditional sketchbooks limited to making preliminary drawings to develop later. Instead, I create sketchbooks I call Idea Logs. Idea Logs are not obliged to any traditions, techniques, materials, or commonplace themes that restrict creativity. This essentially means there are no rules about the order or content of any text, nor constraints on what is drawn, painted, or collaged in these journals. The main tool I'm working with is my imagination—wherever that takes me.

There are several different options for working in these books and a variety of alternative techniques and materials to use for these eccentric creations. The main goals for each sketchbook are to expand my innovation and develop a broader sense of what is possible in my art.

Cloth Paper Scissors: You use collage in quite a bit of your work. What attracts you to this medium?

Dean: Collage, or as I call it, "fingers full of glue," is very appealing to me. Those of us who are obsessed with collage are, to say the least, a little bit nutty, albeit in a good way. I've been a flea market addict all my adult life, and I've always been intrigued by the prospect of finding something there that I didn't even know I was looking for that may find its way into my art.

Part of the bond we collagists have is the hunt-and-find exploration that makes this technique so appealing. Ask anyone working in collage if it's easy to find and place something right where it belongs in a composition and you'll get a resounding, no! But that's part of the allure. It's like finding the missing piece of a 1,000-piece puzzle, so you can proclaim an enthusiastic, yes! in the end.

If you could own one piece of art by a famous artist and money were no object, what would it be?

This may sound like a flip answer, but I don't really covet owning any one masterwork for my personal collection. Of course, there are all kinds of artists whose work I admire, both realists and abstract artists, but my pleasure in looking at art isn't something that is encompassed in any one artwork.

What was the last gallery or museum show you saw that had an impact on you?

About a month ago, I saw a show of self-taught artists that just blew me away. I'm drawn to the obsessive, passionate energy that resides in the work of many self-taught and so-called "naïve artists" that translates into an inspiration for me.

If you've encountered someone who really doesn't like abstract art, have you been able to change his or her mind?

I'm proud to say I know I've had a good influence on many people toward making abstract art, even those who steadfastly resist it. One approach I take is to challenge many pre-conceptions about what abstraction actually means to them, and then turn those negative impressions into a positive attitude.

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"1,000 Drawings" (detail)

Cloth Paper Scissors: Do you recall what first drew you to abstract art? Was abstract art something that has always appealed to you?

Dean: I'm trying to think back to some eureka moment in my childhood, but I guess it was more of an evolution than any one decisive flash of inspiration. I do know my creativity was a strength of my personality as far back as I can remember.

I was always excited to make art as a kid, even before I knew what the words abstract art meant. I just knew the experience of painting and drawing was exhilarating for me. I now know the process of making art was pivotal to my upbringing, and there wasn't much else that stimulated me in the same way. Certainly, one of my teaching mantras today is: The process is always more important than the product in art. And that philosophy has deep roots in my youth.

Cloth Paper Scissors: How are realism and abstraction similar and how are they different?

Dean: You could say the differences involve the choice to focus on tangible observations versus imaginative interpretations of what you see, both equally valid ways to make art. In my painting, "Still 5," I emphasize an invisible energy source that comes from extending the suggestions of gesture emanating from the otherwise inanimate flowers.

All artists strive to, or should strive to, go beyond the ordinary appearance of something, dramatizing and enhancing it, in order to make it uniquely theirs. All art is an interpretation of nature, whether observed or conjured from one's imagination, and once you accept that truth, you have much more freedom to create.

One of my pet peeves is the stereotyped idea of making something "look" abstract, as if that's a formula for success. In fact, focusing on the way most popular abstract paintings look is a giant obstacle in the way to expanding what you can do as an abstract artist.



Photos by Dean Nimmer



"Maze"

Cloth Paper Scissors: How would you describe your studio?

Dean: As you might expect, my abstract art studio is quite unkempt. I have two assistants who help keep it organized, and that's a luxury well worth the price. When I'm working, I don't pay attention to the mess I'm making, leaving brushes in clogged paint cans, uncapped tubes of acrylics left to harden, rolls of painter's tape plastered all over the wall. Eventually this chaos leaves me with no space to work, but that's just the way it is. Occasionally, I envy those neatnik artists who keep their studios organized and everything in control, but I know that's totally against my nature.

In the end, I think my studio environment is evidence of the creative process I'm engaged in, and, rather than trying to hide it, I need elements of it to stay put—like the layers of masking tape under my paintings—as a psychological prompt that gets me in the right zone to do my work.

I find people much prefer coming to an open-studio event to see where my work is created, than they do coming to a formal gallery event where all you see is the finished product. You get a very interesting perspective observing an artist in the middle of making their work that is an affirmation that every artist's creative process is the true generator that sparks his or her art.

Cloth Paper Scissors: What are you currently working on, and do you have any other big projects in the works?

Dean: I have two shows going right now. One features a new series of drawings I made in old journals from the early twentieth century. I found these math and science journals at a yard sale and they turned out to be a great resource for

an ongoing series I've created that already numbers more than 150 pieces.

I feel I rescued these journals from oblivion, because they are simply the notes of a young mathematician learning algebraic equations and simple scientific principles. These notations are visual lexicons, ripe with beautiful handwriting, intriguing diagrams, and spaces left for my painted interpretation. I know this was not the intention of Robert E. Cross when he made these books, but I somehow feel he would appreciate my interpretations of his studies.

The other show I curated. It's called "Uncommon Goods—String Holders," and includes several pieces of my art. The utilitarian device known as a string holder has been around since the invention of string, yarn, and hemp, dating back centuries. Over time, string holders evolved into bizarre folk art objects that abandoned the principle of form follows function in favor of novel caricatures and strange contraptions that have no practical purpose other than art. "Uncommon Goods—String Holders" presents fascinating sculptures, paintings, and mixed-media creations by more than 30 artists from across New England. Each of these artworks challenges viewers to rethink, what exactly is a string holder, anyway?

My plans for the future, near and far, are to continue to make as much art of every stripe as I possibly can, toward the goal of encouraging others to passionately embrace their own imagination and creativity as the precious gems of life they are.



"The Divide"

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