

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

The unspoken art of Gael Stack

Feminist art movement pioneer Stack has taught in School of Art for 40 years



Artist Gael Stack has a soft-spoken and modest demeanor, but her work speaks volumes both literally and figuratively. Her large canvasses and smaller drawings frequently use fragments of words and images, layered over one another. Her richly imaginative paintings avoid explicit statements in favor of cryptic and symbolic ones. One group of her drawings, titled “41 Songs,” features torn, creased, or dog-eared paper.

"Art is like poetry," says Stack, a John & Rebecca Moores Professor of Art. "You want to give the viewer something to do... you have implication."

For 40 years, Professor Stack has been on the faculty of the UH School of Art, as well as a noteworthy contemporary artist.

She is “one of the most accomplished American painters working today,” says Rackstraw Downes, one of her contemporaries and a 2009 MacArthur Fellow.

Last year, a hardcover, oversized art book chronicling her life and work was published by University of Texas Press. Simply titled Gael Stack, the book’s glossy pages show off four decades of Stack’s paintings and drawings. Essays by New York-based art critic Raphael Rubinstein and Alison De Lima Greene, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, open the book and firmly situate Stack as a leader within the feminist art movement that rejected separating the personal from the political and embraced autobiographical representations.

“As a single working mother with two sons to raise, Stack was more cognizant than many others of the issues raised by feminism, and was determined to have her art reflect her reality,” wrote Rubinstein in his essay.

Before arriving in Houston in 1973 with her sons, Stack grew up in Chicago.

“My mother was a musician, she played trumpet and trombone in Ina Ray Hutton’s all-girl band,” Stack recalled. Ina Ray Hutton and Her Melodears was one of the few orchestras during the Big Band Era of the 1930s led by a woman. It was also one of the first all-women swing bands to be recorded and filmed.

“(My mother) gave me endless music lessons, but I am tone deaf,” Stack recalls. “I always kept a little notebook for drawing. I went to Catholic school, so I drew praying hands a lot.”

After completing high school, Stack worked very briefly as a secretary. After she figured out that she was only making enough money to buy clothes to wear to work, she decided to try college.

“Girls weren’t encouraged to go to college at that time,” said Stack. “The University of Illinois was the only school I’d heard of, so that is where I went. I started out in journalism because I like to read, and then I found out that is not what journalism is. I don’t like writing. So, I saw a guidance counselor who asked me what I liked to do. I told him I liked to draw, and that is how I found out you can be an art major.”

In 1970, Stack earned her Bachelor’s in Fine Arts from the University of Illinois. In 1972, she earned her Master’s in Fine Arts from Southern Illinois University. After a brief stint as an instructor at the University of Wisconsin, Stack and her two sons moved to Houston.

“When I came to Houston I had three part-time jobs,” said Stack. “I taught a class at the High School for Performing and Visual Arts, I taught art after school at the Contemporary Arts Museum, and I taught one course at UH.”

The next year she taught an additional class at UH. At the same time, Stack’s career as an artist was burgeoning. Since 1972, her work has consistently been part of national and international group exhibitions or shown as solo exhibitions. She was included in two exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum and received two National Endowment for the Arts artists grants. Stack’s art has been reviewed in many national and international journals.

Additionally, Stack taught as a visiting professor in England in 1986 and at Yale University in 1991. Because of her accomplishments, in 1999 Stack was named a John & Rebecca Moores Professor. In 2004-2005, Stack served as Director of the UH School of Art. Today, she teaches three classes, both graduate and undergraduate levels.

Stack considers herself a painter and a drawer – influenced by a teacher who once told her that she “had a good eye.” She also credits George Bunker, a former director of the UH School of Art, for being one of her biggest supporters.

“Professor Stack has been integral to the success of the School of Art at every level, but nowhere more than in our graduate program, the Masters in Fine Arts,” said Dr. Rex Koontz, Director of the UH School of Art. “This year we celebrate our 35th annual MFA exhibition, and a key part of building the most important graduate art program in the city and the region has been Gael’s tireless work with students. Her career and work serve as a model for those students, many of whom go on to participate in Houston’s burgeoning art world.”

When Stack is preparing for an exhibition, she creates new artwork for each and every show. She has a studio in her home, and she has an iPod set to shuffle to set the mood. She listens to everything, from Bach to Bob Marley. When she isn’t in her studio or in the classroom, Stack travels. Her favorite destination remains Paris. But wherever she goes, she, of course, visits the local art museums.

- By Monica Byars