

## Walter Hatke discusses his subjects in 'Tenses'

Arts by Ben Lucas - Apr 16, 2015

0 348



*The new exhibit, "Tenses," in the Mandeville Gallery, located in the Nott Memorial. (Concordiensis | Sarah Chang)*

Last Thursday, the Mandeville Gallery opened its new exhibit, "Tenses," a collection of charcoal drawings and oil paintings by visual art professor Walter Hatke. Hatke was kind enough to offer a few words about his creative process, how to pick out an unusual perspective, and what effects time and place can have on one's interpretation of a work of art.

Ben Lucas: You tend to pick out unusual angles for your subjects, like "Ceilings."

Walter Hatke: They're around us all the time. We just don't always think of looking at things in certain ways. I've always been interested in perspective and geometry, and seeing things in different, momentary flashes.

When we walk by we don't usually think about perspective, or angle, because we're always trying to "right" ourselves. I've always liked things a little off-balance.

I got the idea for "Ceilings" while I was recovering from a back injury. I had to do endless exercises lying on the floor between my living room and the stairwell, just staring right up. And I've done ceilings before.

I've noticed other ceilings, which we don't always think about as subjects for a painting. But I was interested in making a painting of just a ceiling. I thought: "This is so interesting, the way the [color and light] levels change." At first it's a flat design, but then there's special things going on. I'd see one shape one day, and the next day it would disappear.

Over several months of the same angle, the light would constantly change.

There's actually four or five different moments in that painting, put together. I got the basic architecture, but it was about playing with the close values of shifting gray—some blueish, some greenish, some violetish. It didn't all happen at once—I'd make a note saying "oh, it was kind of yellow this morning."

BL: It's an unusual subject.

WH: It's like the hats. I used to work with this artist who had a corny sense of humor. At the time, he was in his late seventies—very successful.

I helped him out by setting up his workspace and even took him to the doctor a few times. But he was always amused by my name. Whenever he'd sign my name he'd add a little hat on top of the 't'. Or he would do this tipping a hat, turning a key thing whenever we ran into each other.

I have a lot of hats, and they all have specific associations of places in time. I wear all of them, but not all at once. The one entitled "Hawaii," a friend of mine at Penn State did not get tenure and he was depressed about it. The only job he found was in Hawaii. Before he left, he gave me his L.L. Bean hat and said, "Well, I won't be needing this anymore." So the hats have a practical purpose as well as other associations.

In the making of the painting, I wanted to capture the texture. The longer one looks at something, the more you see; you zero in on individual details, and then find more. I keep adding more and more until I'm tired of dealing with them and that's when it's finished.

BL: Like the Beech tree?

WH: Yeah, that was over by Green House. I knew it was going to be a drawing. I remember the tree from my first year at Union, it was gorgeous in the Autumn. We used to have a studio right next to it.

I loved that tree. It was struck by lightning and it survived. But then all the beetles came, it got diseased and they kept trimming it and trimming it. So, I thought: "If I'm going to do anything with this tree, it'd better be soon." I saw the tree twenty-eight, twenty-nine years ago, and over time it'd stay there. Grew on me, if you will. That's often how my ideas start—I'll see something, I'd remember it visually, then I'd revisit the subject occasionally and I may or may not start a drawing.

I took three different angles—one looking up, one looking down, one lateral. Then there's the decision of whether it's going to be a drawing or a painting. Certain subjects just aren't good as paintings. You do a drawing in preparation for a painting, then you discover it works better as a drawing.

I find perspective to be very easy. So I like to find challenging angles, different ways of looking at things you experience all the time. Ones that you don't expect in a picture.

WH: Yeah, that was over by Green House. I knew it was going to be a drawing. I remember the tree from my first year at Union, it was gorgeous in the Autumn. We used to have a studio right next to it.



I loved that tree. It was struck by lightning and it survived. But then all the beetles came, it got diseased and they kept trimming it and trimming it. So, I thought: "If I'm going to do anything with this tree, it'd better be soon." I saw the tree twenty-eight, twenty-nine years ago, and over time it'd stay there. Grew on me, if you will. That's often how my ideas start—I'll see something, I'd remember it visually, then I'd revisit the subject occasionally and I may or may not start a drawing.

I took three different angles—one looking up, one looking down, one lateral. Then there's the decision of whether it's going to be a drawing or a painting. Certain subjects just aren't good as paintings. You do a drawing in preparation for a painting, then you discover it works better as a drawing.

I find perspective to be very easy. So I like to find challenging angles, different ways of looking at things you experience all the time. Ones that you don't expect in a picture.

BL: In the moment of discovering an object, do you see it as something to revisit in the future?

WH: I let it incubate for a while, but there's no rule of thumb—sometimes I'll act right away. But generally, my mode of operation is to see something and let it cook over time. Maybe start a drawing. I usually have five or six projects going at the same time because I get tired of looking at the same thing. [Laughs.] So I'll move on to something else.

Some artists will start a painting and work straight through. I've seldom done that. I find it's better to turn something against the wall and work on something else—there's always something exciting to work on.

Then I'd go back and see it with fresher eyes. Unconsciously, the brain's still working, and sometime it will work out visual solutions in between passes.

After I get the image or composition down, I don't need to look at the subject anymore, I got it. It's more playing around with different elements—putting things in, taking things out. The Riviera painting perhaps has the longest lineage. It was started and I thought, finished, in 1989. And here we are now. [Laughs.]

BL: Does the finishing of a painting provide its subject new context for you?

WH: Taking something out of the studio, yes. The studio is a fairly personal space. It's where you think about the work and come up with the ideas. When seeing one's work in a different space, such as the beautiful Mandeville Gallery, it becomes a reflection, because placing the painting in a different place at a different time changes the context.

To me, they look kind of new because now that it's out of the studio, people will see it. And since I'm no longer working on the paintings, that changes the context. They take their place in time, I suppose.

I guess it's true in all the art, there's a time warp that happens. In visual art, you have this object that you create.

Objects take on something of a life of their own, they either succeed or they don't. I honestly don't know which ones will come across favorable or mean something to the viewers. That's why I'll rework something or look at it with fresher eyes.

BL: Do you think a change in time and place will factor into the viewer's interpretation?

WH: The subject's the subject. A hat, an old tree, a landscape. The subject is given and I present the subject as I experience them, or the way I think about them. They're divorced from my initial experience with the subject. The same is true with poetry— form will mean different things. You present ideas, but the takeaway is different.

I'm not interested in being dictatorial about it, I'm interested in presenting an image and then for each person who looks at it, to relate it to their own lives.

Maybe someone has climbed a Beech tree when they were a kid, or they burned Beech wood in their fireplace.

Everyone has their own stories. It's a means of communication, hoping that other people will find an association of their own with the work or subject.

This may be a leap, but my approach to teaching is rather like that also. It's not a didactic process, I don't want people to paint like I do.

I want them to discover their own ideas, and their own direction. How to mix a color or use a different kind of pencil.

I think that makes a far more interesting event than just me saying: "This is how you draw a tree. You do it this way and no other way." I'm more interested in people finding their own ways.