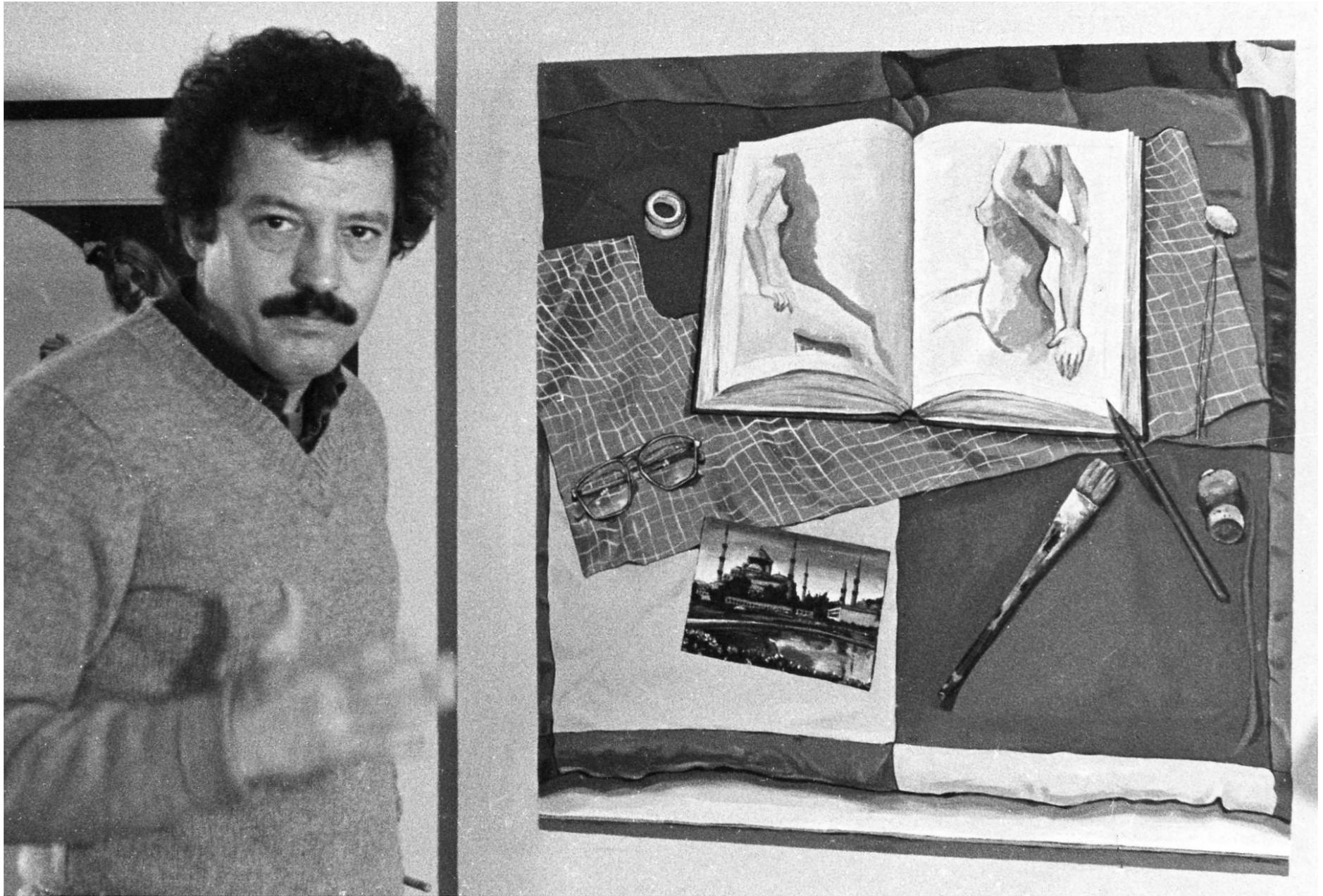




JOHN SEARS - CONTRAST
DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS



John Sears 1981

JOHN SEARS

CONTRAST

Drawings and Paintings

Rider University Art Gallery

September 19 - October 13, 2013

Opening Reception

September 19 • 5-7 p.m.

Panel Discussion: The Creative Spirit

Harry I. Naar, Cynthia Groya, John Suler, Anne Sears

September 26 • 7 p.m.

Gallery Information

Tuesday-Thursday • 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.

Sunday • noon - 4 p.m.

Professor Harry I. Naar, *director*

(609) 896-5168 • www.rider.edu/artgallery



This exhibition is funded in part by a grant from the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Department of State.

Introduction

I came upon the work of John Sears a few years ago when I had a meeting with Anne Sears on the Westminster campus. When I entered her office, I was surprised and intrigued by the art work displayed on the walls. I asked Anne about the artist who created these images, and Anne very proudly told me that they were the work of her husband, a professional artist and teacher, who for many years taught at George School.

The images depicted were still-life objects that, Anne informed me, were important to her husband, including post cards of places visited, images of his sketchbook, a coffee pot, a pencil, a brush, and a compass used for sailing since John was an enthusiastic sailor. All these objects of personal meaning were arranged with a clear understanding of design and composition. Anne also told me that these still-life images were a part of a larger series entitled "Sketch Book."

A few years later, at a jazz concert in the Rider University Art Gallery, I observed a man sitting next to Anne totally enjoying the concert and at the same time vigorously drawing the musicians in his sketchbook.

At that time I did not have a chance to talk with John, but I observed that he had great difficulty walking and maintaining his balance. I later learned that he was an avid bike rider who had been hit by a car while riding his bicycle. The accident almost killed him, and he remained severely disabled.

Creating a meaningful visual image is a difficult process whether the image comes from direct observation or a total invention. After John's accident, the difficult process was not only mental but also physical. John met this challenge; he continued to pursue his passion and gain insights into the world around him with enthusiasm. He had something to say.

Sadly, a few years after I observed him drawing, John died as a result of complications from the accident.

This exhibition is a celebration of his life and his determination to continue to create visual images even though he found himself physically, and at times emotionally, challenged. It is also an exhibition to encourage and to recognize that severely challenged people can still be creative and find a way to continue to contribute to our society.

I want to thank Anne Sears for allowing Rider University to exhibit her husband's work as well as Jay Dunitz and Cynthia Groya for their very personal essays about John Sears.

Professor Harry I. Naar
Gallery Director



In Search of Time, 1981 - Acrylic and Colored Pencil - 36" x 28"

Contrast is the Key

Those words continue to echo in my brain, and probably in the brain of anyone who spent more than five minutes with my husband, John Sears. Yes, contrast is one of art's core principles: arranging opposites to create visual interest. He drilled it into his students. He hand-lettered a "Contrast is the Key" poster for his studio. He even named his boat Contrast.

But for John, contrast was much more than an important element in a work of art. For him contrast represented an approach to life. He understood that life presents us with highs and lows, good times and bad. And he found a way to accept and even enjoy those peaks and valleys, those contrasts. He exulted in the joy of good times. "Just look at the color of those pink trees against the blue sky," he'd exclaim as we drove by a row of magnolias in the spring. And when the times weren't so good and he couldn't control his hands to make a detailed drawing, he accepted the challenge and turned to watercolor washes, completely immersing himself in a different way to express himself.

The works in this exhibit share some of John's journey as an artist and as a human being. When we met in 1981, he was working on his Sketchbook Series of still-life drawings and paintings. These works, which haven't been exhibited since 1982, represent John in so many ways. Each contains an arrangement of objects and mementos that were important to him centered around the sketchbook that was always at his side.

I also felt it was important to include other works that chronicle John's journey as he continued his life as an artist after his life-altering brain injury. When he emerged from a three-week coma, his doctors warned me that John might not be able to make art again due to the area of his brain that was damaged. But he wanted to try, so nearly a year after his accident I took him to a life-drawing session at the studio of his friend Jacques Fabert, not knowing what to expect. When I returned about an hour later both John and Jacques were ecstatic – showing me his sketch of two women. Yes, it wasn't executed in the same precise way as his earlier works, but he had been able to draw again!

John's final work is also exhibited here. When hand tremors prevented him from controlling a pencil, he turned to acrylic paints. His final painting, which he created just days before his death in 2009, is an abstract composition of vivid colors that to me represent his fierce desire to continue to make art even as his body failed him.

Thank you to Harry Naar and Rider University for supporting this exhibit and what it represents. John was one of many incredible artists who create in spite of what may seem to be overwhelming challenges. I hope that our panel discussion will foster new ways to support the artist that really lives within all of us. Thank you to Professor John Suler and Cynthia Groya for agreeing to join us for this conversation.

And thank you to Jay Dunitz and Cynthia Groya for your friendship, support and eloquent tributes to John.

Anne Sears



First Drawing, 1986 - Graphite - 23" x 17"

Thank You

Message from Jay Dunitz read at the dedication of a tree in memory of John Sears at George School, May 8, 2010.

I was deeply saddened to learn of John's passing last spring.

And when I could not attend his memorial service, I spent some time kicking myself for not even having come up with the words to say "thank you" to one of the most important people in my life.

But life moves in funny ways, and today I have that chance again...

So this is for you, John, and for those of us who you shepherded through your art room in 1974, and for all of you here today.

To thank John properly, I have to go back to my three years at George School, beginning in 1972. I must say, I enjoyed all of it immensely – but it's also accurate to say, I floundered through my first two.

While I'd taken a liking to history and religion those first two years, I truly only excelled at "extra-curricular activities." With friends and kindred spirits I wandered the woods of Bucks County on crisp Saturday afternoons, tossed a Frisbee on dewy spring mornings, inner-tubed butt-naked down the Neshaminy, and explored altered states in the dorms late at night. Those two years even included a couple of famously inspired pranks – but when it came to academic achievement, I was a lost soul. And so, much the same way I'd floated nearly rudderless through my sophomore and junior years, I meandered into my senior year, as well. That September when I found myself in John Sears' class, I thought, "Why not? I've done the woodshop and ceramics thing. They were good – why not art, too?" Still, I wasn't zealous about anything in a classroom – not even art.

And so, that's how it started – with a lack of drive, a couple messy charcoals, and what seemed to me to be an overly enthusiastic teacher.

"I don't get him... and these charcoals? Hmmm... maybe this is not my thing." That was my first reaction. But it wasn't long before something remarkable happened. One day, John posed for us in his bulky Shetland sweater, and he had us render a charcoal portrait of him. My first few lines were bold but uncertain, yet I soon noticed something different was happening on the page, and I became excited by the image as it appeared beneath my scribbling hand.

I loved how I was able to capture John – how I was able to portray his expression with my expression! What appeared on the paper wasn't just John, and it wasn't just me – it was a melding of energy and impression! This was new to me – an awakening. From that moment on, I was hooked. Under John's guidance and unwavering encouragement, that single charcoal exploded into a panoply of watercolors, drawings and oils, and later into a series of bicycle silkscreens – most notable, perhaps, for their enormous scale – one that inspired even John to adopt new techniques, which he then conveyed to me.

And though I was grateful to be the beneficiary of so much technique, imparting the "how to's" does not adequately convey WHAT made John a great person and a great teacher.

You see, John was a cyclone of unabashed enthusiasm – and when I stepped into his room in the mornings, I stepped into an expansive world of brilliant light and frenetic creativity. With a twinkle in his eyes he'd deliver it all right to us. His ebullient, sometimes seemingly reckless energy was utterly contagious. His love of life, his passion inspired me – and it did so in a way that nothing else at George School had.

I soon devoted every available minute to art. Between classes, during study hall and late into the night, every hour I could snag during the day, I found myself in the art room – immersed in John’s world – a world that was becoming mine, too. And whether John was physically there or not, his spirit, his voice, cheered me on.

I’m not sure I ever conveyed this story to John, but I’ll tell you – because it’s a testament to how even John’s fellow teachers in far-off departments recognized his impact. I showed up to Diana Chase’s Spanish II class one day that very spring – on time I might add – much surprised to find Diana straddling the doorjamb, blocking my entrance. Keeping her understated smile in check, she explained that she’d heard I was “doing wonderful things in John’s art class,” and then she told me she thought my time would “be better spent over there.” She tipped her head in the direction of John’s art room.

I didn’t get it. I stood there motionless, befuddled – she wasn’t making any space for me to get in, to get to my Spanish seat. She nodded again, and then in a quiet voice directed, “Go.”

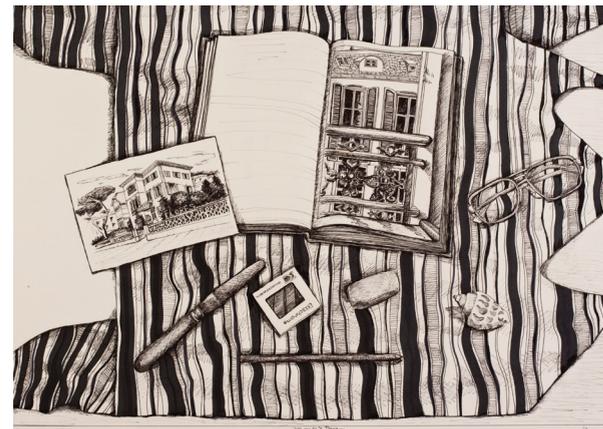


Beautiful Woman of the Gods, 1981
Acrylic and Colored Pencil - 36” x 28”

She’d kicked me out of class. Not because I was disruptive, nor failing (I was a solid C Spanish student, even though I adored Mexico) – but because even she knew, at this time in my life, there was no better teacher for me than John Sears, and no better place for me to be than his classroom!

You see, in all my other classes, I might not always have a correct answer. And having a wrong answer, we all know, sometimes feels embarrassing. But in John’s world, I found it was only possible to be right. Knowing I could take risks and not be embarrassed, I was inspired to do even better – to push myself further and improve upon my own experience. And, so it was there, in his realm, that John provided a safe haven and fueled my drive to explore.

On my own, and with his help, I not only learned how to succeed, but I also learned something special – I learned that the best part – that is, the most fun is often had in going that extra mile. Said another way, stepping into my own creativity for the first time in my life, I truly felt liberated.



Monk's Dream, 1981
Pen and Ink - 36” x 28”

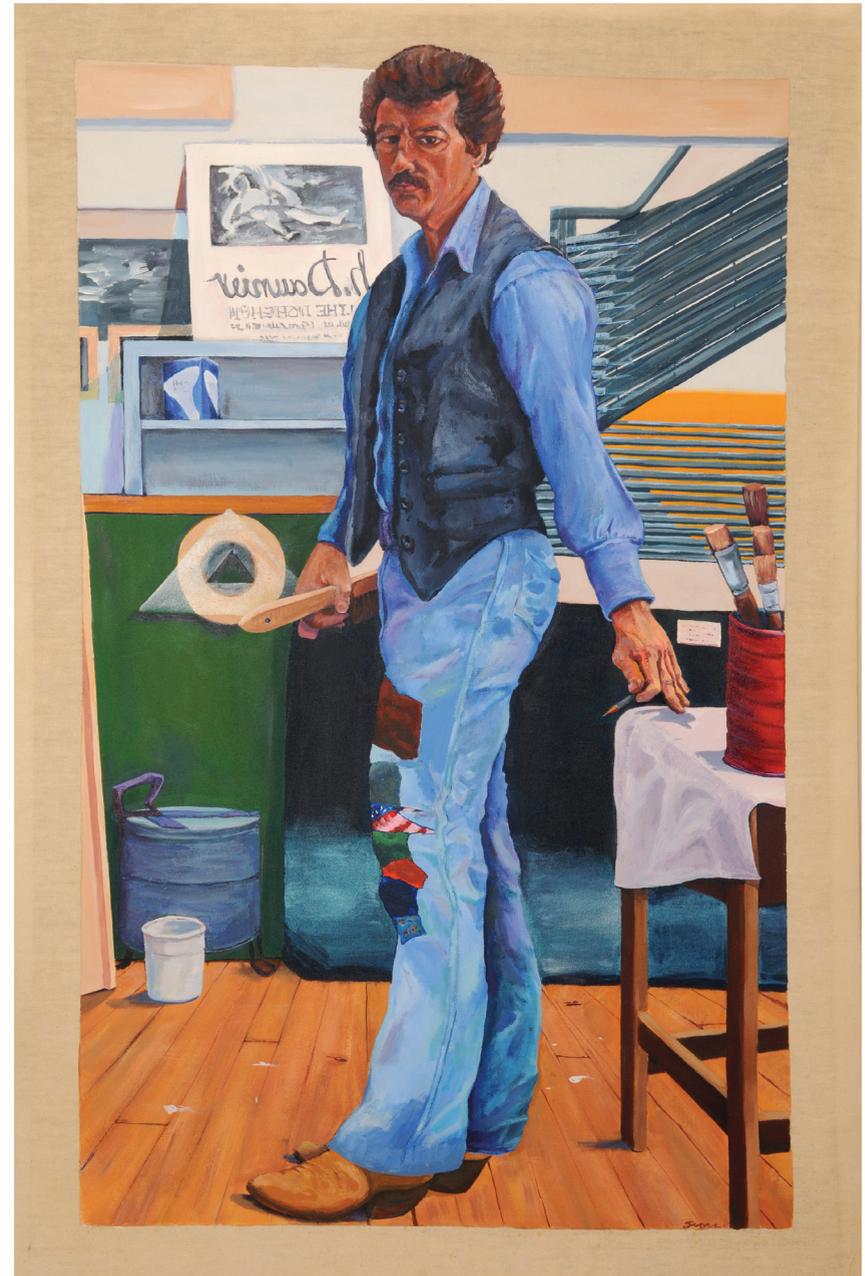
This was John's doing. And though an artist in his own right, John became my cheerleader, coach and mentor. By his own example he taught me that it was OK to like myself and to pursue my own passions – even as, and maybe especially if, it meant pursuing them in a solitary way. And in the peer-pressure caldron that is high school, going it alone certainly felt to me like a novel if not courageous endeavor.

In the years that followed, I had many other art teachers. Plenty of them were willing to teach me a technique or two – but John had already shown me that it takes a special, rare individual to inspire; to plant the seeds that bloom into self-motivation, self-confidence and self-discovery.

John, you were that teacher for me, and for you I will always be grateful. You knew how to turn on the light. And then you did something for me no one else could do. You turned it up, much brighter.

Thank you.

Jay Dunitz's work melds a passion for painting, drawing, and photography into a medium that straddles into science, too. His art has been collected the world over - from NY's MoMA to the Israel Museum - and it has been featured in shows at the Venice Biennale, the Smithsonian Institution and the Ansel Adams Gallery in Yosemite. Articles featuring his work have appeared in Wired Magazine and American Photographer, and he has lectured at the Rochester Institute of Technology and NASA. A book of his work, Pacific Light, was published by Beyond Words Publishing. These days, he makes his home in Malibu, Calif.



Self Portrait, 1981 - Acrylic on Linen - 39" x 60"



Blue Mosque, 1981 - Acrylic on Linen - 36" x 26"

A Meaningful Existence

Written and presented by Cynthia Groya at the Creative Spirit Symposium at the James A. Michener Museum, April 20, 2010.

In addition to living life in pursuit of a meaningful existence, art sometimes lends the artist the possibility of a life beyond the living. The possibility that your breath might be drawn in by others who gaze into your art and recognize the same struggle, the same joy and agony that obsesses them. Someone gets it. Beyond words. Beyond time. Beyond life.

John Sears didn't have command of his words by the time I met him. Or his art for that matter. But, John Sears communicated the meaningfulness of an artful existence in his every awkward gesture, slurred anecdote and painstakingly executed drawing or painting. And though John suffered from double or blurred vision most of the time I knew him, his focus - his wisdom - was clear. He was relentless about the fundamental imperative of contrast in art. And communicated that imperative to every artist who had the courage to hear. And watch.

I met John 18 years after the accident that desecrated all that defined the artful existence John had created. That John and Anne had created, together. I don't know much about the John before the accident. But I do know about the determination that drove him to reach beyond what anyone thought was possible afterward. I saw it with my own eyes. And I was in awe.

John, who had been a master teacher at George School, came to my little art school in Yardley, Pa., every week to paint. Or draw. Or teach. He usually did a combination of the three. It was always a battle for him. And sometimes for the others in the class. You probably know that John was...opinionated? And he always persisted...beyond the endurance of anyone else in the room.

He would pull his resistant body up to the big art table or apprehensive easel, and struggle with all his will and creative energy to get his hands - that tried their best to defy him - to carry out his purpose. He would create a furious rhythm of deep black hatch marks across the paper...that would slowly take shape as a figure... or a still life... or a scene from a photograph...or from somewhere in his memory. Voracious black lines that often slashed the paper. Were they expressing the deep black pain that ripped across his ability to paint the brilliant controlled colors of the paintings that he saw in his head that he created before...the accident?

Of course I hadn't seen John paint before the accident, but I've no doubt he painted with intensity. John's intensity was boundless: The artist that I knew committed every ounce of creative energy in his body to expressing the creative force that pumped breath into his being. Watching John, the indefatigable determination and effort to create, restrained by a body that fought him all the way. I was humbled and awed. I've never known a human being so determined to create art.

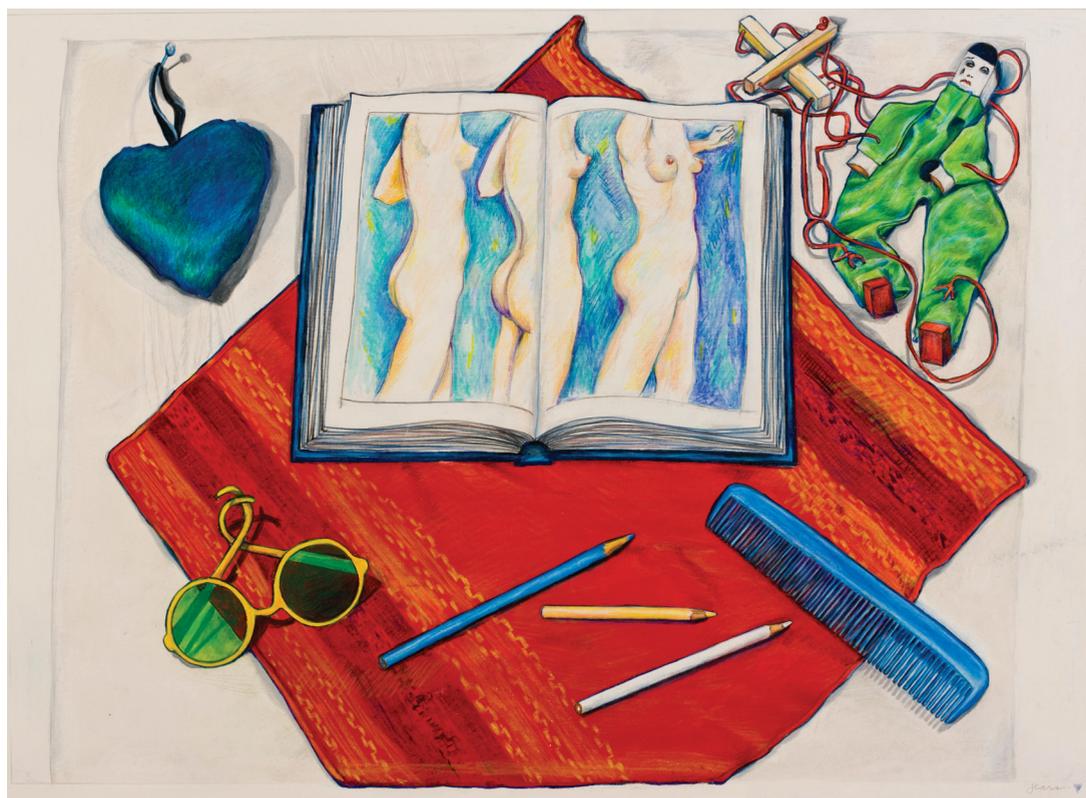
It was never, ever easy for John, and he had every reason to give up. He often shared with me his frustration, his depression, his yearning to create, to control his art. And yet he never gave up. I believe John worked harder to be alive, to draw and paint, than anyone I've ever known.

I admired John's drawings of deep, dark slashes...his ferocious attack on his paper: No mere mortal retreating into an invalid body. He fought the betrayal of his body with unbelievable energy. And never stopped. When light came through John's drawings, it did so brilliantly - never tepid or hesitant - it burst through those slashing black lines: The victor in brilliant golds and oranges - and sometimes, shades of blue. Never resigned, muted color, but full-force, in your face, you're-not going-to-beat-me-down color.

John overcame every imaginable, unbearable obstacle to create art. And he was only able to do that because he was most fortunate to be married to Anne, who lived every agony with him and did everything in her power to empower John AND his art.

Somewhere now, John is unencumbered by his earthly shackles. I'm glad of that. And fortunately for us, John left behind his images, his documentation of the fight to live an artful existence. For us to breathe in and remember. A Meaningful Existence.

Cynthia Groya studied painting and printmaking at SACI in Florence, Italy and received a BFA from Drake University. Her work has been shown nationally and is included in private collections in the U.S. and Europe. She founded and directed Cultural Arts in Progress, a multi-disciplinary art school in Yardley, Pa., taught art at the St. Louis Art Museum, Bucks County Community College and Newtown Friends School, and served as gallery director of the Silva Gallery of Art in Pennington, N.J. Groya has received several awards for painting and printmaking and has exhibited in more than 40 group and two solo exhibitions.



Blue Heart, 1981 - Acrylic and Colored Pencil - 36" x 28"



The Studio, 1980 - Colored Pencil - 36" x 28"



Study I, 1980's - Charcoal - 45" x 35"



Fireclouds, 1981 - Acrylic and Colored Pencil - 36" x 28"



Bucks County Sky, 2004 - Acrylic - 45" x 37"

John Sears

John Sears was an integral part of the art community in the Delaware Valley until his death in 2009. His work has been included in exhibits throughout the United States and has received many awards, including the Patron's Prize for Graphics at the Phillips Mill Art Exhibition, first prize for works on canvas in Bryn Mawr Rehabilitation Hospital's Art Ability International Exhibition for Artists with Disabilities and honorable mention at Princeton Medical Center's Art First exhibition. Sears' art is in both public and private collections, including those of Pittsburgh Plate Glass, Pittsburgh National Bank, Mobil Oil, and Pittsburgh Copper Corporation.

A graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Northern Illinois University, where he earned a master's degree in Art Education, Sears was also a dedicated and gifted art educator. For 17 years he taught drawing and painting at George School in Newtown, Pa., and in 1983 he was recognized by Rhode Island School of Design as one of the nation's leading secondary art educators.

In 1985 he was involved in a near-fatal bicycling accident that left him with a severe brain injury and such disabilities as partial paralysis, speech disorders and double vision as well as cognitive deficits. For the rest of his life he struggled to continue his work as an artist and to compensate for his disability's challenges.

"Making art has been a central part of my life since I was a child. After my accident, when the doctors told me that I might not be able to make art again, I was devastated," he once said about the role that art played in his life. "I couldn't imagine living without being able to create. Using as much will and determination as I could muster, I kept on trying, so that I could once again work in my studio."

www.johnsearsartist.com



John Sears 2004

Front Cover
John Sears' Studio
Photo by Pete Borg

Back Cover
Tuscany, 2005
Watercolor and Salt
24" x 21"

Design and Layout
Dax Finley

