

A person with red hair is seen from the back, sitting at a desk. A desk lamp is visible on the left, and a window with some colorful paper scraps is in the background. The overall scene is softly lit and out of focus.

ARTS

CONVERSATION OF ART

MSA teacher uses art to speak to the world



Story and photos
by Kaitlin Mullins



"Simulacrum"

In Mississippi, there is a growing population who are invested in the creative economy. Large film productions and well-known brands and artists combined with rich cultural influences set the stage for this progressive society to foster art-making and its appreciation. One artist in those trenches is Kelly Walters, a painter, illustrator and visual artist working in Mississippi and teaching at Mississippi School of the Arts in Brookhaven.

Walters teaches Visual Arts at MSA. She has a Master of Fine Arts from Mississippi College and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in art education from the University of Southern Mississippi. Before moving to Brookhaven to teach visual arts at MSA in 2013, she taught at Hinds Community College in Raymond and Mississippi College in Clinton.

Outside of school, Walters is painting and otherwise art-making. In the summer, she teaches workshops with the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans.

She is currently working with Margaret Delashmit to illustrate a children's book by Delashmit. The book, Walters said, resonates with her and some of her current works dealing with women who dare to be powerful and accomplished.

"Every time I read it, I cry," she said. "It's one of those beautifully written stories that I want to make sure makes it into the world, and I have the honor of illustrating it. It's a lot of fun."

Walters had a show at the Mississippi Museum of Modern Art with fellow artist Sam Clark over the summer as part of the museum's "Third Thursdays Pop-Up Series" called Dragons and Dreamscapes. One of the pieces in the show featured her 3-year-old daughter, Clara Avery Walters, as a creature of her own design.

"I asked her if she wanted to be a dragon or a princess and she said she wanted to be a princess flying dinosaur," Walters said. "So that's a fun part of that series."

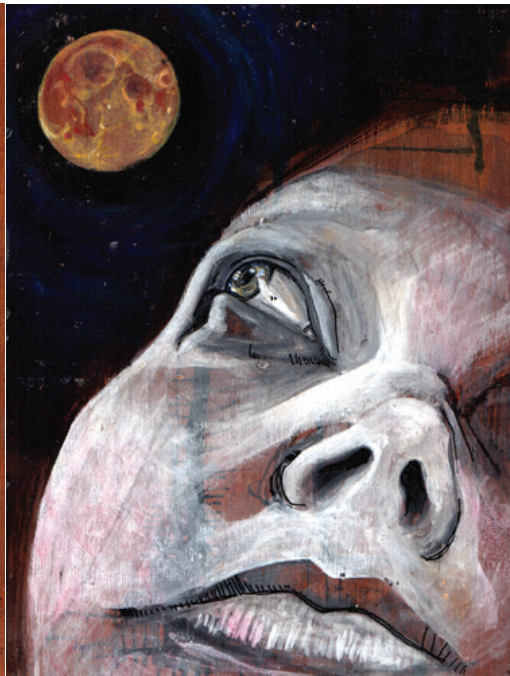
The title? "Princess Flying Dinosaur."

The show also featured a series that holds special meaning for Walters as an artist working with epilepsy.

"My goal and focus with the synesthesia series is to be an advocate for epilepsy and people with disabilities," Walters said. "Synesthesia itself is having two different senses that are going at the same time —



"Big Head"



"Blood Moon"



"Musessm"

like hearing a smell or tasting a sound. We teach it academically, to be more aware of it (like listening to music to inspire a painting), then you have people like myself, where, it's not really something we can turn off."

Walters said she has been told she sees light and colors quite differently than most everyone else around her — like the greens, blues, purples and violets she sees in people's skin. That, the different and magical way she sees, is what she tries to get across in some of her paintings. Using technical methods and materials, Walters creates her work with changing light and viewing angles in mind. Sometimes it is sealing a painting with egg or 20 layers of acrylic in a way that reveals new or hidden aspects of the work.

"It's a wonderful world to live in as far as being an artist, so I'm trying

to bring that out in my art and show people, to start that conversation," Walters said.

Because the conversation, she has learned, is difficult to have. Walters said she likes to use art to get these more difficult topics out in the open, like epilepsy or bipolar disorder,



"Damaged on Transit"

the atypical neuropathy and other issues people around her experience, which are, at the least, uncomfortable for most people to talk about. At this point in her life, Walters said, she is trying to collaborate with other artists to do things that are helping the community and

making a positive impact on how people view things.

"I met a girl the other day that said 'This is me, you have created art that is my life,' and that's why we create art. To communicate to people maybe not even knowing what they're dealing with," Walters



said. "I just live with this every day, but actually getting into the conversation getting it out in the open — we don't. We don't think about that, we're quiet and we don't say stuff. We try not to bother people, but sometimes it needs to be said because we don't realize there are people around us who need to hear these things."

Walters is excited and enthusiastic about the artistic community that works together throughout Mississippi. Besides her own art-making, she contributes to that community by ensuring it has a future. She is helping to cultivate young artists, most notably at the Mississippi School of the Arts, where she has taught visual arts for four years. Over those years, Walters said she has witnessed profound growth — in her students and their work, her artistic endeavors and within the school itself.

"We're doing a really good job, we're creating amazing artists out of this school," Walters said. "And part of the reason why it's doing so well is because (the students) are a family. They support each other, and they encourage each other, and they build each other up. We try to do that within the artistic community as a whole."

"It's building a community of artists that will continue to create art. For years. Together. That's a lovely thing to have, and it will shape the way that Mississippi and the nation will view art," she said.

Teaching young artists, whether at the college level or high school level, is something a good majority of professional artists do at some point in their lives. Walters, like so many, feels a need to share the wealth of knowledge that is acquired through that hard work and views it as a privilege. Part of the privilege is seeing the students' responses to art, varied and sometimes insightful.

"It's been wonderful to have my students experience my work because they can learn from it — good or bad. Not everybody's going to always understand what I'm doing, but I can learn from them experiencing my work," Walters said. "I'll show them my pieces, and I'll say 'OK, what do I need to work on? What do you see that I need to push forward?' So it's a learning experience for both of us. I learn from them; they learn from me."

Walters has a show at the at Gore galleries at Mississippi College from Jan. 11 to Feb. 24, with a reception to be held on Jan. 26 from 6 to 8 p.m.



"As I walk through the valley of death"