

MENTORS

Cal State Fullerton's Eileen Cowin is famous for her teaching—and her cutting-edge photography

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“I didn't like teaching at first,” confesses Eileen Cowin, who has been doing just that for over 20 years at California State University in Fullerton. “I wasn't much older than my students, and I think they wanted more of an authority figure.” No one doubts Cowin's authority anymore. As one of the country's most respected fine-art photographers, she has a reputation

that draws students to the school. “I transferred to Cal State Fullerton specifically to work with Eileen,” says senior Lisa Christiansen, who researched California's best photo programs before making the switch in her sophomore year. “I was completely taken with the subtlety and mystery of her work.”

A good teacher can inspire students by

the mere example of his or her own art. Cowin herself was greatly influenced by the work ethic of her most famous teacher, Aaron Siskind, when she studied photography at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. “He took pictures until the day he died,” she says. “He considered it his job.” But Cowin's success as a photo educator has just as much to do with her

“Mirror of Venus, 1988.”





EILEEN COWIN (3)

patience, sensitivity, and open-mindedness with students. "Eileen never tells you what to do," says Christiansen. "She lets you figure it out yourself by talking about your work." Cowin offers an illustration from another medium: "The violinist Itzhak Perlman said he had two kinds of music teacher. One would say, 'That sounds terrible in F major,' and the other would ask, 'How do you think that sounds in F major?' I try to be the second kind—to ask questions that help students solve their own problems."

Cowin's method extends to students whose photographs are more traditional than her own cutting-edge imagery. "I'm interested in all kinds of work," she says. "If someone wants to make pictures like Ansel Adams, I don't discourage them from going out and shooting nature with an 8x10 camera. I encourage them to

understand what Adams was really trying to do, to learn about others who worked in the same vein, and to ask themselves what unique qualities they can bring to that kind of photography in our time."

But because she is not satisfied "to just get up there and tell students how to di-

lute Dektol for the rest of my life," Cowin has also created new courses that break down photography's walls. "I've always had painters and sculptors sitting in on my advanced and graduate photo classes," she says. "They add a lot of creative energy." Cowin's "Studio Expanded" class taps that energy with video, installation art, performance, and computer imaging—areas into which her own work has moved.

In the last decade her work has evolved from the eerie domestic tableaux with which Cowin is often associated to provocative serial images of seemingly disassociated things, from female cleavage to volcanic eruptions. But the tie that binds her work is a carefully constructed ambiguity. "I like the idea that a photograph can have a number of different meanings, depending on who's looking at it, and when," she says. "I think it stays with you longer." —RUSSELL HART

An Eileen Cowin self-portrait.

