

## Becoming an artist at the age of 43

In her year of trying new things, Melanie Chambers braves a portraiture class and ends up drawing aliens.

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Teacher Thomas Hendry helps Melanie Chambers at an introduction to portrait drawing class at the Toronto School of Art.

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**By:** Melanie Chambers Special to the Star, Published on Tue Jan 26 2016

As the portrait instructor makes his way around the room, I want to cover my drawing: the model's face is squished into her chin and you could land a helicopter on her forehead.

"Looks like an alien," I say.

It's humbling to draw so terribly.

I've never taken a drawing class before, but I'm 43, and I've declared this my year of trying new things, so here I am. After the first hour and a half, I want to leave. I'm frustrated that I can't get it right.

We begin with quick two-minute sketches of the model's head — a pink-mohawked lady with exceptionally high cheek bones. She's got loads of personality to capture.

Sliding the charcoal across the paper, the movement feels elegant — like skating across clean lake ice. But the result is infantile: two intersecting eggshells (one for the cranium and the other for the face) and a grid filled with dashes for eyes, ears and mouth.

"We assume that the face always appears in the centre," says Thomas Hendry, the instructor from The Toronto School of Art. A good rule of thumb: the eyes appear half way down the face and the rest is divided into thirds: hairline, eyebrows and base of the nose.

Then the head takes on new qualities: proportions, lines and angles — geometry. The instructor tilts a yogurt container to demonstrate his point. "Depending on its angle, notice how the lines begin to curve."

If the model looks up, her eyes almost disappear behind her protruding chin. Sometimes an ear is tiny, or lost entirely depending on the angle.

To help situate the face, with a wooden stick held at arm's length, I squint and eyeball where her ears are in relation to her eyes; it feels more scientific and methodical and it removes the pressure to be artistic.

Next, Hendry gives us a new instrument: We exchange the conte pencil (a permanent black charcoal pencil) for an erasable willow pencil, essentially a stick of charcoal. This semi-permanent wand is magic: a ridiculous-looking pug nose is easily deleted.

Draw, swipe, draw, swipe. My finger has the power to erase mistakes.

After page after page of heads, I'm compelled to give the model Betty- and Veronica-style cartoon lips in my latest attempt. Growing up, I filled notebooks with my favourite characters' big googly eyes and luscious mouths.

"We've looked at faces all our lives," says Hendry. "We have signs and symbols of ears, mouth and eyes and these symbols stayed entrenched in our minds." This explains the Betty and Veronica.

After about three hours, my circles are more true to the model in front of me: her alien forehead isn't as pronounced, her features aren't in the centre and, eventually, her lips thin out.

Maybe that is why it's harder to learn as an adult. We default to these early symbols and experiences; entrenched in the past, we draw what we think something should look like rather than what it is.

Eventually, we move onto her nuances: her mischievous tilted eyebrows and her fierce high cheekbones.

Brushing the paper with my finger softens her cheek, while a few thick lines under her jaw give her head shape. A couple of spiky lines from the top of her head (which looks more like a patch of grass than her swoopy pink mohawk) and gradually, line-by-line, the touches make her her.

Less alien-like, my own head feels oddly exhausted, as if tapping into my artistic side is rewiring my brain. Starting from an alien, to Betty and Veronica cartoon lips, the final product is surprisingly, strangely compelling and powerful.

For me, drawing was like math. I never had an aptitude for it (or so I thought), so I never tried. But given a few pointers and heaps of patience, I now find myself sketching people's heads from time to time. I don't care if they look like aliens.

***Melanie Chambers** is spending her 43rd year trying new things. She's sharing them with readers in this occasional series.*