



Entertainment

Making art fun to learn

Photographer and printmaker Michael B. Platt adopted an informal approach to teaching art.



Digital photographer and artist Michael Platt with his wife, Carol Anne Beane, in his studio Aug. 6 in Washington. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

By **Lauren McEwen** August 15

Photographer and printmaker Michael B. Platt takes an informal approach to both teaching and art, working out of his home as much as possible. A high-ceilinged, white room full of studio lights, soft boxes and large reams of seamless backdrop paper, Platt's in-home photo studio is just off the kitchen in his Northwest Washington home.

There is a small bed in both rooms, just in case any of Platt's friends need to crash overnight. In his most recent teaching role, as a Howard University professor, he frequently held his digital photography classes at home and allowed students to drop by to complete projects.

"If your house is big enough, I tell everybody — especially young folks — that you don't need a living room. You don't need a coffee table. You don't need any of that. You just need a place where you can sleep, cook your food and do your work — the necessary stuff," says Platt.

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The etching studio in his basement came first, but it is currently being used to house items for his late mother's estate sale. Recently, Platt has been more focused on digital imagery than printmaking.

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Taking a friend's advice, he took some Photoshop classes while working as a professor of fine art at Northern Virginia Community College.

Unfortunately for Platt, the classes were geared toward commercial art — brochures, menus and the like — which he found dull. Still interested, he decided to invest \$7,000 on a small printer, computer, camera and scanner.

Digital photographer and artist Michael Platt in the front room of his studio/home Aug. 6 in Washington. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

His collection of in-home equipment has grown to include two large desktop Macs and two wide-format Epson 9890 printers.

“I have a reasonable photo studio in the back where I just updated my lights and also, in that photo studio, I've held several students' theses presentations back there, so it's like a little quasi-gallery/photo studio. We also have a lot of people over to eat back there,” he says.

The 66-year-old, who retired from Howard University's teaching staff last year after 11 years, describes his teaching method as “informal, but you get the work done.”

Platt taught printmaking and digital photography classes, allowing his students to use his personal studio. It was a setup that felt natural for Platt, particularly because he remembers learning from people like the late James Valentine, a Columbus-based photographer who allowed students to visit the photo workshop in his garage where they would eat and watch Valentine work with models.

“I can get a lot of art out of my students through this informality, hanging out and trying to get them to go to openings, which means, we get together and we go, because they won't go on their own,” says Platt, who began teaching this way while at NVCC.

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“I would have a little crew of people who enjoyed art a lot, and we would just hang out and go to openings together. It was about making art fun to learn,” he says.

Correction: This article incorrectly described Platt as having taken classes from the late photographer James Valentine at the Columbus College of Art and Design. Valentine allowed students such as Platt to

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