

Ian Murphy Interview at Learnable.com - Transcript

Kevin: Hi, this is Kevin Yank from learnable.com. I'm the Chief Instructor here, and one of my great pleasures is I get to do interviews like these with some of our instructors, and today I am sitting down with Ian Murphy. Hi, Ian!

Ian: Hi, Kevin! How are you doing?

Kevin: Pretty good! Thanks for making time with us. Why don't you introduce yourself to our audience?

Ian: Hi there. I'm Ian Murphy, a fine artist practicing out of England, UK. My specialisms are painting and drawing, and one of the key things that I try to do with a lot of students and people who visit our online learning site is to give them a gist of what my life is all about, the idea of going out drawing with my sketchbooks, trying to be inspired by various landscapes, be it natural or manmade, urban dwellings. I record in my sketchbooks and then I bring all my work back to my studio here in Wigan, where I then set about producing a series of development drawings and paintings ranging from scales of roughly A2 up to very large canvases, perhaps in the region of 6 feet, 7 feet square.

Ian: I really try and share my enthusiasm with all the students and teachers that I work with to try to convey the passion that I have for making fine art, really.

Kevin: Well passion is definitely what I would say I took away as a first impression from your Drawing in the Snow course, which is what you have published first with us here on learnable.com. Drawing in the Snow is available as a free course on learnable.com.

Kevin: But taking a look at your personal website, ianmurphyartist.com, it looks like you cover a lot of different subjects. Is it that getting out and seeing the subject in the world, that exploring to find things to draw, is that the uniting factor of your work?

Ian: Yes, that always been, really. Ever since I was at school myself, thinking back to when perhaps I was the age of 14, something like that, and the flexibility in schools then was that my art teacher would say to me— He obviously knew that I had a passion for drawing, and a talent there, and he would offer me the opportunity to do whatever I wanted to do, so it started on the premise that I said "Well I'd like to leave the classroom, if you don't mind..."

Kevin: (laugh)

Ian: "...and go out drawing." And back then it wasn't a problem. He said, "Okay, I'll see you in a couple of hours."

Kevin: Right!

Ian: So I was able to leave the school boundary, wander off into the local area, and do my drawings in my sketchbook, and then return back to school. In essence, I don't feel that I do anything now that I haven't done, that was the origins of me as a fine artist. I've always done it. I've always been inspired by the domains and the places that I traveled to. It just has grown. The wealth of places that I visit in the world now is ever increasing, and as such the inspiration is ever growing.

Kevin: So what does a new challenge look [like] to you at the moment? What are you working on? What do you go out looking for that you think will present a new challenge to you?

Ian: I don't go with any preconceptions. It's always down to what is there at that moment in time. So everything to me is a possibility; I don't put any barriers up, or anything that needs to be in the way of what a good drawing might be. So currently we've got a couple of things going on in the studio that are being filmed at present— When I say "a couple" it's probably about four or five, to be honest.

Kevin: (laugh)

Ian: We're just about to go down now and shoot for a woodcut series that we're doing, and that's based on inspiration from my visit to the Forbidden City in Beijing. Tomorrow we'll be

filming a development drawing from looking at waterfalls; it seems to be something that a lot of students struggle with, and that's drawing water. So that's going to be a major series for us in the next 12 months.

Ian: So that's going to be one of the first parts, and then next week we're going to start filming the development of my visits to Morocco. We'll be looking at sort of the cultural side of doorways, and entrances, window shutters. The sort of decay and eroded parts that goes with that part of the world. So that's just sort of a glimpse of what we're doing at this moment in time.

Kevin: Could you talk a bit about the style of your work, the materials you use? How would you describe your style, and how it's evolved?

Ian: The sort of key commodities that I always work for, and my drawings always start off with realism, and then a huge amount of observation. I feel in terms of communicating this to any audience, those are the parameters that need to be tackled first. So any student or teacher or any enthusiasts of art needs to get the basics right. If they get that right first, then creativity can come after that point. So that's the foundation of everything that I do, and I draw with realism.

Ian: At the point when I get back to the studio, then I want to start experimenting. I want to be taking risks and trying new media. So I love working with layers and experimenting with different art products. The drawings can be something fragile and tenuous at times, but then I always go with the strength of putting the image back into the drawing at any moment. So I sort of toy with the balance of abstraction at the development stage, and the sort of overwhelming essence of what I do is tackling an awareness of light and mood and atmosphere. Those are key commodities that I always try to get into the finished product.

Ian: I find the most successful ideas have got a smattering of all those things in them. I'm not saying I achieve that every time, but that's my challenge.

Kevin: (laugh) Well that's definitely something that comes out in the Drawing in the Snow course, where I think you're repeatedly talking about capturing the character of the weather and getting a feel for the nature of the light, and how you can bring that into the work.

Kevin: Could you talk a bit about your transition from being an artist to being an art teacher? What led your interest into that field, and how much of your work now is focused on these tutorials versus art for its own sake?

Ian: I think they very much dovetail together, to be honest, in my working life today. I enjoy both equally well. Sometimes I think it's good to get out of the studio and not be self-conscious about what you're doing, and to share skills and talent with others. Getting that format that you can understand the challenges that other people want in their work, so I don't have any problem with sharing skills and enthusiasm for art with other people, so it gives me a thirst as I go along knowing the next day that I'll be back in the studio working on my work and then perhaps out somewhere in the country working with another set of students or teachers.

Ian: In terms of how it started, I think I'm going back now 25 years, really—

Kevin: Wow!

Ian: Yeah, I've seen days...

Kevin: (laugh) I'll allow for some vagueness in your answer!

Ian: Okay, great, great!

Ian: I think it was one of my first jobs—if job is the right phrase—when I finished university and got my degree. I was exhibiting widely. I'd been given the opportunity to become a resident artist in a big gallery and the contractual basis was that 50% of the working week I would be in my studio, an open studio—open to the public—and the other 50% of the time I would work with visitors to the gallery.

Kevin: So was that a novel arrangement at the time, with that gallery, that they would have you teaching as well as exhibiting?

Ian: Yes, I think so. I think it was pioneered by a gentleman called Rod Taylor, at the time, who was a big art educator in the UK. I think he's retired a bit now, but he has traveled the world speaking about art education. His philosophy was dedicating himself to the region of the UK,

which was demographically very poor.

Kevin: Mmm.

Ian: His idea was to allow creative people to come back to the region and give something back. I bought into that a little bit; I quite like that as a philosophy. And what it actually did practically—and I do try to convey this to a lot of students now—everybody learns at different paces. Everybody's got different levels of ability...

Kevin: Yeah.

Ian: ...and I don't think art should just be for the talented or the elite, people who've just got a passion. It can be for anybody. So what I've learned to do at that very (I'll call it) young age at that point...

Kevin: (laugh)

Ian: ...is that I learned how to break down my creative practice into these chunks of not just technique, but principles, if you like.

Kevin: Yeah.

Ian: If you can inspire somebody right at the beginning of a process and then let them go away and work at that, and then let them come back in a few days' time or a week's time and then give them another little bit of inspiration— And to be honest, it's that philosophy that we've brought into our online package. We're trying to do that in a similar kind of way through the art tutorials.

Kevin: This online video course format, obviously it's something we're excited about here at Learnable as well. That is our sole focus. But it strikes me that there are many different ways for someone to learn drawing and art in general.

Ian: Yes.

Kevin: What are your thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of this online approach?

Ian: The strengths, most certainly, are the fact that any enthusiast who wants to learn a technique and do it at their own pace, and in (I'll call it) the safety blanket of their own home.

Kevin: Yeah!

Ian: Because being a visual subject, the last thing that anybody wants to do is to put their weaknesses and their inabilities to the public domain, and of whoever is around the room, whether it's friends—

Kevin: So yeah, you don't have the pressure of an art class, where someone's looking over your shoulder—

Ian: Exactly, exactly! And people who are confident with art products, it's fine; that isn't an issue. But somebody who's a little bit uncertain and wants to learn at their own pace, then I feel the online learning system does provide that.

Kevin: Yup.

Ian: And that's something that we're really trying to push a great deal with these students that we come across, is try the system, see what the videos are like, and if there's any question, anything that arises, then you can contact us through the forum or that kind of system.

Ian: Every little nuance of what can happen needs to be videoed, and the downside to that—I don't know if you've come across this—is making sure that the quality of the video conveys that. Things that I would normally take for granted, because it's intuitive to me, I can't take that risk on the video. I need to spell out all the creative things.

Ian: One of the hardest things is understanding pressure. Quite a simple process within drawing. As soon as you start to change pressure in a drawing, then the marks that you make clearly come out differently. It's a very, very simple thing, but conveying pressure on a video is very difficult, so that's where the narration comes in. So we try and create a good harmony between myself and the cameraman to say we've not quite got that. Let's retake that. So I'm rubbing a little bit out of the drawing again...

Kevin: (laugh)

Ian: ...just to make sure that all those little things do come across as well as possible. And in

the [Drawing in the Snow](#) video that was extremely difficult, because we shot that live, outside in the forest in temperatures below zero, and that was very, very difficult.

Kevin: (laugh) “Do you mind drawing that whole thing again?” (laugh)

Ian: Yeah. Yeah, I won't tell you some of the answers that I gave at the time.

Kevin: Even after you get back to the studio in that course, I know what you mean. There's moments where— Because in that work, you're working with a combination graphite and the pastels...

Ian: Yes.

Kevin: ...the oil pastels...

Ian: Yep.

Kevin: ...and there are times at which you're blending the two, and your narration is talking about how you're cutting into the pastel with the tip of the graphite.

Ian: Yes, yes.

Kevin: And you're right, those kinds of details are not something that you can see in the video, no matter how closely you zoom in.

Ian: No, that's right. Yes. That's a difficult one. I must say, that's part of that intuitive process, because that's the knowledge that I've built up over a 25 year career, is that you automatically know that when a drawing starts to lose clarity, then you know the next piece of equipment, or the next media to go and pick up, it becomes a natural step, but a lot of people wouldn't know that. You wouldn't know what that next natural step is.

Kevin: Yeah.

Ian: Just trying to give the confidence to anybody who comes online to say don't be afraid to give things a try, to get better at art is not an immediate process. It's a marathon, not a sprint is one of the key things that you've got to communicate.

Ian: So what we try and say with the online system is give the tutorials a try, and let the techniques absorb into everybody's creative practice and see how you grow over a period of time.

Kevin: As I was watching your course, I began thinking back to when I was younger, and I think like a lot of people drawing was a hobby of mine growing up. And I remember watching these sort of art TV shows...

Ian: Yes.

Kevin: ...on TV, and I'm sure you know the kind...

Ian: Yes.

Kevin: ...where the artist stands and, over the course of several episodes, builds up a painting or a drawing or whatever it may be.

Ian: Yes.

Kevin: And the biggest difference between your course and those faded memories of TV shows past is (from my memory at least) those shows always were an artist working in his studio...

Ian: Yes.

Kevin: ...drawing either from memory or creating an original image...

Ian: Yes.

Kevin: ...although there was always this sense that they had painted this same painting at least ten times before. (laugh)

Ian: Yes, definitely.

Kevin: Whereas, with your courses, you're out in the field tackling a subject that, at least from appearances, you have found on the day and chosen for this particular work.

Ian: Mmm.

Kevin: Is that very unique to what you do? Because I find it a very inspiring element of your work.

Ian: I think that comes back to what I was saying before, in terms of my educational upbringing, is that I was allowed to do whatever I want to do, so I made all the creative steps from step one

all the way through to the end product. I wasn't dominated by any art teacher that sort of worked on a formula basis, so to speak, and said "Well if you follow step one to step five you'll end up with this end product." It's always been in my makeup that the origin of the idea has got to come from somewhere, and as visual people then our key skill is observation. We aren't people who can just invent things. Everything gets absorbed into our creativity through seeing.

Ian: So to me it's a very obvious step to go out into the world and observe, and see what inspires you out there.

Kevin: I think it's a powerful difference, though, because the temptation if you're watching an artist working on a piece in isolation is to ape that artist's rendition of that particular piece, and your objective is to create a painting exactly like the one you see materializing before you on the artist's canvas.

Ian: Yes. Yes.

Kevin: Whereas with yours, your Drawing in the Snow course for example, what I'm inspired to do is go out and find my own winter landscape and to work along with your video, but on my own creation.

Ian: Yes. In my phrase, I would say you've hit the nail on the head.

Ian: For the people who want to create a copy, I would say fine, go ahead and do it, but that's not the essence of what I'm trying to say. The key thing is be inspired yourself, and get the inspiration from what I deliver, but look at the raw ingredients, and the raw ingredients are yes to do with the weather, yes to do with the location. And once you feel that you're in the right place, and then start to embrace the qualities of what makes good observational skills, so what is the best viewpoint? Should I try to get a little bit higher? What happens if I sit down and crouch lower? What if I go nearer to something and create a more interesting foreground? What if I step back?

Ian: It's all about, if you like, "what if's". And that to me is what educating people is all about, is to create those seeds of creativity and then let them make those steps themselves. The online system allows you to dip back into it when you need that little bit more confidence and inspiration, and then go back again and start the risk-taking again from your own point of view. That's my philosophy on anything.

Kevin: Great. All right.

Kevin: I don't know if you have an answer for this. I was going to ask you, why give away the Drawing in the Snow course for free? And obviously, I understand why you would give a course away for free. Is there any particular reason why the Drawing in the Snow course was chosen as a free example of your work?

Ian: I think, one on a practical level it was the first one. We needed to do a test on the system. The test period just seemed to coincide with it being January, with it being full of snow around here. We wanted to do it—

Kevin: No matter what you decide to draw, it'll be covered in snow at that point.

Ian: Exactly. Unless we were going to jet off somewhere, but it was impractical at the time with the cameraman and so on. And I think, quite rightly that as you just said, it is the essence of what I do, and that is to show everybody the inspiration of being outside before anything else.

Ian: So some of our other tutorials are very much studio-based, a little bit like what you're saying. But in each—I wouldn't say in every tutorial—but in most of them we're trying to convey the fact of where did the original inspiration come from? So sometimes it'll be initial drawings and studies done on location with me narrating what I'm actually looking for, and then the next step will be right, now I'm back in the studio; this is how I will work from here.

Ian: So we felt like the Drawing in the Snow tutorial was quite apt, really.

Kevin: What's the hardest part about drawing winter landscapes?

Ian: The fact that after about ten minutes you can't feel your fingers.

Kevin: (laugh) I was going to say the crouching. The crouching looked pretty hard as well!

Ian: Yeah. Yeah. It is difficult, and often what we had to do, and the practicalities of filming, is

that you'd do several takes. We were shooting that with just one camera as well, so we would do several takes from one angle, and then change angles and so on. And that's just the visual effect of the videos, really, just to make sure that it looks more inspirational. If you just shoot everything from one angle continually, I think it looks a little bit tedious, and it's got an element of turning people off.

Ian: So I wasn't crouching for every minute.

Kevin: (laugh)

Ian: We've just shot one last week, actually, as I was saying, the waterfalls. And that was quite dangerous. Some of the things that we had to get to, and the cameraman was actually taking some very risky shots.

Kevin: A little slippery?

Ian: Very slippery, yeah.

Kevin: (laugh)

Ian: Some great viewing. We're hoping to have that out perhaps within the month, possibly two. I don't know, we'll see how we go.

Ian: But yeah, I think the videos do need to be inspirational as well. It's not just conveying the passion that I've got for doing the artwork, but it's saying if you watch the video— And each part we've gone with a ten-minute scenario, really. Not that it's hard and fast at ten minutes, but we break it down into a ten minute piece. I feel that's enough to allow people to absorb that particular point that I'm making or technique, and then perhaps go away and give that a try. And then there'll be another ten minute piece available the day after, or whatever.

Kevin: It's interesting. That does seem to be a magic number for us as well. Whenever instructors ask us what length they should be shooting for, even if they want to deliver 30 minutes of stuff at once, we often recommend they break it down into ten minute chunks, if only because it's easier for the student to go and refer back to a particular topic or a particular notion later. It's relatively easy to find some particular point in a ten minute video, but in a 30 minute one it can be really tedious to be scrolling back and forth—

Ian: Exactly. I mean, the way that I deliver a workshop live, whether I'm working with adults, teachers or students, I always work on the premise that I'm going to set a challenge. I deliver the challenge, I deliver the parameters of the challenge, I'm saying "I want to see this technique in action." "I want to see this composition." "I want to see this layout." "This is the approach that I want to take." I'll demonstrate that within no more than five minutes, and then I'll give them a time parameter, and that way I think the challenge is fresh, they've understood what I've said, and then they go away and do it. And then I bring them back again, once they've achieved that—or not—and then deliver the next part.

Ian: So I think the online system is better mimicking that, as a live style, really. A small challenge in ten minutes. Go away, give it a try. Come back, and then have a look at the next stage.

Kevin: So apart from the cold hands, is there anything that sets apart the Drawing in the Snow course? I'm thinking there must be something to do with the nature of light bouncing off of snow that makes it very different from other subjects you may have tackled.

Ian: Yes, it is, and that goes down to capturing the atmosphere of the location. I don't know if you've found this with other instructors you've worked with, but when I'm working with anybody live, really, and I say right, we're going to do an art product (drawing, painting, pastel drawing), they immediately go and get a white piece of paper, because it's almost like that intuitive step. "Paper's white; it comes in this size; it's stored in that cupboard or that drawer. I'll go and get some."

Ian: So the first thing that I did was to say "Well, we're going to work on a neutral paper." Because straight away my first decisions after the layout, after I'm happy with the composition, is to create the atmosphere, so straight away I go to the limited range of pastels that I'm going to work with. I've got a spontaneous answer. I can work fast; because it's cold, I'm creating the

gesture and the movement of that surface, and I'm creating that sort of flatness to the snow lying on the undergrowth, but I'm not waiting for ages and ages to start to see the benefit of the drawing. It's instantaneous, you know. So you'll probably see in the tutorial that within five minutes I've got the essence of that location down on the paper as the white shows up against the neutral background.

Kevin: Great!

Kevin: Ian's course, Drawing in the Snow, is available for free right now on Learnable, and you can find Ian's other courses at ianmurphyartist.com, though we hope we'll be able to bring some of them to Learnable soon.