

GARY GAFFNEY

sublime goosebumps

words
DOUG GEYER

photography
DAMON WILSON

At first glance, perhaps second, Gary Gaffney looks like someone's eccentric uncle who lives in a mountaintop observatory and peers up at the stars with his massive telescope. I imagine him bent over faded maps strewn about his attic library, his soft blue eyes, welcoming, smiling beneath impossibly long eyebrows that double as antennae searching for signs of life, clues for the next adventure.

Fortunately for decades of students at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, Gaffney has been exploring the human heart in addition to exploring the heavens. He has been learning as he teaches and teaching his students to love as they learn. His body of work through the years reflects his boundless curiosity and an inclination to experiment with dimension, space, and time. Fortunately for all of us, this mixed media artist has not been sequestered on a mountain or buried in books while on his quest for goosebumps. He is here in our midst, and he wants to bring us all along for the ride.

When Gaffney was a boy, becoming an artist—or a professor at an art academy—was not something he would have thought was written in the stars for him. Though many of his generation were looking skyward, they were focused on finding a metal orb as it circled the Earth. After October 4, 1957, backyards across the U.S. were filled with curious yet anxious Americans searching for Sputnik, visible proof that we were behind in what would become the Space Race. The frost of the then decade-old Cold War had spread beyond Washington and Moscow into the dreams and academic aspirations of many in his day. This atmosphere of paranoia coupled with Gaffney's big family and small income made pursuing an art education and career as likely as his building a rocket at recess.

Nonetheless, Gaffney's creative juices flowed through the years, welling up and out despite the gravitational pull of both familial and cultural expectations.

"I was kind of the oddball in the family—being interested in art, drawing, making things. But as a kid, we didn't have a lot of money, so we made things out of sticks, tin cans, ropes . . . whatever we could. It really was kind of an odd combination of that interest at a gut level and not having enough money [that led to] needing to create your world for yourself. So any kind of old stuff that looked interesting became something to play with, something to invent with."

This impulse to see atypical possibilities in typical and often discarded objects continued to direct Gaffney's path even while he pursued a more traditional course. He enrolled in Tulane University in 1962 with a major in math and minor in chemistry. Art courses were sprinkled in here and there. Sometimes he'd draw for friends, but art wasn't something he was ready to seriously engage. After graduating summa cum laude, he spent the next four years pursuing a PhD at Notre Dame.

He dropped out with all but his dissertation completed.

After teaching math for three years at Pikeville College in Kentucky, he was let go—because he didn't have a PhD. It was at this crossroads where Gaffney did some soul searching. Should he finish what he had started and continue down the road where the signs were posted and the destination predictable, or should he move forward in a direction that was less certain and harder to justify?

"At some point, I really knew I wanted to be a teacher. Math was something I could explain to people, but it wasn't something I could do creatively," Gaffney recalls.

Somewhere in that simple sentiment lies Gaffney's courage to seek what is not easy to find. To surrender to a lifelong lifestyle of a teacher who refuses to stop learning. To continue to create a world for himself and others where creativity is the major not the minor. Where art is more about asking the right questions than providing all the answers. Where feathers are both drawn and ruffled.

Gaffney returned to school and in only two years earned a printmaking degree from the University of New Orleans before following a friend's recommendation to check out the University of Cincinnati. He received an MFA from UC in 1977. The Queen City has been his home and launching pad for new expeditions ever since.

Gaffney became a member of the Art Academy faculty in 1978, when they were looking to evolve into an accredited, degree-bestowing institution. It was at the AAC where he was grafted into a special family of artists, teachers like himself who were also eager to evolve while encouraging and empowering the next generation of problem-solving, convention-challenging thinkers, who also happened to be artists. At the AAC, Gaffney has been able to bring to bear his mathematical and scientific knowledge as well as his creative and experimental spirit.



“One of the luckiest things about being at the Art Academy was that I could follow my own interests and bring them into the classroom. I taught classes on modern physics, the biology of evolution, mythology, love. I didn’t always know a lot about those subjects, but as I learned I taught, and it informed my own work.”

Breaking boundaries (or showing they never existed) has been a main goal in his teaching. The boundaries of isolation and boredom are pervasive and pernicious ones that he’s been especially keen to step over or on.

“We really live in a dulled environment. I think schools are way duller than they have to be, [but] they’re getting better. It’s so easy to follow a celebrity and give our lives over to them. It’s so easy to look on our phones and chitchat. It’s so easy to sit on a couch and eat potato chips watching a football game. And those things aren’t bad, but when there’s nothing that pulls you out of the ordinariness and dullness of life . . . I think it was the philosopher Matthew Fox who said one of the biggest challenges of contemporary life is that we have no respect for awe.”

Gaffney feels strongly about our need for awe, to experience that which produces an overwhelming veneration, an arresting wonder, even fear. Aware of the rarity of those moments, he seeks them out in art and life even so.

He’s also drawn to artists who are not afraid to take on scary topics. He likes art that tells a story and is big, not as in how much space it occupies but more in the volume and weight of the issues it tackles. This is a standard he adheres to as well in his own work.

“When I make my art, I really want it to challenge people. I really want it to challenge me, like I can’t get it all in one gulp. I want a piece of art that’s going to reach out and tap me on the shoulder and make me look again.”

Gaffney was honored by the AAC with professor emeritus status in 2013 and is currently teaching part-time. These professional landmarks might seem to indicate that Gaffney is winding down, retiring emotionally if not professionally. A recent post from his blog *Cosmic Absurdity* dispatches that notion with conviction:

“Let’s stop saying that an artist is someone who makes art. Nowadays, who knows what that means anyway. The truth is, the world needs beauty to push against its blandness, ugliness, and chaos. The world needs to be held in awe. The world needs its eyes opened to new ways of seeing. The world needs to be led to deeper humanity and to awareness of its responsibilities to itself. The world needs to see the light. Who better to take on this task than the artist? This is what the artist has always done.”

Another post from *Cosmic Absurdity* expresses this idea with an example: “Let us praise goosebumps of the sublime. I was listening to a young tenor sing ‘Nessun Dorma.’ Goosebumps. Every time. How many people go through a week or a month or a year without experiencing goosebumps of the sublime? Isn’t one task of the artist to create the trigger for such experiences? And isn’t it the task of the individual to search these out?”

And in person, Gaffney expounds further: “And when you have goosebumps, it’s not always big things. If you see a new baby and you have goosebumps, there’s something deeper there. There’s something about what’s human, some amazing quality about this little thing who might turn out to change the world.”

Gaffney is currently dreaming about and fleshing out an installation tentatively titled *A Monument to Decent Human Beings*. He envisions an ever-changing, traveling exhibit where people would add mementos to honor the decent humans in their own lives. He also plans to continue traveling himself. Central and South America have become favorite destinations, with his logging multiple trips to Guatemala, Brazil, and Argentina.

On his ongoing quest for goosebumps, perhaps Gaffney will name a newly discovered constellation or stumble across a lost city in some lush jungle. Or maybe he’ll feel the little hairs on his arms stand at attention as he stands before big art telling a grand tale.

