

**Memorial Minute
for
Pamela Johnson
May 6, 2024**

Pamela Ann-Elizabeth Johnson, Associate Professor of Studio Art, grew up in Leavenworth, Kansas. She spent her first years in college at Kansas State University before transferring to the University of Kansas, where she completed a degree in the History of Art in 1980. She continued to study formally for years after, first at the Kansas City Art Institute, there completing a second bachelors degree, then at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and finally at Bennington College, where she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1993. Pamela honed her skills as a teacher in a wide range of settings—museums, shelters, elderhostels, community colleges—before coming to Bates in 1999, joining what was then named the Department of Art.

Over the closing years of the twentieth century, the College was actively hiring faculty identified, according to the parlance of the day, as “women or minorities.” By the time Pamela was appointed, the percentage of women on the faculty finally had climbed over 40%. From the start, Pamela was keenly attentive to the deeper cultural changes that such demographic shifts might engender, or fail to engender. Once, after working past dark in her campus studio, Pamela was followed and catcalled by a group of young men as she walked home across the Quad. Exasperated, she spun around to berate them. The men sputtered excuses for their harassment, insisting that they mistakenly took her to be an undergraduate. It was then, Pamela would later recount, that she *really* let them have it.

Despite regularly encountering such obstacles, at once mundane and appalling, Pamela’s artistry flourished. She pursued painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture with equal vigor and talent, and exhibited the resulting work widely. In many of these pieces, we can see Pamela’s persistent fascination with images as a form of “lucid dreaming,” a way to probe the porous boundaries between, as she often said, “what is not real but nonetheless true.” Among these dreamlike images is “*girl of milk and blood*” (2001), featuring a Snow White materialized from a brew of acrylic paint, inkjet printing fluid, and sweetened condensed milk. She described the work in this haunting series as bound not only to Disney’s iconic animation, but also to Matisse’s

oil paintings, Ukiyo-e Japanese woodcuts, movie credits, and stenographer's shorthand—a writing system which, Pamela noted, was “designed by men in large part for women to use to translate the words of men.” Pamela supplemented her robust studio practice with sustained study of writing (fiction, poetry, and essays), music (primarily classical piano and voice), and landscape design (evident in the breathtaking garden at her Franklin Street home). One of her mentors, the poet James Lasdun, praised the “singular, eerie grace” of Pamela's writing, including her “engagingly sardonic humor” and “real instinct for drama.”

Pamela brought this same far-reaching intellect, and occasional flair for drama, to the promotion of art and visual culture across the College. As Pamela once observed, “We are saturated with images more than any other time in history. It is essential to be able to interpret these visual signs.” She worked relentlessly to expand students' interpretative abilities. For a time the College's sole full-time instructor in studio art, Pamela designed studio courses that drew on science, literature, music, and cultural theory as well as global histories of art. One of the most impactful of those courses—AVC350, *Visual Meaning*—remains a cornerstone of the College's studio curriculum. Fellow studio artist Elke Morris stressed that Pamela's inventiveness informed every element of her work for Bates. When AVC, like other academic units, was tasked with developing possible concentrations for a new general education curriculum, Pamela surprised Elke and other colleagues by spreading large sheets of drawing paper over the tables and floor of the next department meeting, on which they were invited to outline, and play with, new ideas. “Something that initially seemed daunting to many of us,” Elke said, “now all of a sudden was uncomplicated and even exciting to do.”

Pamela's teaching, too, mined the possibilities inherent in tensions between the inviting and the daunting—milk and blood. Her colleagues remarked on the “delicate balance of support and challenge” required to teach studio techniques to young adults, and Pamela's attentive handling of that balance. One of her first students, Eliza Stamps '01, described Pamela's teaching style as “honest and funny, technically challenging and theoretically compelling.” Pamela, Eliza continued, provided instruction not only on “how best to mix paint on a palette,” but also, more broadly, on how to “lead a creative life.” According to emeritus faculty Robert Feintuch, “Pamela's students were everything to her.”

Students and colleagues alike emphasized Pamela's abiding humor, and the distinct pleasure of what AVC colleague Erica Rand described as her "amazing laugh" and all that it could convey: "delicate, tinkly, deep, rich, mirthful, mellifluous." That Pamela managed to sustain such mirth, in the face of myriad sources of pain, remains, for me, one of her most remarkable teachings. In December 2007, for instance, Pamela suffered a calamitous aneurysm, and was transported by helicopter to Boston for emergency brain surgery. When back in Lewiston some months later, over brunch Pamela described to me her experience of fluttering in and out of consciousness in the low light of the intensive care unit, while a masked surgeon briskly assessed her organs for transplantability. I sat there, aghast. Pamela, however, forked up another bite of quiche while remarking drily on the declining culture value of tact. Other colleagues remember how, immediately upon waking from that emergency surgery, Pamela badgered them to ensure that her course grades were submitted in a timely way, as she wanted her students' hard work recognized appropriately.

Later, when Pamela was diagnosed with the cancer that eventually took her life, she faced it, too, with characteristic wit and fortitude. She continued to entertain visitors, amidst fresh stacks of books about death, and continued to chase after her treasured canine companion, Watson, while towing an oxygen tank. Pamela was, in one colleague's words, "unflinchingly committed to looking at hard truths." She was also ever the teacher, taking time, even in her last months, to offer painting lessons to retired colleagues, gardening lessons to friends, and advice about navigating the cancer complex to those newly entering its confusing and dreadful passageways. I am indebted to our retired colleagues Sheila and Sawyer Sylvester, Pamela's long-time next-door neighbors, for this lucid parting image of Pamela: "working in her garden wearing a wide-brimmed hat, accompanied by her beloved cat and dog. We miss her."

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