



Brian D. Cohen

Story by
ABBY BRAITHWAITE '92

Photos courtesy of
BRIAN COHEN

an artist's life

ON A SUNNY November Saturday, Brian Cohen, long-time art teacher, sat on the edge of the East Lawn with a small group of his former students. Brian gestured to a young elm tree on the edge of the flagstone patio, commenting that it was planted in his first year at the school nearly forty years ago, after the last of the original elms had succumbed to Dutch elm disease. Now the top branches scratch at the third floor window of the Main Building.

As he talked, Brian's conversation companions leaned in to hear what wisdom he had to impart about time and trees and lessons learned across a rich career and life. "They were tiny," he said, then turned to point to his office window. "The first one died. And this one ended up blocking the view from my office."

Brian chuckled as he settled back into his Adirondack chair and looked out across the lawn to Mt. Monadnock, the November sun bright on the last of the leaves hanging onto the not-so-little-anymore elm.

Brian arrived in the spring of 1985, with a brand new MFA in painting and a young family in tow. He went on to serve the school not only as a drawing, painting, and printmaking teacher, but also as the founding director of The Putney School Summer Programs, as dean of faculty, and as a gift officer in development. He led Long Fall and Long Spring trips, took students all over New England and the world to study art. And in these years he also produced a monumental body of work. He was and is a prolific artist, an inventive colleague, and a lifelong learner.

Brian's daughter, Lee Cohen '03, moved to J.R. dorm. when she was an infant and was raised with a built-in legion of babysitters and companions. She remembers her dad's commitment to his art this way: "Throughout his career, despite a full teaching load and having a family, he always found time to make his own work. Without any time to spare, he learned the self-discipline of committing to his own work even in short, frenzied spurts. He would bring thick metal etching plates with him on vacation, and always had extraordinarily heavy carry-on. Nearly every day he would spend at least 10 minutes on a piece of art. Even after he was diagnosed with cancer, he would bring drypoint points and drawing pads into his sometimes months-long hospitalizations."

"I don't think there's a better definition for success than continuing to make art. That in itself can give shape and meaning to your life," said Brian.

For most of Brian's 35 years at Putney, the north end of the Art Building (now Wender Arts) was his domain. For student artists, the sprawling unpainted building tucked into the woods was a place of work, refuge, and empowerment.

His willingness to embrace the unpredictable, to be a student—beginning at the beginning and forgiving his own imperfections—flowed into his interactions with his students. While he lacked formal training as a teacher, it's clear that he arrived at Putney with the instincts of a gifted educator.

For many years, Drawing 1 was a prerequisite for any other visual arts class. As such, Brian had the opportunity to teach a wide array of students, a reluctant sophomore gritting her teeth through Drawing 1 just to get into the dark-room, to the deeply committed, talented artists who earned themselves private workspaces in the loft. Between these two extremes were dozens of students eager to find entrée into the world of drawing, painting, and printmaking. And each of these groups of students found a welcome in Brian's classes that allowed them to grow as artists and human beings. He respected any student who showed up ready to work; he deeply appreciated the receptiveness of the adolescent brain; and for those students for whom drawing never clicked, he maintained a hope that he might have at the very least helped them be better observers of their world.



Brian in his studio at the University of Washington, 1983; Brian signing the "Diving Bird" print in his studio, 2022.



In talking with several of Brian's students from across his time at Putney, it's clear that he carried simultaneous gifts for teaching the technical side of art—even as he was at times learning himself—and for helping students see themselves as artists, empowering them to ask the questions that would allow their own authentic voice and vision to appear on paper.

"I stressed the sustained development of their own original ideas, as well as their ability to verbally articulate those ideas; the need for patience, focus, self-discipline, and skills necessary to push beyond the familiar; and the inevitability, necessity, and value of struggle and occasional failure in creative effort," said Brian.

He taught his students how to observe the world, how to see in new ways, and how to communicate what they saw in charcoal, paint, pencil, and ink. He taught them how to use their tools and trust in the chemical processes of printmaking.

He also shared the "habits of practice" that were foundational to his own career: show up for your art, and work

hard even through a dry spell or a tough time; don't live for other people's opinions, but always stay open to what a different perspective can offer your work. Make goals for your art, and make a plan to reach them.

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Sara Kazemi '88 arrived as a junior when Brian was in his second year at Putney. From her first drawing class, she was struck by how he saw her in ways she did not yet see herself. His expectations were high, his teaching was generous, and as Sara wrote, "When you have a teacher who sees you clearly without their own story interfering, it helps you to see yourself clearly and be true to who you are."

Brian worked to guide his students on their own paths, providing an extra set of eyes to help them find their way, but without imposing his ideas, or suggesting there was just one way to make "good" art. Luka Negoita '07 remembers Brian's deep enthusiasm for his senior exhibition, which merged biology, drawing, and printmaking, as Luka worked to assemble and record a coyote skeleton he found in the woods behind his dorm. Brian never asked Luka

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to choose between the art and science of this project, but understood that for Luka, this work merged two passions.

Cordelia Fuller '11 arrived at Putney as a junior, Brian's mentorship was critical. Today, Cordelia is a high school teacher herself, and often reflects on the ways that Brian showed up for her when she was at Putney. She remembers his skills in teaching her the techniques and mechanics of printmaking, but she also carries an impression of Brian striking similar to what Sara Kazemi felt 26 years earlier. "If you are lucky," Cordelia wrote, "at some point in your life you meet someone who points you towards

yourself...when someone recognizes you, especially as a teenager, when someone points you towards yourself, it gives you a real place to start as you decide who you want to be.”

“I’ve loved teaching high school,” said Brian.” A few kids brought in preconceived notions and limiting habits, but students that age are remarkably open, eager, and intellectually curious. Teaching can be exhausting and frustrating, but overall joyful and satisfying. I was fortunate to find my way into teaching.”

Brian became a printmaker at Putney, with nothing but a single course of formal training. The art department was equipped with a print shop, and it seemed a shame not to put it to use. So, in the summer before he came to Putney and in the years that followed, Brian set about to learn as much as he could about etching. He began at the beginning, and as he learned, he fell in love with the medium that would define his career.

Brian writes of this time, “I studied books about printmaking, aiming to fill the glaring gaps in my knowledge visible in my early etchings and in my own teaching. The craft, history, and look of etching grew on me, and I was, to a point, forgiving of my own incompetence,

understanding that I was unlikely to be good at something I had barely ever done before.”

While Brian never went back to the large-scale oil paintings and collage that were his primary focus during his MFA program, he kept color in his life through watercolor. Painted mainly on location, outside in the weather, Brian’s watercolors were, like printmaking, a place where he was able to combine his keen sense of observation with an unpredictable medium.

“Experimenting, figuring things out, allowed me to understand etching in its most basic terms and general principles, not as a set of formulas or recipes to follow. Teaching also helps this process of clarification and articulation,” he said.

Diana Brewer ’92 was an accomplished musician when she came to Putney as a sophomore, but was less confident as a visual artist. While she was taking her first drawing classes with Brian, he was beginning to learn to play the violin, and she remembers the reciprocity of that moment. “We had a mutual envy society,” she said of that time when she was learning to draw and he was becoming a musician, “but later, it morphed into a mutual admiration society, when we both started to figure out what we were learning.”

As a Putney student, having access to adults in and outside the classroom is an incredibly rich part of the experience. For the faculty, of course, it can be deeply challenging

Below:
Steel Bridge,
etching,
13" x 19", 1991

Brian's glimpse of the Quebec Bridge over the Saint Lawrence River from a road trip became the emblem for the name of his imprint, Bridge Press. The name also underscores the collaborative nature of his work with writers, musicians, and book artists.

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Above right:
Deer, etching,
5" x 5", 1995

Brian originally created this image for a 1995 holiday card, and then repurposed it twice for two artist's books with poet and former Putney teacher Chard deNiord, *What the Animals Teach Us* (1995) and *Bestiary* (2022). Animals have never ceased calling to Brian and Chard in silent and strange languages that have beckoned them to listen, observe and wonder.

to find the time to raise a family, run a dorm, teach a full load of classes, lead afternoon and evening activities, and commit to an array of weekend commitments. But Brian seemed to do it all with generosity and good humor.

As a dorm head, his genuine appreciation for the teenage mind often was challenged by the absurd antics of his charges, but he approached the job with his characteristic dry humor and a whole lot of equanimity. Diana Brewer was a J.R. resident for two of her three years at the school, and while the details of a teenage transgression are long forgotten, she remembers clearly Brian’s demeanor when confronting her. Even when admonishing her, he brought a grace to the conversation that never undermined Diana’s dignity. His willingness to show up as a human being, not just an authority figure, helped set the stage for friendships that carried on through his lifetime, and Brian remains close with many former students from across his time at Putney.

In the weeks before the global pandemic shut the world down in the winter of 2020, Brian received a diagnosis of acute myeloid leukemia. After a year of intensive treatment, Brian’s cancer went into remission; at the urging of his daughter, in 2021, he began a retrospective look at his art career. He had saved all his etching plates, and over the course of the past year, he reworked and reprinted work from across his 35 years of printmaking: *Brian D.*

Cohen: A Retrospective, a book surveying his career will be published in January, 2023.

Seeing the volume of work, most of it produced in his Putney years, it’s hard to imagine how he did it.

“I got very efficient in my work, a function of having a family and a job that pushed the available time for art making to the margins. When I work, I get right to the point,” said Brian.

While Brian is putting the finishing touches on his retrospective book, he is recovering from a second bone marrow transplant that became necessary when his cancer recurred earlier this year. He moved to the coast of Maine—a place he has always wanted to live— in the winter of 2021 and is passing his hours moving between the immediacy of his day-to-day life, and the necessary look to the past that a retrospective brings. He is connecting with many former students and colleagues, and he is still making art, returning these days to painting, and finding himself needing to relearn some of what he once knew.

When the pandemic shut down the world, the class of 2020’s graduation celebration was brought online. In it, Putney’s faculty were given the assignment of offering the graduates advice in eight words. Brian, never one to waste words, offered just seven: *Keep doing what you care most about.*

