

In Discovering the Self: Exploration in Self-Portraiture, students learn about multiple forms of representation of the self rather than just a simple reflection seen in the mirror. Students utilize different brushes, work with watercolor and charcoal paint, and learn how to be precise in their facial features. In the process of learning how to represent oneself on a canvas, instructor Mon Kaczyk says students should come away saying, "When I study my own face, I learn more about myself than I ever thought possible."
From left, images courtesy of Mon Kaczyk, Pat Macri and Allison Parke

New year, a new you?

Artistree offers classes on movement and creative wellness this winter

By Aaron Rubin
Standard Correspondent

With the beginning of a new year comes endless possibilities and many opportunities to learn about and improve ourselves. To that end, our community is fortunate as Artistree Community Arts Center in South Pomfret is offering a selection of classes this winter to nourish the body and mind, and to promote personal growth. Here are examples of some of what's being offered and what you can expect if you participate.

Gentle yoga

For those looking to find their center, live in the moment, and become the sculptor of their own body, instructor Sarah Ward is leading the "Gentle Yoga" class.

"It does become more of an expression of ourselves than it does a photographic representation."
— Instructor Mon Kaczyk

As part of the class, Ward will guide participants through meditation and pranayama breathing to destress and relax into poses. In the process, Ward says students will build balance and core strength, improve their flexibility, and establish a healthy connection to their inner selves.

The class is meant for all abilities and levels, especially for those who are looking for an introduction to the practice while still reaping health benefits, said Ward.

"It's not intended particularly for those people who are looking to come and have a highly intense, sweaty workout," said Ward. "This yoga is really intended for people who want something gentle that helps wake you up, that helps get your day started, that can provide stretching and maybe an introduction to some poses that you haven't done before."

The class will take place concurrently with others at Artistree and Ward says the noise coming from the other classrooms provides the opportunity to live in the moment and focus on oneself rather than distractions.

"Our focus is to stay within, not let those distractions outside in the world — literally in Artistree and outside in the world — get in the way of your meditative practice," she said.



Finding your center, staying in the moment, and feeling stronger is what students should expect to learn with Sarah Ward in Gentle Yoga.
Courtesy of Sarah Ward

The meditative practice is both an internal and external art form, says Ward. It sets a foundation for sculpting a new kind of physique, but it starts with whatever energy the meditator brings to the mat and should conclude with a new connection made within themselves.

"How you enter into that meditative process of connecting to your body is a way of seeing your body as a sculpture — that thing you are molding, moving, connecting to — just as you would in building any kind of art piece."

In this regard, participants can understand the artistic angle of yoga as both the sculptors and the sculptures.

Ward said that by the end of a session, participants should feel grounded, relaxed, and feel that they have made a connection with themselves and perhaps another person in the class.

"You don't have to be a professional writer to benefit from writing, that sharing personal stories brings us closer to one another and helps us tap into our innate creativity."
— Instructor Elisse Gabriel

Gentle Yoga consists of six classes limited to eight participants per session, and begins on Jan. 18 at 9:30 a.m..

Science of stretching

Achieving a sound mind in a sound body can also be found in the "Science of Stretching" class being taught by Robert Lamprey.

The class is a fit for anyone who wants to alleviate tenseness in a particular part of their body, be it rigid shoulders, locked-up hips, or a stiff back. Lamprey will guide participants through stretching techniques to target associated muscle groups and find a functional range of motion.

Lamprey says a major part of the class is measurably improving flexibility by elongating muscle groups. Using a classic example of trying to touch one's toes, Lamprey says achieving that movement will be brought about by the enhancement of sarcomere tissues, which are similar to "safety springs in our muscles." Participants will hold a stretch until they have met a sense of resistance and hold it until they spring back to a relaxed state and will be instructed to push slightly further with each repetition of the stretch.

"What we would do is go beyond our range of comfort in a stretch," said Lamprey. "Let's say that you stretch down and once you hit your shins, you start to feel some pushback from your muscles. In Science of Stretching, we just try to go a little bit beyond that, not so that we're clenching our teeth, but we're getting a little bit of resistance, and we hold that stretch for a long period of time."

After a number of repetitions, "you would probably find that after a two or three-minute hold of that pose, you would be touching the floor without pushing it," added Lamprey.

Proper deep breathing techniques to support stretches are also employed. One of the techniques used is one that stimulates the vagus nerve in the back of the throat, which can be relaxed through slow and deep breathing. Lamprey says this is key, since 50% of flexibility gains are delivered via the nervous system and can help with initial resistance met when stretching.

"We're using this breath technique to relax the response," said Lamprey. "We can really relax and we can gradually lean into that stretch a little more."

Science of Stretching will run for five sessions, the first one on Jan. 10 at 6 p.m.

Draw, paint, and collage a creative sketchbook

Introductory sessions in visual arts are also being offered at Artistree this winter. One of them is all about learning how to "Draw, Paint, and Collage a Creative Sketchbook" with instructor Sue Schlabach.

As a beginning class, students will work with Shlabach to come up with ways to fill the empty pages of a sketchbook with visual storytelling.

"My hope is to incorporate some storytelling into the practice so that people can use them to be potentially a journal about their life," said Schlabach.

Filling in empty pages can be a "daunting" task for writers and artists, recognizes Schlabach. By starting out with something simple, like shapes, patterns, or "pulling in things from their everyday lives" to create a short journal entry, the fear of the blank page can be overcome, she said.

"That's the beauty of the sketchbook I think — in that it's just an idea-place," added Schlabach. "Pieces of paper

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Sue Schlabach wants her sketchbook students to think beyond the two-dimensional pages of paper and will incorporate multiple drawing exercises to tell a visual story.
Courtesy of Sue Schlabach

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in a sketchbook are cheap and can be filled and then you move on, and whatever you learn on this spread of pages, maybe will build on to something even more exciting and interesting on the next spread of pages."

The first session for the course will focus specifically on breaking away from daunting blank pages and then move on to filling "the next spread of pages" by building upon drawing exercises.

"We'll build into mixing color in. We'll do things with color palettes and then mixing in other materials, glues, papers," said Schlabach. "I want to get into doing some things with paper cutting and almost sculptural things"

With these added techniques, Schlabach hopes to see students use sketchbooks "beyond two dimensions." The first class out of three for Draw, Paint, and Collage a Creative Sketchbook begins on Jan. 10 at 6 p.m. and is limited to 12 students.



The first step of creating a sketchbook with Sue Schlabach is overcoming the fear of the blank page and filling it with simple shapes and patterns to initiate creativity. Courtesy of Sue Schlabach

Discovering the self: Exploration in self-portraiture

"When I study my own face, I learn more about myself than I ever thought possible."

That is the line students of Mon Kaczyk's "Discovering the Self: Exploration in Self-Portraiture" class should say to themselves as they work to create an authentic self-portrait.

Students will learn that there is more than just one way of representing oneself on a canvas and is something very different than the reflection they see in the mirror. But executing that can be an understandably intimidating task for students, says Kaczyk.

"Sometimes it's actually a really scary notion of having to represent yourself on a page or on a canvas, simply because it seems rather intimidating to be representational," Kaczyk said.

To overcome that, Kaczyk will go through "a series of references and presentations of other artists and how they've interpreted themselves" whether they be "very representational" or more abstract.

"We really take a look at several different mediums to allow us to kind of loosen up and get out of our own way to be able to express ourselves," said Kaczyk. "We find ourselves becoming less tight about having to be so perfect. It does become more of an expression of ourselves than it does a photographic representation."

Students will start out with larger brushes as part of their portraits and worry less "over the fine details" than getting an expression out on a canvas. After that, more precise and diverse forms of expression are introduced.

"We run everything: working with a pen, ink, and very large brushes, to working with watercolor and charcoal," said Schlabach. "In the process, we find a place where people feel comfortable working and really exploring light and shadows so that we have an understanding of how to create the shapes on our face and how to define them that much more."

Kaczyk says students have found a sense of camaraderie in previous sessions. They become more comfortable with representation and open themselves up to other forms of expression done by their peers.

> **"That's the beauty of the sketchbook I think — in that it's just an idea place."**
> — Sue Schlabach

"You can certainly do it on your own, but when you're experiencing other's art and learning from them as well, discovering different ways of being able to place a mark on a page, you start to think about possibilities," says Kaczyk.

Discovering the Self: Exploration in Self-Portraiture will begin its first of six classes on Feb. 28 at 1 p.m., and have a limited capacity of 10 students.

Write Away: An uplifting writing class for all levels

Exploring oneself honestly is also at the core of the "Write Away" class, which instructor Elisse Gabriel describes as "an uplifting writing class for all levels."

Gabriel said the class is about connecting participants through sharing open-ended stories based on their memories and experiences. In order to encourage open-ended writing, participants of all levels will put pen to paper "without pause to promote spontaneity," says Gabriel.

Gabriel says this method is a way of encouraging authenticity and tapping deeper into one's creativity well, and by having all classmates participate in the exercise can make everyone feel more comfortable connecting to one another through their stories. Gabriel recognizes that while this may be difficult at first, the benefits are "immediate" and ultimately rewarding.

"They will understand that revealing your authentic truth, however challenging that might be, is what's ultimately the most resonant," said Gabriel. "You don't have to be a professional writer to benefit from writing, that sharing personal stories brings us closer to one another and helps us tap into our innate creativity."

Gabriel said she wants her students "to walk away feeling more confident in their ability to let the words flow onto the page without judgment or self-censorship," and that because of "how nourishing and healing this practice can be," hopes they continue on with the art of writing.

Write Away: An uplifting writing class for all levels will begin its first of five sessions on Jan. 10 at 6 p.m. and is limited to seven students.

All information on these and other winter classes can be found at artistreevt.org.



Sarah Ward's Gentle Yoga class serves as an introductory session to a form of exercise that is not meant to give participants an intense workout but still offers the benefits of yoga. Courtesy of Sarah Ward

