

By Kathleen Alaks of the Daily Courier

For art instructor Kristen O'Neill, good composition is the backbone of any work of art.

"Composition helps tell us what the artist wants us, the viewer, to focus on. Composition makes a stronger, more dynamic picture," O'Neill told her nine art students as they gathered in Reinhart Volunteer Park Thursday morning for a sketch-in-the-park class.

"You want to make people feel welcome into the drawing, that it's a place they want to be."

O'Neill, the administrative assistant for the Grants Pass Museum of Art and a professional artist with a bachelor's degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has been teaching art classes for the museum since 2016. This year, however, with pandemic restrictions in place, she's had to take a different approach to her usual hands-on style of instruction.

"It's a whole different way of teaching," she says. "But I am thrilled to be teaching at all."

Holding drawing classes outdoors — to allow for social distancing — is one new way of teaching. O'Neill meets with students at the park, gives a 20- or 30-minute introductory lesson on a particular aspect or rule of drawing, then lets the students work on their own, while she goes from one to the next giving them one-on-one attention, while wearing a face covering.

Thursday's drawing theme was composition, which O'Neill described as the placement or arrangement of the visual elements within the frame.

"Composition is like the bones of your drawing," she said. "Before you start drawing, think about what you want to be where. You cannot draw or paint your way out of a bad composition."

Leana Prince marked her drawing paper with a few pencil lines, then attacked them with an eraser.

"Drawing is really not my strong suit," she said. "But that's why I'm here."

Malloy Murdock, who has a background in photography, has been wanting to do an illustrated journal, which has brought him to a few of O'Neill's classes.

"And I am actually learning how to draw," he said.

Susy Manley, an oil landscape artist, said she loves the challenges of learning something new.

"When I am painting landscapes, I find myself doing everything horizontal," she said. "So with these drawings, I am forcing myself to do both a horizontal and a vertical. It's a totally different dynamic."

After discussing such elements as focal point, order, overlap, cropping and the rule of thirds, O'Neill told her students that while it's not necessary for an artist to always follow the rules of art, it is necessary to at least understand them.

"What you're doing with art is you're experiencing the world around you and interpreting and editing what you see," she said. "The rules of art are tools to help you edit that in a meaningful way."

The important thing to remember, O'Neill told her students, is "to relieve yourself of the idea that you're going to make a masterpiece today. Draw the same tree 12 times, but do it differently each time. Make a thousand mistakes and you will start to recognize how you could have made that stronger. You will be amazed."