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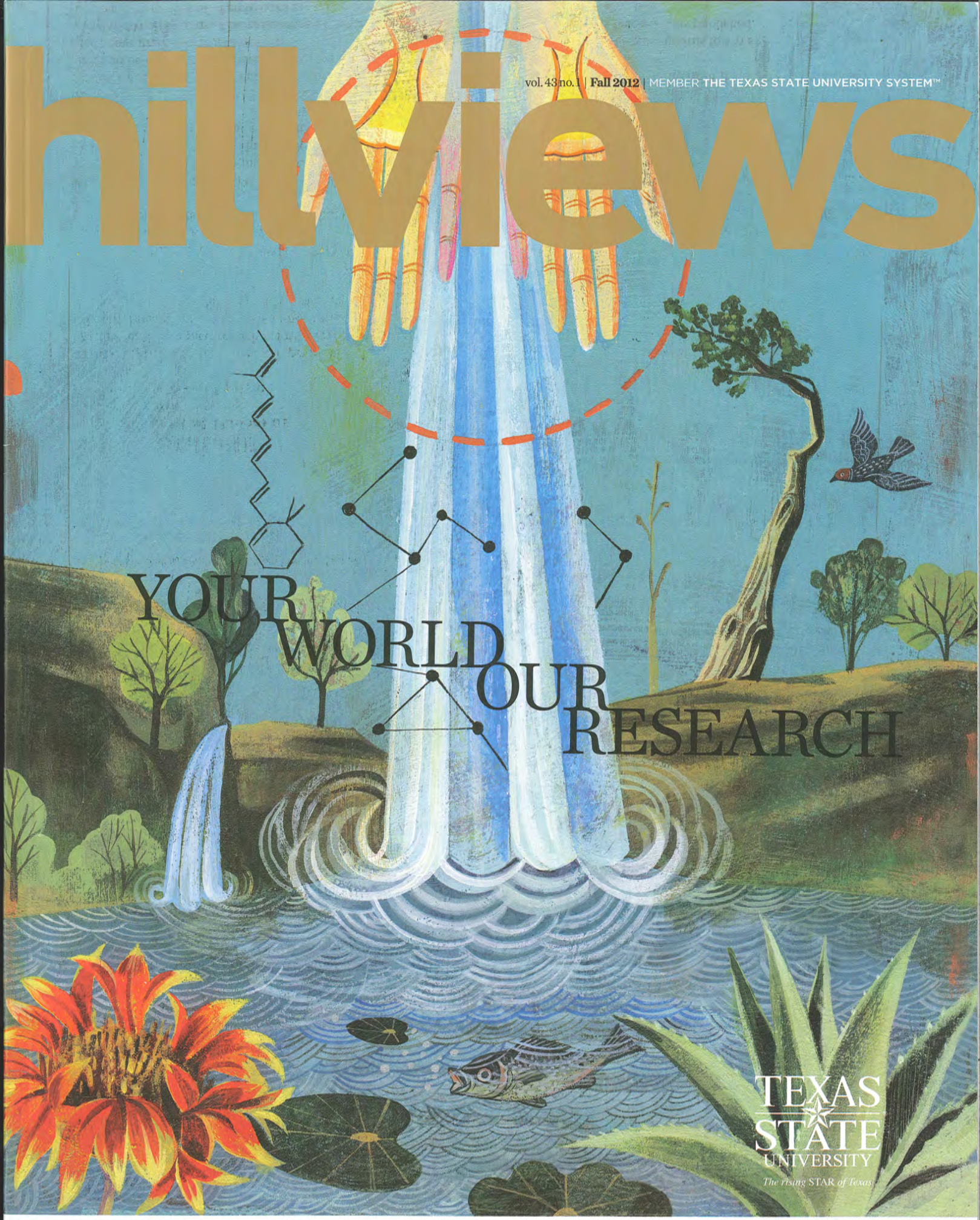


Strutters' Gallery opens p6 Meadows' gift spurs new name for river center p14

The Creat

Far from waiting for a muse, artists pursue inspiration through research.

The creative process is different for every artist, scientist, academic and entrepreneur. Each employs a unique method of gathering, developing and defining the ideas that become their work.

In scientific fields, this method is easily recognized as formal research: the biochemist reviewing test results in a lab; the aquatic scientist testing water content in a lake; the anthropologist poring over museum archives. Creative fields, on the other hand, rarely apply any semblance of such activities.

For creative writers, research crafts vision and excavates details.

Many envision a creative writer as a free-spirited bohemian worked into a frenzy by a muse, or a tortured soul typing in monkish solitude. Far from these tropes, creative writers rely on the day-to-day practice of research.

The faculty of Texas State's nationally esteemed Creative Writing M.F.A. program — National Book Award winners, Guggenheim fellows and National Endowment for the Arts grantees — are luminaries in their literary fields. Among them, three distinguished writers reveal the role of research in their creative work.

ion Myth

by Billi London-Gray

Research Builds Worlds

Novelist Nelly Rosario is a stickler for details; her narratives and historical fiction are supported by true-to-life elements. "Research is definitely critical to my overall work," she says, explaining that real-world facts "can breathe life and add texture" into her stories.

On a broader level, her research forms the basis of her characters and the places they inhabit — from the Dominican women in her novel, *Song of the Water Saints*, to a beekeeping Iraq War veteran in a recent short story.

"My creative work is fueled by what-ifs and whys. Research helps me discover possible answers, sometimes even more questions," she says. For example, what is it about an apiary that can hold a war veteran's interest? "Here, research can help to connect the seemingly unrelated dots of bees and war: Bees are trained to find buried land mines. Research can also allow for play with perspective: The mystic considers the green rain in Calcutta a spiritual phenomenon; the scientist understands that the rain is colored by bee feces full of pollen from local mangoes, as was reported by Reuters in 2002."

Rosario teaches a graduate-level seminar that centers on the effective use of research in writing fiction. Covering research methods — libraries, online resources, interviews, public archives — she and her students examine stories that "wear the writers' research lightly," which is the ultimate goal of incorporating those real-world details into fiction.

"As architects of artificial worlds, novelists should be adept at conducting research so that the reader can submit to the patterns and internal realities of their stories," she says. "Writing is like trying to create a dream from which the dreamer does

CREATIVE WRITING FACULTY | RECENT BOOKS

Cyrus Cassells, *The Crossed-Out Swastika*
(Copper Canyon Press, 2012)

Cristina García, *Dreams of Significant Girls*
(Simon & Schuster Books For Young Readers, 2011)

Cristina García, *The Lady Matador's Hotel*
(Scribner, 2010)

Tom Grimes, *Mentor: A Memoir*
(Tin House Books, 2010)

Debra Monroe, *On the Outskirts of Normal*
(SMU Press, 2010)

not want to wake, and research is among the tools the writer of that dream has at hand."

RESEARCH ABSORBS THE WORLD

Dr. Debra Monroe concentrates her creative energy on nonfiction writing, exemplified by her 2010 memoir, *On the Outskirts of Normal.* While she occasionally digs for specific facts, she considers her research to be two other modes of investigation: paying close attention to the world around her and continuously studying the history of the novel – its forms, conventions, devices and modes.

"Research happens all the time in subtle ways," she says, citing everyday examples such as overhearing conversations at the grocery story and reading the newspaper. "If you are deeply immersed in the writing process, many things feel relevant."

She defines this sort of research – having a keen eye for germane details – as "a state of receptivity. It's having unanswered questions and being ready for information that speaks to it."

Her study of the history of the novel, which stemmed from her doctoral dissertation, informs everything she writes. "That research feeds my writing every single minute," she says. The reason, she explains, is that the form of a story is as critical to its conveyance as the words used to tell it.

"Every new subject is unfamiliar – to the writer, to the reader. But narrative forms can't be entirely brand new or they'd be incomprehensible. They are our unconscious inheritance," she says. "Studying centuries of story forms helps give unwieldy subjects a lovely shape, and these forms give the reader familiar access to unfamiliar material."

For Monroe, this formal research results in expanded structural knowledge about writing, rather than information for one particular project. Her own aphorism says it best: "One story form is a recipe. But hundreds are a repertoire."

RESEARCH SATURATES THE MIND

Poet Kathleen Peirce approaches research with the aim of transforming, rather than transferring, her findings into her writing. She researches intensely and steeps information about a particular subject – "whatever materials interest me in a real way," she says – until the poetic brew is ready.

She composed her fourth book of poetry, *The Ardors,* by studying stories, articles, photographs, literary references and artwork related to pearls. "I immersed myself, and I wrote what came to me," she says.

Using this process, Peirce offers a wide-angle definition of research: "the act of thinking in the company of others." Such a view gathers light from the spectrum of experience and knowledge, focusing it into an expression or refracting it into something that looks completely different.

"In my creative process, I welcome a state of mind that travels in what might sound like two directions at once," she explains. "I gather close what's important to me because it may be useful or beautiful or baffling to me. I take it in. At the same time, I generate an intense vulnerability to whatever turns or stops my thinking might take in response to what I've gathered and taken in. Writing gives the encounter voice and form. I suppose it's sort of like being lost in a labyrinth of one's own making while one is making it."

POETRY | KATHLEEN PEIRCE, *Professor of English*

"*The Ardors* was built with the intention of including a pearl, or pearliness, or some aspect of pearl lore or pearl value in as many poems as I could make. I wanted to see – in pearl-like fashion – what shapes obsession might take. I wanted to see how far I could go, how variously, and this meant reading a great deal about pearls, their biology, folklore, gradations, harvest, fragility, shine. I looked at photographs of famous pearls. I read about the lives of pearl divers, and pearl farms. I kept Shakespeare's lines from *The Tempest* within reach: 'Those are pearls that were his eyes.' I didn't write poems about these things exactly. I immersed myself, and I wrote what came to me."

FONDLE PEARLS AND THEY'RE QUICK TO FLY

Outermost nacreous layer where reflection was
made constantly to bend is how the pearl turned,
even when at rest, like the simple hunger of the dead
brought to bear on the smell of baking bread,
then felt by us as peacefulness
when bending toward a loaf, a slice, a crumb. In this way
we felt acted on as well as left alone, at every turn
reawakening with variation,
with the sense of previous bearings
as well as those we lacked. We saw ourselves
not in the pearls we found, but in the pearls too deep,
too underneath, that went unseen
and were increased. These lay together in our minds;
with these we made adornments for someone.

"Fondle Pearls and They're Quick to Fly" from *The Ardors,* Copyright 2004 by Kathleen Peirce, used by permission of Copper Canyon Press, www.coppercanyonpress.org.

Nurturing the Craft

The Creative Writing M.F.A. program at Texas State is a springboard for emerging writers. Visits by internationally known writers bring the literary world to campus. Award-winning poets and writers form the faculty, giving students the mentorship and nurturing critiques required to hone their craft. A range of generous scholarships, fellowships and residencies provide writers with the most essential fuel for creative growth: time.

L.D. Clark and LaVerne Harrell Clark Literary Endowment and Residency
The Clark writer-in-residence, selected from graduating M.F.A. students, lives and writes for part of the year in a historic Smithville home. As the endowment grows, it will eventually fund two fiction awards and residencies.

W. Morgan and Lou Claire Rose Endowed Fellowship
Rose fellows, selected from entering M.F.A. students, receive a three-year scholarship and engage in research related to the creative writing process.

Katherine Anne Porter Literary Center and Residency
Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Katherine Anne Porter spent her childhood in a quaint three-bedroom home 10 miles from the Texas State campus. The restored building — now a National Literary Landmark — serves as a writer's residence for select M.F.A. students and hosts readings by visiting writers.

Front Porch Journal
M.F.A. students gain publishing experience and connect with writers around the country through work on *Front Porch*, a nationally known online literary journal that includes new fiction, poetry, essays and videos of visiting-writer readings and Q & As.

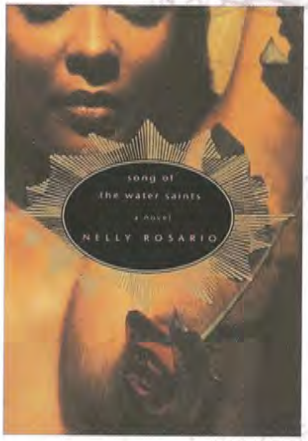
Endowed Chair in Creative Writing
Each year, the chair teaches a graduate workshop and conducts one-on-one critiques with M.F.A. students. The chair holder also visits classes for Q & As, gives one reading and delivers three talks on writing. National Book Award winner Cristina García will hold the chair from 2012 to 2014.

www.mfatxstate.com

NON-FICTION WRITING | DR. DEBRA MONROE, *Professor of English*

"I continue to research the history of the novel; the history of forms; the history of point of view, etc. That research feeds my writing every single minute. Studying centuries of story forms helps give unwieldy subjects a lovely shape, and these forms give the reader familiar access to unfamiliar material."

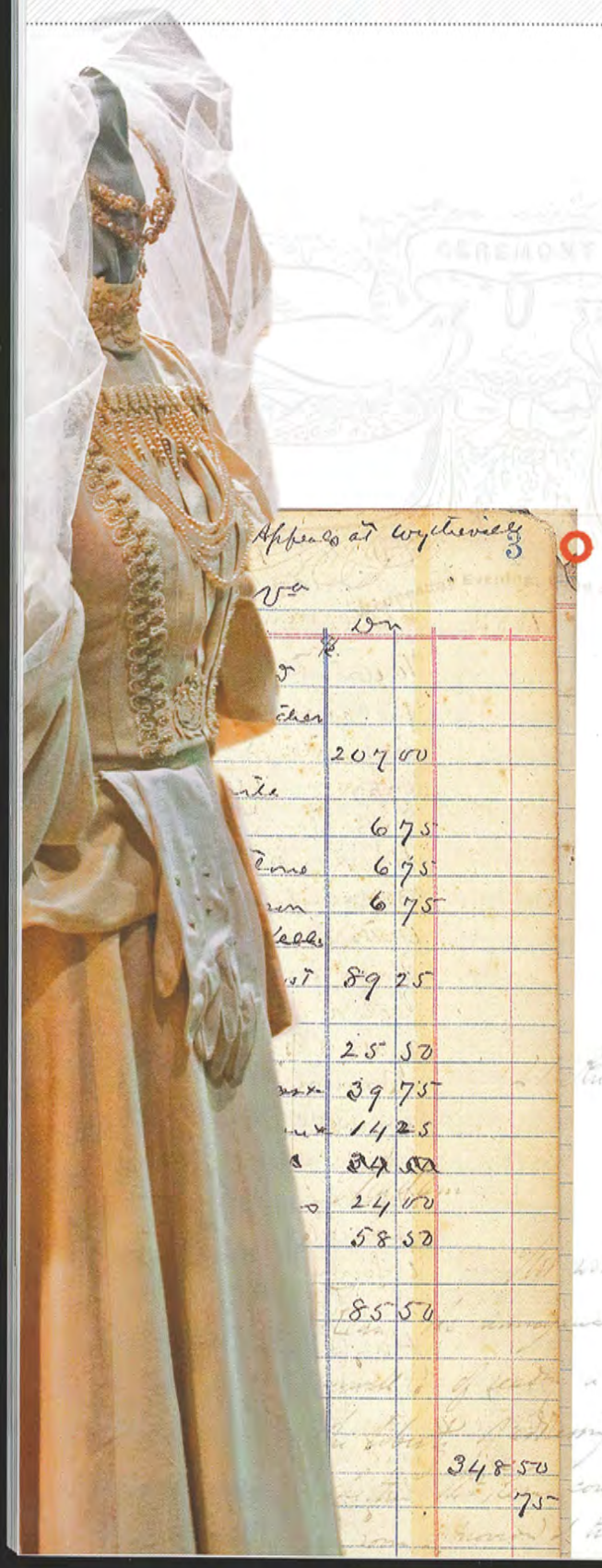
FICTION WRITING | NELLY ROSARIO, *Assistant Professor of English*



"For the novel *Song of the Water Saints*, I read journal entries by soldiers stationed in the Dominican Republic during the U.S. invasion of 1916 and oral histories by elderly Dominicans who'd lived through the eight-year occupation. Both views gave me a broader sense of the climate of those times. Newspapers from the era revealed information that gave texture to the story — stuff like modes of dress, consumer brands and unemployment among silent-film musicians due to the advent of talkies. Conducting research reminds me that I'm forever a student, and I enjoy being a gumshoe. Plus, there's the thrill of the hunt."

On the Origin of Ideas

From crafting jazz compositions to addressing border issues through photography to training Broadway's future stars, Texas State faculty members explain how research is in the DNA of creative endeavors.



Restoring the Past

"I have a personal collection of more than 200 antique wedding gowns. What's interesting about restoring these pieces is the research. The oldest is a dress from Creole, La., dating to 1842. When I began to conserve this dress, some things didn't add up to the time period: stitches, fabrics. I researched its provenance. Wedding dresses are the easiest on which to find provenance, because people keep records about them: court records, family bibles, diaries, invitations, oral history. Probably originally it was a ball gown from the 1830s and some pieces were added to it. Then it was used again later in the 19th century, so it had additional changes. The dress has the history of a family."

DR. ANN DUPONT
Senior Lecturer in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences

Preparing Actors

"Rather than restricting the actor's imagination, research sets it free. Research into the real world expands our knowledge and experience for living in the playwright's imaginary world. Through research, the actor builds confidence in his craft and artistic choices. At its best, the creative process carries us into the unknown, into a sea of questions. Research doesn't always give us all the answers, but it does inspire us to search for them in imaginative ways.

"For my acting students, research assists them as they explore the imaginary world, making it 'real' by immersing themselves in worlds beyond their personal experiences. One of the classes I teach is Acting Realism; my students have to do extensive research into their characters. It's far easier to play a role if you've made choices that are grounded in the reality of the world you're portraying.

"For an actor or any artist, if you draw only from what you already know, the work you do will be limited and not very interesting. Your audience wants to experience something new. It is the artist's responsibility to take them beyond what they already know by exciting their imagination."

Michael Costello, *Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance*

Creating Photographic Narratives

JASON REED, *Assistant Professor of Photography in the School of Art and Design*

Installation of *Without Being Seen*
Photographs sourced from U.S. Border Protection Archives
Cropped and printed by artist
Archival inkjet prints, 16"x 20"

"Most of my work is related to the Texas-Mexico borderland region, which is a complex socio-political environment that must be navigated with an understanding of its history and its contemporary situation. My work stems from questions; I start by reading, writing and looking at data regarding these questions, and only after [achieving] some good amount of understanding do I start to make pictures and create artwork."

Painting Architectural Ideas

"Research is probably the most important activity an artist can do during the creative process. My painting 'Nest' was from a photograph I took [at Beijing National Stadium]; it's an observational kind of painting. That painting led me to research Herzog & de Meuron, its architects. They also did the Prada store in Tokyo. I visited and photographed that, too. Then I started researching the Prada building and found a really nice text at Alkek Library showing their creative process — it wasn't about their buildings, but about all the research they did to come up with the designs. I've got a new body of work influenced by the images in this book. These paintings are a big change for me. None of the colors are real at all. Some are monochrome. My ideas are not from the real world, like in my previous work, but from this book."

TOMMY FITZPATRICK
Assistant Professor of Painting in the School of Art and Design

Tommy Fitzpatrick
Transverse (2012)
Acrylic on canvas, 45"x30"

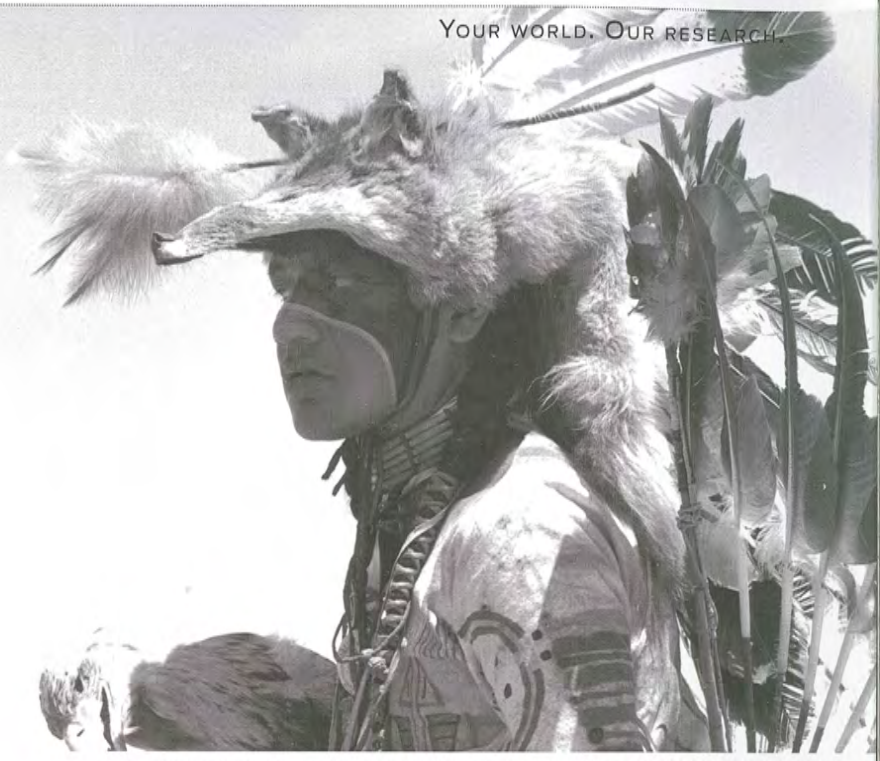
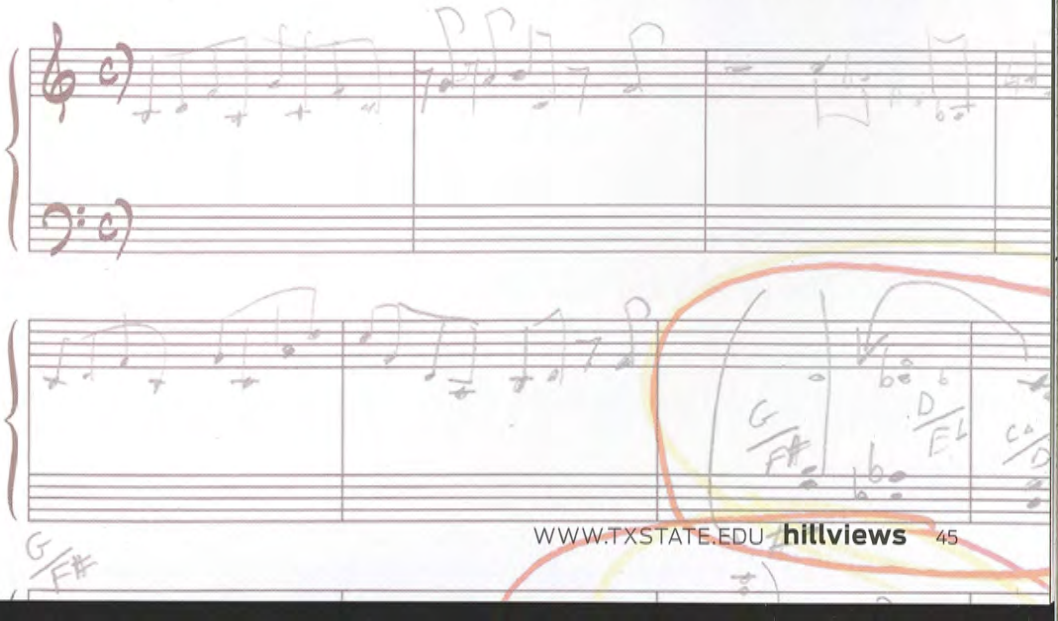


Photo by Nancy Hunter Warren, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), HP.2003.29.19

Composing and Performing Jazz

"In order to find these two pieces, I spent hours listening to almost all 6,000 recordings of Native American dance online at the John Donald Robb Archive of Southwestern Music. I transcribed pieces, deconstructed them in terms of harmony, melody and rhythm, and wrote a contemporary jazz composition that allows a live ensemble to perform in sync with the 60-year-old recordings."

HANK HEHMSOTH
Senior Lecturer in the School of Music
2010 MacDowell Fellowship recipient
for the composition "Two Desert Dances"