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A Mother-Daughter Love Story

Merlene Schain and Sarah Stolar

by Emily Van Cleve



Sarah Stolar (left) and Merlene Schain (right). Photography ©Jeff Medinas

The love between Merlene Schain and Sarah Stolar runs deep and strong. This mother–daughter duo of artists not only share studio space in Santa Fe, but a bond that nothing — not even Alzheimer’s disease afflicting Schain — can break.

“While I was growing up, I worshiped my mother and wanted to be just like her,” said Stolar during a recent video chat. “She’s been my art teacher, my mentor, my mom and my friend.”

Schain, who earned a bachelor of fine arts degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a masters of fine arts from the University of Cincinnati, spent more than thirty years of her career teaching art in educational institutions in California and at her own Ohio-based art school, Schain Studios. She’s versatile in 2-D and 3-D arts and has a long list of adoring former students who credit their success to her proficient teaching.

Stolar grew up in this artistically rich environment, nurtured by a mom who exemplified the joys of being an artist. “Art was a given growing up,” adds Stolar, whose earliest memories include being four years old and crying during one of her mom’s life drawing classes because her rendition of the model didn’t look like those created by the older students.

By the time she was a teen, Stolar was working as her mom’s teaching assistant and creating her own body of interdisciplinary work that investigates the female psychological narrative. With Schain’s help, she put together a portfolio that led to her acceptance at the Art Academy of Cincinnati. Stolar received her master’s degree at the San Francisco Art Institute and has been chair of the Department of Fine Arts and Digital Media at the University of New Mexico–Taos since 2015. “I’ve used my mom’s curriculum with my students,” Stolar explains. “She’s helped me become the teacher I am today.”

Many years ago, Schain and Stolar dreamed of living in the same city and sharing a giant studio together. The plan was revised after Stolar visited her mother in Cincinnati three years ago and discovered Alzheimer’s was tightening its grip on her mom’s faculties and that she needed to immediately bring her to Santa Fe.

Schain lives in a casita on the Santa Fe property that Stolar shares with her husband of fifteen years, Jeff Medinas. Making art is a daily activity that takes place in the casita if the pieces are small and in Stolar’s studio if they’re large. Schain often listens to music from the 1960s, joyfully dancing around while she works.

Since Schain's highly developed representational skills have diminished as a result of Alzheimer's, she now creates abstract works. "Mom still understands she's an artist," says Stolar. "The best times I have with my mom are when we're working in my studio together and she has really lucid moments. We can get into the kind of relationship we've always had, where we ask each other what we think of each other's work and give each other feedback."

Recently, when Stolar was feeling unsure about her work, she turned to her mother for advice. "She told me I need to be hardcore, to toughen up and snap out of it. She encouraged me to do the work I need to do and follow my heart. I really needed to hear that."

There are plenty of tough moments in Stolar's household, times when Stolar's patience with her mom is often tested, and taking care of her is incredibly stressful and grief-filled. But for Stolar, it's worth it. "I want my mom to be remembered as a hero," says Stolar. "She's always been a spitfire. I still want to be just like her."