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Vanishing Point

by MaryPat Campbell

They said that I drew like an architect. These were sweet words, because although I worked hard I was found wanting on the technical side of things. But I could draw - exploded views and perspective were my speciality - just imagine the machine or tool, pulled apart along its central axis, hovering in mid-air so you could see each part and how it fits together with, or exploded apart from the other pieces, like those pictures of Orion, having set off from Cape Canaveral as seen on our TVs, cruising through the chilling vastness of space.

The university offered me a part-time job in the engineering faculty, teaching first year mechanical engineering students how to draw, how to be fluent in their design skills on the page, and how to use perspective.

My slot was the last class of the day on Thursday afternoons, an hour no other tutor wanted. The students who didn't skive off thought they would come along for a bit of fun. To them, drawing was a peripheral thing, a lesson that didn't demand much, at the end of their long tedious day of physics, chemistry and mathematics and which in any case could be done so much better and faster with the design software classes they attended on Mondays.

I imagined my hero, Filippo Brunelleschi, architect in fifteenth century Florence, how excited he must have been with his discovery of how to draw a cube, a building, a cathedral, giving it depth in three dimensions, that would otherwise look flat on the vellum pages hung neatly around his studio walls for his students to study.

I stood in front of the white board with a hazy afternoon sun slanting in the grubby window, with a black felt tip pen in my hand, I reached up to draw a square on the board at eye level, the long black lines of the horizon above me, and where the viewer stood below; I knew which lines should vanish towards the horizon & which should remain parallel to it, but then, it seemed such a big white space to negotiate, like astronauts negotiating the black vastness of space, I got confused and couldn't remember how to do it, which lines should project and which should stay put, I couldn't see it in my mind any more, and standing in front of the board, with my back to the group of adolescent students, I could feel the sweat gather on the back of my neck, I could hear their whispers getting louder behind me, the sound of their laughter as my face reddened and my mind went blank.

'Now they're going to see who I am', I thought, someone who imagines she can draw like a Florentine genius but vanishes down the measured, mechanical, everyday task of the lesson.