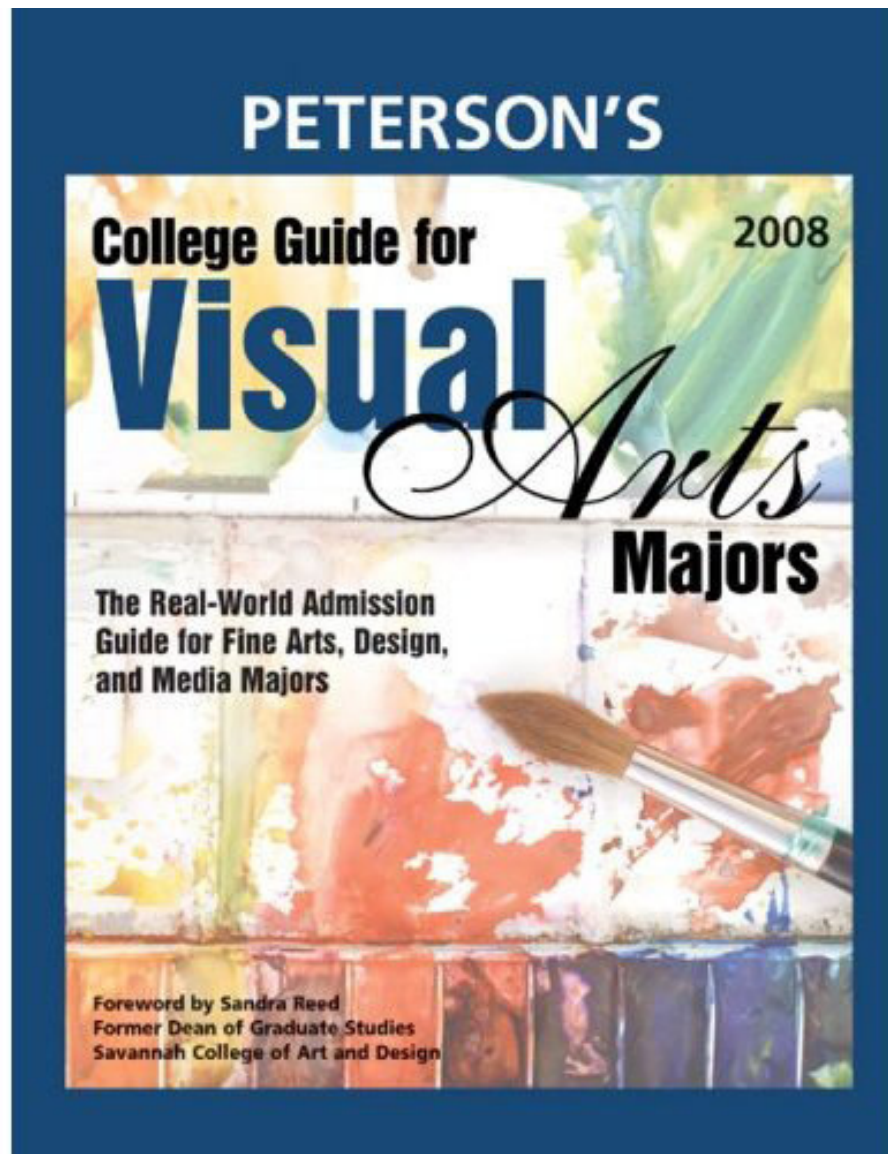


# Essay by Lili Bernard

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From the Chapter

“Up Close and Personal with Professional Artists”

**LILI BERNARD****Painter****[www.lilibernard.com](http://www.lilibernard.com)**

The arts played an integral role in my familial, native-Cuban upbringing. Fine art, music, and theater thrived in our household. When I was just a toddler, my family emigrated to the United States. In our little Brooklyn brownstone my mother gave me my first lesson in drawing. I was 4 years old. With great focus and joyful seriousness she showed me how to arrange circles and triangles to create a beautiful bird. I delighted at the complex simplicity of my mother's design. That moment was pivotal in my decision to become an artist. I was utterly fascinated by the living form that my mother was able to create, via the combination of two mere shapes.

Since I can remember, my mother used to always say that she knew I was going to grow up to be a famous artist one day. She and my father instilled in my siblings and me the knowledge that we could achieve any and every goal. My father, an electrical engineer, used to bring home discarded blueprints. My brothers and sisters and I squealed euphorically as he unrolled the huge papers on the kitchen table and spilled crayons on top of them. For hours we drew and colored on the back of those discarded blueprints. My father categorically saved our childhood drawings for each one of us to enjoy in our adulthood. I spent most of my time growing up in New Jersey. However, in the beginning of my junior year of high school, my family relocated to Tokyo, where I graduated from the American School in Japan. My art teachers in both New Jersey and Tokyo nourished my artistic capabilities. The uplifting nature of my teachers, coupled with the self-sacrificing love of my parents and their wonderful lessons in art, propelled me to study fine arts at Cornell University.

A professor of painting at Cornell University named Patrick Webb taught me invaluable lessons on the derivation and arrangement of colors. Today, in my painting, I continue to incorporate many of the methods that I learned from Professor Webb as well as from many of the dynamic art professors at Cornell University. Along with fine arts, I also studied the sciences and acting at Cornell. My theater professor, Bruce Levitt, encouraged me to consider pursuing a career in acting and recommended that I study in New York City. After three years at Cornell, I left and started a successful acting career in New York, where I studied theater for three years, under the tutelage of Sonia Moore. My fine art continued to develop, alongside my thespian life. I used to come home from rehearsals and performances and paint. At my parents urging and with their support, I completed my bachelor's degree at the City University of New York.

My college education has been instrumental in my career as an artist, both in theater and in fine arts. It has given me the knowledge, skill, and fortitude necessary to forge through my occupation as an artist. Today, as a wife and a mother of five young boys, my vocational focus is more on fine arts. I paint prolifically while my children slumber or attend school. When they are home, they delight in watching me paint, often offering invaluable criticism and support. They boast about my art shows to their teachers and peers. My children tangibly benefit from my college education; I impart to them many of the invaluable lessons in art that I gained as a college student. Clearly, my college education has enriched my life, not only as an artist, but also as a mother.

My studio is in the premier art gallery district of Chung King Road in Chinatown, Los Angeles. The studio is large, over 2,000 square feet, with three levels—a “store front” level that is all windows, a large functional basement, and a loft. Upon my easels, taped in random order, are inspirational photographs and words, most smudged with paint and charcoal. The hardwood floors beneath my easels are splattered in paint. There is always music playing in the background that relates to the subject I am painting. I often dance when I paint and sometimes speak to the canvas, as if it has a life of its own. Painting is always a joy-filled experience. One of my goals is to share with viewers a small portion of the joy I am blessed to feel, all within the process of creating art.

The subjects of my paintings range from the spiritual, through the natural, to the ancestral. I paint in oils, sans thinning agents. One of the most time-consuming and yet therapeutic aspects in my painting is the mixing of colors on the pallet. I tend to derive hues that are brightly colored, which reflect, rather than absorb, light.

It is always rewarding to see how positively my paintings impact people. This is most evident at the opening of an art show. I measure the success of a painting by the length of time people stand in front of it and stare or by the questions they ask, regarding the work. My acting career has helped me with the Questions & Answers portion of art show openings when I have had to stand before more than 100 people and speak about my inspiration and creative process.

I look at every venue to display and sell my work as an utter blessing. This is particularly true in the context of relatively few women and people of color being represented in the art world. One of my most gratifying experiences as an artist is being able to commune with other artists, of all types. I enjoy the soul connection that invariably exists between artists and benefit from listening to the reflections and insights of artists who are more experienced in the professional world of art than I am.

In the eve of a career as a professional fine artist, my plans for the future involve applying to graduate school so that I may pursue a Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) for my own personal edification and fortification. I look forward to benefiting from the relationships I will form with other graduate students as well as with professors who themselves are experienced artists. Being equipped with an M.F.A. will also give me the option to pursue a career as an instructor of art at the college level, should I so desire. My other plans for the future involve my continuing to develop a nonprofit organization I recently incorporated called ¡HABLA! (Harvesting Asian, Black, Latino Artists). The purpose of ¡HABLA! is to provide a platform for the voices of Asian, Black, and Latino fine artists in the mainstream art world, where artists of color are grossly underrepresented. ¡HABLA! achieves this goal through its all-inclusive youth-mentoring programs and its scholarships for artists of color to graduate and undergraduate art schools.

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