

# Erica Harney: Artist + Curator + Scene Painter + Educator

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**Women in STEM, detail of faces**

## **Notes on the original nine paintings of the Women in STEM series June 28-29<sup>th</sup> 2018**

### **Intro**

I was first approached by Fulton-Montgomery Community College about a possible commission in early February, while my solo exhibition *Romanticism and the Theatre of Everyday Living* was running in the College's Perrella Gallery. This exhibition had originally opened at the Penn State University's main campus at University Park (where I completed my MFA in 2010) in September 2017. I was excited enough just to have my work at FMCC: while I have been living and working in Pennsylvania (Philadelphia and elsewhere) for the past decade, I am a New York native and grew up in Westchester and Saratoga Counties. Any opportunity to exhibit my work "close to home" is always cherished. Additionally, my father (who grew up in Mayfield) and several cousins and friends (still residing in Fulton County) are FMCC alumni.

The project originally pitched to me by Ronalyn Wilson was a series of six 48 x 36 in. paintings portraying women working in the STEM fields (this number eventually became nine) as part of the College's receipt of a Perkins Grant.

As I currently teach art at both Cecil College in North East, Maryland and Alvernia University's Philadelphia Center, my original thought was to reach out to students at these schools (particularly Cecil, which has science facilities at the campus where I teach) and use them as models for the paintings. Unfortunately, the faculty and advisors that I had initially reached out to to help recruit students were lax in communication, so after a few weeks of no response I knew I had to come up with a Plan B. I'm glad things worked out this way, as the new plan ended up being much stronger and efficient than the first. Serendipity!

## New Plan

The New Plan was inspired by the work of Alphonse Mucha, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Czech illustrator/Art Nouveau painter. Instead of the literal depictions of women working in STEM fields that I had originally had in mind, I decided instead to take a more “allegorical” approach. Upon beginning, I had a rough idea of which disciplines that I’d like to portray, as well as a general idea of a color scheme. I printed out a list of about 350 different majors/careers that fall under the STEM category and started to select those that would be a). visually appealing and b). represent a variety of science, technology, engineering and math. Each painting required EXTENSIVE research- as an artists with next-to-no personal knowledge or experience in the STEM fields, I really had to rely on exterior research (and a LOT of Google image searches) for the right visual aids and props to accompany each figure.



### Alphonse Mucha's painting representing the allegory of Poetry

In following the decorative trend of Mucha, I employed a circular pattern that would serve as the backdrop for each of the paintings and would contain images/icons/symbols pertaining to each field (atoms, stars, molecules and the Periodic Table, in the example of *Physics* and *Chemistry*, for example). This pattern was actually a luau stencil that I had previously used on a scenic backdrop several years ago: in addition to studio art/teaching, I have an extensive background in scenic painting for Philadelphia-area theatre companies and have accumulated many tools, tricks, and scraps of

materials leftover from previous gigs. This template is one such remnant, and for the past six years or so, my theatre work has been a strong influence in my independent studio work. Even the surface that I paint on is scenic muslin, which is a finer, lighter-weight grade of canvas than most painters use.

Each of these paintings was initially painted one-at-a-time in acrylic, to a certain level of completion. Once I'd gotten all of them to the same point, I went back and re-painted them in oil, mixing up the orders and often working on multiples simultaneously. I wanted to make sure that their chronological evolution wasn't apparent and that they all were completed to the same level and in the same style (as opposed to Michelangelo's *Sistine Ceiling*, where the fresco becomes larger in scale, looser and more gestural as it progresses, showing the artist's increase in speed and decrease in patience). As I was working on these paintings and lining them up in my studio (which engulfs the entire 609 square feet of the basement of my home outside of West Philadelphia, save my washer and dryer) I was lining them up from right to left, the opposite of how we read. As I continued to go in to them with oil for a second, third, fourth (etc) treatment I frequently rearranged them to make sure they all worked together regardless of their final arrangement when installed at FMCC.



### **1 & 2. Physics & Chemistry**

The first painting I began was what is currently known as *Physics*. In its earliest stages, though, I was thinking of this painting as representing astronomy/astrophysics. The second painting I was planning would represent *Chemistry*. Over the course of my frequent communications with Ronalyn Wilson, however, I discovered that neither astronomy, astrophysics, nor chemistry were actual majors at FMCC (although courses were offered in these topics). Early on, I realized that I wanted to illustrate majors/fields of study that were prominently offered at FMCC, to keep this series personalized to the College. So, while I was working, I decided to broaden the topic of “astrophysics” to “physics,” which- like chemistry- is not a major offered by the College, but both disciplines factor considerably in a strong STEM education. So, the first two paintings in the series are somewhat of outliers to the rest of the group, but my entire perception of the project evolved and grew over the course of its production.

As the first of the series, *Physics* stands out in another way: the style of dress of the figure. In addition to considering the work of Mucha and a more allegorical depiction of these fields of study, I had originally intended to liken these figures to the scholars of antiquity: Plato, Aristotle and the like. *Physics* is wearing a toga, but when I posted an in-progress photo of *Chemistry* wearing a toga on Instagram, a former student made a comment about pant suits and not being in to “glam... especially when working.” It was at this point that I realized that antiquities route was not the way to go- and *Chemistry* then exchanged her garment for a pair of scrubs.



**An early, acrylic version of *Chemistry*, pre-scrubs**

Aside from the basic composition of an almost-life-sized figure against the circular patterned background, one other remnant from the early paintings that remained consistent throughout was the desire to individualize and personalize each “character.” While I used timed self-portraits to base the poses (you’ll notice that the bodies of each

character have large heads and narrow shoulders, like myself...and several of them are wearing Dansko brand shoes, which are the preferred work shoe of many professionals....such as myself), I really wanted to humanize each character and keep them from looking too generic or cartoony. I wanted them to be relatable, but not actual portraits. Therefore, all of them are \*loosely\* based off of women I know personally- many of them specifically selected because of their own STEM-related careers or hobbies. *Physics* and *Facilities Maintenance* are the only two paintings where the “model” has been publically identified. I was firmly committed to portraying a diverse array of race/ethnicity/age, so each of my models was chosen \*very\* carefully and with much thought and consideration. *Physics*, for example, is inspired by my next-door neighbor. She and her husband are avid stargazers and own a very impressive telescope. She also possesses beautiful, thick, wavy, silver hair which was a. fun to paint and b. lent itself very naturally to the original idea of modeling these figures off of ancient scholars. *Chemistry* is loosely based on a friend of Central American descent who works in her family business as a dental technician, a field where chemistry factors very strongly. While I worked very hard to stay unbiased throughout the painting process, I have to admit that *Chemistry* is one of my favorites of the group ;)



### **3. *Medicine/Nursing***

By the time I began the third painting in the series, I had starting to get my bearings (although in my earliest planning stages, this painting was going to be titled *Biology*). This character was inspired by one of my students at Alvernia University, who is pre-med. While *Chemistry* may be one of my overall favorites of the paintings, *Medicine/Nursing* has my favorite face. I really enjoy the contrast of dark skin and hair against a bright white lab coat and blood-red background. In many of these paintings, a particular model was chosen based on the color palette (such as the silver hair for *Physics*). While variety and inclusivity of models were undisputedly one of my primary objectives, the artist part of me was ultimately concerned in making the best paintings possible. Every visual element was



**Detail: the face of *Medicine***

thoroughly considered in the composition of each image, from hair color to background color. *Medicine/Nursing* was particularly fun to paint: I raided my medicine cabinet for as many different kinds of analgesics, allergy medicines, cold medicines, vitamins, supplements, prescriptions, etc. that I could find for the pill sections (it's always nice to paint from life rather than a photo when one has the luxury of doing so), but I did also rely on the internet for variety. The challenge in this painting was to select imagery that strongly implied "medicine" without the negative associations, especially given the nature of the current opioid epidemic. Syringes, for example, were an idea that I considered and rejected specifically for this reason. I also wanted to keep the subject matter broad enough to include all fields of medicine, especially because medicine and nursing are both separate majors offered by the college.



**Detail of an early version of *Computer Science***



**Finished version**

#### **4. *Computer Science***

A "visual outlier," in a sense. I struggled horribly with this painting in the beginning: initially adhering to the same circular template that frames each of the other figures and getting nowhere, I eventually realized that "pixilation" was the secret to this painting. I literally drew a grid out over the original version of the painting and blended the colors that were already in place to create the same effect produced by a low-resolution image. Another challenge in *Computer Science* was keeping the technological aspects vague enough so that they wouldn't appear outdated in six months (as tends to happen with technology). Therefore the strength of this piece really relied on the background and the simultaneously vague but high-tech-seeming multicolored keyboard. The character in this

painting is loosely based on an extremely tech-savvy classmate and Chinese immigrant from my graduate program at the Pennsylvania State University who makes and teaches digital art and the philosophy behind it. The figure's outfit evolved quite a bit during the process as well- unlike some of the other fields, computer science is a field that doesn't require a specific uniform so I had nearly unlimited freedom (no scrubs or hard-hats necessary!). Needless to say, this character was fun to dress and accessorize! The flower on her hat was one of the very last additions in the whole series.



### **5. Electrical Technology**

By this time I decided it was time for a more industrial-type career depiction, and elected to portray the electrical technology major. My favorite part of this painting, undoubtedly, is the stormy sky in the background (lightning being the purest and most primal form of electricity, of course). The sky was so much fun to paint! The symbols portrayed

around the border of the circle template refer to types of electrical currents, a visual language I very much appreciated as somewhat of a visual person myself ;). This painting resolved itself relatively easily as I had a clear picture in mind before I began. One aspect that makes this painting unique is that this is the closest to an "action shot" portrayed. This character actually appears to be "at work," and occupies the space differently than the others (with the notable exception of *Facilities Maintenance*). The figure is loosely based on my college roommate from Alfred University, who is an engineer (obviously, not the same as an electrical technician but nonetheless someone who has a firm grasp on the workings of electricity). As I mentioned earlier, I tried to select specific people in my life to give some humanity and personality to each character (I feel like it's easier to give them a more lifelike quality if there's some essence of a real person involved). The challenge here, as you might imagine, is that as an artist most of my friends/colleagues are also artists or something similar. I know comparatively very few humans that work in the STEM fields, let alone women and specifically women of color (which, obviously, is the point of this project). So, I took some creative liberties in the selection of my models.



## 6. *Criminal Justice*

The last of the original six paintings, by the time I began this painting, Ronalyn Wilson had already given approval for the inclusion of three more paintings. I also knew it was time to incorporate one of the “soft sciences,” as criminal justice and other

social sciences were not fields that automatically occurred to me as falling under the STEM heading (hence my extensive research!). The figure in this painting was much more of an “invention” rather than being based off of an actual person- because so much of her face was obscured (as with *Radiology*) it didn’t seem as necessary. The hair was a guilty pleasure just for me- I deliberately chose and Afro because I thought it would be fun to paint (it was!). You will notice the reappearance of the toga in this piece- this figure is very much an allegory and is based off of the iconic images of Blind Justice. Criminal Justice, as a field, is extremely broad and can be infinitely broken down in to smaller, more specific categories so keeping its illustration allegorical rather than literal seemed to be the most appropriate course of action. The books, of course, are a reference to the more academic and philosophical aspects of this discipline- once again harkening to historical scholars. It also seemed appropriate to portray *Criminal Justice* as an African-American, an acknowledgment of that group’s relentlessly biased treatment within the American justice system.



A few references for Blind Justice pulled from a Google image search



***Radiology.....before and after***

### **7. Radiology**

By late March of 2018 I had already received the green light to add three more paintings for a new total of nine. These last three are what I thought of as the “bonus paintings.” Aware of my limitations, I chose these last three disciplines very carefully and painstakingly, as there were still so many options that would be fun to portray! *Radiology*, like *Criminal Justice*, has a largely obscured face so her identity wasn’t as crucial. In the back of my mind, though, she was based off a friend who is the child of immigrants and recently completed her medical residency in Atlanta. This painting was \*by far\* the most challenging. I erroneously thought that painting an x-ray was going to be exponentially simpler than it was, and I repainted the skeleton in its entirety at least three times. This painting is unique in the sense that it’s the most “fantastical” of the group, with the character x-raying herself by using a small, handheld, clover-shaped machine. This is the only painting where the figure/ground relationship is reversed. Another interesting fact is that this painting used to be blue, not white. However, after a few days of working on it I felt that with the blue scrubs and the blue background and the blueish tinted x-ray, the painting was boring and monochromatic. After thinking more expansively about radiology, I started to envision the circular aspect of the background as the opening of a CT or MRI scanner....and thus the background became white. This also helped to balance out the neutral palette of *Physics* (again, I was constantly thinking of ways to visually and conceptually tie in the paintings to each other so that they worked together as a family as well as being able to stand alone as independent works).



### **8. Business**

Another soft science- one that I wouldn't have automatically associated as falling under the STEM heading before beginning this project. I can't emphasize enough how much I personally learned from executing this project! I had originally planned on including a green painting in the original six (the

initial color palette that I had envisioned was black, red, purple, turquoise, green, and orange) and that the green painting would represent mathematics or a related field. Again, my ideas evolved along with the process and my growing familiarity of the majors offered by the College. Business being another extremely broad field, I chose to focus the symbols and icons having to do with data, organization, globalization and communication (with a subtle nod to finance, of course!). The inspiration for this character was a childhood friend with a degree in marketing (coincidentally also the child of immigrants- as with *Chemistry* and *Radiology*- a pattern that I wasn't consciously aware of until now). Many creative freedoms were taken with this character nonetheless, as she was aged considerably. I enjoyed the sophisticated, somewhat glamorous aura of this painting- this character is the only one with painted nails, noticeable makeup, and heels. As I mentioned, even the tiniest visual element was specifically considered for each painting, and I thoroughly enjoyed delving into the specific "costumes" and "props" for each character from stilettos to lab coats.



### **9. Facilities Maintenance**

Selecting the ninth painting was a challenge in and of itself, and I opened it up to a vote between facilities maintenance and behavioral science among my followers on social media. I eventually decided on facilities

maintenance for two reasons: 1. Up until this point there had been essentially no “blue collar” careers portrayed, with the possible exception of *Electrical Technology* and 2. Of all of the STEM majors offered by FMCC, this is the one to which I could best relate to...at least I use many of the same kinds of tools and wear the same kinds of clothes! This last painting is my self-portrait. Decked out in full paint-clothes regalia (including paint-splattered Danskos, safety goggles and equipped with my Ryobi drill and my favorite orange tape measurer (a gift from a former co-worker), there’s very little visual distinction between a facilities maintenance worker and a scenic artist! As the last painting in the series, it was also an opportunity to tie up some visual and schematic connections to other paintings. The red shirt was deliberately chosen to tie in to *Nursing/Medicine* (which was otherwise the only painting that included a significant amount of that color). The neutral background not only tied in with the industrial “Builder Beige” that is prevalent throughout many public institutions, but it also helped to subdue the palette of the group (which is generally quite colorful with the exception of *Physics*). The posture parallels that of *Electrical Technology*. Symbolically, this felt like the right way to end the series.

### **Closing Thoughts**

There’s no debating it- the *Women in STEM* series is far and away my favorite project I’ve ever had, from both personal and professional angles. In the words of art critic Jerry Saltz, “An iron-clad law of art: If your art is only of use/value to \*you,\* it has no use/value at all.” It’s extremely satisfying to feel like I created something of true value and I can only hope to create work of a similar scope for other institutions in the future. Without question, I’m elated that Fulton-Montgomery Community College chose to use a measurable portion of their Perkins Grant funding to promote the sciences through art. What a phenomenal idea, at its very core. I believe that art is at its most powerful and effective when it’s doing some good- when it transcends the trivial and decorative and has some sort of function. As a professor of art, I always strive to teach my students not just about art itself, but how art and design play such an integral part in everyday life from visual communication to emotional restoration. I especially want my students to understand how the skills honed and cultivated in an art education can benefit students in their chosen career path, regardless of the discipline (creative problem-solving, attention to detail, increased powers of observation, and sensitivity to both objective and subjective thought, just to name a few).

I am truly thankful to Ronalyn Wilson and the rest of the FMCC community for selecting me for this very special project. Thanks are also due to Joel Chapin, Torrance Fish and Joe Mulone, all of whom contributed to the success of this series.

-Erica Harney, 2018.06.29

Lansdowne, Philadelphia, PA



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