

Phrean

naus

## rebuilding the bauhaus in chicago

an interview with alysa nahmias on her  
upcoming documentary  
by dustin lowman

the year the nazis included his work in their defamatory art exhibition “*entartete kunst*” (“*degenerate art*”), lászló moholy-nagy was laying the new bauhaus’ foundation in chicago. it would prove to be a severely uphill battle. after first opening as “the new bauhaus” in 1937, the school had its funding pulled, then closed and reopened under several different names: first the chicago school of design (1939), then the institute of design (id, 1944), which was finally absorbed into the illinois institute of technology in 1949.

this story, and those who knew or were influenced by moholy-nagy, are the subjects of alysa nahmias’ upcoming documentary, “the new bauhaus.” having just entered post-production, the film will likely see a fall 2019 release. editor dustin lowman recently spoke on the phone with ms. nahmias about the film-making experience.

**dustin lowman:** does the film primarily deal with moholy-nagy’s personal story, or the new bauhaus’ overall story?

**alysa nahmias:** both, although it’s most heavily focused on moholy-nagy’s tenures in chicago from 1937 to 1946, when he died. we will obviously mention bauhaus in europe, but we are interested in this moment in chicago when there was a productive tension between art and industry.

**dl:** i was surprised to learn that the original bauhaus prioritized that relationship — “art into industry,” as the slogan went. one thinks of art and industry as being incompatible, or at least grudgingly compatible.

**an:** i agree with you, but you have to look at the moment in which bauhaus was founded. between the wars in europe, there was optimism. world war i was “the war to end all wars.” you have all this new technology — photography, mass production, railroads — and artists are starting to understand how these tools can be used in artwork and design. there’s a utopian shine that is challenged when world war ii breaks out. whether moholy-nagy is successful in continuing it in chicago is one of the questions we ask in our film.

**dl:** in speaking to people who knew him, what have emerged as moholy-nagy’s defining characteristics?

**an:** he stood for experimentation, he stood for joy in life and in art. he believed that the world could be a better place and that artists play an important role in that. his work was exhibited in the nazi degenerate art exhibition. he saw that artists and culture are among the first to be attacked in totalitarian societies. because moholy-nagy lived through these times, he understood the power of art and culture — why we need it, what it can and can’t do.

**dl:** what, other than the obvious centennial celebration, makes this story relevant to tell now? it occurred to me that, in a country where arts funding is being cut as we speak, how art survives in certain types of societies is a big part of its relevance.

**an:** for sure. moholy-nagy was endlessly fascinated by technology. he wrote this essay called “production reproduction,” in which he challenges

artists to turn technological tools, tools of reproduction — like the camera, which reproduces images, or records, which reproduce sound — to tools of artistic production. he was trying to get to the root of, what is the medium, what is the technology, and how do we use it in an innovative way? those sorts of questions in the digital age are arising again. how do we prevent technology mastering us, and instead use it in productive, positive ways?

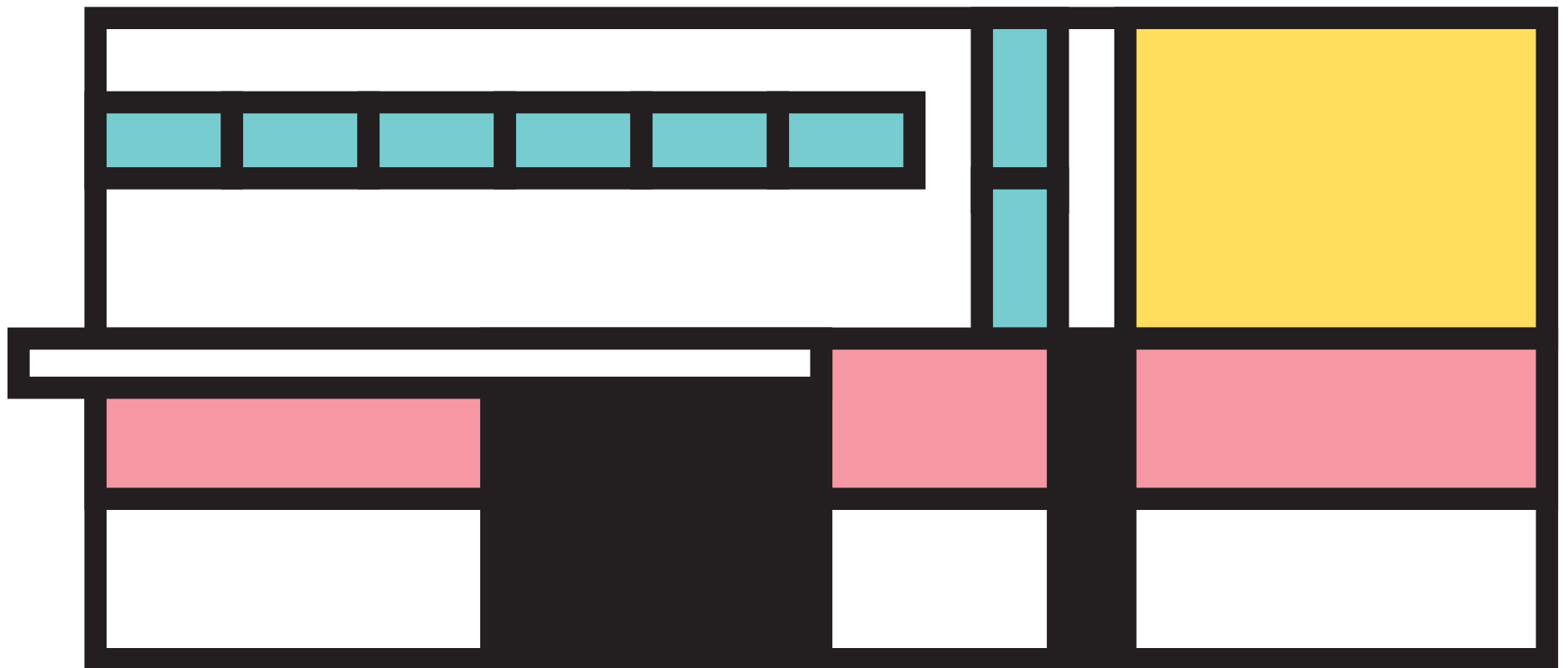
**dl:** in the interview you did with the website deezee, i enjoyed your comment about not wanting the film to be a hagiography (the biography of a saint). what are you doing to prevent it being that?

**an:** we include the voices of sybil and lucia, his two wives, who supported his work tremendously, often in ways for which they were not recognized. sybil wrote moholy-nagy’s biography, kept his legacy alive. lucia, in the early years, was with him while he was at the bauhaus in germany. they collaborated on photographic works for which she received less credit. in our telling of the story, i try to pay attention to, and when possible, correct for, ways in which women were excluded, and try to set the scene in chicago beyond just the new bauhaus itself. there were incredible african-american jazz musicians working concurrent with what was happening with moholy-nagy. although their paths might not have crossed, it’s important to me to understand that it’s not just one person in a vacuum.



at left: exterior of the new bauhaus school of design. 1938. photographer: unknown.

above: lászló moholy-nagy, self-portrait, 1925 ©moholy-nagy foundation.



## haus on the hill

a trip to walter gropius' family home  
by leo smith

on a fine august afternoon in lincoln, massachusetts, a gray prius is bumping its way up the potholed drive of a distinguished historic new england home. the driver: rosalind smith (bfa photography 2022, pratt institute), recent learner's permit recipient. the occasion: the owens-smith family's 2018 greater boston area staycation. the home: the gropius house.

the house was designed by walter gropius, founder of the bauhaus school, as a home for himself, his wife ise, and their daughter ati. it is a beautiful modernist building with new england colonial adaptations befitting its adopted home. designed in 1937 and built in 1938, the house was occupied by the family until ise gropius's death in 1984, at which point it became a museum under the auspices of historic new england.

it stands on a grassy rise backed by woods, a white cement box of unmistakable modernist lineage; it looks out of place in the solemn, maybe haunted woods of lincoln, not two miles from walden pond. it is just out-of-place enough to intrigue. the five members of the owens-smith family — parents doug and suzanne, teenagers rosalind and caleb, and your trusty reporter — make their way to the sheltered entrance.

there, we are given disposable blue booties and instructed primly to touch nothing, not even to lean

on the walls. then our tour guide, exactly the librarian-esque baby boomer you imagine leading historical home tours, brings us inside.

she tells us that the gropius family moved to massachusetts in 1937, where walter accepted a position in harvard university's graduate design program. he began designing and building the house with funding from local philanthropist helen storrow.

we see the local architectural influence even in the modern front hall, which is walled with white new england clapboard, running vertically instead of horizontally. gropius designed the house in harmony with both the land and local tradition. he later said, "this fusion of the regional spirit with a contemporary approach to design produced a house that i would never have built in europe."

in the living room, the design choices become uniquely personal and a little eccentric. the dining room table has only four chairs; when the gropius family entertained, walter wanted only one conversation going on at the table, so they only invited one or two dinner guests at a time. they received them in the living room, keeping the dining room curtain closed while their cook laid dinner out. then, when it was time, their cook switched off the living room lights and ise pulled back the curtain, revealing the dining room table illuminated by one spotlight. they and their guests would eat in that dark dining room, lit only by the one small light.

their daughter, ati, would not eat with the guests. this was by choice, the tour guide tells us — she was

a teenager when they moved to lincoln, and sick of the company of art-world adults. in fact, it took serious bargaining to convince her to move with them at all. ati would have been happy to remain at her english boarding school. as part of the deal, she was not required to dine with boring parental friends.

the other part of the deal was her own specially designed living space. when walter asked ati what she wanted for her new room, she requested a sand-covered floor, so that every morning she would wake up on the beach. walter vetoed this on the grounds of weight and cleaning. ati then requested a glass roof. this was not quite feasible either, but as a compromise, her father built a deck outside her room with a trellis roof, so on warm nights she could sleep beneath the stars. her deck even got its own little spiral staircase so she could come and go as she pleased. porch included, ati's space was twice the square footage of her parents.

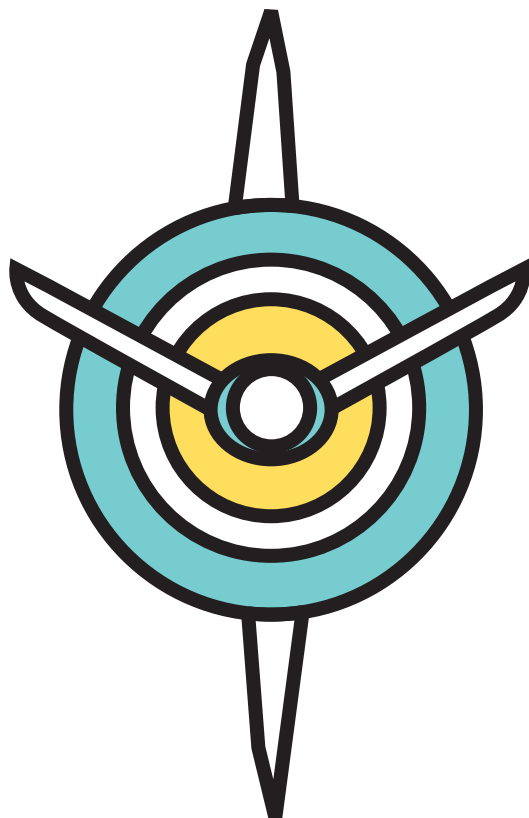
this tenderly designed room and beautiful deck is the last stop on our tour, and by five-person family consensus it is considered the highlight. concord grapes wind around the trellis, not quite ripe when we visit, and as we stand on the porch listening to the tour guide a flash summer storm breaks out. we, fellow visitors, and our guide hurry under the overhang and watch the rain pour down off the roof and the grapevines. the sun returns close on its heels.



## the enduring ballet

how drake, björk, and usher repurposed  
bauhaus aesthetics

*by kaycie surrell*



whether or not you're familiar with oskar schlemmer's "triadisches ballett," you've probably seen something inspired by the bauhaus master of form's choreography and costume work. if the "triadisches ballett" doesn't ring a bell, you can surely recall the bauhaus-inspired costuming in the 1927 fritz lang film, "metropolis," or the film's 1984 restoration featuring music by freddie mercury.

the ballet in its entirety is easily accessible via youtube thanks to bavarian production company bavaria atelier gmbh's 30-minute color film version, produced in 1970, featuring live-action dancers and new music by erich ferstl. the re-creation is an exact replica of the 1922 original that toured until 1929, helping to spread the ethos of the bauhaus. the piece that has since seen iterations it could never have dreamed of in the early-20th-century was of course itself inspired by a work predating it by several decades.

"dreimal sieben gedichte aus albert girauds 'pierrot lunaire,'" translates to "three times seven poems from albert giraud's 'pierrot lunaire,'" often simply shortened to just "pierrot lunaire." the piece — an arnold schoenberg melodrama — originated as a commission by albertine zehme, who helped schoenberg complete the piece in 1912. though it premiered to mixed reviews at the berlin choralion-saal that same year, "pierrot lunaire" has

come to be appreciated for its use of sprechstimme, or "speech-song" — a type of vocal technique employed by other avant-garde musicians like björk, who performed the piece in 1996.

the ballet inspired by giraud's "pierrot lunaire" would later serve as inspiration for artistic forms unforeseen in the time of its creation. both works demonstrate a fascination with numerology and the human form as it relates to puppetry or marionettes. schoenberg's numerological fixation turned into seven-note motifs and ensemble casts as well as the numbers three and thirteen. for schlemmer, it was sets of three and geometrical stage settings largely reliant on depth-perception play and staircases.

the bavaria atelier gmbh 1970 video version of the ballet begins with a dancer in a futuristic blue-and-white costume wearing white face paint that creates a slightly alien visual. the skirt is in the shape of a classic full tutu, but is smooth with rings, like a ripple disc hubcap. the background, or the space they're dancing in, is a three-dimensional yellow stage, like the inside of a cube, and it looks familiar. the ballerina begins to dance toward what looks like a giant



pupa. it has a humanesque face but its small eyes and mouth are buglike — an odd, humanoid tableau atop a larva-like body.

if you let your mind and body relax, simply focusing on the outlines of the dancers and their geometric shapes, you can start to relate them to one another and to their respective backgrounds. they call to mind something completely modern but visually stemming from the same generations-old model.

fast-forwarding a few years, drake's "hotline bling" music video was directed by director x — known for his work on usher's 2004 video "yeah," another piece that focuses on light work. director x mentions artists who inspire his style, such as light and space artist james turrell and music video director, screenwriter, and producer hype williams. try pulling up schlemmer's "triadisches ballett" and drake's "hotline bling" side by side. press play on "hotline bling" at 21 seconds and the other at 36 seconds and you'll be pleasantly surprised to see the mirrored movements. drake's simple steps and easy sway aren't that dissimilar from the ballet's first dancer, who stays in the center of the cube relying on simple movements and easy bends to perform solo until her pupa companion enters the set.

the second part of the ballet, "zweiter teil: rosa," is breathtaking. another ballerina enters looking almost like a cartoon candy cane and dances against a millennial pink background in perfect rhythm with the beat of the flamenco-tinged music — all en pointe — and engages with a thin white hoop in the center of the stage.

in the next scene, a smooth marionette-inspired male dancer, costumed to look like moving paint strokes, enters opposite a ballerina dressed similarly to the opening dancer but in pink instead of blue. they are on a pink stage entering from a set of pink stairs and a pink ramp, respectively. cut again to drake's "hotline bling" video and you'll see that staircase and soft pink repeated again and again throughout.

of course, drake isn't the only artist to borrow from the "triadisches ballett." the 1987 music video for new order's song "true faith" was choreographed and directed by philippe decouflé and produced by michael h. shamberg. several scholars — and decouflé himself — traced inspiration to the bauhaus and schlemmer's ballet specifically.

the costumes in "true faith" call to mind the three-dimensional scene in the third section of "pierrot lunaire," where the principal dancer is dressed as a hypnosis spiral and chaîné turns around a spiral on the stage. the corresponding character in the "true faith" video is also surrounded by spiral shapes, and in one scene pulls literal geometric shapes from a bag and sets them on the ledge to study them.

japanese designer kansai yamamoto, known for iconic costumes like david bowie's black-and-white "tokyo pop" jumpsuit could also have derived inspiration from the "triadisches ballett." the same could be said for many of lady gaga's costume pieces, including her 2010 grammy awards garment — a future-esque armani privé dress consisting of a spherical skirt very reminiscent of "triadisches" hypnotic spiral from the third section. even the yellow in her hair could be an intentional hint at the opening scene of schlemmer's ballet.

future-esque never goes out of style, thanks to humanity's continued fascination with worlds unknown, but a renaissance as we get closer to our own roaring '20s remains to be seen. once you see the patterns from the "triadisches ballett" repeated in something like "hotline bling" you'll start to see them everywhere, proving that the style and synthesis of schlemmer's marriage between mechanization and creativity continue to inspire.

## **bauhaus beauty**

where artistic merit meets mass production  
*by dustin lowman*

among the first assignments of students of the new bauhaus — established in chicago in 1937 by lászló moholy-nagy after the original had shuttered its doors in 1933 — was to whittle a small block of wood down to a shape that felt good to hold. this was in keeping with the original bauhaus' slogan, "art into industry," which spoke to their hope of bringing art into conversation with the systems of mass production.

jump-cut to 1952, when three new bauhaus alums — donald dimmitt, william j. lavier, and james logan — designed the dove beauty bar. the bar of soap was unique in that it didn't resemble a bar; the ovoid, curvy, bird-imprinted item was designed to feel like a kind of lucky stone, a talisman for beauty.

in reference to a 2013 ad campaign, fernando machado — global brand vice president for unilever, dove's parent company — told the new york times that dove's goal was to "create a world where beauty is a source of confidence and not anxiety." their objects must therefore be emblems of confidence. in the case of the beauty bar, this originates in its ergonomic fit to your palm and its gently unconventional shape.

in keeping with the bauhaus' original goal, the product's artistic merit is evident in mass-producibility and positive consumer response. this seems to be at odds with a romantic division of art and industry, in which good art is conceived as incompatible with market potential. the good new bauhaus product is that which discourages lengthy analysis — the beauty bar inspires confidence in its users, rather than compelling them to analyze and define the term "beauty."

in a further challenge to the romantic conception of art, another new bauhaus student — art paul — designed the iconic playboy logo. paul — a school of the art institute of chicago (saic) alum — studied under lászló moholy-nagy at the institute of design (the new bauhaus' new name). he first conceived the bunny as an endnote, but it was subsequently adopted as the magazine's official logo.

the bowtie-clad bunny is minimalistically rendered. looking left, its pricked ears are suggestive of intrigue. the black-and-white color scheme and subtle hint of luxury recall the art deco ideal of the roaring '20s, in which a good life could be meted out in good parties. explaining why he decided on the bunny as the company's spirit animal, playboy founder hugh hefner said, "i chose it because it's a fresh animal, shy, vivacious, jumping — sexy. first

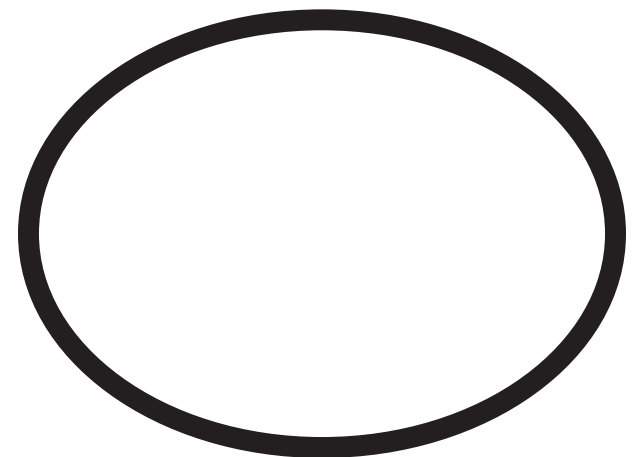
it smells you, then it escapes, then it comes back, and you feel like caressing it, playing with it."

remarkably, the bunny image has not been modified since its first appearance: january 1954, in the magazine's second issue. art paul would go on to serve as playboy's art director for 30 years, commissioning work by such prominent artists as andy warhol and salvador dalí.

art and industry inevitably collide, but one gets the sense that they wouldn't if they didn't have to. art would concern itself only with expressing the ineffable, and industry would stick to maximal utility. never again would studio hermits be forced to maintain facebook pages.

radical, then, is the notion that art should seek to make itself compatible with industry. that was exactly the principle that walter gropius, the german architect who founded the bauhaus, set at the center of his vision. according to the heilbrunn timeline of art history, this was an adjustment from the bauhaus' original, more utopian vision, which had proved "financially impractical." the bauhaus had always been craft-oriented, but the adjustment set mass production and functionality as essential to the school's ethos.

that illustrators and designers enter into brand-oriented work is not itself a shocking event — it happens all the time. more provocative is the idea that brand-oriented work represents an ideal version of artmaking. concepts like mass production and universal utility show up in art much more frequently as catalysts for cynicism than as hallmarks of quality. that these modern industrial phenomena guide bauhaus practices is a kind of subversiveness, in which consumerism is art's companion, not its enemy.





## there for the making: thomas kapsalis at 93

the wwii veteran reflects on saic, the bauhaus, and the pleasure of old ideas

by leah gallant

during the vietnam war, thomas kapsalis stopped painting in color.

this was his form of protest. he had experienced war firsthand, when he was drafted in 1944, halfway through his undergraduate degree at the school of the art institute of chicago (saic). he had fought at the battle of the bulge and been captured. he still has a piece of shrapnel in his hip from the night his cell was bombed, killing his bunkmate.

but this decision — to keep painting arrangements of forms in space, but to make them all in black and white — is almost unrecognizable when compared to the other actions artists were taking to confront war and social upheaval in their work. his subject and his medium didn't change, but the color palette slid from technicolor to newsprint, like "the wizard of oz" moving in reverse.

this is how kapsalis has always worked: at a pace that is precisely his own.

when you walk into the kapsalis household, the first thing you see is an enormous green papier-mâché sculpture of a faucet. it is mounted above the living room couch like a taxidermy head.

thomas, his wife stella, and their daughter, adaman-dia, live and work in a humble, light-filled house on chicago's north side. everything is in its place, and everything — from the plastic wind-up toys in the living room to the greek orthodox icons in the hall — is displayed with equal parts devotion and comic irreverence. the woodworking tools lined up on a workbench in the basement sculpture studio are placed with as much care as the finished sculptures themselves. the traces of kapsalis' 54 years of teaching at saic are also on display: in the basement studio, for example, next to a tiny miró drawing, hangs a bull mask gifted to him by longtime faculty member whitney halstead.

thomas kapsalis' paintings swing between abstraction and the simplest language of representational forms, like tables and cups and heads. his work, which also includes sculpture, is united by a spirit of earnest modernism, gentle curiosity, and fastidious craft. they are burnished with care, the edge of each shape fit snugly into its joint. this is not the work of a tortured artist, but one who, even at age 93, has maintained a facile touch and sense of play. his shapes have a sunny constructivism, like blocks in a sandbox.

i've seen work like this before, but nothing feels rote or played-out in kapsalis' work.

he pauses for a moment, says simply and sweetly, "i feel like i'm still clinging to old ideas, but i like them."

thomas kapsalis isn't post-studio or post-anything. he's not interested. he's there for the making.

mr. kapsalis has pulled out a stack of books for me to look at. we sit at the dining room table while stella makes teddy bears out of terry cloth and fleece, her sewing machine humming softly from the room next door.

the books he lingers over most are the exhibition catalogs of his teachers, including several of paul wieghardt. his respect for their work and their influence on him is obvious.

it was through a teacher at saic, kathleen black-shear, who taught art history at saic for more than thirty years, that kapsalis first learned about the bauhaus.

"it's just a chapter in modern art, but for me, it's more than that," says kapsalis. "the art institute had impressionism as its guiding light. impressionism is okay. but it's wrong for right now. bauhaus made me think of living in the 20th century."

after completing his undergraduate degree at saic, he hoped to attend the illinois institute of design, the chicago bauhaus offshoot founded by lászló moholy-nagy. but because it wasn't accredited, the tuition costs weren't covered by the g.i. bill. so he did his m.a. in art education at saic instead.

then, in 1953, kapsalis received a fulbright scholarship to go back to germany, this time not as a soldier and prisoner of war but as an artist and student. he studied with willi baumeister, a painter, designer and typographer. at a gallery in stuttgart, he bought a george grosz lithograph for \$3, and it still hangs in the hallway.

mr. kapsalis begins telling me about his neighbor. he was a furnace repair-man, and now he is retired. but he hates it. he can't figure out what to do with his days.

here kapsalis' expression shifts slightly, as though he simply cannot comprehend this.

"my hands are full of what i want to do," he says. he reads, he paints, he sculpts. "for the retired person, it's the best thing."

"do you have anything else to add about being an artist?" i ask, by way of concluding.

"i'm just glad i am one," he says.



"nocturne" by thomas h. kapsalis, 1949. oil on canvas, 8 x 15 inches. image courtesy of kapsalis and corbett vs. dempsey

# Straul

# kosauk



part of the chicago bauhaus newspaper,  
a collaborative platform responding to the bauhaus centennial.  
organized by jan tichy & funded by the goethe-institut chicago  
published by f newsmagazine at the school of the art institute of chicago  
designed by unyimeabasi udoh and catherine cao  
edited by grace wells and casey carsel