If you were to pick a beautiful spring morning to drive into Tuscaloosa and onto the University of Alabama campus, there is a good chance you might encounter a well-dressed gentleman tooling toward campus on his bicycle. Al Sella is a legend in the world of Alabama art and has made an indelible mark on the memories of many individuals engaged one way or another with visual arts in this state.

Alvin C. Sella, Professor Emeritus of Painting, has a forty-eight year history teaching in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Alabama. Before coming to Tuscaloosa in 1961, he taught for thirteen years at Sullins College in Bristol, Virginia. Through more than 60 years of teaching, Sella has maintained the discipline of a productive artist, making paintings, constructions, and works on paper for a demanding schedule of group and solo exhibits. In the area of visual arts, Alabama could not ask for a more prolific representative, one who's passion for painting and love of teaching exude from every pore.

Has it always been this way with Sella? His answer is a resounding, “Yes it has, since I was a young boy.”

His father, Joseph Sella, engaged in fine arts sculpting and was a design engineer in the steel manufacturing industry. Alvin was born in 1919 into an Italian American family and was raised in metro New Jersey. Frequent trips to New York City often included visits to museums and other cultural amenities.

At age twenty-two, Sella entered into academic education and pursued opportunities to work with renowned artists engaged in teaching. He began his studies at Yale University School of Art. He then joined the Art Students League of New York where he earned his Certificate studying with George Bridgeman and Morris Kantor. Perhaps his most influential teacher was Robert...
Brackman, the world renowned draughtsman who defined studio drawing for the American art academy and present-day practices of studio art curricula. He continued his studies at Columbia University's School of the Arts [http://wwwapp.cc.columbia.edu/art/app/arts/index.jsp], and Syracuse University.

Sella's first teaching appointment was at Escuela de Bellas Artes, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. He was attracted to the artists and culture of Mexico, and there he met and married his wife, Maria Zavala, in 1947. After he had settled into academic life in the United States, Sella would return to Mexico in the summers to create art, exhibit his work, and teach. He maintained ties with its native artists, which enriched his endeavors in painting.

His first teaching appointment stateside was at Sullins College in Bristol, Virginia, where he taught for thirteen years. In the summer of 1961 he joined the faculty of the Department of Art at The University of Alabama, a group of very dedicated artists and historians [Joseph Bolt, Richard Brough, Frank Engle, Howard Goodson, Jack Granata, Theodore Klitske, and Richard Zoellner]. His arrival at Alabama in 1961 is an interesting story. Sella booked sleeping quarters for Maria and their two children on a Pullman car to make the trip to Alabama. When they got off the train in Tuscaloosa, they could barely endure the outside air due to the incredible heat and the stench of the paper mill. Professors Granata and Engle met them at the station. The Sellas survived the night, but not without second thoughts about Tuscaloosa. When Sella arrived on campus to see the Art Department which is located on Woods Quad, he could not believe how beautiful the Victorian Gothic complex was, with its own quadrangle defined by tall brick buildings trimmed with ornamental...
wrought iron, exuding a rich southern history. The beauty of the art buildings may have sealed the deal, winning the University a longstanding professor and a true original. Sella retired from Alabama in 1996 but continues to teach one course each semester and to work in his on-campus studio. He is a cherished feature of the Tuscaloosa campus.

Sella cannot imagine doing anything else other than being an artist. "I don't know how to do anything else! This is what I have always done," he remarked as he considered three paintings in progress in his studio. Creating art and teaching others about art dominates Sella's life and he is happiest when engaged in both processes.

A conservative estimate based on Sella's teaching career indicates that he taught over 3500 students in the studio disciplines of painting, drawing, and design. This impressive record of teaching doesn't include his many workshops and ongoing classes offered through the Birmingham Museum of Art. What characteristics have made Sella an effective and inspirational art professor? Upon meeting him, you know that you are in the company of a resilient, passionate, perceptive, and fashionable individual. When he turns his gaze in your direction, you can be sure he is paying attention seeking from you what you are feeling relative to your art work. His approach to teaching seems harsh to some as he confronts your thinking and working methods in his classes.

When former students recall their experiences of Sella, many express tremendous gratitude. One former student told me with great excitement that Sella taught him how to use the tools of drawing: how to hold your charcoal or pencil, "like you are holding a feather!" This approach is intended to slow down your mark making so as to keep pace with what you are observing in your subject. Another student recalls Sella referring to paintings as being "flesh and blood," indicating that the artwork is a living thing, something that is very sincere and felt. "The principles of design instilled in Sella's classes are still brought into play every day in what I do," said one former student. His students learn to have a relationship with self-expression and to control materials, processes, space and color.

Throughout his teaching career, Sella was producing art and his works attracted the interests of others as indicated by a very impressive record of exhibitions. His art work began to change in the mid 1950's as he embraced the philosophies and principles of Abstraction used together with his own sensibilities and training to create his own iteration of painting. The use of a brilliant color palette led the way toward his new relationship with a more expressive image and fluid medium.

Sella's work has carried him through a long, exciting career as a studio artist. He remains deeply engaged with the production of
paintings, works on paper, constructions, and collages, having learned early from his former teacher, Robert Brackman, just how important it is to work on a series of pieces at the same time, like having many windows to look out at once. Most of his students and art patrons recall Sella’s repeated reference to the concept of ‘incompatible opposites’, a driving force in his work. This term describes his desire to take unlike phenomena and find a means of creating co-existence within his work. Sella employs a painting process that courts and distorts his initial drawing, altering the planar relationship. He produces a painted environment that elicits a mostly non-verbal and emotional response from his audience.

Today, Sella’s approach to painting reflects a lifetime of studio practice. He adopts a metaphysical position that evolved toward the notion that his art work was a critical and necessary part of life. He cites from Ayn Rand’s Romantic Manifesto “an artist does not fake reality...”

Sella always begins his paintings with drawing, followed by turpentine washes that are intended to break up the space of the canvas so there is something to begin a dialogue between art and artist. It is as if he is looking for a way to bring life to his work as he lays down line, and then pigment, then perhaps removing most of it before leaving it alone so that he can contemplate its space, color and form. He cherishes this struggle and thrives on the uncertainty that he eventually brings under control so that the elements

Undated photo of Sella in his studio at the University of Alabama.
settled into a state of rightness. More often than not, Sella’s paintings celebrate the relationship between the medium and, often, an emerging figurative element. These opposing forces, though perhaps incongruent, add up to a fantastic presence that is simply beautiful and intriguing.

W.T. Dooley
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Throughout his teaching career at Alabama Sella’s art work has been widely exhibited across the region and continues to be featured in group and solo exhibitions. He has pieces placed in many private collections across the country as well as in Madrid and San Miguel, Mexico.

His art work has been included in exhibitions in numerous museums around the country including Toledo Museum of Art, OH; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Philadelphia, PA; Cincinnati Museum of Art, OH; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA; Creative Gallery, NY; Frank Fedele Gallery, NY; and College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA. Solo exhibitions were produced for venues such as Contemporary Art Gallery, NY; Collectors of American Art, New York; Carol Knight Gallery, St. Louis, MO; Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis, TN; and Lauren Roger Museum of Art, Laurel, MS. Sella also exhibited his work in a one-man exhibition at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico. His work appeared in publications such as the New York Times, Life Magazine, Arts Magazine and Art News. Felipe Cossio del Pomar, founder of the Escuela Universitaria de Bellas Artes, Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende Guanajuato, Mexico, wrote about Sella’s painting on the occasion of a solo exhibition produced for San Miguel in the late 1940’s:

“After seeing what Alvin Sella painted in his early youth, I can now be sure without the need to have them face to face, that his painting continues to have a superior quality. Because Sella is an exceptional artist, endowed to bring out the poetic images of worlds little known to other artists, and to create with them the art not of yesterday or today but of all times, since it stems from the profound foundations of his perception and intellect.”

Recently James R. Nelson, Birmingham based visual arts critic, wrote about Sella’s paintings:

“Those who have followed Sella’s career can say with certainty that he attacks sensibilities with a vigor and elan, revealing raw feelings in a poetic manner. His youthful works have a rauous vigor that often seems to border on anger, an explosive boldness that takes fury to lyrical levels.”—Birmingham News