



A Climate for Creative Activity

by

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I am very pleased to be here today and to have this opportunity to address this very important topic that celebrates graduate research and creative activity here at the University of Nebraska. My preparation has led me to looking at old records, enjoying visits with colleagues and emeritus faculty, gathering data from the arts areas on campus — the Department of Art and Art History, the School of Music and the Department of Theater Arts — and while I may not address the particularities of the graduate degree programs in the latter two units, much can be equally applied. The Master of Fine Arts programs in Art, in Theater Arts, the Master of Music, and the Doctor of Musical Arts are all unique facets to the Graduate College and are all vital ornaments within the cultural mosaic of our university, the community and state. We can recognize the tremendous commitment to the arts by the state and our University by the many arts facilities alone in this arts quadrangle — theaters, performing arts centers, concert halls, art museums and studio art facilities. And we know this interest continues to fulfill a part of the original charter of 1869 of this land grant institution to “afford the inhabitants of the state the means of acquiring a thorough knowledge of the various branches of literature, science, and the arts” (Academic Program Review, 1999).

A leading direction for me has been questions about the rationale for these programs at the time of their establishment. With somewhat casual investigation, I have looked at some of those records and talked informally with some of the folks active at the time, those wise gentlemen with sharp memories. A common rationale for the arts programs, which can be applied to all the graduate degrees, are for the purposes of “scholarly, creative and professional experience; to train students for original contributions of significance towards the commercial and educational” realms; for individualized instruction to selected, talented students, allowing for development of their skills and craft. These programs rely on the strength of the faculty, the academic quality of the program, and the quality of the physical facilities. The effect of these new degree offerings were intended to keep good faculty here, to attract good students, to stimulate and develop the entire program. In short, to award “creative degrees for creative work” (file on the MFA in Theater Arts, 1976).

The tangible outcomes that I can cite, of course, are the numbers of students: with 1,085 Master of Music degrees awarded since 1941, and

twenty Doctor of Musical Arts degrees since 1985; with 208 Master of Fine Arts degrees in art awarded since the start of the program around 1962; and around thirty-five Masters of Fine Arts degrees offered in theater arts since its approval in 1976.

Justification arguments were remembered very well: that the establishment of these graduate degrees followed the lead of other, more innovative institutions; there was "a need to prove that art has intellectual substance, not simply mechanical skills, with educational directives and purposes;" to combat the perceptions that "art is less than a necessary subject," that it is "more than a home economics exercise, but an educational force," that offers "intellectual nutrients" (interviews). As my colleague Dr. Peter Worth so ably paraphrased one of his favorite theorists, Herbert Read: when "the mind is galvanized and extended — in any field of endeavor — an experience is created that borders on the aesthetic." So all great insights, understandings, resolutions, carry an aesthetic feeling, that "mark the rhythm of life," and is an experience that all scholars can identify.

I also wanted to make this presentation a chance to think on what specifically happens in the Master of Fine Arts program in the Department of Art and Art History. I want to give an idea of the breadth of research that has taken place on our end of the campus, and why it has been an important element within the collection of scholarship, ideas, people and experiences that make up our University community. If you will, the Masters of Fine Arts Program can be described with an overall analogy of a greenhouse, which, as you know, offers a heated, sheltered, protective environment for encouraging growth of delicate plants. In this way I can lay out the ways and means of our program — and the fruition of what has taken place since the first master's students presented their thesis works in 1966.

I hope to follow the development of visual research and art issues that interweave over time; to see that common artistic ideas resurface, yet always permute into individual creative directions. And I offer the caveat that progress in the arts doesn't supersede or negate past achievements, but rather continues to work toward the goal of timelessness — while being unavoidably timely; moving to our spirit — yet raw, honest and revealing; can serve as a mirror of the individual artist's being and background — yet speak universal themes.

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One Hundred Years of Graduate Research, Education & Creative Activity

Incubator

The start of the graduate program in fine arts is part of a vision that swept around the country, after WWII, of a common desire to establish arts incubators, where new artists and new ideas could be named; to start a serious revision of popular perceptions and misunderstandings about the purposefulness of artists and art.

Consider the legacy of those 19th century notions of the persona of the artist — the decadent bohemian, romantic, inarticulate, full of high passion; with unstable emotions, swings of moodiness and manic energy, waiting for inspiration to strike yet not knowing how to control this burst and its resulting upheaval. And also there is the notion of the artisan, making luxurious, decorative, unnecessary, frivolities. This is the “excessive artist lampooned by educators... marked and marred by the negative perception (of the time) of ‘femininity’ (Singerman 9).” The records of the Art School in 1898 at the University of Nebraska seem to reflect that kind of artist and practice, which seems dated to us, with most students female, women faculty, and courses that included “China Painting,” “Free-Hand Drawing” and “Perspective” classes.

This grand effort to reshape the perception of the artist is examined throughout Howard Singerman’s book *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*. He states in his introduction: “Among the tasks of the university program in art is to separate its artists and the art world in which they will operate from ‘amateurs’ or ‘Sunday painters’ as well as from a definition of the artist grounded in manual skill, tortured genius, or recreational pleasure. Moreover, art in the university must constitute itself as a department and a discipline, separate from public ‘lay’ practices and equal to other studies on campus” (Singerman 6).

This new image that emerges in the ‘60s is of the disciplined, intellectual, esoteric art professor in denim jeans — ideally male. The painter Ad Reinhardt characterized “this up-to-date popular image” of the professional man as “the artist-professor and traveling design salesman, the Art Digest philosopher-poet and Bauhaus exerciser, the avant-garde huckster-handicraftsman and educational shopkeeper, the holy-roller explainer-entertainer-in-residence” (Singerman 126) — somewhat

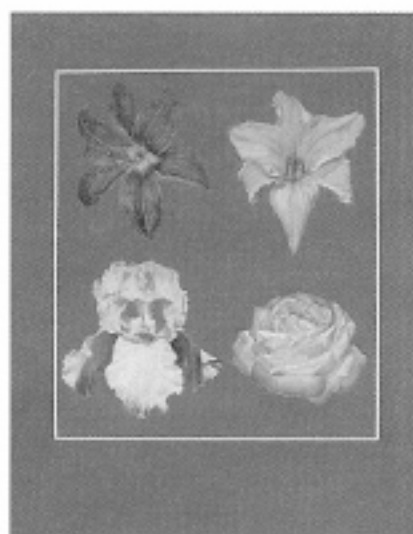


Fig. 1 Larry Bochmer



Fig. 2 Chad Keel

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factions, but sharply accurate. (This image has subsequently shifted again during the '70s and '80s, through feminist challenges to the male-dominated society). These art professionals in the world today — more gender inclusive and culturally diverse — are committed to the intertwined art fields of universities, museums, galleries, the art market and art criticism, and are decidedly articulate, well-read, knowledgeable about art history and current critical theory — and with an M.F.A.

The time of the inauguration of the M.F.A. program is historically aligned with the post-depression/post-war beliefs in the power of scientific research and faith in the methods and models of experimental process — and good outcomes. Deliberate correlation and adaptation of the language of scientific process and ethics were used to justify the creation of such programs. The faculty of that time could see the value of this kind of pure research into visual principles—that could raise the intellectual discourse on art and that could create a widespread discipline open and rich with possibilities—with a need for graduates to assume professional positions, making a place for artists nationwide.

This seriousness could become a part of the intellectual University life, enriching the community with "output and outreach;" with the institutional demands of progress, development, contribution to the field, demonstrating accountability through ongoing, rigorous review.

The examples I am showing are the work of 32 graduate artists, with slides drawn from the department archives of past M.F.A. theses that interested me, and could prove some points. Here I had real tangible evidence of the advance of professionalism — beginning with slides taped together with duct tape, to the uniform standards of presentability of today.

- Work by many M.F.A. students fits the concept of basic visual research as observational explorations — to see how one sees — and to translate perceptions into individual vision, following classic human form (Jean Schlubier, '68), Fig. 3.
- This incubator program allows time to germinate questions, to challenge the traditional props of romantic art (Neil Christensen, '84), Fig. 4.
- Here the icons of beauty are used scientifically, more dead pan, unmotive, studied (Larry Bochmer, '74), Fig. 1.
- There are works that examine the landscape by seeing details and nuances and use emotive expressionism of color (Chad Keel, '74), Fig. 2.

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Fig. 3 Jean Schlukbier

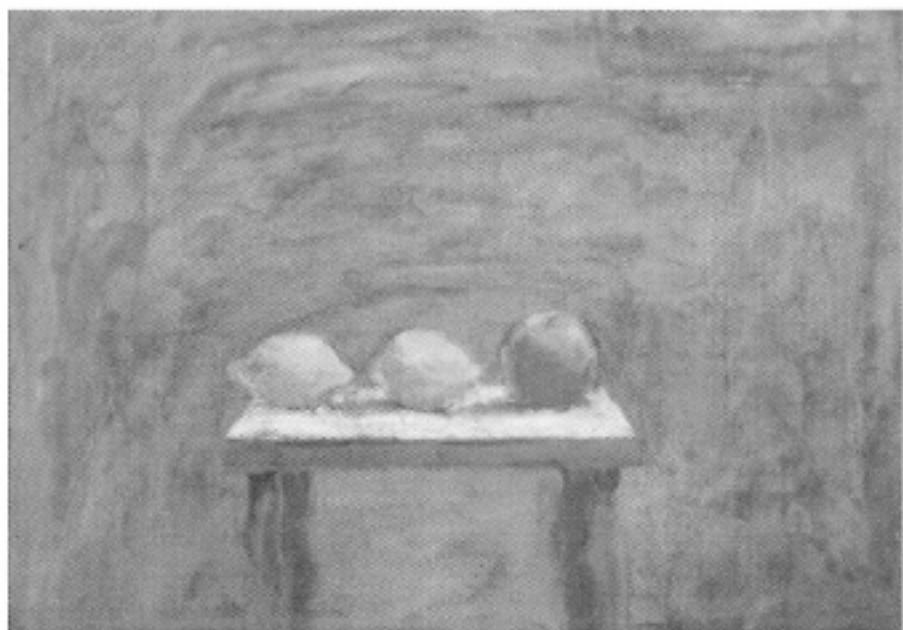


Fig. 4 Neil Christensen

Isolation



Fig. 5 Rob Friedman

The next aspect of this art climate that must be addressed, is why study art here at UNL? In this place? In an incubator the isolation is essential to avoid contamination, disease, to keep free of outside influences. But, most importantly, isolation also provides freedom to concentrate, which is one of our greatest assets here, without the undue pressures of the competitive art scene.

Conversely, we become naturally a part of a widespread network of institutions providing the M.F.A. degrees, some in even more isolated situations. We are part of a network that has sparked great growth in the arts and numbers of artists all around the country. Statistics cited by Singerman show that in 1951 there were only thirty-two institutions that offered the

M.F.A. in art, in the 1960s thirty-one new M.F.A. programs opened, and in the 1970s there were forty-four programs added, with a current total of 185 programs around the U.S. (Singerman 6).

Here at UNL in the early 1960s, there was a fortunate confluence of commitment to the visual arts: the Nelle Cochran Woods Art Building was dedicated in 1962, moving the department out of the top two floors of Merrill Hall; the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery was opened in 1963 (Knoll 138); and the new M.F.A. program in art started attracting the first students, largely from Kansas City.

At that time young men needed to stay in school — to avoid the draft for Vietnam, to prolong youth, with a desire for (and time to allow for) growth and maturity. Statistically, the numbers reflect those times, with our graduate student body showing a ratio of three males to one female during the first half of the program. This has shifted since 1983 — the date I arrived and a convenient mid-point marker — to about an equal ratio of one to one, obviously corresponding to societal changes from the women's movement, as well as a more balanced gender make-up of the department, we are proud to report.

Currently we must diligently work to recruit the best students from around the country, relying on the draw of our faculty, their reputations, activities and contacts; and, significantly, through the encouragement of our own alumni in the teaching world, to send us

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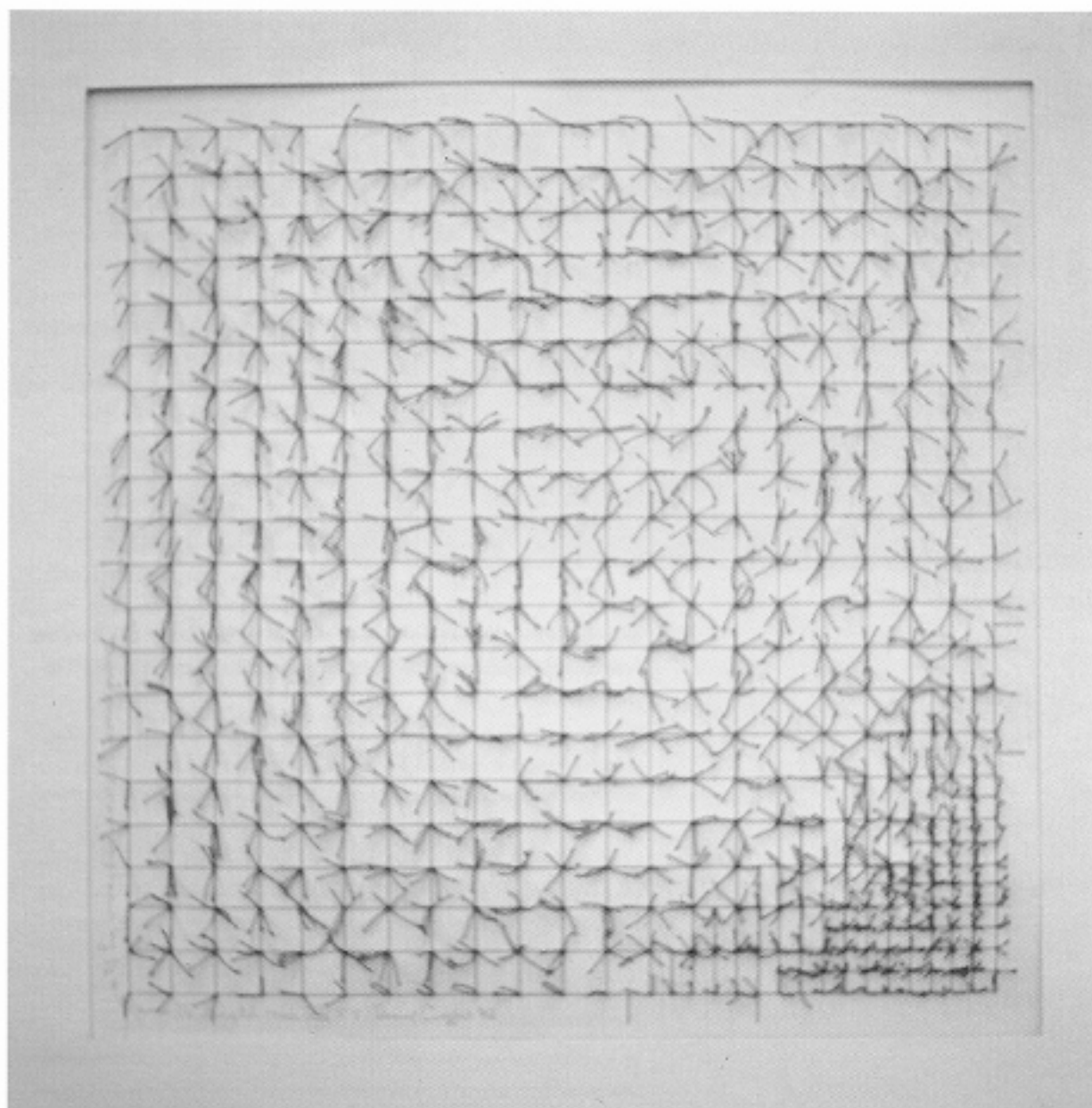


Fig. 6 Duane Crigger

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Fig. 7 James Jacobi

their own students. But realistically, there is a competitive recruitment game for master's students: they all shop for the best deal on a financial package and compare opportunities that an institution can offer. We have maintained graduate recruitment as our highest priority in the department, with consistent awards of GTA's over the years to approximately 75% of our master's students. And we also must continually combat the popular out there of Nebraska as far from everything, where there "can't possibly be any art or culture or good students."

Yet our program has been at an interesting crossroads, attracting

people for a while and reshuffling them off to new places, both literally and figuratively. New combinations and dynamics of personalities are continually being created as characters are shaped and influenced in this climate.

- Therefore, the concept of this place on the map can be an intriguing research question and has been a drawing factor for some of our students: to consider the conceptual issues of isolation as perceptions of emotion and content (Carl Coniglio, '75), Fig. 9;
- to address the vast landscape and sense of space and openness, on the edges of rural to urban (Rob Friedman, '82), Fig. 5; to delve into the neighborhoods, the population mix, and ways of settlement (James Jacobi '81), Fig. 7;
- to a literal analysis of the forms and light that Midwesterners have in their subconscious (Margaret Furlong, '76), Fig. 8;
- to a conceptual art approach about the purity of spatial systems, the measurements between marks that construct a place (Dwayne Grigger, '72), Fig. 6. This common conceptual thread of a sense of place has been for many the issue of why they literally are here.

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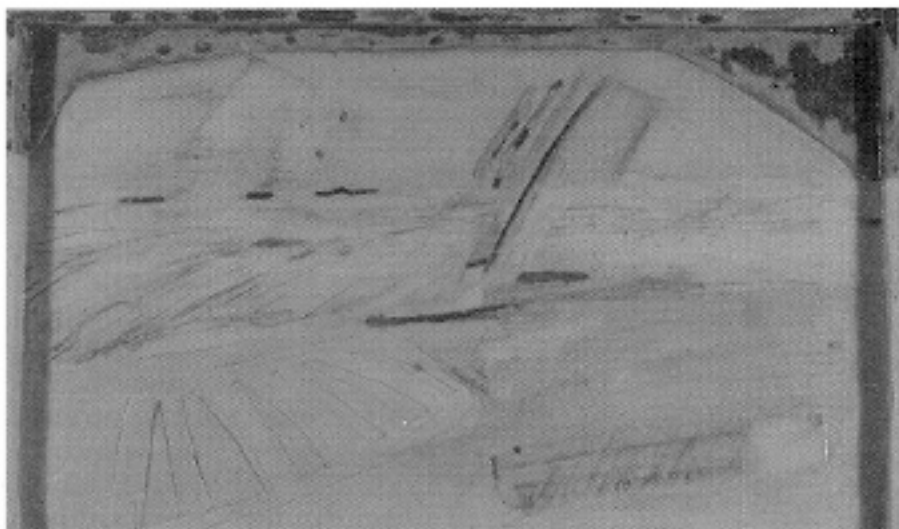


Fig. 8 Margaret Furlong

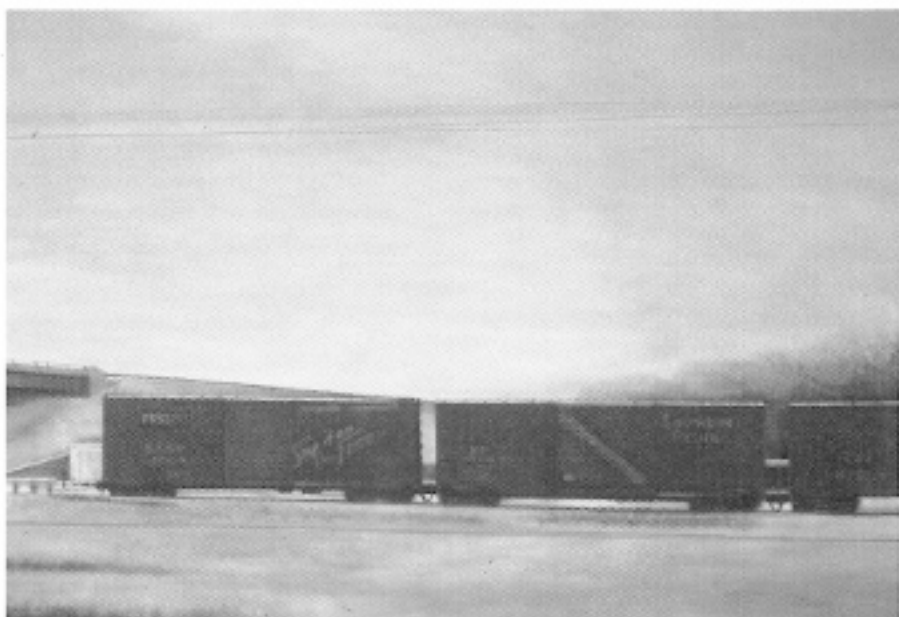


Fig. 9 Carl Coniglio

Hot House

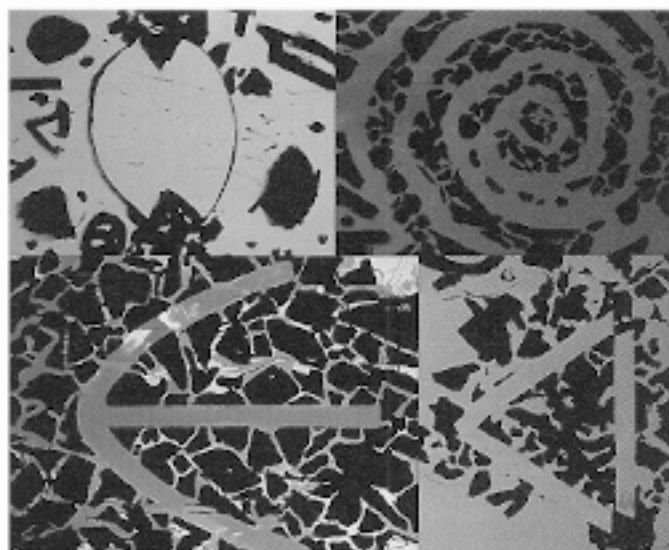


Fig. 10 Lana Miller

The faculty planners of this masters program also envisioned an enriched hot house atmosphere for students — that of interactions, collaborative learning — as much from their peers as from formal situations. And they are fertilized by the offerings of tangible resources, and the nourishment of facilities — of libraries, art collections, traveling exhibitions, visiting artists, studio equipment, private graduate studios, accessible faculty. This program becomes a microcosm of the possibilities and challenges of the art world jungle, while the students are still nurtured, sheltered, mentored. Master's students, aware of their special status and new role, question that status, their own abilities; they challenge the very notion of what art is, as well as the old guard of their faculty. They offer a model of the serious work of discovery. And for the faculty, these students share in the responsibilities,

experiences, dreams and the rewards of a life in the arts.

- Art work even in this glass-walled hothouse follows what is happening in the culture at large. The rapid swings through all the artworld "isms" of the past forty years occurred in this place within various individual research: here posing Pop Art Questions that challenge our social icons (Robert Rogers, '72), Fig. 13;
- that recognizes the impact of local popular culture as a humorous play on influences (Kathleen Ricks, '75), Fig. 12;
- to the symbolists, inventions of a personal language of signs and hidden meanings (Douglas Dowd, '89), Fig. 11;
- here there is a conceptual play on industrial production and signage (Lana Miller, '88), Fig. 10.
- The quest into visual references playfully suggests the "low" art sources of the comics and animation (Jason Briggs, '99), Fig. 14. These avant garde challenges fostered the growing development of specific art language, the critical skills, the explanations and defense that is the mark of the educated artist today.

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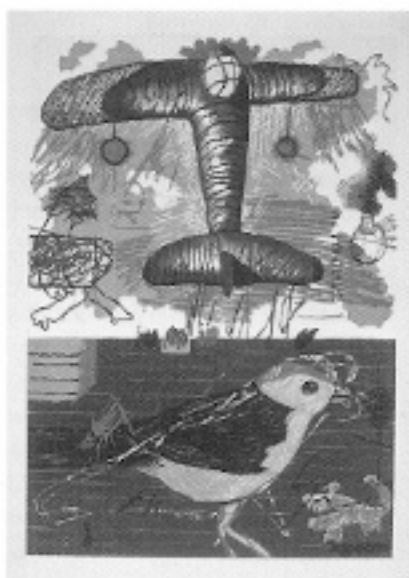


Fig. 11 Douglas Dowd



Fig. 12 Kathleen Ricks



Fig. 13 Robert Rogers

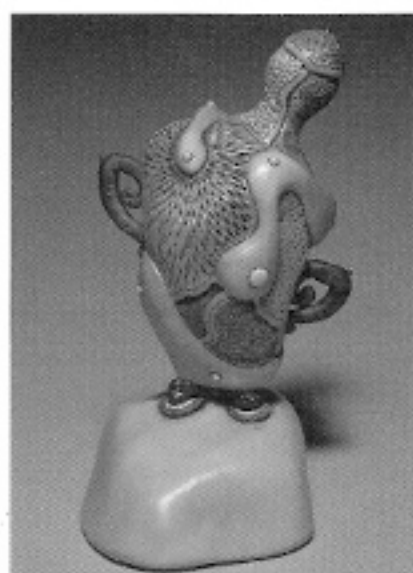


Fig. 14 Jason Briggs

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Proving Ground



Fig. 15 Craig Roper



Fig. 16 William Rowe

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In addition, the M.F.A. program provides a proving ground, of time to explore and to test one's interests, to run with directions to logical and thoroughly examined conclusions — to know how one got where one has ended up. This proving ground allows for the queries of the faculty mentors to be resolved, for the critiques of peers to provoke and brainstorm, and for the development of one's own facility for self-analysis. Currently, art is now very much an intellectual practice, very certainly shaped by the formulations of university M.F.A. programs over this last half-century, where contemporary art is fueled by the ascendancy of the verbal, literate and analytic, over the instinctual, naïve and facile. The beginning artist uses instinct and love of art, manipulation of materials and "hand knowledge," while the M.F.A. artist must go further to understand the basis for impulse, the ramifications of image associations, with research into every affect and meaning, no matter how casual.

- In this proving ground master's students have explored the materials of the art object itself, broadening our understanding of what materials to use—here with the irony of illusion and the mundane (William Rowe, '77), Fig. 16;
- questions about what the material means, or what is an art object lead to logical tests of unusual combinations that may be real, unrefined, or "chosen" art objects (Lawson Smith, '74), Fig. 17; combinations of disparate elements of seemingly indecipherable meanings offer explorations of alternative systems of seeing or knowing (Craig Roper, '96), Fig. 15. Can anything become art? Can anything be new? What is original or originality? These have become ongoing critical and theoretical debates in individual studios here, and out into the broad art world.
- These explorations push the envelope of alternative production methods or emerging technologies beyond hand involvement—to the newest thing of the day such as light, movement, to video and computer (James Butler, '70), Fig. 18;
- the inclusion of ideas of the body as a personal site for identity investigation and experience (Craig Hutchins, '83), Fig. 19.
- Art here acts as the barometer of society and popular culture, commenting on the fads and diversions of our modern life, with the irony of today's views on life issues, problems in society, while challenging the purposes of art (Mary Jo Horning, '90), Fig. 20.

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Fig. 17 Lawson Smith



Fig. 18 James Butler



Fig. 19 Craig Hutchins



Fig. 20 Mary J. Horning

Transcendence



Fig. 21 Gary David



Fig. 22 Steven Shearer

Yet most importantly within this development, we are all searching for knowing "when art happens" through a transcendent occurrence, that we know when we see it. Through the commitment of the artist, the presence of meaning, ideas, and challenge — something occurs to simple art materials. And the quest for "when art happens" is the work of a lifetime. Students must be craving for this to occur, for something more to happen beyond their beginning art experiences that can extend their skill level and intellectual understanding. They also want to learn how to make "it" happen again, to have "it" happen consistently, to establish the knowledge and "rightness" of feeling so deeply that it is a physical knowing. Art appears when the sum is greater than its parts. The M.F.A. degree has become a public acknowledgment that this artist has had this transformative experience.

Some would counter that the M.F.A. is not a certification degree in an administrative sense, as a right to a job, or regulation of skill levels, or a guarantee of professional success, since we all know of successful artists without such a degree, or those with the degree who are not "successful." Yet, I believe it serves more as an indicator of one having experienced a rite of passage of intellectual and creative rigor, and as such it has become accepted in the art world. But for some this effort even destroys the pleasure of artmaking — it becomes probing, even personally difficult to be so revealing, so self-aware.

- In a large part there is a tremendous personal psychological analysis that is necessarily a part of this transcendence — where we can look at this artwork and know it tells us more than a depiction of a face, more than a figure study (Gary David, '80), Fig. 21; artists expose themselves and their inner mind, and their understanding of their place in the world (Steven Shearer, '72), Fig. 22;
- and elevate that awareness of our own innermost questions, about such deep issues as mortality, as that is the role of art in society (Jerry Hatch, '73), Fig. 24. — Art intends to hold a large reservoir of human psyche, of layers of meaning, of eye and mind enticements to lead us towards intriguing questions and memory cues (Julia Gee, '93), Fig. 23.

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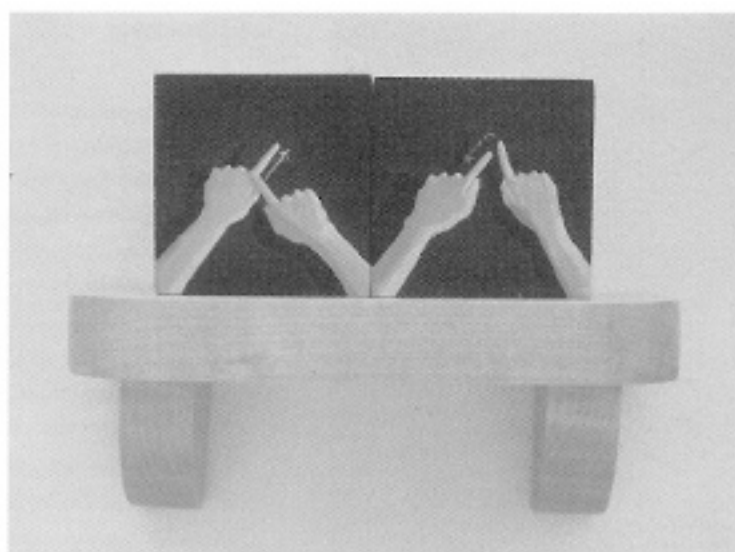


Fig. 23 Julia Gee



Fig. 24 Jerry Hatch



Fig. 25 Robert Weaver



Fig. 26 Susan Moss

Filtering

How is this private transformation that occurs to our master's students a contribution beyond simply art as a luxury, or their experience as a kind of therapy? Some would consider this as an unnecessary dalliance, having nothing for our lives here in Nebraska. Yet this hot house radiates our light, and there is a filtering transfusion through people, the rivers of students over the years, and the "real thing" of the art objects.

Practically, these master's students contribute models of serious artists to our students, and so many have served as teachers with the resulting influence that inevitably happens on both sides. And this fermentation has leavened the art community throughout these successive generations.

The presentation of exhibitions is the natural forum for art work—such as the annual M.F.A. student exhibition presented at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery—with occasional focused shows of alumni that we held in our Gallery of the Department of Art and Art History throughout the 1980s; and some may remember a major gathering at UNL in 1976, held in conjunction with the Mid-America College Art Association Conference.

There is a Nebraska presence with every professional experience or exposure by our alumni who have participated in national competitions, received awards, been featured in solo shows in local venues, or major museums, such as the Walker Art Center and the St. Louis Art Museum.

And the artwork itself stands as a transmitter of the creative activity undertaken here. We can identify the perspective, insight, identification, and analysis of the art experience through the resonating research object. And we enjoy the "savoring of art in its purely aesthetic layer, for the inspiration, and the uplifting feeling that are byproducts of sensory enrichment and delight" (Kindler 41).

- Our developing social consciousness recognizes that we can never really be isolated or naive (Robert Weaver '68), Fig. 25;
- the artist today addresses many cultural questions: political, gender, ethnicity issues, as a part of an analysis of who we are, where we came from (Anthony Montoya '79), Fig. 28;
- new cultural comparisons or relationships are investigated within the field of art itself, responding to historical directions and meanings (Susan Moss, '91), Fig. 26;

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- questions about the critical and theoretic consequences of what art is seen, who selects high art or popular art brings home the whole world as possibilities for inquiry (Jeff Anderson, '90), Fig. 27.



Fig. 27 Jeff Anderson

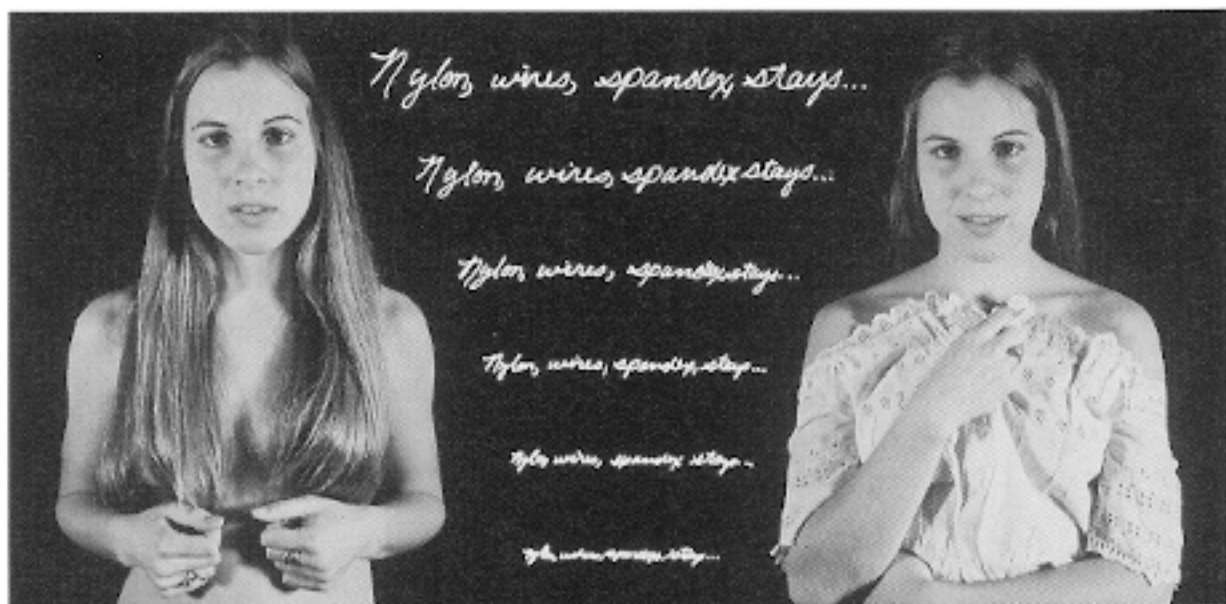


Fig. 28 Anthony Montoya

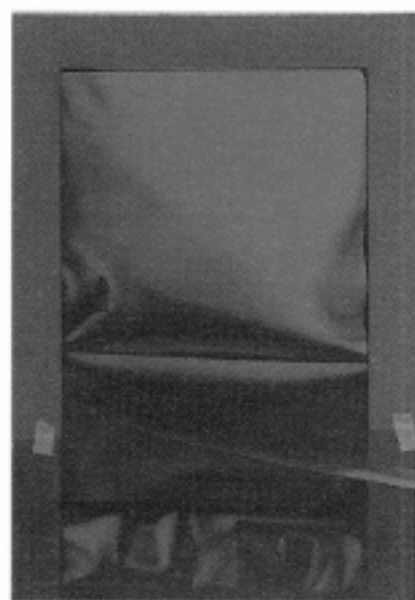


Fig. 32 Ben Gibson

Roots and Branches

Finally, a natural analogy can be drawn of the art community here — of artistic influences, vital institutions, people throughout the more than one-hundred years of arts programs — as part of a deeply planted tree, set where the roots have continued to grow in all directions, within a continually supportive climate. And the generations of students and their work are the branches creating an intricate, entwined crown of twists and turns in an enriched atmosphere.

This loose collective memory in the department of all those that came before, the legendary characters and iconoclasts, from various camps and lineages — has fostered creative threads, such as the long tradition for structural abstraction (Marcia Goldenstein, '73), Fig. 30.

- Research into the elemental nature of color has always been a strong influence here (Ben Gibson, '73), Fig. 32.
- The interactions between professors, their interests and the directions of masters students have reconstructing vision (Glen Hild, '78), Fig. 31;
- and various aesthetic interminglings enable the artist and ourselves to recognize the potency of the natural metaphor (Susan Belau, '99), Fig. 29.

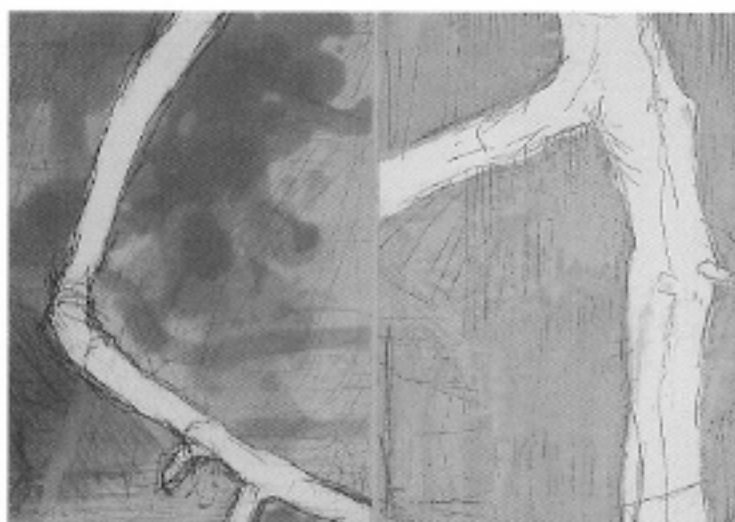


Fig. 29 Susan Belau

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Fig. 30 Marcia Goldenstein



Fig. 31 Glen J. Hild

Conclusion

The typical description of the success of academic programs usually counts the number of graduates employed, or alumni that hold academic positions, which of course the alumni association loves to track. And Arts Councils necessarily cite the success of "cultural-dollars" that contribute greatly to the economy, or numbers of visitors to museums being greater than at all combined sports events.

I would rather foster other notions of success. The study of art for so many of us is a life necessity, not possible to forestall or redirect. The testament of so many of our student artists acknowledge their need for individual fulfillment of their creative nature, for their personal satisfaction through intellectual growth, and their public contribution to home and community. It is through the arts that human nature is empowered. We artists know that we can personally contribute to art's place in local culture, to add ways to see the world, to literally shape something from nothing. It is simple — creative artists desire a life of ideas, to be creators and art lovers.

We recognize that art contributes to a rich and entertaining life, to the esteem of the community, and serves as a reward we gift ourselves in our local culture. As art historian Barbara Rose has recently expressed, the arts are "elevating, creating a ritualized awareness, that is out of the ordinary, but part of everyday" (Rose 1999). Our celebratory rituals of this enlightened awareness are the many exhibitions of art, theatrical productions, musical events, the social scene of the gallery walks, our revitalized historical downtown, our witnessing exciting major performances. All are active, sharing involvements which we use to measure the quality of "the good life" here.

The artist and arts practice is legitimately part of the discovery quest and scholarly life within the patronage of the University of Nebraska — a deeply rooted shade tree on the open plains.

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Karen Kunc has an international reputation as a printmaker, working in the media of woodcuts and artist's books. This professor of art at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has exhibited in Iceland, Finland, Korea, Canada, Poland, Japan and the United States. Among her honors are fellowships from the Mid-America Arts Alliance/National Endowment for the Arts, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Ohio Arts Council. She was a Fulbright Fellow in Jyväskylä, Finland, in the spring of 1996. She earned her M.F.A. from Ohio State University in 1977 and her B.F.A. from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1975. She has been a visiting faculty member at the University of California-Berkeley; at Carleton College; the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts; and the School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan. She received the Outstanding Research and Creativity Activity Award from the NU System in 1998, and is the recipient of the Nebraska 2000 Governor's Arts Award, Artist of the Year, from the Nebraska Arts Council.