Arts & Humanities

# Making Art a Day Job

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**A couple of months** before receiving his MFA from Columbia in the spring of 2000, Barnaby Furnas ordered a new computer. Like most young painters, he had thought carefully about how best to support himself when he graduated, and he had decided on Web design for a living. But then one of his professors told the collector Estelle Schwartz about him. Schwartz came to his studio, liked his paintings well enough to buy several off the wall, and sent reproductions to a Chelsea art dealer, who came over the following day and signed up Furnas on the spot. Furnas canceled the computer order and began working toward his first solo show, at the Marianne Boesky Gallery, where a second exhibition of his kicked off the fall 2003 season.

Furnas is hardly alone in his post-MFA success. As the School of the Arts recruits more and more faculty who are central to the City's art world (Artists Teaching Other Artists is the unofficial motto), many graduates of the last several years are now represented by galleries in New York. Kevin Zucker '02SOA, for instance, was introduced to high-profile dealer Mary Boone through two Columbia instructors, painters Ross Bleckner and Peter Halley, and had a solo exhibition at Boone's gallery before graduating last spring. He will also open the fall season there, with a show of austere, large-scale interiors.

Megan Foster '02SOA, who also paints interiors—banal domestic perspectives made complex and ominous by jagged, abstract shadow patterns—shows at the Black and White Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; and Dana Schutz '02SOA, has exhibited at the LFL Gallery in Chelsea. Schutz's fictional narratives track the life of a character named Frank, whom the artist imagined as the last man on Earth, navigating his mundane existence in a hallucinatory, postapocalyptic landscape.

In a field historically populated by individuals with a powerful sense of singularity, there are more than a few team efforts operating at the moment. Lansing-Dreiden, the fictitious name of a four-artist team that includes another 2002 MFA grad (in order to maintain their group identity, the members carefully guard their individual ones), is represented by the Rivington Arms Gallery, on the Lower East Side. Like Schutz, Lansing-Dreiden engages in storytelling, but one—which employs video, music, photography, and product design—that is considerably cooler and more graphic. Another artist team, Chan-Schatz, composed of Eric Chan ’99SOA and Heather Schatz ’98SOA, gained acceptance into the MFA program with one jointly produced portfolio—a first—and graduated in 1998. The duo now teach a course in digital media in a new multidisciplinary arts program for all MFA students and are represented by the Massimo Audiello Gallery in Chelsea, which is showing their digital art this fall.

Art world matchmaking usually begins with stylistic affinities and mutual respect. The photorealistic watercolors of Tim Gardner ’99SOA, showing regular guys expressing Spring Break mentality, clearly resonated with Collier Schorr, the MFA program’s visiting artist for spring 1999, who explores similar themes of masculinity in her photographs. She recommended Gardner to her dealers at 303 Gallery, where he has since had two solo shows.

Exhibition opportunities are often limited for artists who can’t forge such connections with the commercial gallery world, and over the last 20 years, even sophisticated undergraduate art students have become aware of the importance of networking. “I knew that if Columbia could generate any kind of buzz, it would be an excellent opportunity to be seen by a lot of dealers,” says Barnaby Furnas, the would-have-been Web page designer, who became seriously interested in the MFA program after such well-respected and widely exhibited artists as Thelma Golden and Ronald Jones joined the faculty. Furnas estimates that more than half of his own graduating class is now exhibiting in the City. “I think there were a lot of artists who had gone as undergraduates to school in the City and were waiting for a really good graduate program here, so we wouldn’t have to leave New York.”

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