Connective Clout: Dozens of Ways We Make Things Better, Together
The page contains an article titled "From Subtlety to Bombast: Adel Abdessemed’s Romantic Cynicism" by Charles Reeve, located on page 6. Other articles include "Solitude in Numbers: The Struggle of Nuit Blanche" by Sky Goodden on page 8, and "Open Source, Open Windows, Open Future" by Ryan Bigge on page 12. The contents also feature articles on OCAD University’s campus life, alumni notes, and emerging alumni profiles.
The 2nd decade of the 21st century: An era of collaboration

In the latter part of the 20th century and in the last decade of this century, universities moved to break down hard boundaries, and to encourage—and indeed demand—interdisciplinary work across faculties and institutions. Individually sponsored, peer-owned research, particularly in computer science, flourished, as have program advisors and the development of research in wearable technology. Global partnerships in education and research have proliferated, involving emerging and developed worlds. Quite fittingly, our cover story, Sketch, shows us how the future should look like for OCAD University.

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Exchange opportunities for students complement university-wide internationalization strategy

By Lena Rubisova

OCAD University President Sara Diamond joined the largest delegation of university presidents ever to travel abroad in the seven-day mission to India in November 2010. The visit, which forged mutually beneficial links between Canada and India, represents one in a host of internationalization opportunities OCAD U is currently leveraging—innovation, education and research options that will benefit our own students, faculty and staff, as well as those at our partner universities. They also build on OCAD U’s existing Mobility/Exchange program, which invites third-year students to study abroad.

Mobility/Exchange students report enriched educational experiences and an expanded art or design practice, while visiting students from universities around the world bring new perspectives to the OCAD U classroom. Frequently, going abroad is the first chance for many students to live away from home, become independent and grow as individuals. The experience comes with other benefits—the students learn a new language, expand their knowledge of other cultures and increase their career options, both at home and overseas.

The program is reciprocal—for every student who spends a semester away, there is a student who spends a semester here—which also enhances OCAD U’s international profile in the art, design, new media and post-secondary education communities. Like the students, word of mouth travels too, and many of the visitors choose to come back because they’ve heard of OCAD U through the students who’d spent time here.

Last year, fourth-year Sculpture/Installation student Sasa Rajsic spent a semester at a Glasgow School of Art. He picked the school in Scotland for the structure of its program and its proximity to other European cultural centres. The loose class structure at Glasgow allowed Rajsic to absorb the culture of the practicing artists around him and to work on projects he may not have had the chance to work on otherwise. “It gave me space to work on a larger number of projects and to spend more time experimenting.” The experience has also influenced his approach to his thesis, now that he is in his final year at OCAD U. “[It is] largely a continuation of the work I was making while studying abroad. The physical distance between me and my collaborator, who was in the Florence program last year, was inspirational. It helped us view our collaborative practice from a different perspective.”

Third-year Graphic Design student Robert Lindblom is finishing his semester here on exchange from Miami University in Sweden. He chose OCAD U because he’d heard positive things about it from other visiting students. He has been able to take courses and access studios that are not available to him at Miami. “OCAD U is a much larger school with more departments and opportunities than Miami, like screenprinting and bookbinding.” This semester, he learned about how the design process can influence and formulate an outcome—concepts he plans to use in his professional career.

Lindblom hopes to return to Toronto to work once he has completed his thesis in Sweden. Says Lindblom, “It has been an awesome opportunity to get to know Toronto-based designers and design students who may help me work here later on.”

The proliferation of international and cross-cultural relationships in academia, industry and elsewhere has changed the way people and businesses interact worldwide. It’s a trend that many students want to be part of and they’re looking for ways to infuse their education with an international flavour. This can mean taking classes with visiting faculty from other universities; attending public lectures by visiting artists, designers and critics; getting to know students on exchange here from other universities; and choosing to go abroad themselves to study.

Environmental Design students propose interactive space for ancient Aboriginal heritage site

By Lena Rubisova

If we can apply the design process to a living space?

In one OCAD University classroom and outside of it, students were asked that question, in fall 2010, by Sessional Instructor Cathie Sutton in her Environmental Design class—“Designing Across Difference: Aboriginal Communities.”

Responding to the challenge, Sutton’s students set out to design a public space for the Menikjacan fish weirs at the Ashleary Narrows of lakes Simcoe and Couchiching. These 5,000-year-old wooden fish traps have long been a sacred site and an ancient traditional meeting place for Aboriginal communities. As part of the course, the class visited the site and met with Aboriginal community members to collaborate with them and receive guidance for their semester-long design project.

Abandoned by the Huron in the 1650s, the Ashleary Narrows weirs—a series of underwater fences that were once used to trap and harvest fish—are as old as the Pyramids of Giza and were rediscovered in the 1960s by the Royal Ontario Museum and Trillium. In 1982 the Canadian government designated them as a National Historic Site to promote awareness of the site as well as the threats of boating, fishing and land developments—to its preservation. Now maintained by Parks Canada, the site is protected and promoted by a group of local residents collectively known as the Menikjacan Fish Fence Circle. Although the priority today is to keep the weirs safe and prevent further damage, the group hopes to build an on-site interpretive cultural centre sometime in the future.

The students in the “Designing Across Difference” class were asked to break down barriers to designing across diverse communities, and to do so in a meaningful and engaging way. Part of OCAD U’s Aboriginal Visual Culture Program, the course investigates the role of design in collaborating and maintaining a dialogue, specifically with Canada’s Aboriginal cultures. Working in groups, the students get to know the community they’re designing for—through research, conversations and hands-on experiences. During one of their visits to the weirs, for example, students participated in a traditional learning circle, spent time talking to community members about the site and documented it through photos and sketches. This push to design for and with other cultures reinforces the need for collaborations in today’s world. For example, globalization has made it possible for a Japanese architectural firm to design a project for a Canadian Aboriginal community, and for such a collaboration to work, it’s important to keep the lines of communication open. The students in Sutton’s class are learning how to do just that. At the time of this writing, they’re generating ideas for a wayfinding system and interactive centre at the weirs site, presenting concepts to another, to community members and to OCAD U alumnus Keesic Douglas for feedback. Some of the questions that the students were asked at this stage have to do with whether or not they fully understand the community they’re servicing, how well the navigation system for the proposed space flows, and whether they should consider an open or closed space for the site.

For Douglas, the questions being posed are tricky because Aboriginal cultures are evolving and it’s often difficult to determine what is culturally authentic for a given community.

After watching class presentations of the site and the proposed experience, Douglas was encouraged. Participating students, he says, showed “a genuine interest in learning about the culture.” Many of these students later commented that the course’s emphasis on collaboration—with and among the student teams and with the Aboriginal community—allowed for stronger ideas and concepts to come through. On the structure of the class, third-year Environmental Design student Aledon Buckles explains, “[It’s] different from everything else that you’re able to focus on it more.”

This class reflects a current trend in design education—increasingly collaborative community engagement. As third-year Graphic Design student Angela Gills notes, working as a group means that “everyone has something to bring to the table, especially for this kind of project.” The work presented thus far clearly illustrates that multiple approaches and methods were taken up by students of diverse cultural and academic backgrounds.

Scheduled for completion at the end of the semester, the final presentation of the design for the Aboriginal heritage site will then be submitted to the elders of the community, reinforcing the importance of keeping the dialogue open at every step of the design process.

Lena Rubisova is a third-year student in OCAD U’s Faculty of Design, majoring in Graphic Design. She graduated from the University of Toronto in 2007 with a degree in Art History and Classical Civilization.
From Subtlety to Bombast: Adel Abdessemed's Romantic Cynicism

By Charles Reeve

outb doesn’t come easily, especially when it disturbs something fundamental. Doubting that Toronto will be warm in January is one thing. But doubting that what we believe to be good merges with what we know to be factually as Adel Abdessemed invites us to do—that’s another story. For instance, the care we shower on our pets hardy typifies our relationships with animals. Starting from what we kill and purp to feed our cats and dogs, violence toward animals supports our demands for shelter, clothing, food, waste disposal and so on. But that train left the station millennia ago. The bulldozers that built our cities won’t start flattening them to accommodate the return of the displaced wilderness. Streets and buildings belong there now, which is why in Adel Abdessemed’s photograph Sept Frères (2006), the bears look incongruous. Indeed, without the artist’s apparatus surrounding them, the bears would be shot—a fate befalling thousands of their comrades in an inversion of Darwinism whereby the bears’ adaptability becomes a jibe that gets them killed.

The incongruity depicted in Sept Frères of animals in the urban environment returns several times in Abdessemed’s work, as in Jaismine (2009) and Séparation (2006). These works disturb our expectations only mildly, and, in each case, that disturbance plays against an understated but undeniable lyricism. The tentativeness of the bears in the mid-ground, the stillness of the lion that Abdessemed hugs, the nonchalant beauty of the dog and her pups—these elements turn the incongruity back on itself, as the animals seem to take the unexpected in stride better than we do.

Not surprisingly, given their shared atavistic basis, the incongruence that marks our attitude toward death—we love animals so much that we can’t stop killing them—also characterizes our attitude toward sex. On the one hand, while enlightened men in North America and Europe band together to fight pornography, surveys of Internet usage show that the on-line porn industry yields more revenue than Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo! and Apple combined. This disjunction feeds the unease that surrounds Abdessemed’s Real Time (2003), a video of a performance in which the artist filled a gallery with strangers he brought together solely to have sex with each other, on masse and in public. Ranging thematically from the subtlety and sentimentality of Sept Frères to the bombast and outrageousness of Real Time, Abdessemed’s art also explores media varying from drawing and photography to film, video, ceramics and more. His sculptures, for instance, incorporate such unorthodox materials as cannabis and—as with the cowboy hats in his show at OCAD U, or his soccer balls of a few years ago—razor wire. Also, following in the footsteps of such artists as Marcel Duchamp and Alighiero Boetti, he created an alter ego. However, there’s nothing playful in Abdessemed’s Mohamed/Karlo/Pop, merging as it does Mohammed, Karl Marx and Pol Pot. The calamity evoked by this convergence and the fact that this list could include many other points to Abdessemed’s affinity with other contemporary artists—Sharon Hayes, El Anarkawa, Michael Krebber—who find ideals like paradise, nostalgia and utopia wildly anachronistic. As the current trend toward “reasonable” restrictions on immigration makes clear, nothing undercuts the ideology of tolerance more completely than the rising insistence on its triumph. However, if Abdessemed’s process of turning, overturning and turning back received opinions reaches out to current artistic and social contexts, it also reaches in to an Augustan cultural legacy in Algeria of questioning things as they are—from the writings of Augusteine of Hippo in the fourth and fifth centuries to the art and literature of Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous in the 20th and 21st centuries. These historical and contemporary affinities speak to a thematic and formal richness that characterizes Abdessemed’s art and informs the pieces in The Future of Décor. Consider, for example, the three cowboy hats, fashioned from razor wire and suspended from the ceiling. The cowboy hat becomes a crown of thorns evoking the interaction between steel and skin that gives razor wire the historical significance that it has escaped from its precursor and close relative, barbed wire. While barbed wire spoke to modernity’s need for a material that could cut across geography and into animals and then into people, razor wire restricted its paranoia to people—either keeping “dangerous” persons in concentration camps and prisons, or keeping them out of private property or foreign countries.

The razor wire’s silence in the gallery thus contrasts with its canophonous history—a saga of war, strife, fear and danger. The change in the stylistic stance is made with Abdessemed’s frequent collaborator, David Moss, reflects our contemporary context back to itself rather than offering an escape from it. The looping pandemonium bouncing off the gallery walls makes us long for its opposite, the very thing that our current context of spectacle and violence makes impossible. In the gallery, as in the wider world, we find fewer and fewer reserves of the one thing that facilitates doubt and its companion, contemplation; fewer and fewer reserves, that is, of silence.

— Charles Reeve, Curator, Onsite [at] OCAD U

Visits to OCAD U by artists like Adel Abdessemed challenge us to think critically about humanity, diversity, culture and idealism, and offer a unique learning opportunity for our students.

Born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1971 and educated at the École nationale des beaux-arts de Lyon and Cité Internationale des arts in Paris, Abdessemed exploded onto the international art scene in the mid-1990s. He has exhibited in solo and group shows around the world—at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2009, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Guangzhou’s Institute for Contemporary Art, MoMA PS 1 and the MIT List Visual Arts Center. He is represented by David Zwirner and divides his time between New York, Paris and Constantine.

Abdessemed’s residency (November 22–26, 2010) occupies his first solo exhibition in Canada. The exhibition, which opens during the residency and continues until February 13, 2011, features the world premiere of The Future of Décor—a video commissioned by Onsite [at] OCAD U—and the North American premiere of Rico, another video, as well as recent sculptural works. The exhibition opens on Thursday, November 25, at 7 p.m. with an artist talk and reception. The opening night celebration, presented in partnership with the Cité Internationale des Arts, will include a performance by Abdessemed’s frequent collaborator, David Moss, and the sound installation Sacrifice by Agnès Douzanz, organized by the artist and Justine Durrett at the David Zwirner Gallery and to Julie and Adel Abdessemed. The exhibition and related events were supported by the French Consulate in Toronto, Culturesfrance, the Toronto Arts Council and the Ontario Arts Council. The Nomadic Residents program is supported by the Jack Weinbaum Foundation.

For more information, visit www.ocad.ca/ onsite. To view a video of Abdessemed’s OCAD U talk, visit: http://www.ocad.ca/video-abdessemed
Solitude in Numbers: The Struggle of Nuit Blanche

By Sky Goodden

It's 5:30 in the morning as I wearily climb inside the booth and press my face into the camera. Reena Katz looks back at me and asks how I am. She is asking it with all the presence in the world, it seems. I furtively glance at our framed exchange, cast on the back wall of the Art Gallery of Ontario, some 40 feet high, and try to focus my response. “I've had a frustrated evening, Reena.” We both find ourselves laughing.
In years past, I’d begin my Nuit Blanche at OCAD U because it was close to home and, because I attended school there, I regarded it as my port. This year, a few months out from the AGO, with Allyson Mitchell’s fleshy mannequins of participation and accessibility, aptly linking the displaced protests channel their urgency to the current digital era. The displaced protests channel their urgency to this place, and though it’s merely a parking lot divided art school and institution, the screen melding New York and Toronto eclipses distance entirely. Katz fosters intimacy in real-time, and pulls the oral archives into the digital present.

Steps away, Bentley Jarvis (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Art) centres the Pitch, Panel, Pulse trilogy in a suspended space of acoustic meditation. Titled Temporal Loop, a span of windows project what can only be described as the visual iteration of sound itself. To the accompaniment of Jarvis’s distinctive composition style—a numerically programmed and hailing soundscape that has the effect of slowing everything in its scope—the images scroll themselves across the windows, the visual and the acoustic splintering colour and form between tree and frame. I don’t know it yet, but this will be my evening’s enchantment.

Around the bend, Geoffrey Shea (Associate Professor, Faculty of Art) dances his Temporal Loop projection over the University’s Butterfield building, a space typically occupied by skilled skaters and class-skippers. With a digital projection programmed by phone-ins from projection programmed by phone-ins from projection pictures bobble-headed musicians who spend the night in search of some jewel. Shea’s manipulation of folk art and DIY digital media. The projection pictures bubble-headed musicians who change (as does the music), depending on the viewers who phone in the switch. Shea sites his inclusion of folk music for its history of participation and accessibility, aply linking it to the current digital era. And with his collaboration-driven configurations matched by Jarvis’s cognitive compositions and Katz’s sculptural with machinations and unique beauty in origamic terminations.

I head to the top of City Hall, where, again, practical magic trumps purpose, as I try to pin down up against the ribboned wall of Toronto's municipal lighthouse and watch the pastry wolves sweep the crowd along. Near Graham’s Performance Cafe, with Perforated Sides doesn’t quite connote the performance it’s meant to, as vague reflections doesn’t quite connote the performance it’s meant to, as vague reflections do less to populate the glass structure than to eclipse distance entirely. Katz fosters intimacy to Smile. Previously staged in cities such as New York, Paris and Rio de Janeiro, Smile involves photographing a spectrum of a city’s inhabitants, and then inventively projecting them onto the façade of a defining structure. The rotation of grooming busts takes a while to run in real-time before beginning all over again, all the while injecting the streets with a rhythmic haze (this particular incarnation clicked along to the soundtrack of Michael Jackson’s “Smile”) and supereding its architectural batwings with a benevolent scaffolding. The makeup of a metropolis begins to be revealed, with the sum of its profiles being much more than its parts.

Buoyed by these various plays on projection, I sweep the city for more. But the guaranteed disappointments and demonstrations of Nuit Blanche begin to set in. Starting with Daniel Lanois’s $400,000 enterprise at the helm of City Hall, I find myself less interested in the large screen relay of Lanois fanning his guitar (a nonuous revolution of screen savers unfolding behind him) than in the massive black mirror that tilts up over the stage on which he plays, dully. The large but shallow wall of soundboards and control that grew his projected performance become projected themselves, but through a much simpler technology. Accounting for milling crowds and flickering lights, the mirror’s vast span roves with an unequally exciting that calls to mind an Andrea Gabrieli print set in motion. If only the magic in this had been the sparkler, I think, steering around Lanois’s screen-plastered stalls.

I am limping back to the site of my evening’s start, beginning to wonder if I’m the only one, in this city of raving drunks and sodden parades, who spends the night as if on a pilgrimage, seeking something special. It is just as I sweep in to see of glass-hewn crust, while the others content to Smile. Previously staged in cities such as New York, Paris and Rio de Janeiro, Smile involves photographing a spectrum of a city’s inhabitants, and then inventively projecting them onto the façade of a defining structure. The rotation of grooming busts takes a while to run in real-time before beginning all over again, all the while injecting the streets with a rhythmic haze (this particular incarnation clicked along to the soundtrack of Michael Jackson’s “Smile”) and supereding its architectural batwings with a benevolent scaffolding. The makeup of a metropolis begins to be revealed, with the sum of its profiles being much more than its parts.

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Jutta Treviranus begins our interview by mentioning that she’s trying to correct the spelling of her name on a plane ticket for an upcoming flight purchased on her behalf. Such a mistake is not that surprising for two reasons. Her last name isn’t particularly easy to pronounce (Trey-vee-rah-nouss), let alone spell correctly. And since Treviranus has been a frequent flier as of late, such a typo was bound to happen eventually.

In the past few months, Treviranus has visited Washington, D.C., Brussels, Barcelona, Seville, Paris, Vancouver and Colorado to present her work on accessibility standards and inclusive design to audiences that have included European commissioners, secretaries of state and various high-level government ministers.

Treviranus is not the only one in flux; so is the Adaptive Technology Resource Centre (ATRC), the research unit she founded 16 years ago at the University of Toronto. In August of this year, the ATRC started a new chapter when it moved to OCAD University, where it will serve to augment and reinforce an ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusive design. Now known as the Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC), Treviranus and her team are clearly excited about the possibilities, since OCAD U “still has the agility and creativity and freedom of movement that a large institution such as U of T doesn’t have.”

That’s not the only reason to be excited, however. OCAD U is now also home to the brand-new Inclusive Design Institute (IDI), a multi-institutional regional research network led by Treviranus; with partners that include Ryerson University, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, University of Toronto, York University, Sheridan College, Seneca College and George Brown College. Treviranus is director of both the IDRC and the IDI; which, when complete, will include offices at 205 Richmond Street West, a captioning and multilingual translation centre at 230 Richmond Street West, plus a participatory design lab and accessible performance space—the Black Box Theatre—at 49 McCaul.

“What we’re constructing with the IDI is a regional centre that is looking at designing for diversity,” explains Treviranus. “We’re trying to engage the end user in creating systems that will become part of their lives.”

Despite the 25 years of experience, Treviranus wasn’t entirely sure if the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) would recognize the IDI proposal. “It was actually quite a miracle it was accepted because I wrote it in such a way that it went counter to everything that they tell you to do,” Treviranus says. Instead of following the conventional wisdom of only including senior researchers from major universities and having a strong patent strategy, her proposal included researchers from colleges and researchers without PhDs. And, of course, the entire project is open-source, which means that...
Rather than having a one-size-fits-all solution to accessibility, it’s a one-size-fits-one.
Winning the only major Canadian art award voted on by the public is a particular honour, and this year it went to OCAD University alum artist Kristan Horton (Sculpture/Installation, 1996).

The Grange Prize—the result of a unique partnership between the Art Gallery of Ontario and Acoplano—engages the public in a way that other art awards don’t. By inviting members of the community to view public exhibitions of shortlisted artists’ works—encouraging them to discuss the work online and ultimately to vote on it—the Prize is also contributing to a vital public discourse, one with special meaning for institutions like OCAD U.

With this accolade, Horton—a Toronto-based artist who creates by layering and manipulating photos—is at the centre of this year’s conversation about the power and prevalence of contemporary photography. Recalling the time he spent at OCAD U (he would eventually complete his MFA at the University of Guelph), Horton says, “I learned from serious Canadian artists what artists do. OCAD U’s contribution was for me a rich experience at a formative age. It wasn’t so much how to make artworks, but rather how to think in this particular tradition. I might be told how to do things, but never what to do.”

Launched in 2008, The Grange Prize comes with a mandate to “recognize the best in Canadian and international contemporary photography.” It is this country’s largest photography prize, granting a total of $65,000 to photographers each year: $40,000 to the winner and $3,000 to the three runners-up. Organizers work with an international partner country and institution to form a nominating jury of curatorial and scholarly experts who select a shortlist of four photographers—two from Canada and two from the partner country. The 2010 partner country is the U.S.; the partner institution, the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP) at Chicago’s Columbia College. The Prize invites each shortlisted artist to participate in a 30-day residency. This year Canadian nominees travelled to the U.S. and American artists visited Canada.

When the four 2010 finalists are considered together, it’s possible to see how all of them create non-traditional forms of photography. Horton’s work, for example, ranges from digitally altered abstracts to large-format images of manufactured objects. He has described his practice as one of intensive research and creation. Using layered processes of construction that are both material and virtual, Horton has produced numerous long-term projects. Like the acclaimed Dr. Strange love Dr. Strange love (see above), these works are often linked conceptually by their serial and episodic structure. In a September interview with CBC News, Horton described his art: “We’re talking about layering inside the computer. Each layer I deal with individually and where they meet, they have torque.” Eventually, he achieves a quality of “kalidoscopic coherence.”

For the past decade, Horton has shown his work widely in Canada and abroad. His multi-disciplinary practice includes sculpture, drawing, photography and video, but he admits to being “closest” to photography. To find out more about his art, visit kristanhorton.com.

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Twigs, toothpicks, buttons and thread: Artist Kai Chan celebrated in 35-year retrospective

Organizers of Kai Chan’s 35-year retrospective have further distinguished the artist with an unlikely title: master of the unremarkable. But the designation is one of affection, even admiration, and speaks to Chan’s extraordinary way with everyday materials.

In late fall of 2010 the Textile Museum of Canada and the Varley Art Gallery of Markham partnered to present Kai Chan: A Spider’s Logic, celebrating 25 years in the artist’s career. Curated by Sarah Quinton, the exhibition also marks the Textile Museum’s 35th anniversary.

Chan, whose work has been known to play with assumptions about sculpture versus textile, graduated from OCAD University’s Environmental Design program in 1970. He describes his years at the University as “familial,” years that exposed him to “a lot of work by students in other departments.” This exposure would later inform his practice in myriad ways.

Of that practice, Chan says: “I draw inspiration from the basic elements in my immediate surrounding—light, air, earth, water, flora and fauna. I have chosen to work with simple everyday and, often, recyclable and found materials. For me, the nature of these materials represents a fundamental value that informs living. Indeed, I no longer find that mainstream or ‘traditional’ art materials encompass the range of integral meanings that can capture my concerns about living in our contemporary world. I look instead to the simultaneously irregular and linear qualities of threads and two branches, to suggest the structure and meaning of Chinese characters and calligraphy. Using the tension of such characteristics similarly noted in other materials provides me with the tools to negotiate a balance between East and West within the [conceptual framework] of my art practice. I thus work to achieve an understanding that product and process in art—making emerge as the essence of living a life.”

Kai Chan has exhibited across Canada, the U.S., Japan, Australia and Europe. He is the recipient of numerous grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, as well as the prestigious Jean A. Chalmers National Crafts Award (1998) and Prix Sadie Bronfman Award for Excellence in the Crafts (2002). A Spider’s Logic includes a selection of Chan’s work from 1975 to 2010, gathering 30 key pieces that have never been seen together before, and introducing five large-scale wall works made of finely knotted thread. The exhibition opened at the Varley Art Gallery in late September 2010 and at the Textile Museum of Canada in November, where it continues until May 1, 2011. Chosen artworks from these two exhibitions will tour to additional venues across Canada.

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Calling all OCAD University students: have you ever thought of winning a $50000 prize for your art? It’s possible with the Prix de Rome! The Prix de Rome is a national award, granting $50000 to the winner and $5000 to the three runners-up. It offers a unique opportunity for young artists to further develop their practices.

The Prix de Rome is a national competition for new artists who have not yet worked at the Prix de Rome. This year’s competition is open to visual artists, sculptors and photographers. The Prix de Rome is a five-year program, which involves living and working in Rome for one year. The award is open to Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada.

To apply, artists must apply online. The application deadline is January 15, 2011. More information about the Prix de Rome can be found on the website of the Canada Council for the Arts.

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This March at OCAD University, we’re playing a month-long game of digital show-and-tell, culminating in a contemporary art auction that features a staggering 31 works by 31 faculty members.

Save the date for Project 31: Thursday, March 31, 2011.
In 2010 Kellar and Richardson—which client roster reads like a who’s who in international dream accounts, such as Nike, Fruitopia, Mattel and Tetley—were hired by wireless telecom provider Wind Mobile to design the visual identity for its Canadian market. At a time when most mobile companies favoured simple designs printed on high-gloss paper, Kellar and Richardson persuaded Wind Mobile to go for a multi-faceted, colourfull design on matte paper. Says Kellar, “We thought it would be interesting to present technology in an analogue way.”

Inspired by both art and design—Wassily Kandinsky’s abstract shapes, Eames’ mid-century Modern furniture and 1960s cartoons—the designers created a carbon-like design for Wind Mobile. They used hand-drawn abstract shapes in text bubbles to offer a sense of intimacy and playfulness; multiple colours to suggest the possibility of diverse conversations; and uncoated paper to convey approachability and honesty. “Art is a source of inspiration as well as a complement to design for Kellar and Richardson, who both make art in their spare time—‘the flame that keeps us going,’” notes Kellar.

To fan that creative flame, they created ArtLab in 2004 “to bridge the gap between art, design and corporate culture.” In their past studio, they had a gallerytype space where they exhibited local and International art and design. As part of ArtLab, they also now stage exhibits and events that provide opportunities to collaborate with other artists. One such event took place in 2004, when Nike hired AmoebaCorp. to design the Toronto launch of Art of Speed, its global campaign to promote athletic footwear and apparel to the non-mainstream market. Kellar and Richardson brought together artists, designers and musicians in a warehouse in Liberty Village, a lively creative hub in Toronto’s downtown west. Graffiti artists painted murals with precision and speed, and short films about speed produced by film students at Ryerson University were shown alongside films commissioned earlier by Nike. Over the course of the evening, DJs gradually increased the music’s beats per minute, and walkers served fast food.

The exhibit Mr. Brown vs. Val Kilmer, in spring 2005, featured two street artists in Toronto: Mr. Brown, who was known for paste-ups that resembled tattoos, and an anonymous artist who stencilled images of American actor Val Kilmer’s face on telephone poles, signs and buildings across the city. People were intrigued by the stencils: Was this an advertising campaign for a film? Was it publicity for the actor? Speculation about the artist’s identity generated a lot of hype and drew a large crowd to the event. To this day Kellar and Richardson have not revealed the artist’s identity. Kellar. “But the sooner young designers make that distinction, the better. The client isn’t paying you to express yourself.”

In 2006, Rumble Rumble: An Art Throw Down gathered eight illustrators for one night Kelar and Richardson created a cartoon-style animation for an art throwdown. The illustrators, most of whom were accustomed to working independently, collaborated gradually, drawing over each other’s work and creating illustrations together. At the end of the night, the panels were separated and later exhibited in a sold-out group show.

This skilful crafting of large-scale experiences is a far cry from Kellar and Richardson’s early days. For their first pitch—to specially cable TV channel YTV—they showed up with garbage bags containing their work because they didn’t own portfolio cases. Fortunately, the consultants that YTV had hired from Big Blue Dot—a family/kid-oriented creative studio in Watertown, Massachusetts—would YTV hire the young designers. That was the first major project for Kellar and Richardson, and it allowed them to expand. In 2006 they partnered with John Street Advertising to share an office, and while the two companies currently share some clients, AmoebaCorp. remains an independent design house.

Kellar and Richardson continue to create both art and design, but they see a clear distinction between the two practices—the intention of the artist is self-expression, that of the designer is to solve problems for other people—and although designers may draw on their artistic skills, they’re not making art. “If you tell some designers that what they’re doing isn’t art, they get defensive,” says Kellar. “But the sooner young designers make the distinction, the better. The client isn’t paying you to express yourself.”

Kelar assures. “You check your ego at the door. You’re not hired to create your own style. You’re hired to form a connection between the organization and its audience.”

Self-professed design addicts Mike Kellar and Mikey Richardson connect with others afflicted similarly through their studio’s official blog designgrn.com. Their website address is amoebaCorp.com.

Leanna McLennan’s fiction and poetry have been published in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including Third Floor Lounge; An Anthology of Poetry from the Banff Writing Studio. She currently writes in her studio at Artscape Wychwood Barns and teaches at OCAU and the University of Toronto.
Hitting it Big in Berlin: One Couple’s Story

Berlin is the hottest city for contemporary art. Some would say it’s the new New York of Europe. Now, 20 years after the fall of the Wall, a strong community of artists has emerged, particularly, Canadians, ever since the blockbuster electropop singer Peaches made her way here almost 10 years ago. Numerous artists of note have since emerged from, experimented filmmaker Bruce LaBruce and Janet Cardiff to Matthew Pennock and OCAD U grad Tiff Izsa, who lives in Düsseldorf. They do so despite the fact that their first year in the city was, as both will admit, a bit of a party binge—an endless flow of good hipsters,” Blunt muses. When they first spent time in Berlin, in 2006, Skensved worked as an assistant to the Danish-born Kristine Raussec, an artist with Peres Projects. “I felt that I needed to leave Toronto, that I couldn’t get any more out of it,” recalls Skensved. She notes that it’s easy to feel at home in Berlin, but “you never learn German.” Why? Because there are so many Canadian artists in the city to mingle with.

It was in 2007, after getting their MFAs from the University of Waterloo, that Blunt and Skensved decided to move to Berlin permanently. That’s when they bought an apartment and began exhibiting. A finalist in the 2008 Royal Bank of Canada painting competition and a multiple recipient of CCA project grants, Skensved has shown at Kultumplast Wedding International and Galerie Knuth & Krüger. She launched her first solo at September Gallery in, coincidentally, September of last year. Blunt showed at Galerie Scherer 8 and Künstlerhaus Bethanien while assisting Sietsema. He’d also worked as an assistant to Manhattan-based painter Sarah Morris in 2005.

“The best part…here is the apartment—show scene. It’s all word of mouth—sellers. You’ve got to dig deep, on the surface it’s just the commercial galleries.”

Ever keen for more challenges, the couple are currently restoring—from scratch—their apartment, which was built in 1905. But their story of having made it in the Berlin art scene is not, by any means, a fairy tale. Job-hunting can be difficult, Blunt cautions, because most galleries no longer hire English speakers, preferring instead fluently bilingual applicants.

Non-proficiency in German has been a serious setback for Blunt and Skensved. Despite daily studying and up to five hours a day practising with German friends, Blunt says that he is still not fluent enough to apply for jobs that require German. Be prepared too, he says, to pay a minimum of €125 a month for health care and for Keunum—the required three-month deposit up front when renting an apartment. In the matter of travel documents, the best and easiest route is to get a youth mobility visa from the German Consulate General in Toronto. Free of charge to applicants who are Canadian citizens between the ages of 18 and 35, the visa allows you to work for one full year anywhere in Germany. Alternatively, you can get an artist’s visa, in which case a letter from a German gallery willing to employ you would help.

“Berlin is a real education, more…than you can imagine,” says Blunt. “You’re on your own, you’re in the big leagues.”

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Of course, it also pays to know Canadian insiders like Blunt and Skensved, who will walk newcomers through the most recent Index art guide, recommend where to set up a bank account and perhaps offer directions to the next apartments show. And don’t underestimate the importance of parties, as they’re simply business networking venues to disguise. “When you walk into the director of the National Gallery of Canada, she’s in party mode. So, it’s easy to approach people here... versus back home,” says Blunt. “We know so many people [now from] all over the world.”

But for this couple that could—and did, work is a top priority. Blunt continues to assist artists and is trying his hand at curating home shows. At the time of this interview, Skensved is preparing to create a public sculpture this winter. And as they approach their fourth year in this city, working and living in Berlin remains magical, they say: “Berlin is a real education, more…than you can imagine,” says Blunt. “You’re on your own, you’re in the big leagues.”

Alumni, take note. For those of you looking to make it big in Berlin’s bustling art world, meet—via Sketch’s intrepid Berlin-based reporter, Artstar* Nadja Sayej—OCAD U Drawing & Painting graduates Emmy Skensved and Gregory Blunt. Herewith tips from this couple that could—and did.
Vanessa Harden: Covert Gardening and Interspecies Collaboration

By Leanna McLennan

I James Bond were a covert gardener, what spyware would he need? OCAD University alum Vanessa Harden (Material Art & Design, 2005) asks questions like this as part of her design process. Harden—who is currently working as a designer in London, England—was an OCAD U medal winner in 2005 and, more recently, the recipient of the prestigious IF concept award for Best Universal Design in 2010 and the Blueprint Award for Best Exhibition at 100% Design London in 2009.

Vanessa Harden is a modern storyteller. She dreams and she builds. Her finely tuned design process—brainstorming, field research and prototype building—was honed at London’s Royal College of Art, where she completed her Master of Arts (Design Interactions, 2009). “I design for people in fringe groups,” she says. “I spend time with them, so I can see what tools they need. And I look for the interesting story.”

Once that story is found, Harden crafts a narrative around the product and its users. The James Bond storyline was inspired by the gadgetry in James Bond films. “I played on the idea that this type of gardening is illegal and came up with a narrative inspired by the gadgets in James Bond films.”

In her storyline, two gardening spies are on their way home from work. In an abandoned lot, the first spy takes out a shovel from his stylish black briefcase, digs a hole in the ground and leaves. The second spy follows on his heels, unzips a secret bottom compartment in her red leather handbag and presses a button to trigger a conveyor belt that expels a plant from the handbag into the hole. She walks away, leaving behind a beautiful flower. Mission accomplished.

Harden has created other products for clandestine gardeners—a shoe with a secret compartment for seeds, and a camera that shoots seed capsules from its lens. “I take everyday objects that you wouldn’t think twice about, but when you look closer, you realize there’s something different about them that’s intriguing.”

Her own life story is no less interesting. Right after graduation, she headed to Barcelona to make her mark as a designer. It was a humbling experience, recalls Harden. “I realized that if I wanted to work with technology, I had a lot more to learn.”

And learn she did. In 2006 Harden did a residency at X5 Labs at Concordia University in Montreal and earned a diploma from the MIT Media Lab’s Advanced Studio Program. She learned how to program computers and build circuit boards. But in order to become a successful designer on the international stage, she knew that she needed to further her studies. That’s when she enrolled in a Master of Arts program at the Royal College of Art.

Now kept busy with myriad independent projects, commissions and consulting work, Harden has a client roster that includes Burberry, the British luxury fashion house, for which she created a report on the impact of emerging technologies on the Burberry brand’s fashion shows, products, and retail stores; and the BBC, for which she and Dominic Southgate, her partner in the design firm Gammaroo, designed and built props for an upcoming film, Operation Mincemeat.

Recently, she was commissioned by Do The Green Thing—a London-based non-profit public service that advocates a greener life—to design an environmentally friendly tent for music festivals where tents are abandoned after the events. For her origami-inspired design of an aesthetically innovative, biodegradable tent, Harden solicited input from Mark Bolitho, General Secretary of the British Origami Society. And, in keeping with her engaged design process, she took the cardboard prototype to the popular annual music event in Scotland, T in the Park, in July 2010. “It was cold and raining the whole weekend, a drunk person fell on my tent, and half of [the tent] blew away,” Harden says, laughing. “But people liked it.”

Meanwhile, Harden is involved with Built by... (her current collaboration with industrial designer Kevin Hill) which she describes as “an inter-species collaboration between humans and bees.” In it, designers position furniture inside a specially constructed beehive, so that beeswax will drip onto it. Later, they will retrieve the furniture and add a resilient coating to the “bespoke detailing” in order to make it more resilient.

To view Vanessa Harden’s designs and to find out more about her design process, visit vanessaharden.com.
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