art&education

“Structural Integrity: Rooted Idealism at SFAI”
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SFAI MFA students at work in their studio.

It’s apropos that the first person I interview for a profile on the San Francisco Art Institute’s MFA program is Jeff Gunderson, who has been the Special Collections librarian and archivist at SFAI since 1981. To get a sense of the MFA’s ethos and history, everyone—from administrators to students and alumni—tells me, start by talking to Jeff. Gunderson describes SFAI by saying that if you come by the library on a Friday afternoon, it’s “kind of crowded.” Students come in not to access required reading, but to use the extensive collection of artists’ books, exhibition catalogues, and art history books for themselves. The Anne Bremer Memorial Library predates SFAI itself as one of the oldest libraries on the West Coast.

This feeling of both inhabiting art history and being a living part of it—Gunderson emphasizes this continuity—permeates the majority of the conversations I have with SFAI community members.

When I ask Gunderson what changes he's seen at SFAI over the last thirty-five years, he laughs and says that "the world has changed more. Students still come with the same brilliant mentality they have always come with; they're just grappling with a different world." What's kept him there so long? "SFAI is truly on the edge of art schools. It's an institution that doesn't deal in graphic design or illustration or interior design or architecture. Being truly not applied in any way creates a sense of freedom that you can't get almost anywhere else these days."



SFAI courtyard and tower, 800 Chestnut Street, San Francisco.

This positioning of SFAI—as one of the very few stand-alone fine art—only schools left in the country (nobody seems quite sure how many there are; there may be as few as one or two)—is arguably one of the defining characteristics of the MFA program, according to those I interviewed. As SFAI president Rachel Schreiber explains, "In the postwar era, as art schools around the country added design programs and applied arts as a means to quickly grow enrollment, SFAI stayed true to its mission," which was to promote focused, rigorous education in fine art. Strikingly, this move to remain focused solely on fine art actually seems to have increased the enrollment at SFAI; several alumni have told me that it's one of the biggest factors that drew them to the program.

Nicole Crescenzi, the director of graduate admissions, sees the major appeal of the SFAI MFA program as being a "down-and-dirty art school that's about 'making' and 'process,' as much as it is theoretically and conceptually rigorous."

She explains that this attracts students who tend to be interested in making radical work that can "upend systems," as opposed to merely reproducing contemporary art trends in a more consumable mode. Crescenzi underscores a kind of radicality when describing the ethos of the MFA and SFAI more generally, where everyone is pushing each other to advance new discourses and where easy reconciliations (think user-centered design) are not part of the equation.

This idealism, along with a laser-sharp focus on being a practicing artist, are palpable in conversations I had in the intimate courtyard of the SFAI campus on Russian Hill and in the sprawling warehouse of graduate studios further south in the Dogpatch neighborhood. Many students and alumni also said they chose the program for its intellectual flexibility. One alumnus described the academic atmosphere as "lawlessness"—and many have cited this freedom to experiment as what brought them to the program and kept them challenged. However, in the same breath several students and alumni also suggested that the counter-point to SFAI's somewhat utopian orientation is a lack of professional development classes that would help with the practicalities of being a working artist after graduation.



SFAI Zellerbach Quad at dusk, 800 Chestnut Street, San Francisco.

The MFA program at SFAI is also characterized by its large cohort size, with Schreiber proudly describing it as "the largest MFA studio arts program west of the Mississippi." Cohorts in the MFA program are measured by the dozens rather than the handful; during graduate open studios this April, more than 150 currently enrolled artists showed work (the average cohort is slightly smaller; this year, first- and second-year students comprised about 250 pupils total).

For Gunderson, the size of the program can be a "double-edged sword ... artists can find fellow travelers, but it's also a big world to navigate." Students and alumni echoed this sometimes paradoxical nature of the program: the scale of the program means being exposed to a large number of faculty and enough diversity in the student population to find their own niche, but as one alumni puts it, it's also "easy for students to get completely lost and wander through."

MFA chair Tony Labat sees the program's large size as inherently connected to the diversity and the range of work that's produced in the MFA: "To some people on the outside, it seems to be too big, too much, but I think it allows there to be a scale that avoids cliques and favoritism and allows students to create many small communities within the big communities." The large enrollment also allows for more international students. In the six years that he has been chair, Labat has been excited by the ways that the program has attracted students from the Middle East, Asia, and South America. According to Labat, this creates a deeply rewarding provocation for students, faculty, and the program, pushing them "to really deal with cultural diversity and aesthetic diversity, which can be challenging when developing skills like critiquing works sometimes lost in translation."

This arguably generative lack of uniformity gives way to a truly interdisciplinary structure, evidenced in the program's lack of medium-based divisions. As simply a "studio degree program"—one of Labat's great accomplishments—all students are working toward an MFA in studio art. While students can still declare a major, only a handful now do. For Labat, dropping majors means that "there is an encouragement for students to step outside of what they're familiar with. One might come in as a photographer and within a semester or two be experimenting with new forms." Labat says that this reflects larger ideas around what a contemporary artist is today and how artists are working now, "getting rid of conventional, purist mentalities and the related entrenched thought processes." Another major outcome of dropping majors is that students have the ability to work with professors whose teaching styles are most useful to them. Current students and alumni concur: returning this curricular control to the students is a powerful element of the MFA at SFAI.



SFAI studio of Willow Blue Heaton (Dual Degree, MA/MFA History and Theory of Contemporary Art/Studio Art 2016). Photo by Stephanie Smith.

Other notable curricular elements of the MFA include special topics seminars. A list of recent seminars includes "Performance Ecology," "Speculative Fiction and Conceptual Practice," and "Necropolitics, Violence, and Mourned Lives." These electives are taught alongside one-on-one graduate tutorials, in which students regularly meet individually with faculty and in group critique seminars. There are also two lecture series: the Graduate Lecture Series, which is required of all MFA students and combines regular talks by visiting artists with graduate studio visits; and the Visiting Artists and Scholars Lecture Series, which is open to the public. Recent visiting artists and critics have included Thomas Demand, Michelle Grabner, Alfredo Jaar, Lucy Lippard, Takeshi Murata, Carolee Schneemann, and Andrea Zittel.

The graduate program at SFAI also offers an MA in the history and theory of contemporary art, as well as an MA in exhibition and museum studies. Students in the MFA and MA often share courses—for example, a recent course around the theme of the artist as curator. MA students at SFAI also curate MFA shows and write about student work, creating a familiarity with student practice. Crescenzi cited many current examples of MFA and MA students working collectively on spaces and exhibitions. One current example is Recess/SF, founded by several current graduate candidates—not alumni—in both the MFA and MA programs.

Many alumni of the MFA program stay and run gallery spaces in San Francisco (trying to list these feels like writing a who's who of the Bay Area art world's emerging young guard: Will

Brown, THE THING QUARTERLY, 100 percent, ~~CAPITAL~~, City Limits, Bass & Reiner, Romer Young, Ever Gold ...); a surprising number start these kinds of initiatives while they are still students. As one reason for this tendency, Schreiber points to an emphasis on students exhibiting their own work actively while pursuing graduate education.

The concept of embeddedness, as a kind of rootedness within SFAI and its surrounding community, came up in at least half the interviews I conducted. In fact, it's easy to argue that a seamless integration between students and the art world—the Bay Area art world in particular—is the final defining characteristic of SFAI's MFA. While many schools have art galleries, there is rarely the level of integration that the MFA program has with the galleries at SFAI. There are three major galleries at the school: the Walter and McBean Galleries, which are run by the Exhibitions & Public Programs department, with major student collaboration; the Swell Gallery, a graduate student–run art space focused on the role of the gallery in the educational context; and the Diego Rivera Gallery, a student-directed gallery specifically for work by SFAI students, which holds dozens of shows and student exhibitions each year.



Artist Ron Nagle gives a Visiting Arts and Lectures talk to the SFAI community.

Hesse McGraw, the vice president for Exhibitions & Public Programs at SFAI, enthusiastically explains that students propose a range of projects throughout the year—everything from art on café walls to "a sail above the courtyard fountain."

McGraw celebrates the students' "sense of using the entire campus as an exhibition space" and the way that the galleries continue to connect professional artists with SFAI students, the community, and the public (through public lectures and events). McGraw describes this Venn diagram consisting of the public, SFAI student-artists, and professional artists as "constantly morphing" and creating "incredibly potent contexts."

The Walter and McBean Galleries in particular act as a laboratory to realize "dream projects" that haven't gotten support elsewhere. As an example of this kind of project, Alejandro Almanza Pereda's recent residency and resulting exhibition included building a three-thousand-gallon water tank in the gallery to capture underwater still lifes; and shielding the famous Diego Rivera mural at the main SFAI campus with a fluorescent-tube scaffolding in collaboration with students. Almanza was in residence for five months with no preconditions; he was just to "respond in some way to SFAI." Everything Almanza produced was in public view, and it also resulted in half a dozen graduate students working closely with the artist. McGraw explains that immersing students in Almanza's project from its conception to realization "catalyzes the artistic practices of our student-artists and encourages them to pursue their own seemingly impossible ideas." As an added bonus, Almanza paused in the midst of his residency to do a pop-up show of student work—an endeavor that SFAI, in its flexibility and continued encouragement of student programming, was particularly equipped to support.

McGraw's hope is that these kinds of experiences can expand the agency that artists have in the world. To that end, a number of fellowships in the exhibitions department are also offered to select students and alumni to engage in the work of public programming. The most recent artist-in-residence, Mariana Castillo Deball, collaborated over nine months with exhibitions fellow Christopher Squier, who graduated from the program in 2015.

As SFMOMA reopened this spring and the Bay Area found itself in the art world spotlight, many took stock of the local art ecosystem. The close relationship between SFAI and SFMOMA dates back to the founding of SFAI in 1871, when both were under the umbrella of the San Francisco Art Association. (In 1880, the first public showing of a moving picture, Muybridge's Zoopraxiscope, was shown at the SFAA.) SFAI split from SFMOMA in the 1930s and the San Francisco Art Association was officially dissolved in the Sixties. Today, SFMOMA and SFAI have no official special relationship, though this may change—SFMOMA operates the nonprofit Artist Gallery at Fort Mason, where SFAI anticipates moving the graduate studios from their current location in Dogpatch. This relocation to Fort Mason will also move the graduate studios much nearer to the main campus of SFAI, bringing the graduate and undergraduate students closer and expanding SFAI's sense of community. This future graduate center will open in the fall of 2017 at the Herbst Pavilion (Pier 2) of the Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture; this year's massive MFA graduate exhibition was held here, with ninety-one artists contributing works to the show. Schreiber notes that this move has been part of a larger conversation with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the Presidio Trust, the For-Site Foundation, and the Headlands Center for the Arts, entities that came together to transform the northern waterfront of San Francisco into a cultural corridor, with SFAI as its anchor tenant.



Becca Levine in her studio at SFAI (MFA Studio Art 2016).

For now, the graduate studios are a few miles south of the main campus, fairly isolated from the rest of SFAI but not from the art world—the Dogpatch area is quickly becoming a Bay Area art hot spot. Many galleries are relocating to Minnesota Street Project in the neighborhood, although the MFA students at SFAI by and large aren't benefitting from this increased attention to the area. (Gallery crawls at the mostly high-profile galleries on Minnesota Street, like Casemore Kirby and Ever Gold, rarely extend to the graduate studios, which are several streets away and usually not open to the public.)

During the last week of classes before summer break, I visited a graduate critique seminar taught by artist Anthony Discenza. I was reminded of what photographer and SFAI professor Reagan Louie said about his MFA students: they "tend to be independently minded … perhaps a little less art-market and career driven, which is not to say many of our grads don't go on to have a successful art career. But our students seem more open to exploring and making art for other reasons." Discenza examined several pieces of sheet metal cut into rectangles about three feet on all sides and affixed to the wall. These banged-up, fairly generic industrial sheets seemed to show signs of former lives. The second-year MFA student who made them normally creates metal sculptures, so he was departing from his usual practice. The other students were extremely supportive and, as one might expect, began a formal conversation about the works' relationship to painting. Discenza pointed out that the pieces might be imagined within a history of rule-based work, with tight parameters about how something is deployed. The student seemed excited at the possibility of a continually unfolding, playful game, where the only problem is having too many options—with the solution being self-assignment.

I saw this first critique as a miniature of the MFA at SFAI itself, where the challenge is finding focus and direction in an intellectual environment designed for utter freedom.

But the second critique of the class (about six to eight students are in each critique group) seemed even more salient. The student whose work the class was critiquing was a first-year MFA candidate who normally makes massive installations. But she said that she had been told by other students in her cohort that making only one large installation a year isn't sufficiently pragmatic. So she presented sections of a recent sculptural installation as potential standalone works. One such work consisted of a set of giant Plexiglas cutouts. These large, organic, and strange pieces were arranged linearly, hanging from an invisible line like the cross-section of a mammalian skeleton in a natural history museum. This gesture of separating the Plexiglas pieces out to appease criticism from fellow students immediately caused some member of the class to launch into a rigorous defense of the integrity of the artist's intention and an insistence on not bargaining. A few of the second-year students (crits at SFAI are often mixed) shared what they had learned about doing whatever they wanted artistically, as long as they took complete ownership. As the students gathered around one of the orphaned Plexiglas cutouts placed on a table, Discenza reiterated that one goal of the MFA program, and of being a working artist, is to "be in a place where you call the shots, which you can only find by starting in a place where you own the shots." The student under critique smiled, turned away from the lonely object—now representative of selling out—and began talking about a new work.

—Monica Westin