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Artist, teacher or both? Supporting graduate art teachers

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Beginning teachers can face a myriad of challenges in the classroom – adjusting to school life, behaviour management and building on the skills developed at university among them. But for art teachers, there is often the added challenge of maintaining a personal art practice.

The Melbourne Graduate School of Education's Teacher Artmaker Project is working with graduate art teachers from the Master of Teaching to learn more about how artists adjust to becoming teachers, and offer some much-needed support. Unique to the University of Melbourne, the project has two components – a survey and an annual exhibition.

Chief researcher Wesley Imms says the project is addressing a range of issues, including the common myths that surround artists becoming teachers.

"People believe you can't teach art and make art at the same time, that 'good' art teachers somehow have a personal practice and that having an active art practice impacts your long-term retention in teaching," Dr Imms explains. "But we have very little research evidence to support these claims. We need to learn more about them to ensure our graduates have the greatest expectation of success in their careers."

The research is currently following around 100 graduate art teachers from the Master of Teaching, with around 40 new participants joining every year. It is exploring whether new teachers make art and, if they do, what impact it has on their teaching and their likelihood to remain in the profession.

So far, the research team has discovered beginning art teachers' sense of identity shifts from that of an artist who teaches to a teacher after about a year in the classroom; that beginning teachers' artmaking does decline in their first year of teaching, but they remain positive and committed; and that artmaking and teaching can enhance one another.

Researcher and exhibition curator Purnima Ruanglertbutr says they've found fusing the roles of artist and teacher has a number of benefits.

"We've discovered embracing the two identities of artist and teacher, rather than separating them, has a very positive impact," Ms Ruanglertbutr says. "Keeping up to date with the contemporary art world really feeds into what teachers do in the classroom, and artmaking increases their capacity to mentor and stimulate their students."

Ms Ruanglertbutr says encouraging teachers to practice their art is important, and could be a positive way to inspire higher quality teaching across a range of disciplines; not just art, but also subjects like drama, music and English.

"Fostering an ongoing passion among beginning teachers for their discipline may improve their teaching and their wellbeing, encouraging them to stay in the profession longer," she says. "To do this, we need to prepare teachers before they graduate to consider themselves as teacher-practitioners and then, crucially, once they are working in schools, offer strategies to support ongoing artistic practice, as well as professional development."

The annual exhibition is one such way of supporting ongoing artistic practice. It showcases work by around 30 newly graduated teachers, providing a supportive environment to encourage continued artmaking during these critical years. The inaugural exhibition, Crossing Boundaries: The Journey from Teacher to Teaching Artist was held last year, exploring the journey from being an artist to being a teacher.

This year's exhibition, Sensations of Art-making: Triumphs, Torments and Risk-taking, will be held from 4-15 October at the Victorian Artists Society. It is taking a different approach from last year's exhibition, asking the artists to explore the challenges and risks of their artmaking, and to comment critically on how this feeds into their classroom practice.

For beginning art teacher and Master of Teaching graduate Louise Kyriakou, participating in this year's exhibition is challenging but provides the motivation she needs to continue making art.

"It's always difficult to start a new work of art, working full-time at a school. I did find that being surrounded by art, helping students with their work, and through the study of other artists, that I was brimming with motivation, but severely lacked the energy to execute ideas," she says. "Having deadlines and exhibitions like the TAP to plan toward definitely helped to realise my work."

Ms Ruanglertbutr says that, so far, the exhibition has encouraged the artists to experiment with materials, media and techniques they wouldn't usually work with.

"Preparing for the exhibition is building their confidence and skills in catering to students of a wider range of abilities, cultures and interests," she says. "This means they can implement more personalised curricula and lessons in their classrooms."

Dr Imms says the exhibition not only provides a professional development opportunity, but also access to a professional network.

"This ongoing support for graduate art teachers is unique in Australia. We've been delighted with how many graduates have volunteered to take part – it really speaks to the quality of the next generation of educators. I certainly hope this work will grow beyond the Melbourne Graduate School of Education; its benefits to the participants and their students are clear."

For more information:

http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/teacher_artmaker_project

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Exhibition captures beauty of salt desert

A new exhibition by Indian artist Gigi Scaria, a former McGeorge Fellow at the University, explores images of a vast, arid, and salty desert. By Katrina Raymond.

PREVIEW

Delhi-based artist Gigi Scaria will hold his first major solo exhibition in Australia at the Ian Potter Museum of Art with new photographic work revealing a strong connection between the Australian and Indian landscapes.

Mr Scaria's new work has been conceived and inspired following cultural exchange programs with the Australia India Institute in Jaipur and as MacGeorge Fellow at the University of Melbourne in 2012 where he exhibited Prisms of Perception at the Potter.

The new body of work – Dust – reflects Mr Scaria's response to Australia's vast landscapes and the inspiration to explore the geographic diversity within his own country.

Through a series of new video works, photographs and painting, Dust presents large-scale images of salt lakes and expanses of desert not immediately recognisable as India. The place is Kutch, a district in the far western state of Gujarat, near the border with Pakistan, where much of India's salt is farmed.

Mr Scaria creates an immersive experience that explores the awe and simplicity of landscape, the impact of time and human habitation and the ability of place to shape emotions.

"Even though you feel like you are in the middle of an ocean, you stand solid and supported in the salt," Mr Scaria says. "There is a fear and fascination about being an outsider but the vastness is also oddly comforting. There is stoicism about the place."

Dust, also the title of the key image in the exhibition, suggests a city consumed by the desert and forewarns of the cyclical relationship of humanity and nature, the ebb and flow, creation and destruction over time. Perhaps marking the beginning of a new direction, this work is the only post-produced photographic work in the exhibition referencing Mr Scaria's earlier urban preoccupations.

One of a new generation of Indian artists, Mr Scaria has established a significant international exhibition profile, has participated in more than 90 exhibitions since 1994 including India's debut presentation at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

Born in Kothanallor, a village in south Kerala, India, in 1973 Mr Scaria received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (in painting) at the College of Fine Arts, Thiruvananthapuram. He moved to New Delhi where he undertook a Master of Arts (in painting) at Jamia Millia Islamia. Moving from Kerala to New Delhi was a significant experience that in turn influenced Scaria's creative work. He began to make art reflecting the impact of city life. He worked with mapping, abstract forms and narrative painting, later focusing on the mapping of the 'city' itself. In the mid-1990s, while establishing his career as a professional artist, Scaria also illustrated children's books and taught art at an experimental school in New Delhi.

Scaria's creative repertoire includes a range of media such as digital art and video, photography, installation, sculpture and painting. Scaria has worked primarily with themes of modernity and urbanisation, and icons that are personal, political and historical.

Dust is on show at the Ian Potter Museum of Art until 2 February 2014.

www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au



Gigi Scaria, Dust, 2013; inkjet print, 100 x 150 cm, © Courtesy the artist



Rugmaker/author Najaf Mazar tries to teach Steve Thomas some rug repairing skills, watched by Najaf's wife Hakima.

Freedom Stories: a multi-platform documentary in progress

Award-winning documentary maker Steve Thomas is filming an independent feature about the many and varied contributions that former asylum-seekers are making to Australian society. He spoke to Alix Bromley about this ambitious project.

ARTS

"If you hadn't kept all those secrets from me when I was a kid I probably wouldn't have become a documentary maker," Steve Thomas used to joke to his mum. She would laugh, but it is the secrets and lies of his English childhood that give this award-winning documentary maker the determination to keep exploring unknown stories.

Mr Thomas' current project Freedom Stories, which also forms part of his PhD at the Victorian College of the Arts (where he lectures in documentary), explores the lives of former asylum-seekers who arrived in 2001 and are now citizens. Given the

Coalition's pledge to bring back temporary protection visas, a scheme Labor abolished in 2008, it's timely to consider the many and varied contributions refugees make to Australian society.

Freedom Stories follows Mr Thomas' previous documentary *Hope*, the story of the SIEV X disaster, which won Best Social/Political Documentary at the ATOM Awards and was a finalist in the Australian Human Rights Awards and Australian Director's Guild Awards.

The participants in Freedom Stories arrived, mainly by boat, around 2001, the controversial period of the Tampa, the 'Pacific solution' and the 'children overboard' affair. They found themselves in indefinite mandatory detention, often for long periods, and then placed on temporary protection visas, which extended their uncertainty. They are from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Syria, having arrived in Australia around the time of 9/11 when anti-Islamic sentiment was at its peak.

"This film is an attempt to correct misunderstandings in the political and media debates which tend to objectify refugees as 'illegal', 'boat people', 'victims', 'scary Muslims', 'potential terrorists'," says Mr Thomas. "The process has been extremely damaging to them and our community because they're exactly the kind of people we need here in Australia."

Mustafa Najib, who arrived on the Tampa, is a member of the advisory panel for the film alongside Malcolm Fraser, Professor Louise Newman, Julian Burnside and Arnold Zable.

"It is very important that all Australians know the actual truth about asylum-seekers, that we are not exactly what some politicians have alienated as 'illegals', and therefore potential risks to the Australian society and the national security of this country," Mr Najib says.

"It is important that a closer image of us, our daily lives and our positive contributions are provided to the Australian people, so that at least it's recorded and hopefully one day history will do the judgement," Mr Najib says in response to the documentary project.

The unheard voices in the political media debate are the voices of asylum-seekers themselves, a point supported by advocacy bodies such as the Refugee Council of Australia.

"That's exactly what this film is trying to do," says Mr Thomas, "bring their voices to this debate and in a way that has a sense of hindsight to it. They've been through the process, recovered to the best of their ability and can tell their own stories. Not objectively but with a bit of a sense of distance and perspective."

"We all remember the dreadful stories of protests and lip-sewing at places like

Woomera," Mr Thomas says. "But now they're among us, they're citizens just like us. They're voting, studying, and becoming doctors, tilers, painters, musicians. But not only that – their desire to contribute to their new country is very strong."

Mr Thomas and his co-producer Lisa Horler are planning dissemination using a multi-platform approach, including the production of a feature documentary (perhaps with a shorter TV version), an educational DVD package fitting into aspects of the new Australian curriculum and an interactive website.

As an independent project relying on philanthropic support, and with the filming stage nearly over, Mr Thomas and Ms Horler are now working to raise funds for the editing process. They plan to use crowd-funding once they're on the home-straight and aim to launch the feature at the Sydney and Melbourne International Film Festivals in mid-2014.

If you are interested in supporting Freedom Stories or finding out more about the project contact Steve Thomas through the website:

www.freedomstoriesproject.com and you can follow the project on Facebook

www.facebook.com/freedomstoriesproject

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The Melbourne Graduate School of Education is researching the challenges of being an artist and a teacher, and offering graduates the chance to maintain their practice through an annual exhibition. By Catriona May.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

Beginning teachers can face a myriad of challenges in the classroom – adjusting to school life, behaviour management and building on the skills developed at university among them. But for art teachers, there is often the added challenge of maintaining a personal art practice.

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