



Class of 2008, Winter 2008, pp. 62-69

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BY [LEAH SANDALS](#)

SPOTLIGHT

THIS SERIES OF ESSAYS ON EMERGING CANADIAN ARTISTS IS SPONSORED BY THE FRASER ELLIOTT FOUNDATION IN MEMORY OF BETTY ANN ELLIOTT

Fifty thousand dollars: it's the approximate price of a large Jack Shadbolt painting, a 2008 Lexus GS or a down payment on a 600-square-foot condo in downtown Toronto. It's also roughly the price—with living expenses, books and materials factored in—of a graduate art education in Canada. And it's a useful fulcrum for the question of whether the expense of a graduate art education—one covered by schools, grant makers and the public, if not by an art student—is worthwhile.

To shed light on this issue, *Canadian Art* selected ten of this year's top M.F.A. and M.A.A. (Master's of Applied Arts) grads from across the country, looked at their work and listened to their own evaluations of graduate study. The picture they painted wasn't always rosy. Debt from undergrad years is a burden for many and almost all these grads urged that stronger links be established to ground students in the real-world practice of art. But overall, these grads seemed to feel that the price tag on their M.F.A.s was worth it. For most, their studies helped ease them into a new community; for all, the degree represented a rare opportunity to focus on art-making for two solid years.

The range and caliber of what these recent grads have created—in realms as diverse as abstract painting, video performance and institutional critique—reinforce this optimism. As their various awards and

ERIK ATHANASSIADIS: *Troislogos* (University/Translation) 2008
 Proton beam's blue beam on face:
 wood panel, 100 x 100 cm, acrylic
 Inset: 1.30 x 2.43 x 1.21 m with
 NEWS (wood panel)



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The range and calibre of what these recent grads have created—in realms as diverse as abstract painting, video performance and institutional critique—reinforce this optimism. As their various awards and grants attest, each of these artists has as a goal not only mastery of practice, but its reinvention and reinvigoration.

Other trends exist among these diverse art-makers too. Two of them—the *trompe l'oeil* painter [Dil Hildebrand](#) and the anti-Modern abstractionist Nguyen Duc Huy Nam—might be called the new illusionists. They have a traditional studio-based painting practice, but create work that deconstructs the logic of seeing a flat plane. Another type of emerging artist might be called the entangled rebel. Exemplified by the cheeky interventionist Joshua Schwebel and the erudite conceptualist [Kristina Lee Podesva](#), these artists make immaterial works—think educational platforms and content-free galleries—grounded in a deep connection to academia and theory. Another group of artists could be termed the innovators. These are artists like the language-obsessed microscope photographer Victoria Cheung and the relational-aesthetic painter Vytas Narusevicius, who both combine art with other fields. The seers of the 2008 class—like the photographer [Olga Chagaoutdinova](#) and the video artist Olivia Boudreau—use lens-based practices to view and question the world in all its cultural, social and mediated diversity. Finally, the builders—represented by Kiki Athanassiadis and [John Eisler](#)—speak to the hierarchies of the built environment through specific approaches to both product and process.

Dil Hildebrand surprised many people—not least himself—when, in 2006, halfway through his Concordia University M.F.A., he won the RBC Canadian Painting Competition.

“I came into the program thinking, ‘I’ll try different things and not be too concerned with making polished work to show the world,’” he recalls. “I was thinking grad school would be a private place to do my research, but I was thrown onto the national stage.” Looking at Hildebrand’s work (which is represented by the Montreal dealer Pierre-François Ouellette) today, it’s clear that the pressures of exposure have served his paintings well. When he started school, Hildebrand’s paintings intriguingly married his experience in the artifice-laden world of set design with painterly skill to create witty worlds within worlds. Now he’s expanded his *trompe l'oeil* references, playing with how paintings themselves are created to achieve layered, sophisticated and thought-provoking illusions. Hildebrand—who began his B.F.A. at the University of Manitoba and then spent five years in Vancouver working on films—says the program helped him achieve his M.F.A. goal of settling into Montreal.

“I needed a community,” he says. “And I needed the way an M.F.A. program can connect you with a community.” The program even connected him with the former Winnipeg painter Eleanor Bond, who became a positive influence.

In 2005, the Calgary artist [John Eisler](#) was known nationally for paintings that meticulously reproduced the way industrial printers render images. With his record of successful shows and positive reviews, some wondered why Eisler decided to break stride and do an M.F.A. at the University of Guelph.

As he explains, he was, in many ways, feeling worn out and hemmed in by the niche he had created. “Those older paintings were very optically rich, but very labour-intensive,” he says. “I found myself a little bit alienated from the process; the procedure eventually required that I act as a kind of machine.”

Eisler needed time during which he didn’t have to worry about showing and could try something new. “Grad school seemed perfect for that,” he says. “It would give me the chance to develop a new body of work without a day job. Also, I wanted to teach, and connect with a new community [in Toronto].” With this in mind, he spent his M.F.A. developing a practice rooted in a *lack* of visual control. Instead of painting a canvas with brushes, Eisler now stains it, folds it, immerses it and works in other procedural ways to generate an abstract image. He has also branched into sculptural “wireframe drawings.” In both genres, he aims to make creation itself his subject.

Eisler calls his M.F.A. experience satisfying. His plans include a Toronto studio and shows like the one he had last fall at Diaz Contemporary. Of his current paintings, he says, “I don’t worry about a lot of things that I used to worry about. I’m responsible for everything, but I don’t have to think about every square centimetre like I did before.”

Many Canadian grad students would kill to study in the United States. With privately endowed facilities, big-market access and international curatorial connections all part of the American promise, the spirit is willing, if the bank account is weak. The recent University of British Columbia grad [Kristina Lee Podesva](#) turned that tendency on its ear, moving from New York, where she took classes at Harvestworks and worked for the web service e-flux, to Vancouver for grad school. As Podesva tells it, her choice was due partly to the presidency of George Bush, partly to Seattle connections

and partly to UBC's conceptualist legacy.

Interestingly, even at a school as conscientious as UBC, Podesva quickly became frustrated with gaps in pedagogy. So she made filling these gaps the purpose of her practice; alternative schools, inspired by historical projects like Black Mountain College, Vincent Trasov and Michael Morris's Colour Research project and Joseph Beuys's Free International University.

Podesva's 18-month *colourschool* project, for instance, was "a venue for free study, a free school within a school for research and a collaborative study of colour as it is culturally coded"—both formally and socially. The first iteration of *colourschool* was in Podesva's M.F.A. studio at UBC; the second was at Emily Carr the following year. The project included weekly labs on colour, bootleg video-art screenings, Fluxus-style events like air tastings and slide shows on the use of colour in public space. ([Instant Coffee](#), [Paul de Guzman](#) and [Germaine Koh](#) were among the presenters.)

Colourschool and other Podesva projects—like *The Arcades Audio Project*, in which an elaborate meal would be followed by diners reading Walter Benjamin, or *The 09F9 Archive*, an exhibition about DVD pirating—reflect her concern with commercialization.

"Even a cursory understanding of art from the past 40 years shows how much artists try to resist commodification of their work," she says. "I think there's some critical function that art can serve; I was longing for this. So I reconfigured a space within the institution to do collaborative, open work."

The majority of M.F.A. grads experience some culture shock when they move from school to non-academic life. But the Concordia photo M.F.A. **Olga Chagaoutdinova** has lived through far more dramatic transitions—she grew up in Soviet Russia, had her first child when the Berlin Wall came down and moved to Canada in 2000.

Chagaoutdinova says her photography practice was taken up first as a means of understanding North American culture, and then, later, as a method for studying her own roots. "I knew that if you want to study a culture deeply, you have to look at how people live," she says. "I decided to study hard."

The results—nurtured first at Emily Carr under the wing of [Roy Arden](#) and later in Montreal under Geneviève Cadieux—are both extensive and impressive. Her bodies of work range from portraits of Russian prisoners to contemporary Russian home interiors to urban interiors and landscapes from Cuba.

"Russian society discarded many good values with the shift to perestroika," Chagaoutdinova explains of her Russian interiors. "Now, cupboards they've had for 200 years sit next to IKEA furniture that will fall apart in 40. I'm interested in how all these cultures coexist in one corner of a room." Her conviction that socialism will disappear in her lifetime accounts for her interest in documenting Cuba.

[Martha Langford](#), the founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography and an art-history professor at Concordia, is currently working with Chagaoutdinova on a commission for the Montreal area, and last fall the artist showed in her native eastern Russia. This year, the Havana Biennial is also on the slate.

Nguyen Duc Huy Nam has come a long way as a painter, both geographically and artistically. First trained in Edmonton at Grant MacEwan College with subsequent undergrad studies at Emily Carr in Vancouver, the recent NSCAD University M.F.A. grad has moved from realism to a unique form of abstraction that, among other accolades, recently won him the \$25,000 Joseph Plaskett Award.

Nam considers his M.F.A. program key to breakthroughs in his work. "When I applied to grad programs, I knew my work would change significantly," he explains from his new home in Montreal. "But I felt like the M.F.A. environment would facilitate a change that could be quite difficult."

Nam's latest paintings, the result of this shift, meet his self-set challenge of exploring abstraction "without rehashing or repeating certain tropes of modernist art," Albertan or otherwise. In his work, he uses shapes he encounters in the urban landscape—from bank-machine consoles to bus interiors—as starting points for a process of formal manipulation that leads to canvases of colourful, symmetrical elements.

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Nam plans on taking the next ten years to develop his current body of work. “A teacher once told me that I should take it easy, because I’m very impatient,” Nam explains. “She said most painters don’t figure themselves out until their mid-30s: she told me that when I was 23, when I wanted it all and wanted it now. So now I’m just working in the studio as hard as I can; I hope to go to Europe through the Plaskett award; and I hope to pick up a commercial gallery.”

A master’s program usually runs two to three years—though it can feel more like one quick month or a dragging decade depending on one’s enjoyment. The recent UQAM grad **Olivia Boudreau** is particularly sensitive to such differing experiences of time; during her grad studies, the former dance-school dropout built a performance and video practice that examines the psychological and physical dimensions of duration.

In one recent Montreal performance, Boudreau, who won UQAM’s Prix Pierre-Ayot as well as a SSHRC grant, sat in Concordia’s Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, her back to a camera, for the 150 hours of the exhibition’s duration. During this time, she gazed ahead at live video of her back, providing a literal and symbolic meditation on the fissures between embodied and documented realities.

In other works, Boudreau addresses visceral aspects of the body. “I’m also interested in intimacy, animality, seduction,” she explains, “all these themes referenced in images of the body that we see in pop culture.” Her works reflect a pointed, savvy, third-wave-feminist perspective, with videos of young women in fur coats crouching on all fours, or women in off-camera states of undress. The work can also take a humorous turn, as in *Vaches*, a video that documents the artist tethered to a cow grazing in a field.

Though Boudreau’s first pick for grad school was Glasgow, returning to her undergrad haunt of UQAM worked well. She notes the support of André Clément and David Tomas, as well as an exchange stint at the École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs in Paris, as key to her development. At the moment, Boudreau is preparing for a show at UQAM in January.

The priority for most freshly minted M.F.A.s is shopping their thesis work to new exhibition venues—not for **Joshua Schwebel**, however. The 2008 NSCAD M.F.A. grad’s thesis show consisted of exactly *zero* works. Prior to the show, Schwebel had for months been showing up at scheduled seminars gabbing about his “massive thesis project” and sporting “injuries” from working on it. One of NSCAD’s largest galleries was specially reserved for his thesis work. On opening day, it was completely empty—excepting some outraged peers. An image of Schwebel “working in the studio” that ended up in a NSCAD brochure was staged.

Though Schwebel’s practice made him unpopular with some, in the end it seemed a perfect fit for NSCAD University. Remembering his successful thesis defense, he says, “Sara Hartland-Rowe [a NSCAD faculty member] came up and said, ‘Oh, we should have failed you. The project would have been so much better!’ And I was like, ‘I know!’”

For Schwebel, expectation was his subject. “What I ended up doing was creating the expectation of work, of content. I created evidence that it would be fulfilled—without fulfilling it.”

The work—which includes the exhibiting of his university transcripts as “documentation of performance”—might seem overly cheeky, but Schwebel has good backup. He spent much of his time in Halifax studying contemporary philosophy and rhetoric—what some might call deep non-object theory—at King’s College, earning a SSHRC grant along the way. Further, one is reminded of a certain **Ken Lum** student performance: stealthily procuring all the keys for a studio and then locking everyone out, as well as showing up drunk and abusive.

Though Schwebel’s work is less confrontational, it is just as pointed in its analysis of (and just as enmeshed within) the world of academic roles. Schwebel is currently following up his M.F.A. degree with Ph.D. studies at the University of Western Ontario. He says he hopes to study public art, and the unanticipated. In a deliciously ironic turn for a man who aims to make “art that doesn’t look like art,” he is teaching foundational studio classes.

From the excellent recent exhibitions at the Canadian Centre for Architecture to the rush on starchitects for art-museum redevelopments, it is clear that art and architecture have a particularly friendly relationship at the moment. This zeitgeist is deeply felt in the recent installations, sculptures and drawings of the York University grad **Kiki Athanassiadis**. Raised in Montreal, with an initial degree in architecture from McGill, Athanassiadis finds that art is the ideal form for exploring her general interest in the built environment and particular interest in home architectures. As she put it over the phone last summer, “My work became about bringing the idea and feeling of home or place from my personal history into more general ideas of home. Looking at the writings of architectural theorists, and the history of

architecture, was also an influence.”

Athanassiadis, like many M.F.A. students, approached grad school as a focused opportunity to make a cohesive body of work. She found inspiration in the York faculty member Barbara Balfour, who, she says, “has a very strong intellectual outlook and a good sense of humour, two things I try to play with as well.”

Like many of our other top M.F.A. students, Athanassiadis took considerable initiative with her education. When she couldn’t arrange an official exchange through York U, she used SSHRC funding to spend a few months in Berlin: the experience was invaluable for making professional connections.

One major reason that artists do M.F.A.s is to get a teaching credential. This desire—learning more to teach more—was the main reason the artist **Victoria Cheung** enrolled, but her goals shifted along the way. Now the University of Guelph M.F.A. grad is on her way to fusing an amateur study of language with conceptualism. Cheung creates works that playfully pinpoint the ways and places where language breaks down. Her thesis work consisted of microscope-magnified photos of thousands of asterisks that Cheung collected from print media over a period of months. She catalogued the photos in a scientific idiom and presented them at Art Metropole last fall.

“When I was doing my research, I found that asterisks have at least 14 different functions,” she explains. “There are no books that outline these. And there is only speculative information about how they originated. That ambiguity is interesting to me.” She also spent time during her degree investigating endangered languages with the help of several Guelph languages professors.

Cheung’s practice may seem a far cry from typical twentysomething art interests, but the artist notes that she was uncommonly fortunate to have a public-school art teacher who let her follow her conceptual-art compulsion as well as her interest in museums and art education. Cheung speaks fondly of faculty members like **Ben Reeves** and **Patrick Mahon**, who encouraged her in her undergrad years at the University of Western Ontario, and marvels at the support she received from both students and instructors such as **James Carl** at Guelph. Aside from applying for teaching jobs, Cheung hopes to visit Asia and gauge how the art world, and her own art practice, operates abroad.

When **Vytas Narusevicius** was turned down for a job at the Department of External Affairs after completing his undergrad political-science degree, he couldn’t have imagined that one day art, rather than government, would be his realm for creating connections between people, but that is what has happened for the recent Emily Carr M.A.A. grad.

Though Vytas’s thesis-show paintings—which won him the school’s Governor General’s medal—at first resemble traditional abstraction, they are, to him, relational objects: “I’m a painter, and I’m also engaged in a search for discourse through a material practice,” he says from Vancouver. “The goal really was to view painting and the relationship between a painting and the viewer as a relational-aesthetics kind of thing; that there is this discourse even though it’s in a private moment.”

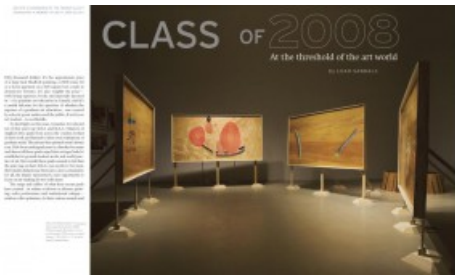
Narusevicius’s conceptual, theoretical and, yes, political take on painting seems particularly suited to cerebral Vancouver School traditions. (It is no accident that he did his fine-arts undergrad at UBC.) His other recent projects, which include a series of hard-edged abstractions based on Georg Cantor’s mathematical theories and a Deleuze and Guattari reading group, reflect this sensibility.

Narusevicius’s interests made Emily Carr’s inaugural M.A.A. degree class an interesting environment for him. Though Narusevicius says he would like to have seen more theoretical depth in the program, and notes that he had to move into the undergrad painting studio after ventilation in the grad area was deemed inadequate, he is generally satisfied.

“I could walk through the front door of Emily Carr and immediately have five different conversations with five different people about art,” he says. “You can’t really have that experience in many other places [than art school].”

Now graduated, Narusevicius hopes to both stay connected and connect others through a new website he’s developing on the much-overlooked painting scene in Vancouver. “I hope it could change things, in a small way, at least,” he says. We’re quite certain that many Canadians can and will relate.

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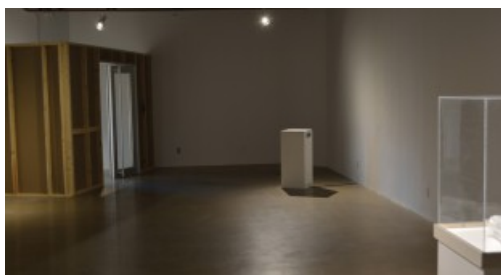
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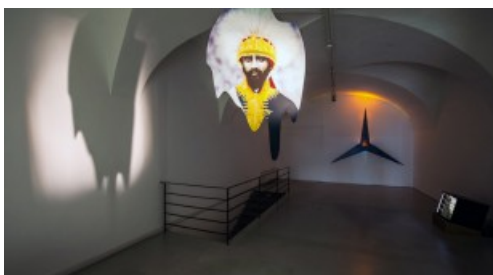


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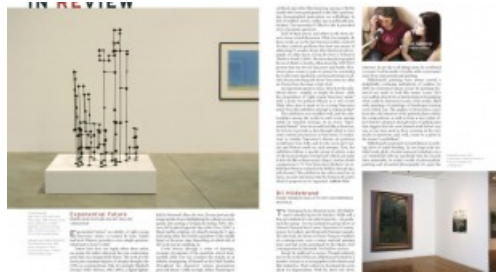
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