

STUDIO PHILOSOPHERS

The IDSVA Doctoral Program

A game-changing experiment in art education offers a research-based doctorate program for working artists, providing them with an opportunity to expand their involvement in the greater cultural dialogue.

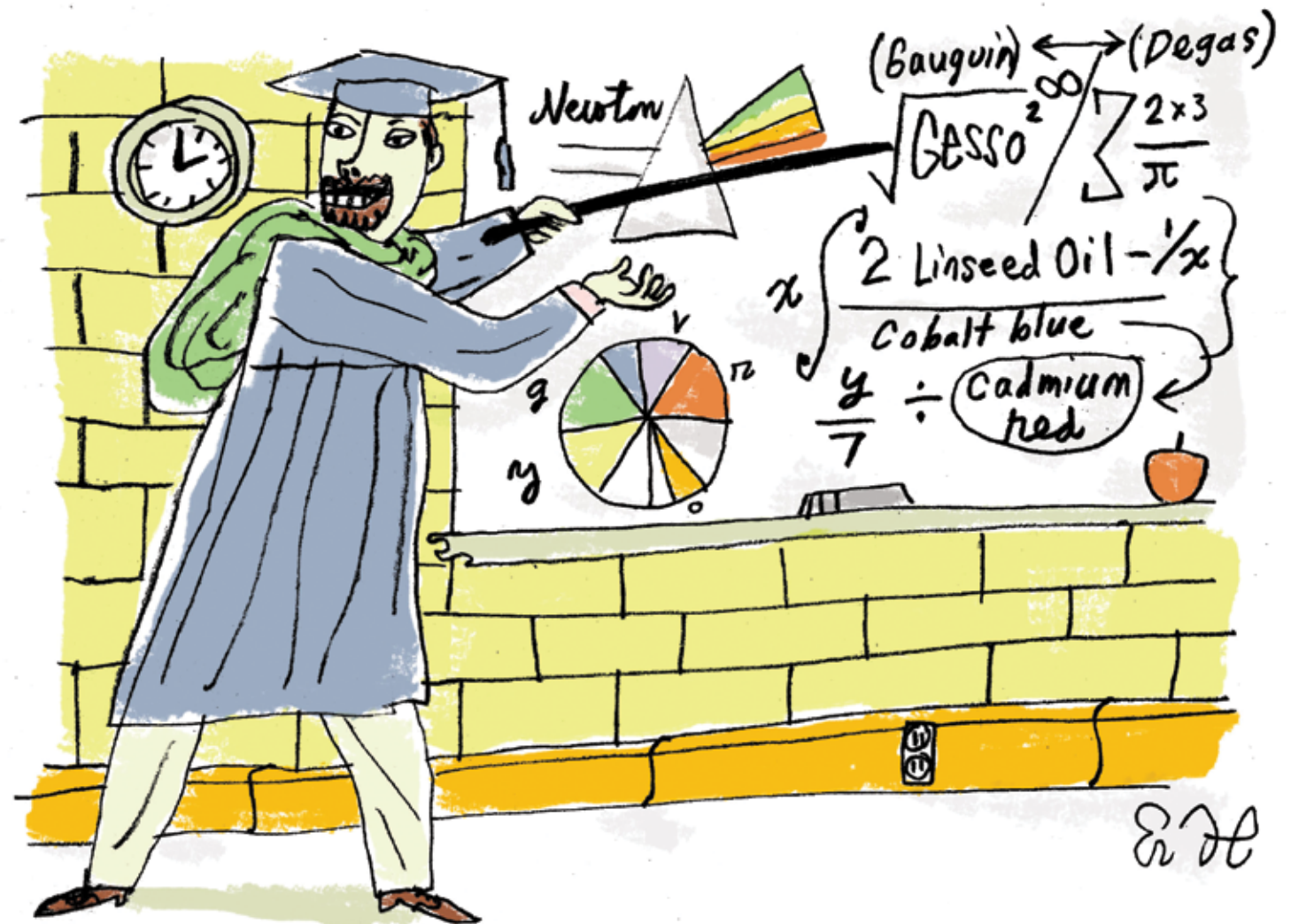
by MICHAEL GORMLEY Illustrations ERIC HANSON

At first brush, Dr. George Smith comes across as the model college professor—a no-nonsense intellectual whose persona seems to have been shaped by thoughtful research, collegial discourse, and the task of shepherding the minds of young intellectuals. Art, that most complex and diverse of human achievements, heads the procession of topics that Smith can eloquently expound upon—followed by psychoanalytic theory, German philosophy, and the literatures of France, England, and America. But scratch the surface of Smith's polished academic veneer and you'll see his true reformist nature. At heart he is a firebrand, one who is currently working toward a revolution in advanced artistic study.

I recently met with Smith when he was arranging a travel seminar for the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA), the graduate school for working artists he founded six years ago. He had recently returned from the annual conference of the College Art Association, where five IDSVA students had been selected to present papers. For five faculty members to be representing a single school at this conference would be exceptional; for this number of students to be representing a single institution may

be unprecedented—an impressive showing for an institution in only its sixth year.

But I had a question for Smith. Why the need for a school offering doctorates to working artists? In Europe, doctoral education of artists has been gaining ground for roughly two decades, but it remains a relatively rare engagement for American artists. Here, the academic hierarchy still ranks “artist workers” below “academics thinkers.” The Ph.D., academia's highest award, is bestowed upon those who critique rather than practice art. Smith is out to change that—and he seems to be doing one heck of a job.



The education of fine artists within the American university system is a postwar phenomenon and largely the result of the GI Bill. Artists who served in World War II were eager to cash in on their veteran benefits and pursue fine-art study. Prior to the war, advanced studio-art education was primarily delivered by small independent professional schools and noncredentialed ateliers. Studio art, as far as the elite colleges and universities were concerned, lacked the academic rigor suitable for degree-granting study. But the government-backed capital proved irresistible, and programs awarding fine-art degrees sprang up at universities across the country.

Problems arose—some minor, some not. Studio classes didn't quite fit into the standard college lecture schedule—classes needed to be longer and emphasize practice over research. And what to do about the prickly issue of graduate degrees, including the prized Ph.D.? A compromise was reached. Fine artists would be awarded a practice-based Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.), and the Ph.D. would be reserved for liberal-arts and humanities scholarship, including art history. All seemed to go smoothly for a generation or so; but then the art world began to change and demand that its practitioners, especially those aiming to teach on a college level, be equipped

with the research, writing, and critical skills characteristic of research-based disciplines.

“At that juncture I was working as the vice president for academic affairs and dean at the Maine College of Art [MECA],” says Smith. “I felt that American M.F.A. programs were out of step with contemporary art practice. Most programs focused primarily on studio work and offered very limited exposure to aesthetic theory and the allied disciplines that inform art practice. At MECA, I designed an M.F.A. program that was half-studio and half-theory. This might have been seen as revolutionary at the time, but now, of course, most M.F.A. programs include

a serious theory component. Such programs argue for educational content that more closely approximates the intellectual challenges graduates face in the art market and better prepares them for a host of employment opportunities that require a fund of theoretical knowledge and critical-thinking skills not offered in our former studio-based instructional model." Indeed, MECA's theory-and-practice M.F.A. closely parallels the developments seen in contemporary art production, which favors artwork prioritizing a conceptual framework and examination of the artist's role in society.

Smith is fond of saying that cultures advance when they ask the right questions. The task of critiquing contemporary culture has in more recent times been largely argued by philosophers, and this overarching influence has often derailed art production from effecting its own critical impulse. Too much art merely serves as visual illustrations of extant ideas developed in other arenas. Contemporary art has largely been an endless parade of work trafficking in the latest politicizing motives. It's sometimes spectacular, sometimes banal.

But at times throughout history, visual artists, rather than philosophers, led the charge in the greater cultural discourse. Are artists today interested in and willing to take on the responsibility of acting as stewards of culture? If so, given the complexity of the world we live in, I would venture that artists need to reconsider what manner of education will best prepare them for this calling.

Smith would argue that for artists to step up and fill this cultural void

they need the kind of advanced training currently offered scholars in allied disciplines, and this is exactly what his doctorate program offers. "The vast majority of our students come to us with M.F.A.s and have active studio practices," he says. "They are in no further need of training in that area. Additionally, many of our students currently teach or have had experience teaching studio courses on the college level. What they lack is an in-depth study of aesthetic theory and exposure to the allied disciplines that have historically informed art practice. Our program provides a broad base of knowledge and opportunities to practice critical methodologies and form a critical voice that can inform contemporary art production. One needn't

look far to see the trouble our world is in, and I attribute those troubling dilemmas, at least in part, to the failing of art criticism and production to point a way forward for culture.

"The artists graduating from IDSVA are poised to make that advance by competing for exhibition, critical publication, and pedagogical opportunities," Smith continues. "College-level teaching offers the single most promising arena for change. IDSVA graduates are well trained and equipped to handle a broad range of studio and seminar courses. However, the data on institutional hiring practices demonstrates that artists are often passed over for tenure-track posts in favor of Ph.D.-carrying colleagues."



Smith and the IDSVA are not without their detractors. Awarding doctorate degrees to artists flies in the face of a historical prejudice that separates artists from scholars. "Fine art's focus on 'making' is a highly suspect activity for an intellectual, given its association with labor," Smith explains. His critics question whether training at the doctorate level is appropriate or even needed for studio work—after all, one can argue that the current M.F.A.-oriented system of postgraduate education is sufficient to launch a professional studio career.

Smith believes these critics are acting out of the fear that artist doctorate programs will render the M.F.A. obsolete. He agrees that the M.F.A. does a good job of preparing artists for the demands of studio practice; however, he is certain that artists who want to

pursue scholarly research, engage in the larger critical debate informing visual culture, and compete for tenure-track teaching posts need the kind of advanced training offered by a doctoral program. For this reason, the IDSVA curriculum and requirements are aligned with traditional doctoral-program models. Candidates study historical and critical texts, prepare and present scholarly papers, sit for exams that test a general fund of knowledge, and write and defend a dissertation on an original research topic.

The world is IDSVA's campus, and Smith has gainfully exploited the internet to conduct courses and attract a diverse and far-flung cohort of students, many of whom have active studio practices and teaching posts. The program follows a low-residency model and aims to channel its resources toward faculty and travel. "We take our students through art history by offering intensive seminars at the historical sites that were the locus of that period's defining cultural advancements," Smith says. "Our students begin with an intensive residency at a former feudal estate in Tuscany, where they study contemporary art theory while exploring the medieval period. From there we travel to Siena and Florence—the birthplaces of quattrocento. Field work in Berlin and Paris traces the development of mercantilism, the Enlightenment, and the subsequent rise of Modernism. Intensives in New York and visits to the Venice Biennale focus on contemporary production. It is a unique and compelling educational model—we couldn't afford these offerings if we needed to maintain a facility."

About the IDSVA

The Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, which is headquartered in Portland, Maine, and supported by a worldwide faculty, is the first and only American school solely devoted to doctoral studies in art theory for visual artists. The school offers online instruction and holds residencies in numerous European and American cities. For more information, visit www.idsva.org.

The greater question posed by IDSVA's exciting new approach is whether such a program can change the larger culture, as well as whether the culture even needs changing in this way. We have long separated those who produce art from those who critique it. After all, the two actions require very distinct skill sets. Certainly, a Ph.D. is not appropriate for every artist. But all things considered, cultural criticism, specifically art criticism, is in crisis. Not since Clement Greenberg (like him or not) has the discipline produced a clear and well-argued voice. Perhaps some artists can take on both the role of cultural critic and producer. But this is a very tall order, and there will be few individuals willing and able to balance creation and criticism in this way. But if not artists, then who? **A**

Michael Gormley is the editorial director of American Artist.

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