

KANTOR / FEUER GALLERY

[Download PDF version page 1](#)
[page 2](#)



Ryan Johnson, *Presenting*, 2003. Courtesy Zach Feuer Gallery NYC. From left: Opposite, *Ghosting*, 2004. Courtesy Ryan Johnson and Black & White Gallery New York.

THE LAUNCH OF SPACESHIP COLUMBIA

JESSICA KRAFT

NOT unlike the cultivation of yBos at Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s, the Master of Fine Arts programme at Columbia University has been spinning out some of the most success-ready graduates of the past five years. Signing on with Chelsea galleries even before their final thesis shows, some of these artists have sold their entire portfolios in one night to ambitious, Saatchi-esque collectors aiming to get in early on the next big thing. More than ever, gallerists are scoping out MFA shows for trend-setting trophies, which allows some young artists the luxury of choosing which collections they want to be included in.

The Columbia classes of 2000 and 2001 were the first to elicit this kind of frenzied market speculation, with David Altmejd, Ryan Johnson, Tim McGrath, Dana Schutz and Kevin Zucker making up the vanguard (all under 30 at the

time of their first solo exhibitions). Zach Feuer, director of Zach Feuer LFL gallery in Chelsea, became one of the biggest promoters of this group, offering shows to them after meeting some of them at a party. 'A lot of what attracted me to this group was how sophisticated the communication about studio practice was in their studio community ... their learning curve was speeded up because everyone was exploring and sharing in amazing ways,' he wrote in an email.

As the commercial success of their students was amplified, the Columbia MFA programme began to surpass the other top art schools in the area (Yale University, New York University, Pratt Institute, the School of Visual Arts and Hunter College) in reputation and numbers of applicants. When six Columbia MFA graduates were selected for the 2004 Whitney Biennial the school threw a



Opposite: Ryan Johnson, *Ghosting*, 2004.



Above, from left: Tim Lokiec, *Wilderness Child Birth Project*, 2005. Tom McGrath, *Beige Building in October Foliage*, 2005. All images courtesy: Zach Feuer Gallery (LFL).

massive party hosted by prominent collector Beth Rudin deWoody and Whitney council members at the luxury handbag boutique, VBH. But long before this party, Columbia-cultivated artwork had become a high-end commodity capable of defining the taste of a new generation of art patrons.

Dana Schutz is commonly touted as the poster child of this Columbia crowd, with her works currently selling on the secondary market for six figures. Working in colourful, high-octane oils that smear and drip delightfully, she paints an alternative reality full of parable and historical reference. The premise of her works rests on a fictional nightmare: humanity has been destroyed apart from a lone survivor, Frank, whose actions and experiences she chronicles with vivid, plastery strokes. Her largest and most developed painting is included in P.S.1's 'Greater New York' show, which exhibited works by 167 artists who have 'emerged' over the past five years and will likely be the American art stars of the future. Susan Reynolds, director of Feigen Contemporary Gallery, affirmed that the show is 'very important to collectors wanting to know some of the prevalent ideas that are out there and brewing'. With 20 per cent of 'Greater New York' artists holding the prestigious degree, Columbia's predominance in the contemporary art world was further confirmed.

So how did this boutique-size programme become such a hothouse of talent? 'Teachers there teach students the basics,' Brooklyn gallery owner Tatyana Okshteyn said. But in the programme's two years, students also pick up savvy marketing skills and learn how to approach blue-chip dealers.

Jon Kessler has recently given up the programme's chair position, which he has held since 2000. Over five years, Kessler pioneered a unique mentorship scheme that matches students with artists who spend one full week per semester working intensively with the students, developing a rich dialogue and critical exchange that extends beyond the studio to evening dinners, pub sessions and parties. 'Art school is also about the stuff that happens outside the studio,' Kessler said, 'and the art world is based on contacts and sustained relationships.'

Columbia is also one of only a few schools offering courses that address 'the business of art', instructing students about archiving practices, tax law, grant applications and other practical matters. Furthermore, the faculty list reads like a permanent collection checklist: Mark Dion, Coco Fusco, Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kara Walker all teach on the programme. But rather

conservatively, Columbia's curriculum still promotes mostly object-based art, and admitted students rarely engage with post-studio practice.

Many in the art community are now asking what will happen to those students who rocket out of graduate school with inflated sale prices? Will they quickly become known for a particular style and cease to innovate or experiment? 'While the students are in school, they're great! Once they leave, they are unable to guide themselves and they are pressured by the galleries to keep producing to meet demand,' Okshteyn said. Brian Sholis, an associate editor of *Artforum*, has observed that many of these artists get locked into solo shows, without participating in group exhibitions, which might also broaden their exposure. This leads to their development as 'single facet artists', he said, voicing a concern that speaks more about creative integrity than commercial success. But Kessler doesn't view early-career success as an impediment to future contributions. 'Rauschenberg was 25-years-old when he won the Grand Prize in Venice,' he said.

Megan Foster is one of these Columbia graduates who is able to manage commercial success in a more gradual way without getting pigeon-holed by the prospect of future sales. Represented by Black & White Gallery in Brooklyn, Foster is the master printer at Columbia and produces bold, cartoon graphic-inspired prints that reference popular films and banal suburban interiors. She sees her approach to her art as a function of the relationship with her gallery. 'Some dealers only want a certain look,' she commented, 'galleries that aren't blue-chip are more likely to allow you to take risks.'

Understandably, older artists who attended top-rate art schools 10-20 years ago and are still establishing their careers are not pleased with the current appetite for younger and younger crops of emerging talent. One Hunter College MFA grad wrote anonymously on the popular website *anaba.blogspot.com*, 'I guess I graduated at the wrong time, a few years too early, because none of this was happening then. I feel like I missed the boat. I have been trying so hard to get my work out there and there is just SILENCE everywhere.'

But in this high-stakes art economy you may get what you pay for. At over \$35,000 per year, tuition at Columbia is the highest in the industry, which is no deterrent as applications double and dealers come running.

JESSICA KRAFT IS A WRITER BASED IN NEW YORK

Kraft, Jessica. "The Launch Of Spaceship Columbia", *Contemporary*, Issue 16, No 76, 2005, pp 30-33