

Higher Learning

After decades in the shadows, Columbia is becoming the top choice for artists on the rise.

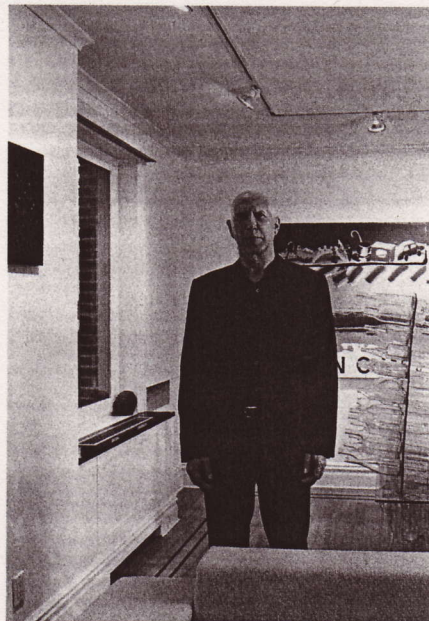
Photographs by JOSEPH MAIDA

The corner of 133rd Street and 12th Avenue is the last place one would expect to find a burgeoning New York art scene. But it's there, in a ramshackle former warehouse nestled between a sewage treatment plant, the famous Fairway grocery store and a string of autobody shops, that Dana Schutz, Ryan Johnson, Tom McGrath, Marc Handleman and Kris Benedict—young artists who have all had successful shows in Chelsea recently—spend their days stretching canvases, building armatures and playing the occasional game of soccer in the hallway outside their studios. They work together, several of them live together, and they were all lured uptown by the same institution: Columbia University School of the Arts.

Until relatively recently, one would have been hard-pressed to name a major artist trained at Columbia. There was Agnes Martin, of course, who graduated in 1952, but she studied education. Sculptor-cum-fashion-star Rachel Feinstein attended as an undergrad, but she was a religion and philosophy major. Over the past five years or so, however, the university's visual arts graduate program has steadily gained in stature. Artists such as Tim Gardner (who graduated in 1999), Barnaby Furnas (2000) and David Altmejd (2001) have become household names for the gallery crowd, and Schutz, from the class of 2002, has emerged as one of the most exciting young American painters, with Charles Saatchi collecting her exuberant oils and her gallery now selling paintings only to those who agree to donate them to museums. Another telltale sign: Six Columbia grads were featured in the most recent Whitney Biennial.

Though impressive, none of this would be surprising if the artists had studied in New Haven, Connecticut, rather than in Morningside Heights. For half a century, Yale has been the preeminent East Coast school of art, with UCLA battling CalArts and Art Center in Pasadena for West Coast domination. But now, many of the biggest talents are opting for Columbia over Yale and UCLA. "Five years ago, when I told people that I was choosing Columbia over UCLA, they were like, 'What are you talking about? Why would you do that?'" says Kevin Zucker, who received his MFA in 2002. "Right now, it's everyone's first choice."

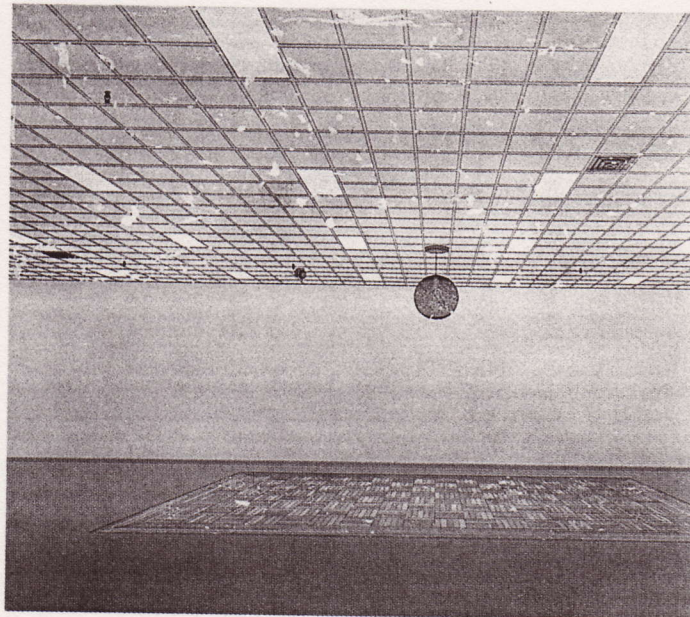
Most would agree that Zucker, who combines painting with computer graphics to create abstract mappings of interior spaces, played a major role in the elevation of Columbia's reputation. In 2001, while still in school, he was offered a solo show at the Mary Boone Gallery—hardly the sort of thing that



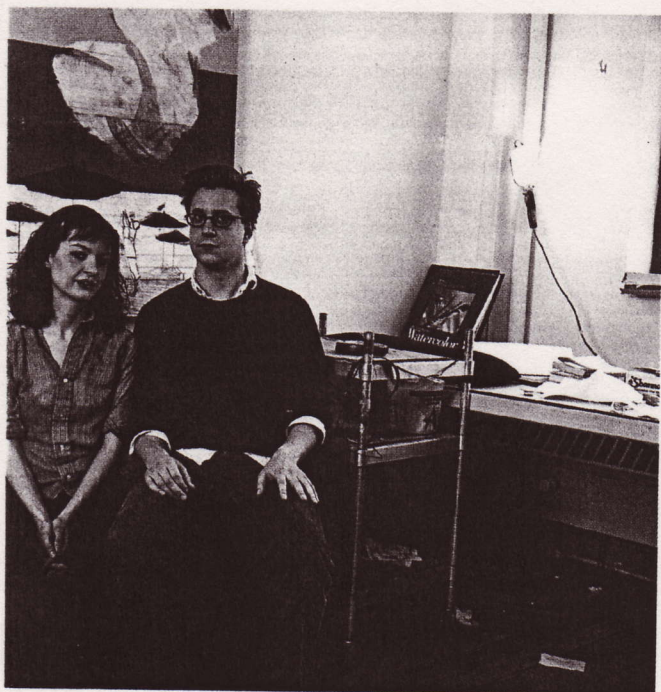
From left: Recent grads Dana Schutz, Ryan Johnson, Kris Benedict, Marc Handleman and Tom McGrath in Johnson's studio. Above: Bruce Ferguson in his art-filled apartment.

happens to a student every day, or even every decade. “Just once in a while you walk into a student’s studio and there’s really nothing to say,” says painter Ross Bleckner, who, after serving as a visiting artist at Columbia, recommended Zucker to Boone. “They’ve kind of arrived at something that is very much their own and very resolved and very interesting. I think Kevin was really that kind of student.”

Not everyone shared Bleckner’s enthusiasm for a student’s showing so soon, and in such a major way. Twentieth-century art history is full of cautionary tales about early success followed by rapid flameout, and one might imagine a 25-year-old painter feeling compelled to produce an endless number of variations on the same work to make his dealer (and himself) a quick buck. “We all knew Kevin was a brilliant young artist,” says Bruce Ferguson, dean of the School of the Arts. “But when Mary said she wanted to do a show with him before he graduated, there was a kind of crisis, because we had to figure out whether this was good for him or bad for him. The understanding is that when you get out of school you might get a gallery and have a professional life, but suddenly here was a kid who was starting his professional life while he was in school.” Four years later, Zucker—who is engaged to painter Anna Conway, a pixieish fellow Columbia grad enjoying her own share of success (including a recent sold-out show at Guild & Greyskul)—shows no signs of an imminent



Left: Anna Conway and Kevin Zucker in their studio. Above: Zucker’s *Room Accommodates Ceremony (Seasonal Pricing Flexibility)*, acrylic and transfers on canvas, 2001.



“It’s not that we’re less academic,” he adds. “It’s just that the practical side of things is taken into consideration.” This year, for instance, Columbia is offering a class called the Practicum, in which students are taught about the business of being a working artist—everything from accounting to tax law. If it sounds terribly unromantic, that’s the point. “I think in the past art was taught as if it were this romantic thing,” says Ferguson. “And in a funny way, looking back on it now, that was irresponsible. Or at least cultural conditions have changed to such a degree that now it would be irresponsible. Of course, we don’t think that commercial success is the only success for artists, but we no longer pretend that it’s not one of the indices of success.”

To those clinging to a more bohemian example for how an artist should live and work, the Columbia philosophy might sound a whole lot like careerism—a dirty word in the art world. But Columbia alumni insist that their alma mater is nothing like Goldsmith’s, the London art school that produced most of the Young British Artists in the late Eighties and became notorious for teaching students how to schmooze their way to fame and fortune. “That was one thing that really wasn’t a part of my experience [at Columbia],” says Schutz, a native of Livonia, Michigan, with a voice that sounds, in her words, “like a munchkin,” and a head full of Shirley Temple curls. “We would mainly make art for ourselves, for what we were thinking about. It wasn’t like people were doing it with a view of having a show.”

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Basquiat-style meltdown; he’s currently preparing for a show at Greenberg Van Doren and teaching undergraduate seniors at both Cooper Union and the Rhode Island School of Design. Ferguson, meanwhile, is learning to embrace the student-as-professional paradigm.

“We’ve become more like the law school and the business school in that we’re a professional school,” says the dean, who signed on in 1999 after a successful career as an independent curator and writer. (Ferguson is Canadian and has worked extensively overseas, but he is perhaps best known in the United States for founding the SITE Santa Fe art festival in New Mexico.)

Conway, who shares a studio with Zucker in the Vinegar Hill section of Brooklyn, agrees. “If there’s one thing that really stood out for me about Columbia, it was that they cultivated an atmosphere of patience,” she says. “Bruce’s long-term interest in us as artists was apparent. I never felt a rush to run to the gallery.” Definitely not a shrinking-violet type, Conway, who like many recent grads now teaches at Columbia (“They hold onto us after we graduate. It’s kind of sweet,” she says), takes umbrage at criticism of classmates who did choose to show early. “Why shouldn’t you be able to make a living?” she asks. “There’s a ridiculous

expectation about what artists are and what they do.”

More and more, for Columbia grads, showing is not so much about making a living as it is about paying off debt. The annual tuition at the school, already comparatively high at \$31,240 in 2004, will reach \$39,144 in the next three years. (Yale’s 2004 tuition bill, meanwhile, was just \$21,600, and students in Hunter College’s MFA program, whose reputation is also on the rise, pay about \$5,000 a year.) Ferguson, who has been fighting the university tooth and nail for tuition relief for his students, acknowledges that the fee is “extraordinary,” and becomes so flustered when the subject is raised that he immediately spills a bottle of water all over his desk. “It’s always an act of courage to decide to be an artist,” he says, mopping up the spill. “The last thing you want to do is add to that a punitive financial situation.”

“I think the anxiety of taking out a lot of loans and shelling out a lot of cash makes you kind of want to sell,” says Daniel Lefcourt, a student in his second, and final, year who helped pay off some of his school bill with a recent show at Taxter & Spengemann (the gallery’s owners discovered him when they visited last year’s open-studios night). Still, Lefcourt insists, he was not encouraged by anyone at Columbia to pursue the galleries. “People have the idea that you’re encouraged to produce a product here,” he says, “but actually, as soon as I started making big, finished-looking paintings, I had the harshest round of critiques. Like, brutal.”

So what, then, if not a new focus on getting students’ work into the galleries, has been responsible for Columbia’s recent rise? There’s the faculty, of course: Artists Kara Walker, Rikrit Tiravanija, Charline von Heyl and Janine Antoni are there, and sculptor Jon Kessler, who is enjoying something of a revival thanks to a recent, well-reviewed show at Deitch Projects, is the visual arts department’s outgoing chairman. There’s also the fact that the school is just a taxi ride away for many of the biggest names in the art world, making it easy for Ferguson to convince major gallerists and artists to visit. If there’s one white box most closely associated with the Columbia artists, it’s Chelsea’s much-talked-about Zach Feuer Gallery (LFL), whose young owner has shown the work of Schutz, McGrath, Johnson, Zucker and other Columbia grads. “I’m 26, and they’re all around 26, so I’ve just sort of known them,” says Feuer. “I met Kevin through a friend. I met Dana at a party. I met Tom through Dana.” While Feuer is reluctant to coin the idea of a Columbia “school” of art, he sees at least one similarity among the artists. “Before, the majority of the graduate-student work I was seeing was really sort of conceptual and forced. But [the recent Columbia students] were really sort of freeing themselves up and enjoying the process of making art. It shows.”

Some of this freedom comes from Columbia’s interdisciplinary approach, with painters, video artists and photographers working side by side, critiquing one another’s output and jumping between media with abandon. (Lefcourt, for example, says the paintings he recently exhibited were the first he’s done in five years; he works primarily in video and



Right: Dana Schutz’s *Hand*, oil on canvas, 2004. Below: Tom McGrath’s *Untitled (Over the Hedge)*, oil on canvas, 2004.



digital photography. Ryan Johnson, a 2003 graduate who is engaged to Schutz and has a studio across the hall from hers, painted all through school but just had a show of his life-size figure sculptures made from colored paper.) “They have less of a genre distinction at Columbia, and that to me reflects so much more directly the way artists work now,” says Shamim Momin, cocurator of the 2004 Whitney Biennial.

But according to just about everyone you talk to, it all comes down to the fact that a graduate program is only as good as the students enrolled in it. “The secret of art schools is that the students teach one another, probably late at night, and in ways

that I can never know,” says Jerry Saltz, art critic at the *Village Voice*, who teaches at Columbia, New York’s School of Visual Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago. Columbia has attracted more than its share of young talent lately, and success has bred success. According to Saltz, who devoted a recent column to Lefcourt’s show, the buzz doesn’t appear to be of the flash-in-the-pan variety, either. “I’m personally interested in artists who are interested in having not 30-month careers but 30-year careers,” he says. “And as fizzy as it is right now, Columbia does a good job of teaching students the value of that.”

The school also seems to do a good job of teaching students how to avoid the pitfalls—and pratfalls—of art-world stardom. The Columbia crowd doesn’t make news by dancing naked on barroom tables or engaging in other Damien Hirst-style antics. They’re a decidedly nose-to-the-grindstone crew. When asked what she and her grad school friends do for fun, Schutz says, “We mostly hang out in the studio. If we’re not here we get ‘studio guilt’ and feel like we should be.

“I mean, sometimes we do go out,” she continues, laughing. “We go across the street to Fairway. We go get olives at the grocery store. Woo-hoo!”

—JENNY COMITA