

PERSPECTIVE

ART FOR SCHOOL'S SAKE

Too many institutions want students to conform to criteria that can be tested and evaluated. The result is pedagogy, not creativity.

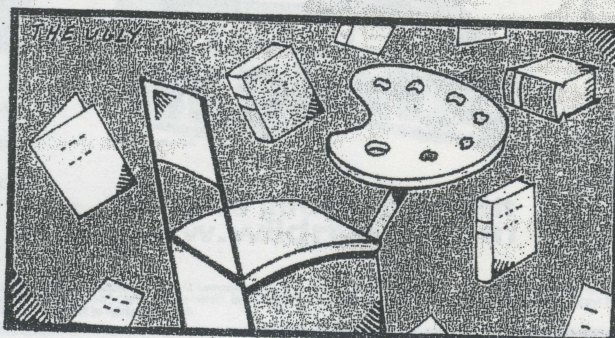
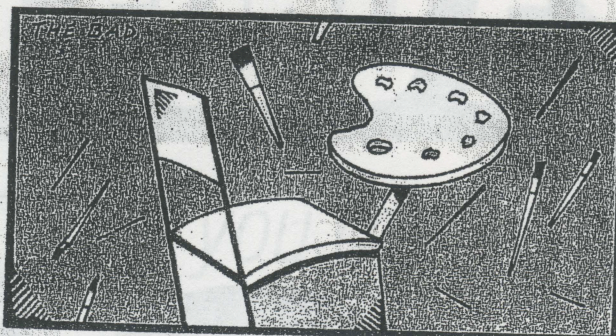
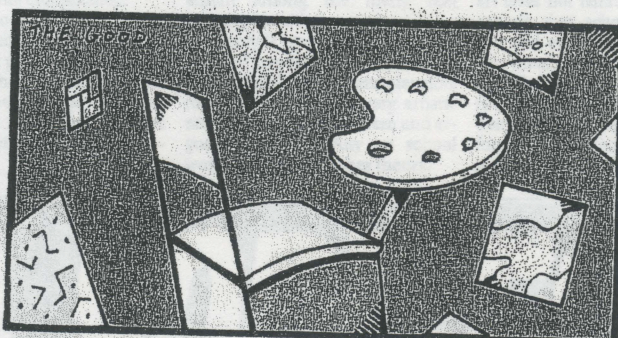
By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

These days, a young artist can barely get arrested, never mind launch a career, without having gone to art school. And usually not just undergraduate art school either. Art, after a century of flourishing on the margins, is now a mature mainstream profession. The MFA—the master of fine arts—is its professional emblem.

"Public Offerings," the sprawling exhibition in the middle of its run at the Museum of Contemporary Art, got started as a curatorial attempt at taking stock of exactly what the art school phenomenon has meant for art in the 1990s and beyond. And I do mean "taking stock." The show's cheeky title invokes the boom in IPOs—initial public offerings—that characterized dot-com stock in the Clinton years.

The original working title for the exhibition had been "Global Academy," to highlight the art school underpinning that characterizes most art and artists today. All 25 artists in the show graduated from prestigious art programs in Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, and all 25 have high profiles today. "Their success," the show's bulky catalog declares, "has raised the profile of art schools and the issue of the programs' increasingly important role."

Greater Los Angeles claims more significant art schools than any other urban area in America—and, in fact, probably more than any other on the planet. Young artists who graduated from L.A. art schools dominate "Snapshot," a current survey at the UCLA Hammer Museum of young artists working here. The show includes six graduates from UCLA, six from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, six from CalArts in Valencia, three from Otis College of Art and Design in West L.A. and one from down the 405 Freeway at UC Irvine. Only four of the 25 didn't go to art school here, and all



RANDY LYHUS / For The Times

of those studied someplace else.

In America this phenomenon has been building for 50 years, ever since the GI Bill sent thousands of ex-soldiers into higher education programs after World War II. Before the war, college was the exception for young Americans; after, it became the norm. A lot of those who took advantage of the GI Bill ended up studying art, and a lot of those who studied art ended up becoming important artists.

As with the influx of European expatriate artists who were fleeing fascism in the 1930s—and who presented a model of seriousness and prestige that had always eluded our young nation's art world—it's not too much to say that the GI Bill was instrumental in the maturing of American modern art. Before 1950, commercial illustration was a likely avenue to fine art; after 1950, the route was school.

Just what makes today's art schools so different, so appealing? There are probably as many answers as there are schools. For me, however, art schools are typically one of three types: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly.

The easiest to identify and understand are the Bad art schools. A Bad art school is fixated on teaching technique. Curriculum is focused on things like life drawing, foundry work or principles of design. The hoary idea seems to be that if a student can master technique, she will have earned the tools with which to build her individual expression. Command of technique, as the German Romantic philosophers first explained, would allow nature to express itself through the inspiration of the artist.

Back in the 1980s, when Neo-Expressionism was making celebrities out of painters whose technical training in the medium was spotty at best, critical voices of despair loudly lamented the failure of technique in an era when the video camera had replaced the pencil as the classroom-

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the Set

Frankenheimer: He was impossible with crews, which is why we had to fire him off "The Horsemen." The Spanish crew revolted. It was impossible for him to relate to them. We had a revolution the first day of shooting. I didn't want to work without him, but after that incident on "The Horsemen" I couldn't do it. He was terrible to the crew on "Seconds" too, but he was great with me.

Wexler: He was a sweet guy, but he was a boxer before he was a cameraman. He was always somewhat in that fight stance. Once you got past that and he knew that you were a friend and you were OK, he'd relax. He used to whittle on the set. In my experience he was a very introspective person.

Art Versus Craft

Babb: Once or twice, people would interview him and say you are a real artist. You are a poet of the camera, and he was just kind of embarrassed by it. But secretly he knew he was a lot more than a technician. I tried to tell him it wasn't a disgrace to be an artist. I think he was just embarrassed! □

Susan King is a Times staff writer.

Knight: Art-School Approaches—the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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Practice isn't hard to understand. It's the same as it is for any profession, from medicine to social work, journalism to the ministry. Practice is immersion in a calling or vocation. It's full engagement with the profession of making art now. Practice is thinking as an artist, living as an artist, working as an artist. And doing it while in school.

That's why an overburdened

Art has always been a difficult fit with school because making new art does not conform to objective criteria that schools can test. That's one reason most art schools are Bad art schools.

emphasis on technique is a hallmark of the Bad art school. Technique is just one fragmentary element among the many that encompass artistic practice.

Theory is easy too. Theory is the body of hypotheses, suppositions and principles that seem plausible for the present day. Every artistic era has them, lives by them and argues over them. Any art school worth its tuition teaches theory.

So what's the difference between a Good art school and an Ugly art school, if both are seriously concerned with theory and with practice? The difference is: Good art schools privilege practice over theory; Ugly art schools privilege theory over practice.

For art students, practice is more important than theory because being an artist is not a scholarly discipline. To approach making art as a scholarly discipline is to attempt to establish an authoritative society of learned persons—to establish, in other words, an academy. The goal is

change, and an excellent spot weld can be measured.

The same goes for theory. Theories can be taught and learned, and the learning can be evaluated with reasonable objectivity, the same way the Peloponnesian War or organic chemistry can. And that's the danger. Theory is a scholarly discipline, like history or science, even if making art is not.

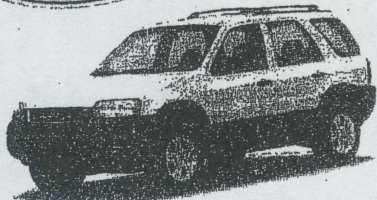
In Good art schools, especially good MFA programs, students are encouraged from the first day to stop thinking of themselves as students and to start thinking of themselves as working artists. Scholars, by contrast, remain willing students all their lives; it's in the nature of the beast. In Good art schools, a faculty of working artists banishes students, regarding them instead as younger peers. That's the emphasis on practice.

Emphasizing theory blocks that essential shift. A student at an art school that privileges theory over practice can never be anything other than a student. Ugly art schools keep students as students. The academy prospers, but art wilts.

How ugly is that? □

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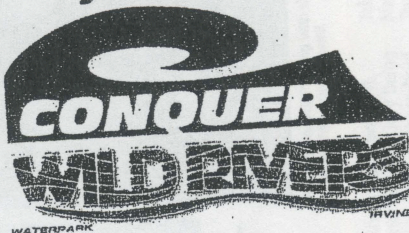


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