

## ALUMNI PROFILE:

# KAREN WIRTH

It is difficult to write a profile on alumna Karen M. Wirth. She defies convenient categories. Her work involves sculpture, installation, and architecture. As an educator, she has taught K-12 and museum education, and has taught in private and public colleges and universities. Her administrative experience spans a variety of roles from academic dean to board member and oversight of public art project art designs. Driven by her many interests, Wirth has ventured into various areas of the art world. She has had tremendous success in all of her pursuits. The Department of Art is very proud to claim her as one of its most outstanding graduates.

Wirth received her MFA from the University of Minnesota in 1990 and her BFA magna cum laude from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where she graduated first in her class. In 1984, she did graduate work in Art Education at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD. She has taught at the University of Minnesota, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), and the College of Visual Arts (CVA), St. Paul, MN, where she was Dean of Academic Affairs from 1999-2001 and Associate Professor since 1993. After an extensive national search, she was recently hired as Chair of Fine Arts at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design where she will assume her administrative responsibilities this fall.

Throughout her career, Wirth has consistently been the recipient of grants, fellowships, and honors. Some of these awards include a Minnesota State Arts Board Visual Artist Fellowship, two Jerome Visual Arts Travel and Study Grants, a Bush Foundation Visual Arts Fellowship, two Jerome Foundation/M.C.B.A. Book Arts Fellowships, and a National Endowment for the Arts regional Visual Arts Fellowship. She was recently received an American Institute of Architects Minnesota Honor Award for Open Book Staircase, with MS&R architects.

Wirth is an artist with an extensive exhibition record. She has participated in numerous solo and small group exhibitions as well as public art and architectural projects. Much of her work is interdisciplinary. What connects the "dots?" How does she integrate the many facets of her talents?

*My work blends sculpture, installation, and architecture. Often the work refers to books for both structure and content. These disciplines allow me to develop ideas about space and human experience: public and private, presence and absence or loss, revelation and concealment. No matter what the medium or form, I begin with the concept, and work with materials that will best support the idea.*

*In the past few years I have collaborated with architects, most often MS&R, on large-scale public art/architecture projects: designing light rail train stations for the Minneapolis Hiawatha Project and the grand staircase as sculptural book at the Open Book Center. In all cases, I am critically interested in how the formal and conceptual elements*



KAREN WIRTH DOING A RUBBING AT THE CLOISTERS OF SAN GIOVANNI LATERANO IN ROME, ITALY.

*of the work affect or dictate the experience for the viewer. The formal elements of architecture and public space such as light/shadow and compression/expansion of volume are not designed solely for visual effects, but also to direct the physical and conceptual experience.*

*On differing scales, those issues are the same in my books and installations: Scale and proportion affect body relationships; materials invite touching; spatial arrangements guide movement. Where there are objects and sound in my installations, there is image and text in a book. The interaction of the viewer with the materials, structure and composition all add layers of meaning. The merging of space and viewer, perception and experience is my ultimate goal.*

*The pleasure of conceptual development, the joy in the making, and the temerity to get it out there have led me to explore new directions with confidence and wonder.*

Wirth's dynamic leadership experience made her the prime candidate in MCAD's search for a Chair of Fine Arts. She will bring her working knowledge of all areas within the Fine Arts as both a studio practitioner and an educator to this position. Her six years as Chair of Fine Arts and two years as Academic Dean at CVA have undoubtedly prepared her for the challenges that await her at MCAD. She has strong ideas about curriculum and art education.

*A contemporary curriculum must balance tradition and innovation. Traditional discipline-based teaching provides a strong cohesive education that allows students to make informed choices. A contemporary curriculum must also address changes in the field, as art moves increasingly into a global, interdisciplinary practice. It is in the migration*

*between that effective change happens. A curriculum is a living thing. Fluid thinking and creative problem solving, both as an academic leader and in cooperation with the department faculty, enriches the program and strengthens it in times of flux.*

*I believe that a successful art education must include multiple approaches. It should provide a grounding in aesthetics and composition, technical skills, exposure to a wide range of materials, conceptual development, critical thinking, creative problem solving, historical background with a contemporary outlook, and connections to the broader art and social communities. I also believe that being an artist is a gift and a privilege. I encourage students to have passion, commitment, and a vital understanding of what they do and why.*

*What does this mean for MCAD? Whenever there is a change in academic leadership, whether it is the president or the department chair, it is a time of flux. Potential is explored through collective assessment where the program has been and imagined possibilities. A primary responsibility of the new department chair is to provide stable leadership that supports the core values of the department while building new direction in cooperation with the faculty.*

Like the tension between the roles of artist and teacher, there is a tension between the roles of administrator and artist. Both roles are very consuming. Wirth has the taxing job of providing leadership and direction to the fine arts department of a major art school. As an artist, she must also find time for the studio. She regards this as a question of balance.

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## NOTES FROM THE NASH

The fall of 2003 marks the opening of the new Katherine E. Nash Gallery. A gallery of 4,900 square feet of floor space and 560 linear feet, the gallery is one of the finest exhibition facilities in the region. Designed by nationally acclaimed architects Meyer, Scherer, and Rockcastle, the gallery is located at 504 East 21st Avenue South, the very heart of the West Bank Arts Quarter. The School of Music and the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance are both within a short walking distance. For so many years, the Nash was buried in the lower concourse of Willey Hall. The new Nash is easy to find. Its new location guarantees the gallery the visibility it so very much deserves.

Please take the time to review the schedule of exhibitions at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery for this academic year. The exhibitions promise to "show-off" the wonderful functions of the new facility, functions which include flexibility, a sophisticated lighting program, and a moveable wall at the north end of the gallery allowing subtle control of natural light. It is indeed appropriate that the inaugural exhibition showcase the work of Department of Art faculty. *Art Moves: 2003 Department of Art Faculty Exhibition* will showcase the latest work by the department's talented faculty. In addition to the new Nash Gallery, the new art building also has some very worthy programmable public spaces that will be used to present the work of students in the department's degree programs. These public spaces will be featuring the *MAN DAT ORY*

*2003 Graduate Student Exhibition*, an exhibition which will be running concurrently with the faculty exhibition. Both exhibitions will help celebrate the opening of the new Nash Gallery and Art Building.

The faculty exhibition will be followed by *New Photography: McKnight Fellows 2002/2003*. This exhibition showcases the 2002 winners of the University of Minnesota/McKnight Foundation Artist Fellowships for Photographers Program. One of the most coveted awards for Minnesota photographers, this year's exhibition will feature work by Douglas Beasley, St. Paul; William Cottman, Minneapolis; Vince Leo, Minneapolis; and Peter Haakon Thompson, Minneapolis. This year's exhibition will also present the creative work of the three review panelists who selected the 2002 award recipients: Jim Goldberg, photographer, San Francisco, CA; Andrea Modica, photographer, Manitou Springs, Co; and Willie Osterman, photographer/teacher, Rochester, NY.

The winter season at the Nash begins with *The 4th Minnesota National Print Biennial*, an exhibition featuring work by this national competition. *The Minnesota National Print Biennial* has consistently demonstrated the vitality of printmaking in all forms. Its goals are to stimulate interest in print activity and provide a forum for an exchange of techniques, trends, and ideas. Always a spectacular exhibition, the last *Minnesota National Print Biennial* was hosted by the



Weisman Art Museum. The 4th biennial will be curated by Siri Engberg, Associate Curator, Walker Art Center; Marjorie Devon, Director, Tamarind Institute, University of New Mexico; and John Scott, Artist/Professor at Xavier University.

In February 2004, the Nash Gallery will host a spectacular exhibit of contemporary photography from Iran entitled *Persian Silver*. It is made possible through the cross-cultural relationship built by our own professor of photography, Gary Hallman, and is the first exhibit of work by Iranian photographers outside Iran since that country's revolution. We are very excited about this show. Watch for more information.

Of course, there will be many opportunities next year for viewing student work. The Nash will be hosting Master of Fine Arts exhibitions and Bachelor of Fine Arts exhibitions will be staged throughout the new Regis Center for Art wonderful public spaces.

We hope to see you at the Nash this fall!