

art

Learning curve

Minnesota college art professors and students collaborate in a new show at MCAD.

ART REVIEW MARY ABBE



For Karen Wirth, the magic moment came at a Sunday brunch last February.

As a top administrator at Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), Wirth had recently returned from New York, where she spent the previous year being mentored at Parsons School of Design. The New York college's provost and dean served as role models while she developed new ideas about teaching art. The brunch was her moment to see if what she had learned could inspire colleagues, too.

"I put together a leadership group — all these women who are, or were recently, heads of art departments at colleges around the Twin Cities," Wirth said. "It was such a vibrant, powerful group, all of whom have the same work-life struggles and institutional needs and yet we're competitors. It was so wonderful to talk about these issues away from the institutions."

Out of that happy morning came a year-long experiment culminating in an exhibition that opened this week at MCAD.

As suggested by its title, "Intersections: Women, Leadership, and the Power of Collaboration," the show is more about process than product. It emphasizes cooperative, cross-generational and loosely feminist ways of making art. Participants include 14 female leaders of art departments at 11 Minnesota colleges and universities plus 18 graduates or current students — mostly women — who developed projects with their teachers.

The process of collaboration "changes the student-teacher dynamic," said Wirth, who is now MCAD's interim vice president of academic affairs. "We don't often do that because it's hard to fit into results-based programs, yet as practicing artists and designers we have to know how to collaborate and we have to tweak pedagogy to see how this succeeds or fails."

Collaboration tested

Wirth picked Isa Gagarin, a 2008 MCAD graduate, as her collaborator. They started by reading "The Waves," a poetic 1931 novel about consciousness by the English feminist Virginia Woolf. After a lot of stops, starts and "re-grouping," they distilled their response into a two-part installation that includes a spare, 10-second video loop of their own creation and a 47-second video loop of minimalist images about waves, movement and the void.

"The text is about nothingness and the video is about a meditative process," said Wirth.

Other participants took a more traditional tack. Patricia Olson, a past chair of the art department at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, and former student Roxi Swanson sought inspiration in art history. As figurative painters, they generated four portraits that infuse traditional paintings with contemporary sensibilities. Olson portrayed herself in the tuxedoed guise of German expressionist Max Beckmann and her student as a lush 19th-century French woman by J.A.D. Ingres. Swanson did a self-portrait in the style of contemporary artist Jenny Saville and portrayed her mentor, Olson, in the manner of the early-20th-century Austrian painter Egon Schiele.

Additional projects include a multimedia photo show, utopian landscapes projected onto a wall, objects on pedestals that are not necessarily traditional sculptures, and photo series.

"The idea of artists being these singular creative geniuses has been debunked for generations, but this really shows that there are many ways to work together," said Kerry Morgan, MCAD's gallery director.

One of the more ambitious projects grew from a collaboration between Laura Migliorino and two of her former students at Anoka-Ramsey Community College. The students, sisters Mayu and Yumi Nagaoka, are first generation Japanese-Americans, while Migliorino is an Italian-American who has often focused on immigration and assimilation issues. Together they produced a photo-narrative loosely inspired by Puccini's tragic opera "Madame Butterfly" about misguided Japanese-American relationships. Their 12 images update the story with contemporary costumes and gender ambiguity.

"The project brought out some wonderful and unexpected things," said Migliorino. "It was much slower than working alone and you have to let go and compromise, but the result was a richer, more in-depth and intimate collaboration."



Laura Migliorino and two of her former students at Anoka-Ramsey Community College, sisters Mayu and Yumi Nagaoka, collaborated for a photo-narrative loosely inspired by Puccini's tragic opera "Madame Butterfly."



Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel "The Wave" was the inspiration behind "Nothing Staid," an installation by MCAD administrator Karen Wirth and former MCAD student Isa Gagarin.

RIK SFERRA



Patricia Olson's painting (above) of former student Roxi Swanson and Swanson's painting (left) of Olson, her former professor at St. Catherine University, were inspired by art history.

INTERSECTIONS: WOMEN, LEADERSHIP, AND THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

What: Art projects by 14 women who chair Minnesota college art departments and 18 student/alumnae collaborators. • **When:** 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Mon-Fri., 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Sat.; noon-5 p.m. Sun. Ends Feb. 26. • **Where:** Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 2501 Stevens Av. S. • **Events:** Reception 6-8 p.m. Fri. Talks at noon Feb. 2 and 6:30 p.m. Feb. 15. Lecture, 6:30 p.m. Feb. 8. • **Admission:** Free. • **Info:** 612-874-03700 or www.mcad.edu.