



CREATIVE REVIEW



Creative Insight

THE SECRETS OF NURTURING YOUNG CREATIVE TALENT

We speak to the faculty of top art and design schools – Falmouth University, Gobelins and the School of Visual Arts – to get an insight into how they spot talent and the pressures of reputation

By *Rebecca Fulleylove* 19/04/2021



When applying to an art and design institution or looking at a school’s alumni, talk of reputation inevitably comes up. This might be subjective, but when the same schools continue to churn out great creative after great creative it makes sense to look a little deeper to find out if it’s the students, the teaching or a combination of the two that’s behind a successful stream of alumni.

With this in mind, we’ve spoken to a handful of lecturers and department heads at three leading art and design schools: Sue Clarke, senior illustration lecturer at Falmouth University in Cornwall; Joseph Maida, chair of the BFA photography and video department at School of Visual Arts in New York; and Moïra Marguin, head of animation at Gobelins l’École de l’image in Paris. They discuss tailoring teaching style depending on the student; how you can spot a great future creative; the importance of

depending on the student, how you can spot a great future creative, the importance of thoroughly preparing students for the professional world; and more.



Top: The photography darkroom at School of Visual Arts in New York. Above: Kerris Vean building, Falmouth Campus

WHAT SETS THESE SCHOOLS APART FROM THE REST?

Past students of the University of Falmouth's illustration course include Charlotte Trounce, Josh McKenna and Harriet Lee-Merrion, and it's built a reputation for being one of the best places to study illustration in the UK. Though London is often hailed as the UK's creative hub, it's refreshing that a coastal town in Cornwall has become just as buzzy. Sue Clarke, who's been teaching on Falmouth's BA Illustration course for 17 years and is currently senior lecturer, believes it's the location that has helped it stand apart.

"Being located far from large cities has prompted us to consciously reach out and connect with creative opportunities nationally and internationally, to ensure that students are fully 'clued up', connected and aware of the breadth and scope of illustration," she notes. "The university has a strong sense of community, both creative and supportive. It is a prominent feature of Falmouth and contributes to its creative identity as a town."





Editorial illustration by Harriet Lee-Merrion, Falmouth University class of 2013

One of the distinct features of the illustration course is the importance placed on developing professional practice skills as well as intellectual and creative abilities, to help prepare students for their future careers.

“Students gain insight into the industry from the first year through visits to magazines, publishers, design companies and through an illustration forum. This provides a tangible context for their exploratory creative journey through the BA,” explains Clarke. “Their awareness of the industry builds through a Professional Practice Lecture Programme in the third year, and culminates in an Industry Feedback Week just before students graduate. This effectively provides students with a trial run of how to promote their work when they graduate, and builds their confidence to be proactive with self-promotion.”





Gobelins campus building

It's a similar approach at Gobelins, where the emphasis is placed on helping the students adjust to working life as quickly and easily as possible. The animation school has been operating for almost 50 years and has hoards of alumni working at Disney-Pixar, Dreamworks, Warner Bros and more. "For a while, we were the only school teaching animation and training students for the industry," says Moira Marguin, who's been head of animation at the institution since 2010.

What gives Gobelins the edge is the fact that more than 90% of its teachers are also working professionals, who come together and create a curriculum that aims to help students succeed in the industry. "The other thing we try to do is to put the students in conditions that are closest to the way it works in a studio. So we don't have classes in the traditional way, it's a project-based pedagogy, and so the students will work on a project for four or seven weeks long," explains Marguin.



Coffin by Yuanqing Cai, Nathan Crabot, Houzhi Huang, Mikolaj Janiw, Mandimby Lebon, Théo Tran Ngoc, Gobelins class of 2020

Another key focus is how Gobelins anchors a lot of its teaching in character animation, as it's the most valuable skill in the industry. "You want to be a storyboard artist or a director, but on projects you only have one storyboarder and one director, yet you always

have a crew of character animators,” says Marguin.

“So if our graduate students have all these skills plus the skills of being a character animator, they can be sure they will always have the possibility to work and earn money.” This explains Gobelins’ current ranking as the top animation school in the world, and its track record of having around 90% of its graduates gain full-time employment within six months of leaving.



Killing Time by Camille Guillot, Fanny Hagdahl Sörebo, Aleksandra Krechman, Sarah Naciri, Morgane Revelonary, and Valentine Zhang, Gobelins class of 2019

At the School of Visual Arts in New York, there’s a similar emphasis on pairing students with leading mentors from the professional field for the BFA photography and video course. But in addition to this, the department actively changes and develops its offering to students.

“When you can express yourself honestly and authentically – with strong technical articulation to boot – you are in charge of your destiny, and you make an impact”

“My department values technique, concept, and responsibility equally, and we are constantly revising the curriculum, investing in new equipment, and organising exhibitions and programming that reflect the current moment to reiterate our mission. We know who we are, and we ask our students to be in touch with themselves, too,” explains Joseph Maida, who’s been the chair of the photography and video BFA for the last three years, but also taught at SVA for 15 years before that.

“When you can express yourself honestly and authentically – with strong technical articulation to boot – you are in charge of your destiny, and you make an impact. Our students learn how to do precisely that, and they have success because we help them understand who they are, what they are capable of, and how to reach their maximum potential.”





School of Visual Arts campus building

SVA was founded in 1947 and boasts some impressive alumni across the arts such as Keith Haring, Samuel Bayer, Justine Kurland, and David LaChapelle. One of the benefits of working in such a creative institution, Maida feels, is the autonomy he and his department have in shaping the curriculum.

“Good leadership matters, and too much bureaucracy is inherently problematic, especially at an institution that is committed to art, creativity, and free expression,” he explains. “SVA’s President understands this and empowers his Chairs to make decisions about education based on the students’ real-time needs and experiences.”



Jump by Jacob Mendel, current student at SVA

THE MARKINGS OF A GREAT CREATIVE

While all the tutors we spoke to agree that there isn’t a specific type of person who applies to these institutions, the educators say that there are certain qualities they look for and try to spot when a new year group arrives.

“Students who become successful creatives will often have a total passion for their work, an open mind for new challenges and discoveries,” says Clarke of her students at Falmouth. “Plus a thirst for creative experimentation, a need to draw/make/create, and an ability to apply personal, critical, reflective, analytical thinking – alongside a desire to work very hard!”



Chairs by Charlotte Trounce, Falmouth University class of 2011

Similarly for Maida it's a mix of the practical and theoretical, but also that 'artist's instinct'. "A great creative is able to see the world consciously and with intention," he says. "They are open to experiences outside of themselves and understand how to become a better person because of their engagement with the larger community."

"What's needed is a good sense of observation, that's probably one of the first qualities as an animator. You need to watch how people move, and how things express themselves"

Having the potential to develop a visual language is also a skill Maida looks for. “Students who can take good pictures are important, but even more important are students who can take multiple good pictures, which together express a complex thought around a particular subject or topic,” he says. “So, I’m always looking for someone who understands the details and the bigger picture at once.”

Marguin looks for a sense of curiosity in order to make the most of what’s offered by the teachers and fellow students at Gobelins. “Also I think what’s needed is a good sense of observation, that’s probably one of the first qualities because you need to feed your creativity as an animator,” she adds. “You need to watch how people move, how animals move, how things express themselves. It’s all about observation.”



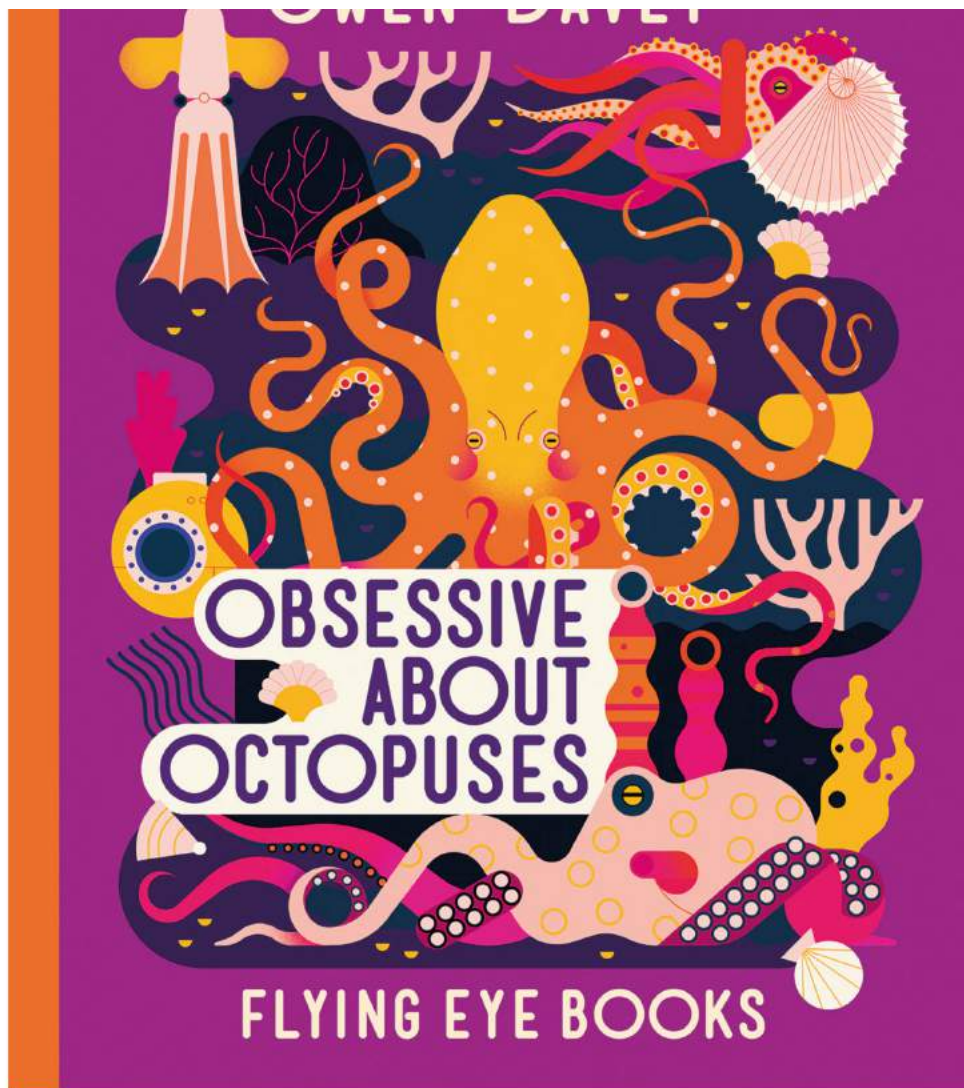
Image by Aubrey Wipfli, current student at SVA

HOW TO NURTURE TALENT

Once these qualities have been spotted, it’s about harnessing and finessing the talent of these young creatives, which tends to differ depending on both the institution and the course.

“The plurality of our department, which includes faculty who are celebrated photographers and video artists alongside photo editors, art directors, historians, and scholars, means that we are able to support and nurture every student’s talents, though those potentials are as diverse as our students themselves,” explains Maida. “This is why we have students who go on to be art stars, fashion photographers, editorial darlings, and picture editors, to name but a few of their successful career paths.”

To encourage this, Maida says his team helps pupils to be informed, to take risks and to remain engaged. “To make something arresting is one thing, but to understand what you’ve done, what it communicates, and how it functions is something much greater,” he notes. “My style of teaching is to nurture my students while holding them accountable to their role in my classroom and in the larger community.”



Obsessive about Octopuses book cover by Owen Davey, Falmouth University class of 2009

The diverse range of work that Falmouth's illustration students go on to do means that the individual advice and mentorship each student receives is key. For the first couple of years Clarke says there's an emphasis on creating new challenges to open up the scope of what illustration is, mainly to shake up their work patterns. By third year, Clarke says teaching is more akin to consultancy with extra focus placed on individual guidance to allow students to recognise their "unique skills and interests" and the creative challenges they need to overcome.

"I would say that an overriding key factor in nurturing talent, across all year groups, is to help students build their confidence in their own work"

"While still encouraging students to stretch their potential, there is a shift towards helping them develop and refine more specialist skills and evolve their personal distinctive visual language," explains Clarke. All teaching at Falmouth tends to involve balancing individual support alongside knowledge-based lectures, while encouraging students to reflect internally on their strengths as well as looking outwards for sources of inspiration and challenges.

"I would say that an overriding key factor in nurturing talent, across all year groups, is to

help students build their confidence in their own work,” she continues. This approach is echoed by Marguin, who acknowledges the extreme competition young animators face. To combat this, every student gets the most amount of attention possible.



Strawberry Perfume by Samuel Klughertz, Alix Arrault, Jules Rigolle, and Martin Hurmane, Gobelins class of 2017

“The maximum number of students in a class is 30, and if you compare that with other universities, they often have many more students,” says Marguin. “So we can do a very close follow-up of the work the students are creating, and this also helps each student to succeed in their projects, as well as their personal goals.”

With the school accepting 30% of international students, Gobelins caters to their pupils further by splitting each year into two groups, one French-speaking and one English-speaking so everyone can get the right attention.

WHAT STUDENTS EXPECT

We’ve talked a lot about what teachers and department heads are looking for, but part of what allows these institutions to continually produce great talent is progress – which is guided as much by the students as the faculty.





Potassium by Aileen Barney, current student at SVA

“Students generally want what everyone wants: to be seen, to be heard, to be respected, and to be validated. The specific terms of these expectations and how they play out are always changing because of broader cultural, political, economic and social shifts, but the essence of what students hope for remains consistent,” explains Maida.

“A key challenge of the job involves balancing teaching delivery with administrative duties and the growing needs for student pastoral support”

Clarke finds that most students expect a combination of good contact time with staff, access to facilities, and a breadth of learning and opportunities, but notes that nowadays there are higher expectations with regards to future employability. “Since the implementation of student fees, and the substantial personal investment that a degree now involves, I have recognised a slight shift in how students perceive their education, from valuing the academic experience in its own right to placing greater importance on the outcome and more pressure on themselves to achieve higher grades,” she reflects. “This can have the positive impact of increased commitment from students, but also the negative consequences of less risk-taking and experimentation.”

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The Parisianer cover by Charlotte Trounce, Falmouth University class of 2013

The pressure that comes with running a reputable course and producing notable alumni also applies to the staff, especially as a lot of the focus is on preparing students for a creative career – which, in the current climate, isn't always guaranteed. “A key challenge of the job involves balancing teaching delivery with administrative duties and the growing needs for student pastoral support,” says Clarke. “The need for pastoral support has increased significantly over the last few years, and with the impact the pandemic has had on well-being globally I am anticipating this becoming even more of a challenge.”

Likewise for Marguin at Gobelins, her two big challenges are ensuring the students gain employment at the end of their time there, and adapting to what students require from the teaching. “Students are changing the way they want to learn, they want the possibility to customise the programme,” she says. “I think sometimes we need to wait for them to ask what information they want to be given rather than spoon feed it just because it's in the curriculum.”

The needs or expectations of students might have shifted, but the constant is the dedication of staff at creative institutions. It's this, in combination with students' willingness to develop, that continues to produce exciting young talent. “It is very rewarding to feel that you have contributed to the incredible creative journey that many students undertake over the three years of their degree, often overcoming many challenges, struggles and moments of self-doubt along the way,” says Clarke. “We often feel very proud to see their potential and ambitions come to fruition. It is particularly rewarding when students (sometimes years later) acknowledge the significant role you have played in helping them make that journey.”

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