

Freedom to Flourish

Chiseled into a stone façade of the oldest wing of The University of Iowa's Art Building, Roman block letters spell the aphorism *ars longa vita brevis est*. If art endures and life is short, then the University's School of Art and Art History has been responsible for the productive lifetimes of generations of artists who have made work of lasting significance. Since the late 1930s, they've come from all corners of the planet to participate in a program that grants aspiring artists the opportunity to work side by side with artists of great distinction and the freedom to pursue their personal paths.

Robert Tillman knows the pursuit can include surprising side trips. When the Baltimore native began his graduate work at Iowa two years ago, he was a printmaker, but a year into his studies, he changed course.

"There's a lot of competition, and I didn't want to get lost in the crowd," he says. "I began to mature as an artist when I started to see the importance of my personal strengths and interests."

Tillman's new work promotes the value of collective effort. Inside his cramped study space at the Art Building, Tillman found inspiration close at hand, in an empty desk drawer, and he went to

work converting the unused space into a miniature replica of an art gallery, no more than two feet deep and a foot high. In delicate verisimilitude, it completely resembles exhibition space any struggling artist would covet, right down to the track lighting and smooth-sanded floor. For two years, Tillman's Hardly Peppercorn Gallery featured prints—measuring fewer than two square inches—by fellow Iowa printmaking students. In preparation for his thesis requirement, Tillman issued an open call for artwork, and submissions poured in from artists as far away as Belgium, Scotland, and Spain.

The new incarnation of the Hardly Peppercorn Gallery is a mixed media installation called *Iowa Miniprint International 2002*. According to Keith Achepohl, Tillman's thesis adviser and head of the art school's printmaking department, the international exhibition of 34 miniature prints represents a survey of contemporary printmaking that's diverse in media, in content, and in geography.

"My new work is not about art hanging on a wall," says Tillman, who has exhibited his prints across the country and abroad. "What I love about my gallery is the ridiculously small scale, and that it incorporates my interest in performance.

Top: Carianne Mack attributes her growth as an artist over the last few years to many things lowan, among them long countryside drives and her new friendships with Iowa Writers' Workshop students.

The opening of this spring's annual M.F.A. exhibit at the UI Museum of Art showcased the thesis work of 38 art students. In the 1930s, Iowa became the first school in the country to accept creative work in exchange for an advanced degree.

by Melinda Pradarelli





It's as if other artists become actors in a play I've written. They improve the scenario I've established. This is interactive art that's put into the world to confront all of the senses, not just sight. I'm also trying to create work that extends the reach of art to a broader audience."

Tillman moved his whole desk, including the gallery-drawer, inside the University of Iowa Museum of Art for display in a life-sized show, the *MFA 2001-2002* exhibition. The show, on view for three weeks at the end of the spring semester, reflected the creative quests of 38 graduating artists who, like Tillman, were triumphant in forging their artistic identities.

"Artists come to Iowa and completely change who they are and how they work," says Wallace Tomasini, professor of art history. "They move into different fields and modes and means, and Iowa's program gives them the space to develop new ideas. They concentrate almost 24 hours a day for an entire year in the studio. It may be the only time in their lives they get to concentrate on every aspect of their work."

The work of Carianne Mack took on a whole new aspect at Iowa. A native of rural Connecticut who comes from a family of artists, she had been making large abstract paintings that examine the relationship of society to nature. But, at Iowa, she began to understand her inspirations more fully.

"The professors encourage you to pick your art apart and question everything," she says. "I broke down my work and tried to find where the shapes and colors were coming from and why I chose this format. Poetry readings in downtown Iowa City, having coffee with friends from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, taking long drives through the Iowa countryside, and even exploring yoga—all of these things have helped me develop my art."

Mack remembers the day of a major artistic breakthrough. She was drawing outdoors when she took special notice of the shadows cast from some trees onto her sketchpad. The forms spilling onto the

pages reminded her of the organic shapes she was exploring in her paintings. She later used the image of those shadows as the centerpiece of a painting, and she went on to other experiments inspired by nature, including a process of letting poured ink dry—"like frost," she says—on her canvases and allowing the emerging design to influence the outcome of the painting.

Like Mack, Cody Bush was impressed with the wonders of nature at an early stage in his studies at Iowa.

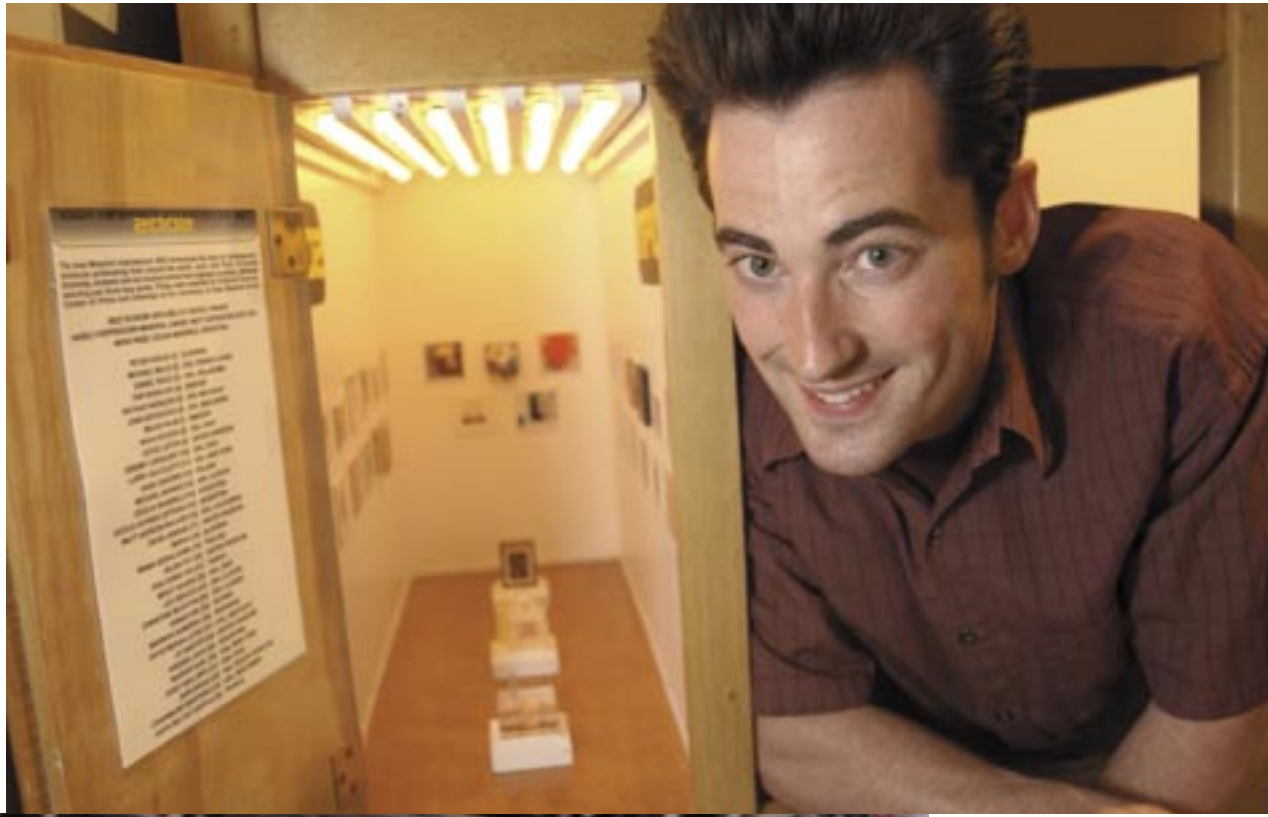
"Texas is flat and dry and there's very little vegetation, and Iowa is fertile, lush, and green, by comparison," says Bush, who came from Lubbock, Texas, on a fellowship to work with Chungchi Choo, the Iowa professor and metalsmith whose jewelry appears in museums in London, Paris, and New York City. "I've gotten a lot out of watching the land change and grow, and that's coming out in my work in more organic shapes."

Bush also finds inspiration in science fiction. Atop crowded desk shelves, a couple dozen hard-plastic action-figure toys from *Star Wars* and other movies preside over Bush's latest work in progress. On the wall of the cubbyhole where Bush works in the metalsmithing building, another source of inspiration is marked by a few of those car magazine photographs that flaunt the prototypes dreamed up by automobile designers of the ultramodern and experimental. The cars have names like Piranha and Precept, and their futuristic fins and curves suggest starting points for Bush's own jewelry design.

Bush takes pride in owning an engineer's intuition about how things fit together. He was recruited two summers ago for an internship with a General Motors Corp. design team, who hired him for the computer-aided design skills he had acquired during his metalsmithing and jewelry study at the School of Art and Art History. Using software for three-dimensional modeling, Bush has turned his ideas into a stunning port-

Top: Making miniature prints is a big deal these days in Europe, where many works of art originated for Robert Tillman's *Iowa Miniprint International 2002*.

Cody Bush takes advantage of design software to craft metalsmithing projects large and small, including an ultra-lightweight recumbent tricycle and pieces of jewelry.





folio of jewelry, lamps, and sculpture, including a recumbent tricycle molded from lightweight carbon fiber.

“There’s almost no substance that can’t be used these days,” says Shannon Frewaldt, who peppers his conversation with words like epoxy and kaolin and gesso and orbs. “That’s the wonder of art. Even stuff that might seem common or ordinary, you can turn into something memorable in your hands.”

His lexicon belongs to a ceramics artist, but Frewaldt also compares the artwork from his Iowa years to finds from an archeological dig.

“I try to make objects that would intrigue me if I stumbled upon them,” says Frewaldt, who came to Iowa because of the wood-fire program in the ceramics department, and because of Chuck Hinds, ceramics professor and potter of some celebrity in art circles.

Great teachers like Hinds lure some of the best artists in the world to Iowa, according to Dorothy Johnson, director of the school. For others, a tradition as a top-ranked program is the measure of the school.

Back in 1936, the year The University of Iowa established the School of Art and Art History, her predecessors really got it right, Johnson says. Artists and historians naturally complement each other’s work, and students in both fields learn best when they train in close proximity to each other. Former art department head Lester Longman conceived the farsighted idea of housing the two disciplines of creative art and the study of art history under the same roof, a practice that became a model for art schools throughout the nation. He also brought to the art school such nationally recognized artists and scholars as Grant Wood, Philip Guston, Stuart Edie, Mauricio Lasansky, H. W. Janson, and William Hecksner. As early as the 1930s, the school earned more widespread recognition by becoming the first in the nation to introduce the revolutionary concept of granting advanced degrees based on works of art as fulfillment of a thesis requirement.

Drawn by the reputation of a great teacher, Shannon Frewaldt came to Iowa to work in the wood-fire program in ceramics.

Again, schools around the country followed Iowa's lead, making it acceptable in many places for creative work to stand as the entire thesis.

Over the past three decades, *U.S. News & World Report* repeatedly has ranked the school among the top 10 in the nation. Today, the school offers a master of fine arts degree with concentration in ceramics, design, drawing, intermedia and video, metalsmithing and jewelry, painting, photography, printmaking, and sculpture. Students working on a master's degree in art and art history can apply for the yearlong master of fine arts program, and must pass a clearance process involving faculty critique of their work.

While graduate degree candidates come to the School of Art and Art History to develop their artistic abilities and hone their vision, they also learn the crucial details of creating a career as an artist. Visiting artists help give graduate students an overview of what it's like to make a living as an artist. Mack and Frewaldt admit to entertaining romantic notions of what it means to be an artist, but they learned how to write a curriculum vitae and an artist's statement. Graduate students also gain work experience because they benefit from paid teaching assistantships as instructors in undergraduate classes, which may add a new dimension to their set of career goals.

A master's degree doesn't guarantee an artistic future beyond Iowa's borders, and where artists might find meaningful employment has become an increasing concern, notes John Dilg, professor of painting and drawing. Prospects were different in Longman's era, when, for several decades, hundreds of students of Wood and Lasansky spread out across the country and became established artists and teachers in their own right. Some students land teaching jobs right out of school. Cody Bush, for one, will begin a full-time tenured track as an assistant professor of metalsmithing and jewelry at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Some, through perseverance and luck, find a reputable gallery to represent their work, but even that prize is little more than lunch money for most artists. Few artists in America, Dilg says, earn enough from their art to make a living.

Success for an artist, however, is not measured in monetary terms alone.

"Faculty advise students about their careers, but it's not all about fame and money and turning yourself into someone who's on the cover of art magazines," Johnson says. "The freedom to make your art—that's success."

For seven decades, the Art Building has been the testing ground for this philosophy. But, with an appraisive glance toward the cubbyhole study areas of the printmaking studios, Johnson concedes that a persistent shortage of space often threatened the historic mission of keeping artists and historians in close proximity to each other.

Tillman felt the pinch. His domain for two years was the Art Building's newer wing, built in the early 1970s. There's not much room to walk down the wing's corridor crammed full of old wood desks buried beneath stacks of sketchpads, cups of paint, and piles of books. These thrown-together cubicles are where printmaking students study, due to a scarcity of classroom and studio space. But, this fall, renovation begins on the Art Building, and ground breaks on construction of a new 80,000-square-foot addition designed by award-winning architect Steven Holl (he also was called "America's Best" architect in a July 2001 issue of *Time*). Holl's addition will sit across the street from the original building, next to a small lagoon and limestone cliff on Iowa City's Riverside Drive, with a portion of the building extending over the lagoon. The new three-story building—whose red metal exterior will echo the brick of the old building—will house a café, classrooms, a library, offices, seminar rooms, and student gallery space. Still, for Frewaldt, nothing can beat the special ambience that fills the old Art Building.

"There's wonderful light here, but there's also a palpable sense of history—all the artists who have come through here," he says. "And that I've been part of this—to me, that's the most amazing thing."

