

## BOTTOM UP

---

When I first came to the Department of Art at CSULB, I was in awe of the variety of its programs and the scale of its facilities. It didn't take long to realize the depth of its experienced and open-minded faculty; it was no doubt a Department ripe with possibility. However, as I became familiar with the realities of the Department, it became clear to me there was something going on at the graduate level that was far more transformative than could be perceived in my guided tour. There was a thriving culture of graduate students that had coalesced through a common need to foster an interdisciplinary community, and also through a desire to engage the broader field of the Los Angeles art scene.

Several years ago, before I had become faculty at CSULB, a group of students self-organized and mobilized in an effort to confront what they had perceived to be the graduate program's marginalized reputation. The story goes that after a group of CSULB grads had not been included in the events at Supersonic, a regional, curated survey of graduate student work, these grads took matters into their own hands and decided to form GLAMFA and Open Studios in response. As someone coming to these events late, I can see how their success has set in motion something much greater than its initial objectives: it seems to have invigorated the entire graduate program. It took me a little time to understand the complexities of how this all unfolded, and while it is possible that I have some of my facts wrong, this has been a source of great inspiration for me. As the head of the Sculpture program, I think about GLAMFA and Open Studios often; these events have served as an inspirational story of student will, and have also served as something to make the Sculpture program live up to.

The question of what makes a graduate program successful is an elusive one, because each university has its own identity and needs. One generally focuses on a combination of factors including faculty, location, facilities, and funding. However, without a doubt, the

most important ingredient has to be an invigorated and engaged community of students. The graduate culture at CSULB has demonstrated its strength, maturity and conviction through the events and continued success of GLAMFA and Open Studios. As I see it, GLAMFA / OS and the community it has cultivated mark a turning point at CSULB. They have initiated a momentum that has guided not only a renewed graduate culture but also an upgraded graduate curriculum.

Today, the success and vitality of the graduate community is self-evident. Graduates have adapted to become a more autonomous community, and I believe there is more overlap between programs than ever before. In addition, thanks to some of our dedicated faculty, the graduate program has implemented an improved curriculum and also expanded upon a more interdisciplinary course of study. Students have the ability to customize their own graduate committees, opting for the faculty of their choice. They can elect to choose faculty to preside over their degree from different programs or from within a given discipline. In addition, key graduate courses are staffed by a constant rotation of full-time faculty, which gives students exposure to a range of faculty within the department. Also, many programs have attracted notable visiting lecturers. For example, just this past year in the Sculpture program we have had the benefit of hosting graduate courses taught by such visiting faculty as Jedediah Caesar, Mason Cooley, and Kelley Nipper. The Department also continues to have all of the resources of highly competitive studio programs in Ceramics, Sculpture, Photo, Painting, Graphic Design, Illustration, Metals, Fiber, Wood, and Printmaking. Not to mention that the faculty and curriculum in the Art History and Museum Studies programs continue to be one of the best kept secret strengths of the Department. The fact is, if you consider what makes a successful graduate program - faculty, location, facilities and student culture - clearly CSULB has all the resources, and yet, because we are state funded, it is more affordable than competing schools.

Originally, I sat down and wanted to celebrate what I perceive to be a flourishing

graduate community, and how I see the graduate students at CSULB making inroads in the Los Angeles art scene. However, I have also recently been contemplating the probable future effects of the current California budget crisis, and what is shaping up to be an unprecedented challenge to the entire California State Education system. My thoughts have been drawn not just to the challenges that might affect the students and department at CSULB, but consequently, the effects to the role that state-subsidized universities historically have played in shaping the art scene in Los Angeles.

Art practice and discourse has, by its nature, always been rooted in community building. Over the past several decades, curators, critics, collectors, and artists from around the world have developed a fascination with the LA art scene, as it has become one of the most influential art capitals in the world. For instance, the Getty Foundation announced a while back its plans for 2010-2011 to sponsor a series of 23 exhibitions at venues throughout Southern California, highlighting the history of postwar art in the region. The very structure of this collaborative venture, *Pacific Standard Time*, lends itself to the fundamental bond between communities, institutions, and artists, and also to the diverse history of the culture. The majority of institutions that are participating in this initiative are university based museums, although the list also includes alternative spaces, along with the major metropolitan museums.

Historically, it is no mystery that Southern California universities have played a crucial role as hubs of artistic emergence, and this has been even more so the case over the last few decades. A host of influential artists, following in the footsteps of legends like Allan Kaprow, Robert Irwin, and John Baldessari have cultivated prolific communities in and around the region. As a result of the dominant programs these artists have forged in universities, multiple generations of students have built upon these cultural hubs. It is clear that universities in Southern California have been a key factor in the strength and character of the tight-knit art communities of Los Angeles.

There is no doubt that deepening budget cuts and depleted resources will erode the infrastructure of universities, and that this could diminish their dominant role as community generators. This is why a bottom-up, self-propelled, student-led collective is such an important model for augmenting the effects of waning university resources. Therefore, if one considers the ideas and ideals behind GLAMFA and the proposition of Open Studios, it becomes clear how these events mobilize greater community interplay both locally and between institutions. In an era of social networking and social media, we are all well aware of the role that community plays in our lives, so it is no stretch to relate community involvement to sustainability in the arts. In other words, in times of economic strife in the art world there is an even greater need for community support.

Open Studios is a corollary to GLAMFA; as such graduate students in the program simply and symbolically open their doors. However, because their practices are not staged with the authority of a curated gallery exhibition, Open Studios is a more participatory event, one set-up for exchange. Walk around, look, and engage. You will see works being done in a variety of programs representing a range of approaches - from practices rooted in performance and new media to works dedicated to the mining and melding of more traditional disciplines. You may notice that there is a great deal of overlap between programs; you will see artists making work in one program that could be representative of another. What you will not see is homogeneity; being that each grad at CSULB selects his or her own graduate committee members and course of study, the breadth of the Department's resources lends itself to a more customized culture. You may have to do some walking to get to different studios, but this will give you some time to see the full range of programs. I think you will see how the graduate art program at CSULB is a place where things can happen, and things are happening. The program continues to produce top caliber professional artists, with many forging impressive careers here in LA. But perhaps most impressive is that collectively, these grads have demonstrated the success of a self-made bottom-up community.

So, I leave you then with Open Studios 2009. And it is just that: an open invitation.

Bryan Crockett  
Associate Professor, Sculpture Program Head  
CSULB Department of Art