The Faculty Record

OCTOBER 14, 2005

Taking the Visual Arts Department by “Storm”

You need kaleidoscopic vision to appreciate Gareth James’ multi-faceted talents

By Ginger Otis

It is students who know the most about the Visual Arts Department. James, chair of Visual Arts Division in the School of the Arts, is a young professor with a crisp British accent and an impressively wide reading of modern French philosophy.

If you were around before 2003, you would note the resemblance to Storm von Helsing, a character he created as the1982 video game, “SimCity.” The resemblance to von Helsing ended up staying in New York, as Jon Kessler, then chair of Visual Arts Division, asked him to Columbia in the first place. “So many of the most interesting artists, critics and art historians pass through New York,” he says. “So the students have access to incredible feedback from the top people in their field.” A studio visit, he explains, is where the visiting critic visits the students in their studios and discusses both the students’ finished work as well as their work in progress.

In addition to his Columbia responsibilities, James co-runs an interdisciplinary program called Curatorial Reconstruction, created for the American Fine Arts Gallery, a contemporary photography gallery in Lower Manhattan.

“Rather than fill the gallery with objects or images, James engaged in his ‘open-source alter ego’ in a project, entitled Curatorial Reconstruction, created for the American Fine Arts Gallery, a contemporary photography gallery in Lower Manhattan. In this role, he encourages artists and critics to curate exhibitions of their own making, within which they can engage in a dialogue with the contemporary art world.”

As befits his informal style, he attributes his conversational verbal agility to his students’ conversational verve and the momentum and dynamism that he encourages his students to become comfortable with talking about their work, rather than seeing it as “an external discourse” they have to learn to get a “tough but elegant” job. He preaches the gospel of the slightly insane form of amataur origami: most of the pieces are large-scale objects constructed out of one single continuous sheet of solid blue paper. Where student projects end, it’s a wonder he finds the time to continue creating his own artwork. Although only 35, James has an impressive résumé, having had shows in Berlin, Havana, and London, among other cities.

A number of his pieces are currently on display at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery in Chelsea. The New York Times characterized the show as “tough but elegant.” But he preaches the gospel of the slightly insane form of amataur origami: most of the pieces are large-scale objects constructed out of one single continuous sheet of solid blue paper. Where student projects end, it’s a wonder he finds the time to continue creating his own artwork. Although only 35, James has an impressive résumé, having had shows in Berlin, Havana, and London, among other cities.

For The Record

Gareth James may enjoy assuming the alter-ego of Storm von Helsing, but what if he were asked to be Robinson Crusoe for a change? How would he take on life on an uninhabited island? What books and music would he like to have as his conversational companion? What must be miss and least?

BOOKS: Cosmimism, by Italo Calvino would be all I’d need: a collection of short stories, all of which (through the most exuberant personifications) draw their cast of characters from inert matter—from the scale of the infinitely small—and cover periods that span the vastness of geologi cal time. It’s hard to feel alone in such a frame of mind.

MUSIC: Gavin Bryars’ “Jesus Blood” (with its intense looped structure) would help pass the time nicely, and then either Aaron Copland’s “Appalachian Spring” for a little utopian nostalgia or Benjamin Britten’s Peter Grimes for those dis- topian moments. I can’t decide between the two.

PEOPLE: I’m reminded of the joke about a genie, three wishes, and three people stranded on a desert island the last per- son misses the first two who had already wished themselves off the desert island. “Wow, I miss those guys, I wish they were still here..."

MISS LEAST: The retification of lived relations between subjects exchange into value in the field of visual culture in particular Guy Debord’s opening thesis to his book The Society of the Spectacle (1967) still holds true today. The wholesale transformation in value, modern con- ditions of production parallel itself presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

MISS MOST: Exchange.

Helping to reverse the statis- tics of women in the sciences, she is working in the sciences in the nation’s top universities, the Department of Biomedical Engineering of the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science has succeeded in luring top biomedical engineer Gowri Novakovic, who will be full professor. She comes to Columbia from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she was leading a research team on tissue engineering.

Vunjak-Novakovic received her Ph.D. in chemical engineering from the University of Belgrade in 1980. She is one of the leading tissue engineers in America to take the position of the Tissue Engineering Resource Center at the National Institute of Health (NIH), and a fellow of the American Institute for Medical and Biological Engineering.


Columbia is one of the most recognized centers of science in the world. It also has a history of being powered by advanced biomaterial scaffolds and bioengineers to new tissue and organs that could poten- tially aid in the treatment and repair of damaged or diseased heart muscle, bones, cartilage and ligaments.

These same tissues are also used in a “bioactive” model for fundamental biological research, to help understand some of the molecular and patho- logical processes underlying the function of our tissues. For this project, Vunjak-Novakovic is collaborating with conjunc- tion with colleagues from the School of Engineering and the medical and dental schools.