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# Art Schools That Will Change Your Life: the Top US Art Programs in 2020

By focusing on skill, these seven art programs prove that what's renegade revolves around the revival of representational art.



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Laguna College of Art & Design alumnus & faculty, Brittany Ryan, advising a sculpture student at LCAD, image courtesy Laguna College of Art & Design



romantic vision of art schools evokes dusty, skylit interiors crowded



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Renaissance artists Raphael, Leonardo, Donatello and Michelangelo, and not the cartoon.

This vision, of course, doesn't exist — nor ever did.

If you read US News & World Report's Graduate Fine Arts Program rankings, you'll see many familiar Ivy League names, especially as Yale University dominates. Yet many other art programs are thriving, even though most aren't included.

Maybe some of these under-the-radar programs are excluded because of subjective philosophical differences. The programs in this list share more in common with the fictional scene set above rather than much of the postmodern, conceptual work championed by departments like Yale.

That isn't to say that these programs yearn for a past long gone, but rather that many advocate for the marriage of the analytical and the abstract: the analytical in the acquisition of skill through traditional training, and the abstract in the innate development of a clear visual language. Analytically, they equip students with the tools to depict the world around them truthfully.



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Abstractly, students intuit which corners of the world *to* depict. In short, they explore which subjects attract them and fine-tune their personal aesthetic. As classically-trained musicians practice scales that translate into performing entire suites of music, so, too, do these programs impart the analytical tools above so that students-cum-artists may assemble their own rich pictures.

The following programs are eclectic and diverse in their locations, their affiliations, and their structures. For that reason, they are listed in alphabetical order rather than any numerical hierarchy.

But their origins all share the same ethos, echoed in dust motes falling across plaster casts in that fictional scene: that of creating earnest, unabashedly representational art.

## Beaux-Arts Academy



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*Location:* Provo, Utah

*Established:* 2013

*Director:* Joseph F. Brickey

*Program Type:* Private atelier



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Students working at the Beaux-Arts Academy, image courtesy Beaux-Arts Academy Facebook

**I**t makes sense that the Beaux-Arts Academy, located in Utah with its large Mormon population, emphasizes both the pragmatic *and* the divine. BAA is an atelier which fastidiously adheres to classical traditions, especially

in its instruction of figure drawing, color theory, and composition.



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become fluent in the visual arts, but also in architecture and art history. Under founder Joseph Brickey's eye, classicism — as the principles of ancient Greece and Rome — come alive.



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“The Rending,” BAA Director Joseph Brickey, 2017, 22 × 15 × 14 inches, image courtesy the artist

“The word ‘traditional’ can connote to the contemporary mind something archaic and out of step,” explains Brickey. “But that which is historic can also be timeless, enduring and relevant as far into the future as into the past. Though certainly not mainstream in our contemporary world, the classical principles of Truth, Beauty, and Virtue are by nature creative, demanding, and forward thinking. They are also fundamentally positive.”

BAA combines three systems: the academy (the broader class experience), the atelier (the studio environment), and the apprenticeship model (a working student-mentor relationship). BAA also focuses on architecture, both literally and metaphorically; Brickey speaks of how the program “[teaches] the ‘art of



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“No matter how contrary the zeitgeist, embracing the standards of Excellence, Permanence, and Transcendence is not so much counter-cultural as it is ‘proto-cultural,’ ” he continues. And Brickey is eager to feed that proto-cultural hunger: “I hope that as the Beaux-Arts Academy provides these opportunities, it can attract the ‘starving artists’ of the world who have raging appetites for greatness ... That will feed our own hunger!”

## Grand Central Atelier



GRAND CENTRAL  
ATELIER



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*Established: 2013*

*Founder: Jacob Collins*

*Program Type: Private atelier*



Students working at the Grand Central Atelier, image courtesy Grand Central Atelier Facebook

There are few names as synonymous to the revival of representational art



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work produced by himself and his alumni — reincarnated itself in Queens' Long Island City as the Grand Central Atelier. Perhaps it's his phoenix-like trajectory, begun when representational and skill-based art was considered irrelevant and unpopular, that's propelled him to the forefront of the atelier movement.



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"Illiudium PU-36 Explosive Space Modulator," GCA faculty Tony Curanaj, 2010, oil on linen, 19 x 14 inches, image courtesy the artist

The ironic twist is that Collins' ambitions soon outgrew the atelier. "I had spent several years since Water Street's inception, however, thinking about how to make a more robust, more perfect classical art school, one that ultimately could not be accommodated in an atelier setting," he claims. That



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*back to the atelier. The Grand Central Academy then morphed into the Grand Central Atelier, completing the circle.*

The common thread is Collins himself, not just as a pensive artist, but as a leader who's equal parts charisma and gravitas. Since 2013, the Grand Central Atelier has grown, not only offering full- and part-time programs, but also resident artist studios, monthly open sketch nights, the Hudson River Fellowship, and the adjacent Eleventh Street Arts gallery (amongst other amenities and opportunities) — all with plans to keep building. This expansion, both academically and spatially, is no mean feat in one of New York's hottest real estate corners.

“Each distinct stage in the student’s education was conceived and is controlled by a larger trajectory,” Collins says, “the end of which is to give the student the skills and understanding necessary to create classically-inspired paintings finely conceived and excellently executed.” In short, Collins aims to provide students with a trajectory as circular as his own.



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[Drawing by founder Jacob Collins, 2012, image retrieved via jacobcollinspaintings.com](#)

## Laguna College of Art & Design



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*Location:* Laguna Beach, California

*Established:* 1961

*President:* Jonathan Burke

*Program Type:* Private undergraduate and graduate, BFA- and MFA-granting



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Image courtesy Laguna College of Art & Design Facebook

**L**ocated in Southern California, it makes sense that LCAD — more so than any other program in this list — acts as a bridge between traditional visual art training and the entertainment industry's digital sphere. It's no



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demonstrates tangible skills regardless of major, proving that seemingly anachronistic foundations actually possess an *increasingly* valid role for students, whether they graduate wielding a paintbrush or a Wacom tablet.



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["Little Swimmer," LCAD alumnus & faculty Brittany Ryan, 2019, 32 x 14 x 12 inches, image courtesy the artist](#)

“Since 1980, LCAD continues to be the only accredited, degree-granting college of art in the U.S. that has a solely skill-based representational approach in the BFA and MFA,” says President Jonathan Burke. Crucially, he adds: “Representational art at LCAD does not insist [upon] one approach to image making, but strives towards visual accuracy and upholding the high conceptual and technical standards that superb figurative painting and drawing demands ... The focus of fine arts as well as our entertainment majors is to integrate classical traditions with contemporary sensibilities and technology to create original art that elevates and delights the senses and intellect.”

President Burke credits his faculty (notably, all of whom are practicing artists)



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representational art [as] an effective language to communicate to a diverse audience,” he says. “Our faculty considers representational art as contemporary, relevant and each is committed to teach artistic traditions to the next generation of drawers, painters, sculptors, animators, and illustrators.

“My ambition is that each LCAD alum continues as a practicing artist and contributes to renewing the enduring tradition of representational drawing, painting and sculpture,” President Burke concludes. As those alumni are just as likely to work in front of a computer screen as an easel, it speaks volumes about LCAD’s purpose and ethos.



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["Exile," LCAD alumnus Julio Reyes, 2019, egg tempera on panel, 12.5 x 19.5 inches, image courtesy the artist](#)

## Miami International Fine Arts



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*Location:* Miami, Florida

*Established:* 2014



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*Program Type:* Private visual arts center expanding to include sculpture, dance, and music



MIFA hosting the Kameristika Chamber Orchestra, image courtesy Miami International Fine Arts

**M**IFA is Miami's former Chiaroscuro Atelier reincarnated into a sprawling visual arts center to accommodate more of its dynamic programming, as well as a future expansion into sculpture, dance, and music. Venezuelan by heritage and Italian by training, the original trio of founders — **Elkin Cañas, Milixa Morón and Carlos Martínez León** — couple rigorous

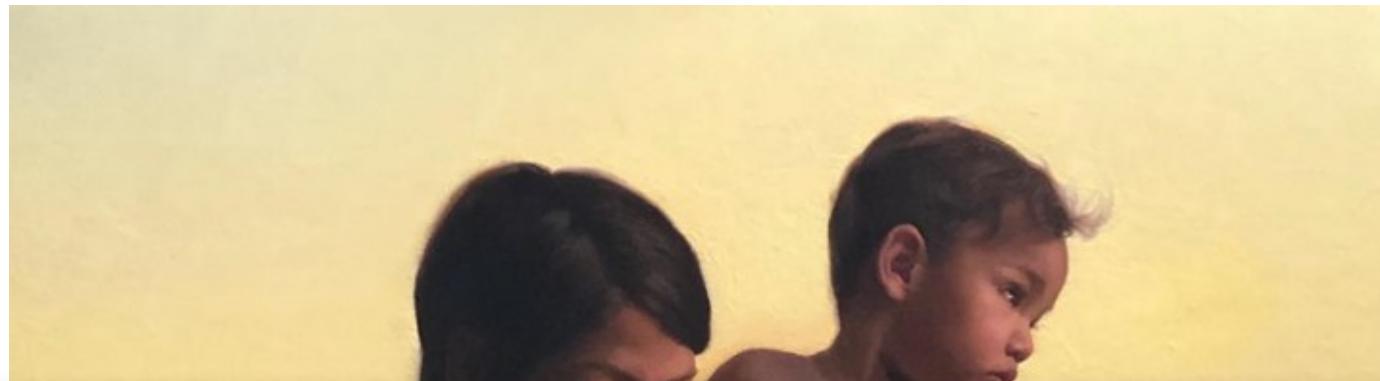


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["Inner Harmony," Parallel Education Director Carlos Martínez León, 2017, oil on linen, 43 x 16 inches, image courtesy the artist](#)

Carlos Martínez León emphasizes MIFA's new, cross-disciplinary approach: "The learning process of arts should be done with five senses." This hybridization first began at Chiaroscuro, where Cañas, Morón, and Martínez León each contributed their own individual painting philosophy. At MIFA, their autonomous approaches to visual arts will be interwoven with studying sculpture, dance, and music, as mentioned above. *All* the arts will converge at MIFA, simultaneously influencing each other.



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["Hope," Academic Director Elkin Cañas, 2019, oil on canvas, image courtesy the artist](#)

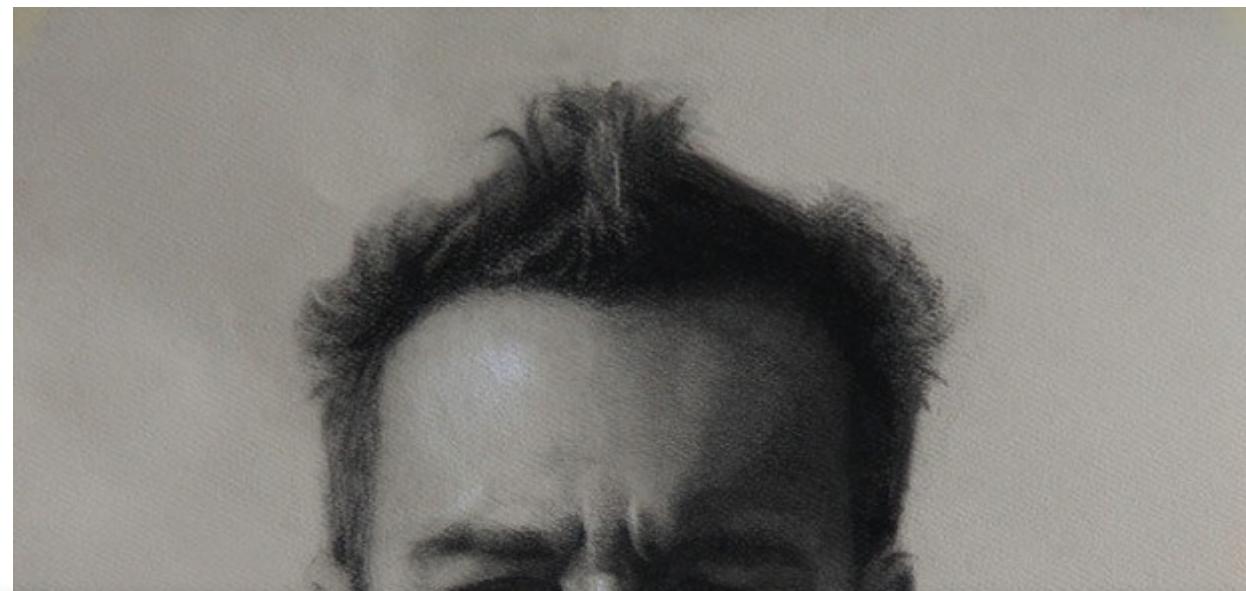
In a city known for flashy contemporary art fueled by exclusive fairs, MIFA is



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to acclimate. “Over time, we realized that Florida is a diverse environment, with different needs,” says Martínez León. “We had to adapt and evolve to new dynamics that suit what Florida needs in order to succeed.” This means imparting a wide “mastery of the basic principles capable of solving any pictorial situation.”

MIFA’s approach to the visual arts aims to be as diverse as their students and their multi-sensory programming. MIFA, indeed, will prove a welcome home to *all* the muses amidst Miami’s contemporary art scene.



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["Squinting at the Model," Principal Instructor Milixa Morón, charcoal on Canson paper, image courtesy the artist](#)

## New York Academy of Art



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*Location:* New York, New York

*Established:* 1980

*President:* David Kratz

*Program Type:* Private graduate, CFA- and MFA-granting



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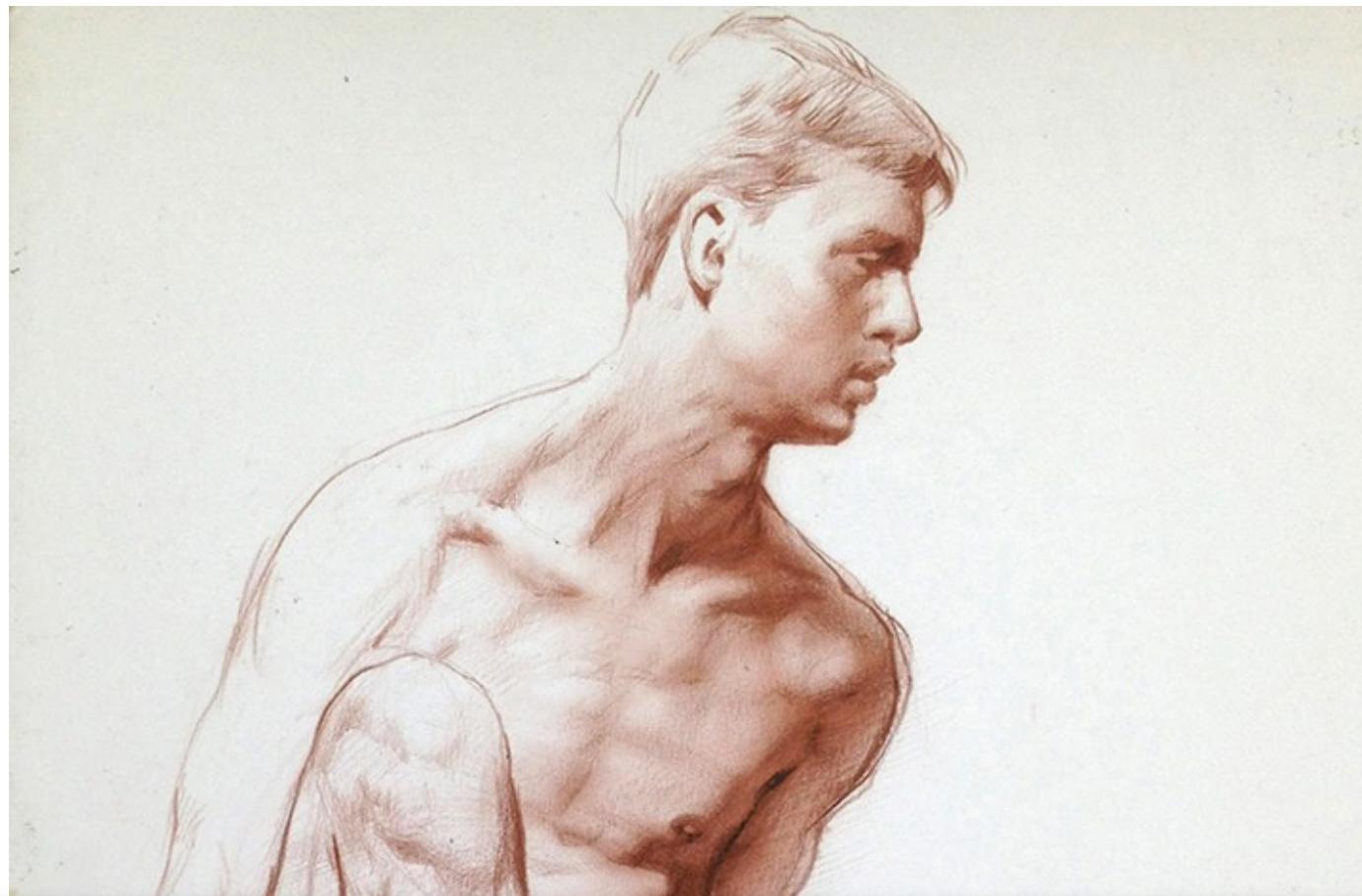
Student working in the New York Academy of Art's Wilkinson Hall, image courtesy New York Academy of Art Facebook

**T**he New York Academy of Art is the only graduate program in the United States established to exclusively study figurative art. The Academy



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School of Figurative Art evolved into an elegant TriBeCa fixture that's ever-expanding, both in physical and institutional growth. The Academy immerses students in two rapid-fire years of creation within its walls and emergence into the city outside them.

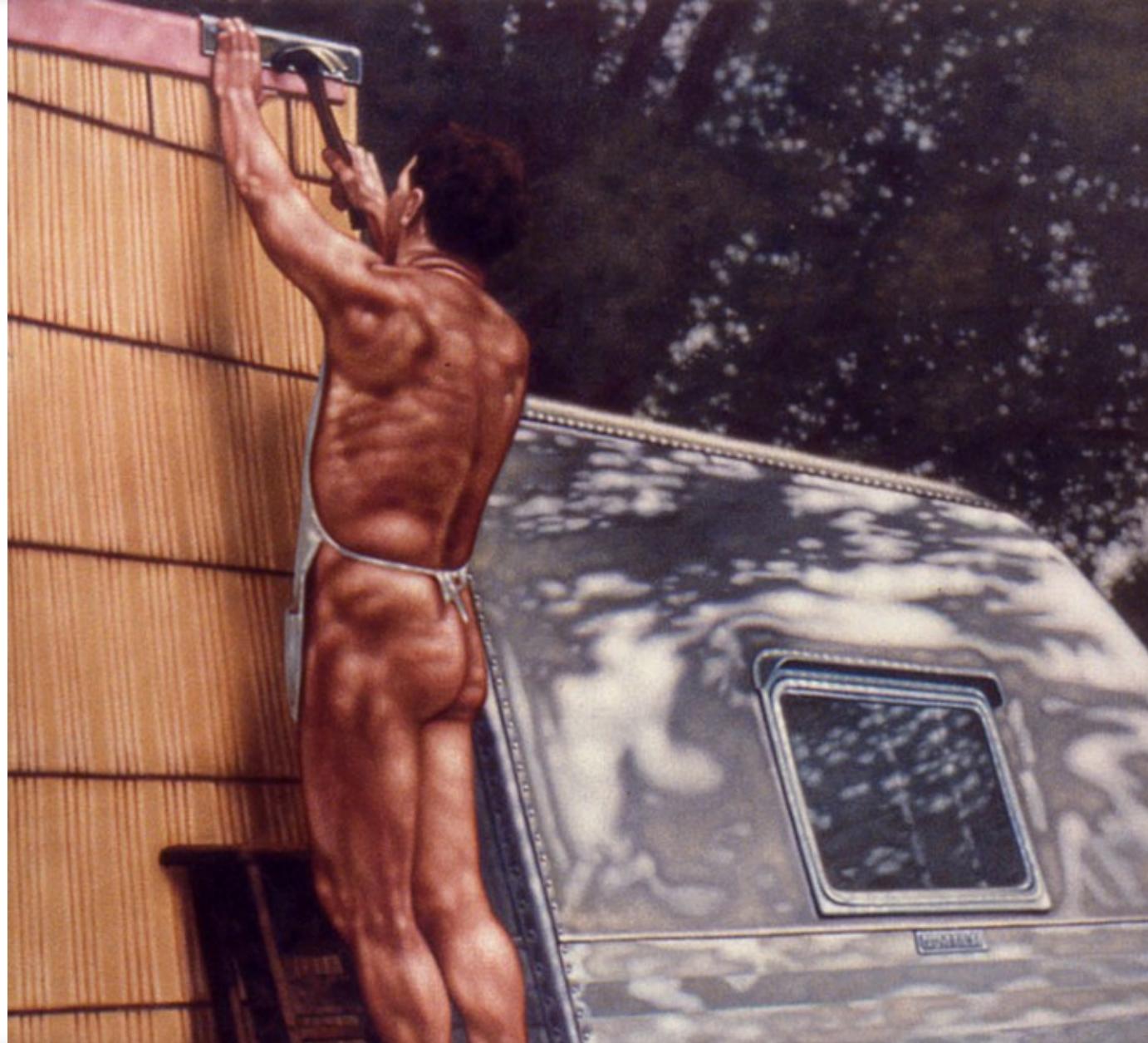


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[Drawing by NYAA faculty Steven Assael, image courtesy the artist](#)

The Academy openly advocates merging the analytical and the abstract — and stands tall in the art world because of it. “Academy students are presented with the most complex set of visual tools ever developed and are encouraged to engage with contemporary culture. The point of an education like this is to make our students as visually articulate as possible while not allowing them to repeat the past,” explains Provost, Peter Drake. “I would argue that our context



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["Do It Yourself," Provost Peter Drake, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 67 x 57 inches, image courtesy the artist](#)

But it's clear that the engine powering the Academy's well-earned context is its students and faculty. "I am always astonished by the talent that the Academy attracts. I love watching the range of students interact with each other," continues Drake. "I also ... think the program has grown in sophistication in every conceivable way, by hiring Faculty, Visiting Critics, Master Class Instructors and Lecturers with high-profile careers and a genuine passion for engaging with the art world. Just being in a room with them as they demo for our students is exhilarating. You can learn so much just by watching a contemporary master demonstrating their knowledge."

Note Drake's use of the term "contemporary master" rather than "old master." That differentiation reverts back to the Academy's philosophy of integrating skill without denying the world in which we currently live. "More and more young artists are realizing that they need the visual grammar and syntax that the Academy offers in order to realize their artistic visions," he says. And look what engaging, contemporaneous linguistics the Academy provides



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## Polk State College



POLK  
STATE  
COLLEGE

*Location:* Winter Haven & Lakeland, Florida

*Established:* 1964



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*Program Type:* State college, Associates in Arts with transfer track for BA & BFA



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Located between Tampa and Orlando in Central Florida, Polk State Visual Arts is this list's most egalitarian program, combining a top-tier skill-based art education with the accessibility of a state college. Polk State eradicates the stigma surrounding two-year programs, offering visual arts students not only an associates degree but also a carefully calibrated transfer track towards a Bachelors. Under the energetic leadership of Holly Ann Scoggins, Polk State's visual arts department averages around 200 majors with a plethora of media to explore. The underlying current — especially given Scoggins' status as a New York Academy of Art alumnus — lies in its strong foundations in which students study representational art, photography, and ceramics in state-of-the-art facilities.



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["Ritual," Program Coordinator Holly Ann Scoggins, 2018, oil on canvas, image courtesy Polk State College](#)

“Polk State’s Art Foundations program rivals any university because of the



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education and transfer to [their] institution of choice. Art students often do not have support from their families and are told that art is not a practical career. We fight against that by advising students based on the arts career path they want and using real-world scenarios in the classroom. We educate students, families, and the community on our creative economy and how arts careers are thriving in the twenty-first century.”

It's not that Polk State Visual Arts is the little engine that could. It's the not-so-little engine that *does*. Polk State Visual Arts' department has all the trappings of a world-class university because it maintains that high a standard. Scoggins even developed a Portfolio and Resume for Artists Capstone course, teaching students how “to document their work, build a portfolio, apply to colleges and art shows, apply for scholarships, [and] hang exhibitions, among other skills and requirements.”



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[Photography Professor David Woods, image courtesy Polk State College](#)

Successful full-time professors work with students who become successful alumni. Indeed, it's their shared emphasis on and drive towards work experience that also sets Polk State Visual Arts apart, especially as Scoggins



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straight into the workforce being artists, designers, and craftsmen in the community.”

“Not just makers,” she clarifies, “but political shakers and local influencers with a heart for the arts.”



[Ceramics by Ceramics & Sculpture Professor Andrew Coombs, image courtesy Polk State College](#)



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## Studio Incamminati

# STUDIO INCAMMINATI

SCHOOL FOR CONTEMPORARY REALIST ART

*Location:* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

*Established:* 2002

*Dean of Fine Arts:* Dan Thompson

*Program Type:* Private atelier



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Student work at Studio Incamminati, image courtesy Studio Incamminati Facebook

With the establishment of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in



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Nelson Shanks, Studio Incamminati is now under the helm of Dan Thompson, who also heads the New York Academy of Art's CFA program. If Shanks were a quiet revolutionary, then Thompson is a steadfast visionary. Thompson's approach at Studio Incamminati neatly echoes the god after whom he once named his former Harlem atelier: Janus, who simultaneously looked back into the past and forward into the future.

Both Shanks and Thompson have long been revered in the figurative art community, and Thompson intends to preserve Shanks' curriculum, which laid the crucial foundation upon which he's already been expanding. Paraphrasing Shanks' curriculum, students begin with focused, fast drawing that leads to the development of an oil painting *palette*, emphasizing pigments before practice. As the student moves along, the curriculum "is organized as a series of affiliated disciplines, each of which is studied until thoroughly understood," explains Thompson. "Studio Incamminati educates via a progressive model of related skillsets. Each of these exercises, such as color, is designed to help our students to achieve a more astute visual aptitude."



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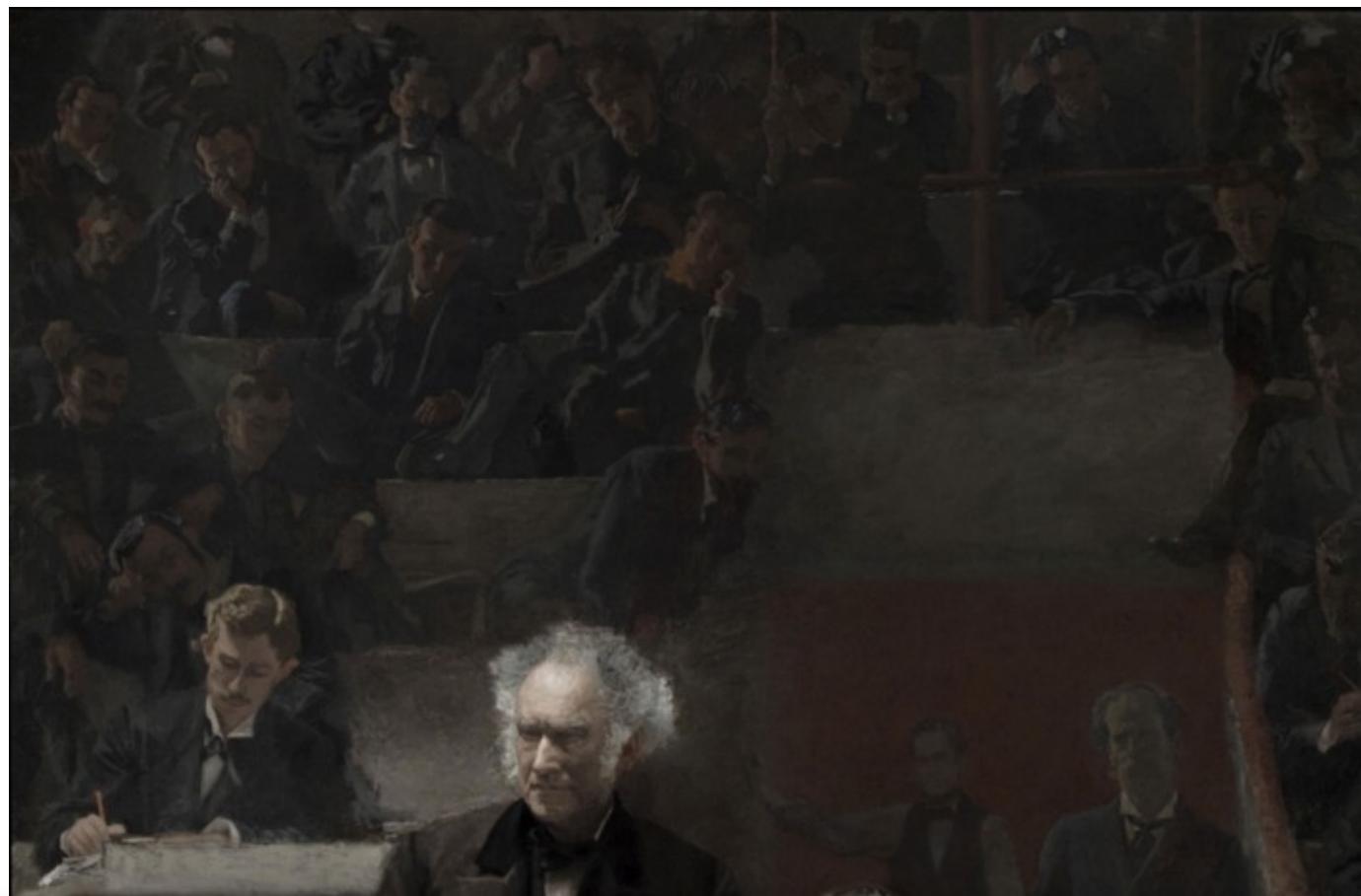
["Sselfless," Dean of Fine Arts Dan Thompson, 2017, oil on linen, 20 x 30 inches, image courtesy the art](#)

And as Thompson is a veritable master of “astute visual aptitude” himself, he has already implemented swift and impressive improvements at Incamminati. Not only has he made strides in the further integration and improvement of



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lecture series explores the “very personal takes on the ‘why’ factor of skill acquisition — as in, *why* are you learning to paint realistically? Or, *what* is worth making images of in this era? Perhaps even *where* will you take your newfound abilities?”



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Thomas Eakins (American, 1844–1916), “Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (the Gross Clinic),” 1875, oil on canvas, 8 feet x 6 feet 6 inches, image courtesy the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art

Notably, after over a year's planning, Thompson developed the Gross Anatomy for Artists Course with Thomas Jefferson University. “Each week I have partnered with JeffMD's Anatomy Thread Director, Dr. Elizabeth Spudich,” says Thompson. “We concentrate on areas of the human body [with which artists have] trouble [spatially] reasoning and translating to the paper or canvas. Dr. Spudich prepares the specimens in consultation with me, dissecting regions that do not get the attention that they deserve (the human wrist, for example) in order to clarify misinterpretations of human structure.



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How very serendipitous that Thompson created the only atelier program with formal studies in dissection in the same city as Thomas Eakin's revered *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (the Gross Clinic)*. But that serves as a monumental example of Thompson's innate ability to look both backwards and forwards. It's his status as *our* Janus that allows him to build this progression of dialogues and dissections upon Philadelphia's foundations.

## Closing: The Archipelago

The programs in this list possess many of the same attributes, especially glowing praise for their respective faculties and an emphasis on skill and tangible ability. But what may unite the programs is more powerful yet.

None deny the world in which we live as none view the visual arts as a secluded field of study. Each program extends bridges from its field to others, whether they're architecture, history, technology, medicine, or even community activism. If no man is an island, then none of these programs are



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Though each program is distinct, together they form a sort of artistic archipelago, a series of individual havens linked like a chain, separated by bays but traversed easily. And while this article lists only seven islands, there are plenty more to be discovered.

This growing archipelago's future also lies in its travelers: the islands' students.

"Although we are told that collectors and museum goers have moved away from beauty and now favor star power, speculation and investment ... People are drawn to inflection, to characters, as they are a great visual story," says Dan Thompson.

A fire must lie in the travelers' bellies, for who else will reject status for truth?  
Who else will portray the characters?

Who else will bring those stories to life?



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*her husband, the sculptor [Brett F. Harvey](#), in 2018. You can learn more about her work by visiting [www.laurenredding.com](http://www.laurenredding.com).*

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