

Art is tops at Williamstown High

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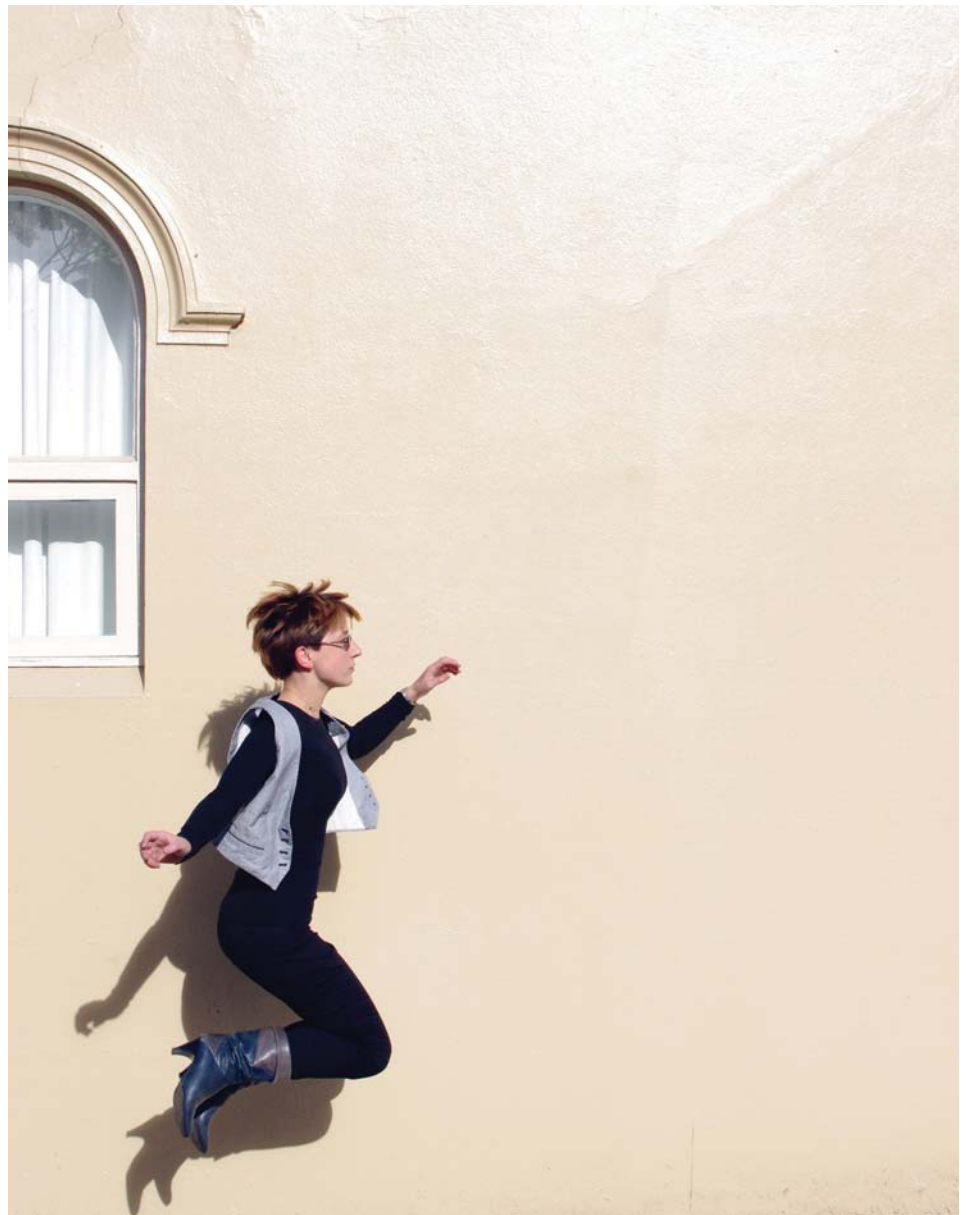
Thirty years ago, art was seen as a 'bludge' subject, a discipline that you only followed through to Year 12 if you didn't have the talent or drive to do 'real' subjects. Fast forward to 2011, and the many choices available under the umbrella of art within the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) have uncovered a wealth of talented and creative students whose abilities can now be effectively developed to follow pathways to a variety of careers that incorporate art. The finest works each year in areas such as photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, mixed media, ceramics, film and printmaking are showcased in the VCE Season of Excellence – Top Arts exhibition.

There is some kudos attached for schools that have representatives at Top Arts. Usually students who are selected for the exhibition have received an A or A+ grade for their work, which must also meet a number of other criteria that ensure students have a sound understanding of art history, concepts and techniques. Students must apply to be exhibitors, and are chosen by a panel including staff from the National Gallery of Victoria and teachers.

Williamstown High School is one of only two schools (the other being Methodist Ladies College) with not one, but three of their 2010 VCE students exhibiting at Top Arts this year. Located just to the south-west of the Melbourne Central Business District, Williamstown High is one of the oldest secondary schools in Victoria, its junior and senior campuses blessed with picturesque surrounds in the form of Hobsons Bay, and a wealth of historical buildings representing its maritime roots.

Senior Art Teacher Eleanor Voterakis, who has been at the school since she graduated as a teacher in 2007, suggests that one of the reasons that the visual arts program at the school has been so successful is because the subjects are taken seriously. "We have fun, but with high academic expectations. It's not just taking an easy subject," she explains. Voterakis also attributes the school's achievements to subject counselling that ensures "the right kids take the subject", because they have an understanding of what is involved from the outset.

In Years 7 to 9, students take a broad look at different art forms, and are also offered challenge units in areas such as ceramics, cartooning and photography, which give them the opportunity to explore a particular form in



Felix Trinh Portrait 1

more depth. By Year 10, classes are presented with a number of electives that have been carefully planned by teachers to meet the needs and interests of students. For example, in the more traditional painting and drawing stream, students look at street art in a unit called 'From studio to street'. 'Collections, obsessions and miniatures', a sculpture subject that focuses on making assemblages of a variety of examples of the art form, and Visual communication are

some of the other electives.

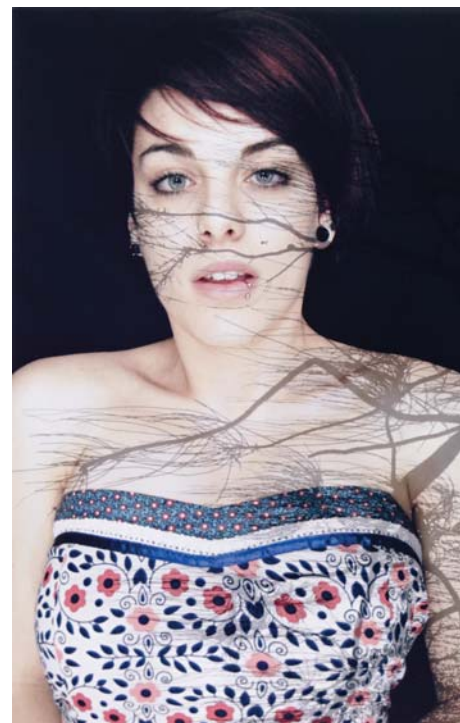
While the start of Year 10 is largely teacher-directed, pupils gradually become more self-directed so that by Year 12, the teacher becomes more a facilitator who guides individuals as they begin their creative design projects. Another important element of the program, according to Voterakis, is that students are encouraged to develop their analytical abilities from early on so that they can build a deeper understanding



Portraits of Eleanor Voterakis by Year 12 student Felix Trinh (“Jumpology”)

Felix Trinh is a current Year 12 student studying Studio Arts photography.

His area of exploration for Studio Arts this year is Surrealist photography with a particular emphasis on ‘jumpology’, a photographic portrait technique whereby the subject is photographed mid-air whilst jumping. The pioneer of jumpology was Philippe Halsmann, an American photographer who believed that the jump forced the subject to focus on the act of jumping and therefore inadvertently revealed their true self. Felix has been inspired by this idea and these portraits of his teacher are a reflection of this (previous page and right).



of art, which can then be applied to their own work. This might start with looking at artworks to decide whether or not students like them, and discussing the techniques used, as well as investigating the historical and social contexts of each work. The process equips students with descriptive language to explain their own and others’ art. Writing about what they see helps students to synthesise their understandings of various aspects of the works.

The Year 12 program at Williamstown High School follows the Studio Arts stream of the VCE – as distinct from ‘pure’ Art with its heavier emphasis on theory – which allows students to choose a theme to explore through the year. After writing a proposal that outlines their ideas and approach, students develop different options and then produce finished artworks. Voterakis explains that the focus that the subject places on the studio practices of artists – their materials, processes, ideas, inspiration and aesthetics – seems to fit Williamstown High’s largely middle-class clientele well. “It’s quite an accessible study design whilst still offering the scope for the exploration of very sophisticated ideas, so I think it suits classes where you have a range of interests and ability levels,” she elaborates.

The program has proved popular, with around 45 of the approximately 200 Year 12 students choosing Studio Arts as a subject in 2011. Photography in particular has

Clockwise: Freya Alexander I feel like I can't wake up; Madaline Rielly Refinery decay; Elizabeth Miller Dreams (detail); Felix Trinh Portrait 2

become a favoured option. In fact two of the three students featured in the 2011 Top Arts exhibition are photography students. Elizabeth Miller “used the motif of birds and trees to symbolise a desire for freedom”, while Madeline Rielly’s work drew on four sub-themes – decay, alienation, fragmentation and construction – “to communicate the underbelly of our thriving, affluent and opulent metropolitan lifestyle”.

The third exhibitor, Freya Alexander, completed a series of five pen drawings exploring the world of young women. Alexander’s unusual approach – she used a website to gather responses to explore her theme of the “stories young women have to tell” – is a testament to the effectiveness of the teaching methodology outlined by Voterakis. The result is a body of work in which “the use of pen suggests the narrative quality of my works and captures the brilliance and chaos of teenagers’ lives.”

Voterakis also acknowledges that the school is lucky to have the support of the parent body. “Many of the parents of the students at

Freya Alexander

Freya Alexander studied Year 12 Studio Arts while in year 11 and achieved very highly. Her work was accepted into the 2010 Top Arts exhibition.

Williamstown High value the arts and this is definitely a factor in developing motivated and engaged students.” She characterises the students who take art courses as a generally relaxed group of kids who feel a strong sense of connectedness to the school. Students who elect to apply to be a part of the Top Arts exhibition are especially motivated and work hard to put together the information required, including an outline of their work, to be considered for the collection.

Another strategy that teachers use to inspire students is to expose them to artists and art. Each year, they attend at least one art show, such as the Newport Substation VCE exhibition. Teachers also encourage students to stay connected to the art world by regularly suggesting websites that



Clockwise: Elizabeth Blunt and teacher Chris Munro, Visual diary of Joseph Gentry, Image of year 11 Studio arts by Freya Alexander; Year 8 Art Isabella Sekulovska, Kondilo Karidis, Samantha Owen and Caitlin Jacks by Chelsea O'Neill

feature 'cool' artists, as well as art blogs.

With teacher quality often identified as a key influence on student outcomes, the passion of the staff at Williamstown High undoubtedly has an impact on the results of their art students if Eleanor Voterakis is anything to go by. Voterakis believes that the arts are a "super-important" part of the curriculum and values not just visual art, but "anything that engages the creative, analytical part of the brain". The fact that she

herself is an artist, and is currently working on a body of work for exhibition with drawing as her preferred art form, makes her an appropriate role model for students. "I do think that this personal motivation to make art rubs off on the students to a degree," she admits.

The school evidently builds a lifelong love of arts, with many students demonstrating a strong tertiary interest in arts subjects such as graphic design, interior design and media

communications. A few also go on to study fine arts. Voterakis suggests that workforce requirements and the increasing amount of visual literacy in society will make art students' ability to brainstorm, analyse, judge and think critically useful skills as they move into the workplace. Far from 'bludging', art students might actually be some of the best-prepared to adapt to our increasingly digitised world. **ET**