

DREXEL'S PROGRAM COMBINES DEEP VISUAL LITERACY WITH THE PRACTICAL PROFICIENCIES
TO PROSPER CREATIVELY IN AN ERA WHEN EVERYONE'S A PHOTOGRAPHER. *By Michael Bucher*

d e p t h O F f i e l d





LACEE TOYAMA



LEAH BANK

MIKAELA WEGERHOFF



Paul Runyon takes a couple steps back and views his handiwork.

Equipped with a power drill, screws, tape measure and level, the director of Drexel's photography program methodically hangs students' work — 16 portfolios of about eight images each, side by side, perfectly level. It's the day before the opening of Drexel's annual Senior Thesis Exhibition, and he fills the jigsaw-puzzle-like walls inside Drexel's Leonard Pearlstein Gallery with a curator's eye, as he used to back in New York City's prestigious Light Gallery where he once displayed photographs from greats such as Harry Callahan and Emmet Gowin.

Once complete, the exhibition gleams with professional polish. The collection (partially used in this layout) is diverse and beautifully arrayed, including portraits, landscapes and still lifes; in black and white and color, naturally and artificially lit.

On display is the capstone of nine months of independent study and four years of visual training. In quality, the images are a reflection of the program's fine art aspirations, while also symbolizing its pragmatism — these portfolios will be the students' calling cards as they pursue careers after graduation.

Anyone teaching or studying photography today must answer to changes in the field over the past five to 10 years.

The megapixel arms race among smartphone manufacturers has meant that nearly everyone carries a highly capable camera in their pocket everywhere they go. Instagram's 300 million active users have uploaded over 30 billion photos. Facebook users upload 300 million images a day. Flickr holds nearly 350 million images in its public Creative Commons domain alone, plus billions more in private accounts. Digital photography, mobile apps and the Internet have made photos cheap to produce, simple to edit and fast to deliver.

Never has it been so seemingly easy for an untrained amateur to take arresting photographs. So why should anyone spend four or five years of college studying photography?

It's a question Runyon often hears from prospective students and parents during open houses. After all, some traditional photography careers — staff photojournalism, stock photography, some forms of editorial — have changed significantly. And lower barriers to entry have drawn eager, albeit untested, competitors into certain segments of the industry.

But at the same time, visual communication has never been more important, and the cream, as they say, always rises to the top.

"Photography is in many ways becoming the new English 101," says Runyon. "If people are not literate in visual communication it will be harder for them to succeed; it's becoming as common in many ways as using Word or Excel."

Visual literacy — the conceptual framework of an image — sets the pro photographers apart from the dilettantes. Technology has simplified picture-taking techniques, but that doesn't mean people understand or are aware of the messages their pictures convey. Composition, framing, light and context convey clues about the image that may not be obvious to the untrained viewer. Conversely, a photographer who understands the history of the medium can reference that history to create a powerful image that resonates in fresh ways.

Imagine, for example, the lighting and style of a 17th-century Dutch *vanitas* — a style of painting meant to remind viewers of life's futility and brevity — applied to a contemporary photo series depicting addiction.

"The world has enough photos of pretty sunsets," quips Runyon. "It's very easy for someone to make a very technically perfect, but uninformed picture."

Runyon has kept Drexel abreast of changes in the field by furnishing up-to-date photo facilities and hiring instructors well versed in both the artistic and commercial sides of the business. Under his leadership over the past 15 years, he has expanded the program's reach from a local institution to a national one, with students graduating this year from California, Florida, Hawaii, Texas and Virginia. He proudly puts his students' work on par with other nationally respected programs like Columbia College in Chicago, the School of Visual Arts in New York and Rochester Institute of Technology.

Photography majors study a curriculum heavy in art history,



LEAH BANK



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NOAH ADDIS '97

Career Migrant

For 11 years, Noah Addis practiced photojournalism at the respected *Star-Ledger* in Newark, racking up three New Jersey Press Photographer of the Year awards and a team Pulitzer Prize.

But as the newspaper industry shrank, he took a buyout in 2008 and embarked on a career of independent documentary projects. His transition was made easier because his photography professors always pushed him to do work outside of his comfort zone, he says. "At the time, I didn't appreciate how important this was, but my time at Drexel taught me to grow and adapt even years after graduation," he says.

He was part of a group commissioned by the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in collaboration with fellow photographer Brian Cohen to photograph the effects of the Marcellus Shale gas industry — work which became a travelling exhibition.

He's now building a collection of photos supported by artist grants that document the effects of urban migration around the world, called Future Cities. The idea for the project first came to him when he was in Lagos, Nigeria, for an assignment for *The Star-Ledger*. Traveling from the airport, he was moved by the sight of the city's immense slums, which made him think about the social and economic processes that form such communities. When finished, he intends to publish a book of the photographs.

"Photographic technology has changed tremendously since I graduated, but the faculty emphasized that photography is all about ideas," he says. "They encouraged the importance of developing a personal photographic vision. Those skills are still as relevant as ever."



MADISON CARROLL



photo history and design — as well as courses on the business of photography to ready them to negotiate rates and estimate shoots as independent artists.

They have at their disposal a photography facility lavishly equipped with diverse and first-rate gear, including professional Canon DSLR cameras, 4x5 field cameras, Hasselblads, and professional studio lighting equipment. Students can print in the program's one surviving darkroom — an increasingly rare opportunity; Drexel once had nine — or at the 50 digital workstations networked with professional Epson printers.

The combined focus on art history, design and technical skill prepares graduates to go on to become advertising, editorial, architectural, wedding and portrait photographers; photo editors; artists; documentarians; gallery curators; educators and art directors, to name a few common paths.



ALISON MEYER '03

Photographers' Friend

Alison Meyer enrolled at Drexel intending to become a photographer, but her co-op experience set her on the path of art photography representation and production instead, and now she uses her training to help other photographers market themselves.

Her co-op was with Frank Meo at his New York City photo agency, Meo Represents, where she learned about creating estimates, photo shoot production and photography representation.

Through her connection with Meo, she landed a job at Getty Images, one of the largest assignment and stock photo agencies in the world. By the time she left six years later, she was representing award-winning photojournalists in one of the agency's boutique brands, Reportage by Getty Images.

What followed was a short stint at VII Photo, an elite international photojournalism agency where, in addition to photographer representation, she also managed negotiating sales and licensing, commissioned photo assignments and targeted new business prospects. A year later, she was introduced to Pat Bates, the owner of a lifestyle photography agency in New York City. Bates found her through a mutual business connection and offered Meyer a job to represent a roster of eight photographers.

"You learned how to look at a photograph objectively," Meyer says of her training at Drexel. "That's something I've learned to take with me and apply to my job."

"I tell people, 'We are not an art school, and we are not just a technical school. We are both; we blend the worlds of art and commerce together,'" says Runyon.

He rattles off names of successful alumni. An art director for *Fast Company*. A photographers' representative at luxury lifestyle agency Pat Bates and Associates. A photojournalist nominated for the Prix Pictet. Some have gone on to create their own studios or assist other, more established shooters. Others have pursued advanced degrees and are running high school photo departments and college programs.

About a third of alumni find ways to use their skills without touching a camera — doing design work, photo editing, or representation of other photographers, for example.

"Our alumni do quite well in terms of outcome," says Runyon. "Because of the way we teach, along with the applied/technical skills they receive in our program, the range of careers they go on to pursue is quite varied."

Runyon's ideas about photography come from a long career bouncing between art and commercial photography, built on the foundation of a BFA in photography from the University of New Mexico.

"That education made me extremely literate about the history of the medium and taught me the importance of having a very deep visual resource to draw from," he says. "Without that resource to draw from, you're just going to reinvent the wheel."

After graduation, he went to New York City and worked in one of the world's first premier photo galleries, Light Gallery. After a stint running the Photography Place Gallery in Philadelphia, his independent spirit took over and he opened his own advertising photography studio. For 17 years, Runyon produced commercial work for Fortune 500 clients.

Runyon sees many reasons to be excited about being a photographer today. For one, the cost to launch a photography business is a fraction of the \$100,000 investment it cost him to open his Old City commercial studio in 1986. Today, he says, photographers can work based on their talents and vision, not on their ability to own and operate expensive equipment. He says that the opportunities that exist today in advertising, architecture, pharmaceutical, fashion and wedding photography are some of the best he's seen.

"If somebody's willing to put in the effort, they can do it," he says.

In some ways, things are easier than they used to be. One old barrier that has fallen is the wall between photographers and commercial buyers like Cali Capodici, who hires photographers for 40 to 50 shoots a year for Digitas, the largest advertising agency in Philadelphia. Every year, she teaches an adjunct class at Drexel to help students market their portfolios commercially.

"It is much easier to get your work in front of people like me at minimal

KAMERON WALSH





LACEE TOYAMA



MIKAELA WEGERHOFF

cost,” Capodici says. “Gone are the days of cold calling and sending a letter to someone via snail mail. I can go to a website and immediately get a sense for who a photographer is as an artist instead of having to call in a portfolio to review.”

At Digitas, it’s not unheard for a complex, all-rights, on-location photo shoot to bill out at up to half a million dollars — but those big jobs don’t go to unproven people.

“It’s a much more competitive field now, because everyone thinks they are a photographer,” she says, “but the talented ones can and do create thriving careers in the industry. A successful commercial photographer can make a very good living well into the six figures.”

The art market is thriving, also.

Runyon recalls that when he worked at Light Gallery in the late ’70s, Ansel Adams landscapes sold for \$500 apiece and prints by Harry Calla-

han, one of the most important photographers of the 20th century, were selling for \$450 (around \$2,500 in today’s dollars).

It’s now routine for photographers with gallery representation to sell pictures for between \$10,000 and \$20,000 apiece, he says. Digital technology helped to make that possible — it has become easier to reproduce high-resolution prints on large scale, which puts them on par with media such as paintings.

Photographers today also have more freedom to straddle genres. It’s no longer unusual to see photojournalists exhibiting in an art gallery, for instance, or art photographers producing corporate images.

“Twenty years ago, the idea that advertising photographers



like Jill Greenberg would have shows in galleries would have been implausible,” says Runyon, referring to Greenberg’s show this past winter at ClampArt Gallery in New York City. “No one would have considered that a possibility because they were two different worlds.”

When Runyon had an opening in 2005 for a new professor, he looked nationwide for someone who would fortify the program’s balance of art practice with commercial preparedness and help students thrive in either world. With 200 applications, Runyon decided on Andrea Modica, a fine art photographer specializing in an 8x10 view camera and a 19th-century process called platinum printing.

She’s published numerous books of her personal photo projects and exhibitions across the world, but she also handles more routine projects such as annual reports and fundraising books for groups like the American Indian College Fund, as well as assignments for *The New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek* and *Time*.

“She knows how to do assignment-based work using her style,” says Runyon. “That is critical to the mission we have here.”

In an age where students might otherwise feel pressure to use the latest technology to be relevant, Modica embodies Drexel’s emphasis on the end



result, not the tool. Through weekly critiques and open class discussion, her students learn how to make judgments about the elements within the photograph and get feedback on the messages that their images convey — intended or not.

Modica recalls an incident from earlier in her teaching career when a student presented images of nude female figures superimposed onto a giant male hand, unaware that women in the class would find the image offensive. They saw it as a depiction of domination and control; he just thought it looked cool.

“Photography really makes us face what we might think to be the case and what really is the case,” explains Modica. “You teach that by requiring the students to stick to a language that can only be applied to things they can point to in the picture.”

To achieve this level of visual sophistication, seniors spend their entire fourth year producing a single portfolio — the Senior Thesis. Such intense focus on the ideas underlying a body of images can lead to striking creative breakthroughs.

Modica recalls how one senior, Taylor Pick, hunted for a topic that resonated with her. Pick eventually decided on flowers and plants — a subject that’s extremely challenging to portray in a fresh way. Her early attempts were in full color and heavily lit, bursting with clichés of that genre. Over the course of the year, she experimented with styles until she found her own.

In the middle of winter term, Pick came to Modica’s office and laid out a portfolio of flowing black-on-white leaves, pods and stalks — simple, minimalist and arresting. On display was the growth and perseverance a photographer must discover to make satisfying work — it brought both to tears.

“I know with my own work that turning those corners never ends,”

ANNE WILLIS



JEFFREY STOCKBRIDGE '05

DIY Documentarian

In the 10 years since graduating from Drexel’s photography department, Jeffrey Stockbridge has catapulted himself from apprentice to entrepreneur printer and acclaimed documentarian.

In 2006, while assisting his former co-op employer and architectural photographer, he earned fellowships from the Center for Emerging Visual Artists and the Independence Foundation Fellowship in the Arts, providing him a handful of exhibitions and a \$10,000 grant.

With the grant, he bought an inkjet printer and used what he’d learned at Drexel to make great prints. When the first show opened, Stockbridge had 14 framed prints from his project on abandoned spaces in Philadelphia ranging in size from 24”x30” to 40”x50” — and a bill totaling \$20,000.

“It was a challenging experience because it was something a lot of people might have been freaked out by,” he says. “To invest that much in yourself as an artist, you have to be a little crazy.”

The quality of the prints impressed people so much they started hiring him for printing jobs, accidentally starting his printing business, Stockbridge Fine Art Print.

Next, he began a critically acclaimed documentary project about a former working-class neighborhood now known for drugs and prostitution, called “Kensington Blues.” He is finished shooting the project and working on publishing the book himself after frustratingly finishing runner-up four years in a row for a photography book award.

“I’m making my book dummies and I’m gonna be psyched on them,” says Stockbridge. “It’ll take more time and cost more money, but at least I’ll get it done.”



ANNE WILLIS

says Modica. “I go through periods of working and working and feeling like I’ll never get to the next level where I’m surprised again. And then it happens. It’s like turning a corner and bumping into your destiny.”

A distinguishing feature of Drexel’s photography program is, of course, Drexel’s Co-op program. Students typically spend half of their junior year working for a private employer. No brief internship, the co-op program is a six-month immersion in the field.

Runyon, Professor Stuart Rome (who built Drexel’s initial photography program in 1985 and recruited Runyon in 1996) and Modica have employer contacts across the country in fashion, advertising, architecture, museums, galleries, nonprofits and magazine publishing.

Last year, Runyon helped Mikaela Wegerhoff ’15 land a co-op with New York editorial photographer Jeff Riedel. Equipped with technical training in digital film scanning and image processing, Wegerhoff was able to digitize a huge collection of the photographer’s earlier negatives. The collection — now featured online — is being published into a book.

“Photographers are willing to take Drexel students on because they have a useful, real world skills,” says Runyon. “The six-month co-op allows our students to make a significant contribu-



DANA LEONETTI '05

Designer Devotee

Dana Leonetti wasn’t sure where photography would lead her, but while studying it at Drexel she took classes in digital retouching and inkjet printing that ended up defining her career much more than a camera.

While still in school she followed her interest in magazines by landing an editorial internship at *Seventeen* magazine, where she joined sets for photo shoots and photographed street fashion for articles. When graduation came, her experience with retouching and printing quickly landed her a job at the Cartoon Bank, an offshoot of *The New Yorker* that sold published and unpublished cartoons from the magazine.

As her interests shifted more toward graphic design, she joined *Vanity Fair* as a designer and worked her way up to associate art director. She stayed with the magazine for five years building concepts, producing photo shoots for special advertising sections and designing other marketing material. After a stint with another Condé Nast title, *Self*, she arrived at *Fast Company*, where she is currently the marketing art director.

In September, she oversaw the week-long 20th anniversary of the magazine’s Innovation Festival in New York City, which hosts thousands of creatives and innovators for talks, workshops and tours.

tion to the firms they work with. You are not going to get a job in this business without prior experience. It will not happen. There is not a photographer I know who will hire an assistant who has not worked for somebody else already. There's too much at stake."

After spending one half of their junior year on co-op, students dedicate their senior year to their year-long capstone. This is done under the direction of professors who help them develop their photos into cohesive bodies of work.

In addition, they participate in a new class designed to help them market their work. For that task, the students meet with Capodici, the Digitas art buyer. She helps the students develop a website, digital portfolio and print-based marketing materials.

"When you're hired by someone else to do work, you're being hired for the way you solve problems visually, and how your style might be adapted to a client's needs," says

Runyon, explaining the reasoning for an advertising portfolio development course.

The new course helps students, especially those focused on fine art, to think realistically about how their pictures can function commercially.

One graduating senior, Sydney Arroyo '15, brought to Capodici a body of work featuring older people posed in crafted tableaux designed to throw into question the implied reality in a photograph — a fine art project. When Capodici saw the images, she advised Arroyo that they had potential to earn her pharmaceutical jobs, a market Capodici works with regularly.

"The class emphasized how you should hold yourself professionally and how to be taken seriously," recalls Arroyo. "She was the extra push you need to get on your feet and be like, 'OK, I'm gonna be OK after I graduate. I'm still terrified, but I'm gonna be fine.'"

Mike Froio '01 parlayed his personal interest in photographing the trains, rails and landscapes of the Pennsylvania Railroad into a job for Conrail making a video documentary of the rebuilding of a freight train bridge on the Delaware River.

Recalling the three-day video shoot, he says the November weather was so cold, that in the middle of the night, he had to drive to a nearby drugstore to get heating pads to prevent his hard drives from shutting down. Despite the difficulties, he says the job never felt like work because it was so closely related to his personal photo project.

"With your personal work, you try to figure out how to make it interesting for you without making it eye candy," says Froio, who now works at Drexel as the photo department facility manager and an adjunct professor. "With commercial work, it's about how to satisfy the client's need and get that same gratification the personal work gives you."

On the walls of Runyon's office hang some of his personal work — color photographs from the American West, a landscape he fell in love with in college.

Every spring, he and half a dozen student photographers fly into Las Vegas to spend 10 days photographing national parks such as Capitol Reef, Arches and Canyonlands. It's not a vacation but a lesson on climate change and industrial tourism. Students make pictures along areas of Lake Mead that were once 100 feet below water. They photograph the parched earth. They record the evidence of devastating wildfires. As they were taught to do in their classrooms back in Philadelphia, they practice using photography to express thoughts on something meaningful. Changing landscapes. Development. Ecology.

"I want the students to understand it's a very easy place to make Ansel Adams-type pictures. It's really easy to come away with sunsets. But the reality is quite different," says Runyon. "You have to get past that impulse to take those [pretty] pictures and go to areas that are more important." **[D]**



TAYLOR PICK

a ‘regular’ job

SIX YEARS AFTER VENTURING INTO THE WORLD OF BUSINESS TO OPEN A CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, SARAH STOLFA '15 IS DOING ALMOST TOO WELL — THE ARTIST IN HER WILL HAVE TO WAIT A BIT LONGER TO RETURN TO THE LENS. *By Michael Bucher*

Sarah Stolfa — the raven-haired, elaborately inked doyenne of the Philadelphia Photo Arts Center — rules an airy former warehouse in the Crane Arts Building of Kensington that is home to a special art organization.

Stolfa dreamed up the PPAC six years ago, soon after finishing an education in photography and fine art. She imagined an all-in-one digital photo lab, gallery space and educational organization — a place for artists to display their work and for novices to learn about photography and access technology to improve their craft.

Nothing like it existed outside of university programs.

One of the first people she went to for advice about her idea was Stuart Rome, an influential photography professor with deep roots in Drexel's photography department.

“You know what this is going to do to you as an artist, right?” he asked, remembering firsthand the toll it took on him to help design the photography program at Drexel in the '80s.

“I know, but I'm OK with that,” she told him. “I don't think it'll be like that forever.”

Stolfa, who already had a 2005 degree in photography from Drexel, had just graduated from Yale with an MFA in photography in 2008. In 2009, she published a book of portraits that she'd started while at Drexel — and which won her the *New York Times Magazine* College Photography Contest — called “The Regulars.” Based on portraits of bar patrons she served as a bartender at Philadelphia's McGlinchey's Tavern, the photo series combines the lighting, depth and detail of 17th-century Dutch paintings with contemporary commentary on social isolation. An artistic career awaited her, but Stolfa had a lot of ideas she wanted to see through first.

In her heart, she worried that investing her energy in running an organization would stifle her creative work. On top of that, she had plans to start a family. But Rome was moved by her desire to give back to Philadelphia and agreed to help get the project off the ground. Stolfa reasoned that she was laying the foundation for an organization that could someday live on without her.

Now passing its five-year milestone, the Philadelphia Photo Arts Center has become a fixture in Philadelphia's photographic community, host to an annual photo day popular with the public and regular classes and photographic exhibitions. The space has doubled and the full-time staff has grown from two to five. It has attracted a robust 16-person board of trustees made up of successful businesspeople, doctors and photographers. The budget this year approaches \$1 million, up almost tenfold from year one.

“The challenge when we opened was getting support and getting people in the door on little resources,” recalls Stolfa.

Today, the problem isn't getting people in the door, it's finding room for them all. The Free After School Teen Program, of which Stolfa is particularly proud, has too many applicants. Stolfa faces adding a second section to fit demand, but she is unsure exactly how.

“We need an extra \$10,000 because we need an instructor and teaching assistant and a couple more books or we have to turn kids away,” she says. “And that's not success to me. We're not turning kids away.”

Her commitment hasn't always been easy on her. During the first year, she was teaching a class and pregnant with her first child when she thought she felt contractions. Her doctor's office told her to come in immediately.

“I hung up, and then was like, ‘I'm gonna finish teaching this class,’” she says, determined not to let her students down.

When she finally arrived at the hospital, she was in preterm labor and ended up hospitalized for five days (the doctors were able to interrupt the labor and she went on to deliver at full term).

She has since pulled back from most teaching, but one class is special. It's a project-based group that has been meeting for two and a half years. One of her students, a freelance writer named Debbie Lerman, has pushed herself especially hard to make better work. It's paid off, earning Lerman a Fleisher Art Memorial Wind Challenge and a solo show in 2017.

“When she came in here, she was making simple, cliché pictures,” says Stolfa. “She's very open to experimenting and pushed her way through stuff.”

Lerman says Stolfa is different from other instructors she's had in classes at Fleisher Art Memorial and University of the Arts. From Stolfa, she gets honest feedback.

“That was so refreshing because in the classes I'd taken before, everyone wanted to be real positive,” says Lerman, “which is great for confidence but not great for making progress.”

This fall, PPAC will host its 6th annual Philly Photo Day — an outreach program collecting thousands of photos from mainly amateur photographers throughout the Greater Philadelphia region. Although growing in popularity, Philly Photo Day will take a hiatus next year because Stolfa fears it's becoming the only thing PPAC is known for. What PPAC provides for the community is always changing, she says. She believes art education and photography are evolving disciplines and it's her mission to adapt with the needs of local artists.

“If we're still doing well and relevant — that's my goal,” says Stolfa. “What that means in 10 years, your guess is as good as mine.” **[D]**

