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<http://acuads.com.au/conference/article/shes-done-alright-for-a-girl-strategies-for-teaching-wome>

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## **She's Done Alright for a Girl: Strategies for teaching women artists**

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While evidence suggests that up to 65% of visual arts graduates in Australia are women, women artists are still dramatically under-represented in most sectors of the industry, from institutional exhibitions through to commercial gallery representation. The push for gender awareness in art school education was a prominent aspect of second wave feminist activism in this country, however the outcomes for women artists, particularly as their careers proceed, often remain discouraging. Yet, against this rather sombre backdrop, our experience as both teachers and students of the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree course at Queensland University of Technology suggests there is an optimistic story to tell about the possible retention and success of women artists in Australia. As a small department of only nine ongoing staff across all areas of studio and art history/theory teaching, we have observed the strong performance of our female graduates. For example, of the fifteen recipients of the Queensland Art Gallery Melville Haysom Scholarship for young artists since 2002, ten have been from QUT's very small graduate cohort, but more importantly, of that ten, all bar one have been women, including two collaborations<sup>1</sup>. The most recent recipients, Clark Beaumont, were also the Australian representatives in the Kaldor Projects' *13 Rooms* exhibition of performance art in 2013. Milani Gallery, one of Brisbane's leading commercial contemporary art galleries, represents seven female QUT graduates<sup>2</sup>, who enjoy vigorous national and international careers. The 2013 round of the Freedman Foundation Travelling scholarship recognised four female QUT graduates<sup>3</sup> amongst its five recipients. Last year's *Fresh Cut* showcase exhibitions of four emerging artists at the Institute of Modern Art featured two female graduates<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, QUT graduates have been at the heart of Brisbane's most critically challenging artist-run initiatives, including all-women ventures such as No Frills\* and LEVEL ARI.

As teachers, practitioners and researchers, we are compelled to understand the pedagogical approaches we engage in, how and why they have arisen, and the consequences of these strategies. This collaborative research represents the first stage in a longer consideration of gender in our teaching practices. As collaborative

co-authors, we have had ample opportunity to observe the course structure and teaching methods from a variety of viewpoints, as our varied experiences include the positions of undergraduate student, postgraduate student, teaching staff member and professional arts practitioner. Crucially, we are positioned inside our subject of inquiry. Reflective research of this kind is a complex and potentially fraught affair, because as Pat Drake and Linda Heath have pointed out, 'reconciling [one's] position as both a researcher and as a responsible practitioner pitches researchers into a place that forces methodological as well as ethical consideration of researcher distance' (Drake 2011, 33). For the purposes of this research, our methodology has included observations of teaching practices, anonymised interviews, and self-reflection on our experiences as students and staff. This paper maps some key characteristics of both course design and pedagogical principles, and asks whether there is any evidence for a correlation between the features of the course, gender awareness in the studio and classroom, and women's expectations, aspirations and achievements with regard to their art careers. Through this process we have identified three key pedagogical aspects for consideration: the teaching model, course content, and professional preparation.

Gender awareness in education is characterised by the recognition that gender roles are largely constituted by learned behaviours and attitudes in the context of social power relations that most often disadvantage women. As Judith Gerson and Kathy Peiss explain, 'gender is not a rigid or reified analytic category imposed on human experience, but a fluid one whose meaning emerges in specific social contexts as it is created and recreated through human actions' (Gerson and Peiss 1985, 317). Gender aware pedagogy attempts to mainstream women's needs and perspectives into both course content and processes. It must account for both easily identified practical gender needs and more complex and longer-term strategic gender interests. For example, the ability to access safe and clean parenting facilities would satisfy a key practical need in higher education, whereas a culture that empowers women to feel entitled to ask for flexible class arrangements that allow them to use those facilities would be accounting for strategic gender interests. We have observed that progressive discussion and critique of the power structures that underpin inequality in the visual arts is a notable aspect of the teaching environment in our department.

The Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at QUT is a three-year, interdisciplinary studio course, operating under a distinctive open studio model, where visual intelligence,

ingenuity and resourcefulness are core skills. This program is, as Charles Robb has previously described, characterised by all students using materials and techniques as necessitated by their practices under the same roof, 'in a continuous network of studio spaces' (Robb 2009). This means that students working with painting, sculpture, photography, video, sound, performance, or any combination of these, are co-housed and integrated in the studio class. Because of this diversity, staff must, by necessity, respond to each student's practice in the spirit of collaborator or co-learner as much as mentor or instructor. As we have observed, this manifests as a conversational process of negotiation, in both group teaching situations and one-on-one consultations. The resulting dynamic interrupts the master/apprentice relationship that underpinned the traditional atelier model, and remains as a philosophical residue in many art schools. In this way, studio staff (regardless of their gender) demonstrate the influence of feminist principles in their teaching. Feminist pedagogical practice is characterised by a fundamental recognition of difference. As Carrie Nordlund, Peg Speirs and Marilyn Stewart describe it, feminist teaching 'makes room for all voices and honors inclusion so that issues of difference emerge for all to recognise' (2010, 37). The recognition and promotion of difference is fundamental to the open studio model.

We recognise that Visual Arts at QUT is heavily weighted toward male staff members. Across all areas of the department, only three of the nine permanent lecturing positions are filled by women, and all three of the studio teaching co-ordinators are male. As partial compensation for this, permanent staff members have agreed that tutoring positions should, wherever possible, be filled by women with active professional practices. While this is less than ideal, setting up a predictable dynamic whereby permanent or tenured positions are filled by men and more precarious sessional roles filled by women, it has meant that face-to-face contact is predominantly with female staff, enabling female students to discuss issues of gender and sexuality in the studio more freely. As those in the authorial team who have worked as sessional studio tutors have observed, the visible negotiation of life in what has been termed 'the precariat' (Standing 2011) provides a salutary lesson to students on the perseverance required to make a life in the arts.

Regardless of the staff gender disparity however, most studio and history/theory lecture staff have become keenly attuned to the question of women's inclusion in the teaching syllabus. Strategies we have observed include the explicit discussion of women artists marginalised in mainstream art history scholarship, as well as more

'covert' approaches. In one term of first year studio practice lectures, for example, only women artists are offered as case study exemplars for the studio-based formal exercises. No mention of this gender bias is made to the students, and in interview, the first year studio coordinator noted that very few students even pass comment on the fact. In the second year of their studies, students are provided with another women-only term in studio, but this time, these lectures are accompanied by explicit discussion of the contribution women artists have made to the field. Members of staff have been developing a database of women artists across movements and eras that will function as a general resource for inclusive teaching in the future.

The generally inequitable situation that exists for women artists is discussed formally in second semester of the first year, as part of a historical analysis of the Women's Art Movement's impact on Australian art history. This is accompanied by another lecture discussing LGBT and queer art practice. Contextualising gender as a factor in both the making and reception of art at an early stage in their degree appears to have a galvanising effect on many of the students, who are often considering the relationship between the role of the artist and their personal identity at this point in their studies. Students are keen to discuss the difficulties they observe for women in the arts, and teaching staff draw on research (such as that available on the CoUNTess Blog) to focus those discussions. The documented lack of women artists exhibited at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art in 2011 (CoUNTesses 2012), for example, formed the basis for a number of discussions of how women artists can progress from exhibiting in artist-run spaces to publicly funded Contemporary Art Organisations. Through these discussions, embedded into weekly class activities rather than stand alone professional practice subjects, all students are encouraged to develop their career strategies.

Understanding the diversity of approaches possible in this strategizing appears crucial in professional preparation. A key aspect of QUT's teaching structure is that studio teaching staff and the art history/theory team work as a single department, recognising that BFA students may well work as arts writers or curators, or move into postgraduate study in art history, often in addition to maintaining their practices as artists. This acknowledges the increasing prevalence of portmanteau visual arts roles, such as the artist/curator, writer/practitioner, and artist/teacher for example, resulting in additional opportunities for those graduating from the studio-based program. The characterisation of this shift in our industry as an opportunity, rather than a compromise, interrupts the expectation that there is only one way to be a

successful artist. As women are more likely to encounter career interruptions, they are more vulnerable to the perception that they are no longer 'real artists' simply because they cannot practice full-time, or because their practice must incorporate or work around other roles. We have observed that presenting alternative narratives for a life in the arts is particularly empowering for female students. As one co-author explains, 'This has meant that while I have had to negotiate work and my practice as well as post-graduate degree, I have done so with the understanding that I can make art in various places and times, and that I do not have to work on it solely on a full time basis in order to classify myself as a professional practitioner' (Co-author reflection). Armed with a broad knowledge base and strategic skills related to both the studio-based and theoretical concerns of contemporary art practice and history, graduates appear well placed to negotiate the somewhat murky terrain of the industry, developing a portfolio career that will enable them to meet their needs, both creative and financial.

We have observed that a critical position regarding the dominant power structures of the art world is central to the degree as a whole. This critique is not focused solely on issues of gender, but by equipping graduates with an awareness of dominant power relations, they are able to reflect on how gender and sexuality impact on their own experiences as artists. In this there is a parallel with Ellen Dorkin and Susan Clement's explicit identification and critique of 'Big Daddy' in their practice of theatre education. Christine Young explains that the figure of 'Big Daddy' is 'a sly manifestation of the persuasive cultural conditioning that prompts women to seek approval from the very power structures they wish to dismantle' and that by revealing how these power structures operate, Dorkin and Clement 'acknowledge a key obstacle women artists face in choosing a position of resistance, as well as the extraordinarily destructive force that internalized racism and sexism can exert on an artistic process' (Young 2012, 137-138). Paradoxically, deconstructing the privilege structures of the art world appears to prepare students more effectively to function successfully within them. Providing alternative narratives for artistic development beyond the internalized sexism of the art world could well be one of the most productive strategies to employ when striving to provide for strategic gender interests.

By questioning the accepted structure of the visual art industry, the QUT course requires students to reconsider what constitutes a sustainable art practice. Similarly, the strong emphasis on improvisation, working within constraints, and rethinking the

rules of practice suggests to students that it is their professional responsibility to consider how their practice can be sustained, even under less than ideal circumstances. One of the strongest survival skills taught in the degree is collaboration. While the art world is traditionally reliant on the model of individual success, collaboration is an embedded aspect of the course over the whole three years. Students are expected to work together productively in groups for selected studio activities, learn about collective and collaborative practices in their art history/theory units, as well as work in groups toward conventional assessment items such as essays and class presentations. This may well be preparing young women in particular to manage in their professional lives more effectively. A majority of students entering the course are women in late adolescence. As Rhonda L. Williams and Abby Ferber have pointed out, 'by practicing and reinforcing positive small group interaction, adolescents can gain support and build on their perception of self. One of the best interventions in addressing adolescent issues [...] is the use of small group interaction. Small group programs are more effective than individual interventions' (Williams and Ferber 2008, 54). Our recent discovery of research literature suggesting that the collective and collaborative approach undertaken in much of the QUT visual arts course may be assisting young women with a more confident transition to adulthood provides exciting suggestions for further research.

As we have observed, elements of feminist pedagogy have found their way into many aspects of teaching within our discipline. In some cases, these have been explicit and consciously deployed, while other strategies are more covert or simply reflective of feminism's substantial influence on the processes of contemporary art. We have also identified areas for further improvement in the future. We recognise that we do not have the smoking gun required to demonstrate a causal relationship between our teaching practices and the success of our female graduates, however there seems to be a recurrent theme that warrants further examination. Many of the values and strategies inherent to QUT's visual arts degree emphasise critical and reflective approaches to the art world, even from the insider position. This suggests that demanding simple inclusion in the existing power relations of the art world is an inadequate response to strategic gender interests, and that resistant approaches of artist-initiated activity, collectivity and collaboration have enabled female students and graduates to conceive of themselves as legitimate artists regardless of the constraints imposed by our industry as it currently exists.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Clark Beaumont (Sarah Clarke & Nicole Beaumont), Ruth McConchie, Catherine or Kate (Catherine Sagin & Kate Woodcroft), Elizabeth Willing and Louise Tahiraj (Bennett), Alice Lang, Natalya Hughes.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Brown, Kirsty Bruce, Lucy Griggs, Natalya Hughes, Sandra Selig, Gemma Smith, and Jemima Wyman.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine or Kate, Alice Lang and Elizabeth Willing.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth McConchie and Anita Holtsclaw.