

# Where Beauty Gets the Business: ART AS PRODUCT

SEIDENBAUM, ART

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• Practically, the whole school applies itself.

The faculty is full of professional people who also teach. The students are there to study art because they want to translate education into wages. There is none of the pious apologizing one hears at larger institutions—how regrettable it is that most graduates use their degrees as passports into private industry. At the Art Center School honest commercialism prevails, permeates: you train yourself to get good work.

During 35 years worth of being in the education business, founder Edward Adams and his idea have been extraordinarily successful:

Ad agencies and industrial firms dangle more offers in front of Art Center graduates than there are graduates to accept them.

More than half of the automobile stylists at General Motors and Ford are alums of this small school on 3rd St.

Almost every national magazine is dotted with photography and illustration by people who learned their crafts at Art Center.

It is a place of rigors. Art Center operates on a trimester system, making a degree possible for the year-round student in two years and eight months. Each class is an all-day venture, one subject per day, a way to exploit concentration and the facilities.

There are no fraternities or social clubs or ath-

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BY ART SEIDENBAUM

letic teams. And although the school has students from 40 states and 21 foreign countries, it has no dormitories; Art Center young people make their own lives even as they apply skills toward earning a living.

The rigors might seem fatuous — until you've been there—because the emphasis, even the language, is straight out of a salesmanship manual. Industry—which would include design firms and manufacturers and ad agencies and art houses and packagers — is regarded as the "ultimate consumer." These are the places where Art Center graduates are bought.

## Student 'Product'

Students are affectionately known as "product." John Thompson of the school administration says, "Industry tells us that one of the values of our product is the sense of freedom and taste graduates display."

Don Kubly, assistant to president Adams, explains curriculum changes as a result of "seeking ways to make our product better."

But the 1,000 young people at Art Center do not look like product at

all—less so, in fact, than the somewhat uniform platoons at larger campuses in the Los Angeles complex.

Nor do they behave like product; while some 50 students worked up an assignment for a U.S.A. tourism poster, magic marker smears up to their elbows, I walked by and saw 50 different approaches to the delimited problem.

Another class was redesigning the Citroen automobile and there were more individual solutions than there were splinter parties in pre-De Gaulle France. In the lobby of the school are model designs for drinking fountains and industrial vehicles and wine bottles and shop tools — everything, including a possible kitchen sink. All samples are handsomely constructed and unlike other samples.

The drawings and paintings hung through the halls are imaginative and good, professional-looking, if that over-oiled word has any meaning left.

Art Center insists that its students have both hands in fine arts, if not their hearts. "Drawing is to the artist and designer," warns the school catalog, "what mathematics is to the engineer—his means of communicating ideas. Only after he has acquired a working knowledge of his language can he begin to do creative work."

"Creative," of course, is another one of those trampled words. But Art Center indeed has fine artists on the faculty, to provide solid esthetic footings for the next generation of commercial artists. Such established painters as Lorser Feitelson, John Alton and Eugene Fleury teach there.

Fleury and his wife, Bernice Polifka, were exploring the visual poten-

tials of Pop art at Art Center a decade ago, before the latest frenzy in fine art became a fashion.

The line between good commercial art and gallery art is fuzzy, in any event. The current Pop masters—with their cartoon balloons and Brillo boxes—are fascinated by the graphics pitch. And magazine illustrators, layout men, art directors are, in turn, avid applicators of what's happening in (or to) museums.

## Detailed Chores

The real hard line is discipline. Unlike many other art schools, where the assignments are less formalized as a student advances, the chores at Art Center become more and more detailed. Such inartistic elements as, a commodity, size of page, necessary elements of copy or trade-mark must be worked into the presentation. The teamwork of the terrible outside world, as practiced by art director and artist and merchandiser, is part of the process.

Art Center imposes discipline. Other schools rely on the talented artist to find it for himself.

It's easy enough to haw-haw group effort, as the death kiss of the arts; pooled means produce shallow ends.

Feitelson throws a few aspersions the other way: "Sometimes I think artists don't need to have talent any more to succeed in the galleries—just arrogance. Then they may be admired for a drug habit or the number of social diseases they've contracted. Individuality is not the whole story. When the Old Masters worked on large murals, they had to have student helpers, they had to satisfy their patrons' requirements — they were tailors working to suit."

Only three out of 10 Art Center students work their way to a degree. Some drop out; some are pushed. Faculty member Phil Cohen explains, "Mostly the ones who go are the ones who aren't making it."

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Grades are ladled out on the basis of such non-institutional criteria as: Imagination and Originality, Taste, Craftsmanship, Drawing Ability or Photo Technique.

Girls, alas, are a short statistic in the school—only 15% of them. While there are good looking ones and the place also has the reflected sheen of professional models, Art Center would like more women to apply themselves.

Peculiarly, before Art Center occupied the block, the spaces belonged to a private girls' school. Kulby still has a button near his desk with the ancient legend: "Ring three times for house mother." He's pushed it three and more times, to no avail.

No historic house mother would recognize the place anyway. Behind violent orange doors are model auto body shops and film stages and photo labs and studios and plastics workrooms—a labyrinth of expensive faci-

lities honeycombed around an old English quadrangle.

Like almost every college, Art Center does have building aspirations. The Ford Motor Co. (not the Ford Foundation this time) recently gave the school \$1 million toward new construction on the four-acre campus.

Frankly more commercial than the Otis Art Institute and more industry-oriented than Chouinard, Art Center is an on-ramp to the main roads of advertising and design. What it does, it does thoroughly and well.

There are even some signs that a few years of "wrist work" in the arts is making the whole advertised world more attractively wrapped and less likely to stab itself with tail-fins. Naturally, since we are the "ultimate ultimate consumers," the Art Center is trained to paint for the marketplace. And if our dreams appear limited — pretty packages for an acquisitive society — that's because we have not yet demanded more.