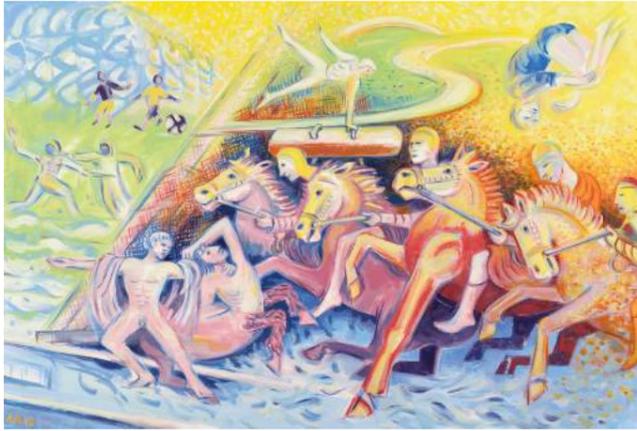




Frank Gambino
Lydia
Charcoal on paper



Anna Bisset
Olympians III
Oil on canvas

Corsham re-formed



Jon Woolfenden
Out with the Girls
Oil on canvas



Guy Thomas
Sea Stack
Steel



Richard Crooks
Still in that Place
Fired clay, acrylic paint

In a paper for a series of conferences at the Tate Gallery in the early 1990s, the artist Susan Hiller related the comment that whereas Paris has artists' cafés and New York has artists' bars, in England we have art colleges. She then went on to elaborate that the function of the British art college was to validate a professional path but tied to this was its nature as a socialising body. British art education, she says, "has been a rite of passage more than a form of training, a situation where older artists influence, criticise and sponsor younger ones and where the younger ones keep their elders on their toes". This relationship between master and pupil, authority and the acolyte, was neatly visualised by another artist, Tom Phillips. As an introduction to a profile of his own work on BBC2 television in 1989, Phillips traced his lineage from his own tutor/master Frank Auerbach through to Auerbach's tutor Bomberg, followed by Bomberg's tutor Sickert, and so on until he reached Raphael. Many of us who went to art college can trace a similar lineage. We were all taught by artists who were taught by artists. It is a 'vertical' chronology stretching through time.

Alongside this vertical heritage is a horizontal plateau. On this plateau are our contemporaries at college, our fellow students. We look across to their example; we learn from the work that they have done; we acquire skills that they have forged; and we take sustenance from both their encouragement and their criticism. It is easy to label this as mere influence but in both cases, tutor to student and student to student, it is more a matter of dialogue. This dialogue does not end with college, it can last many years as can be seen with this group and their current exhibition project.

Traditionally at the centre of the art academy was the life room. Drawing the figure from life was an essential skill that all were trained to master. It is the expectation of the man in the street that an artist can capture a likeness – make a drawing of them or their loved one. Life class drawing is much more than this. It demands honest looking, and the result might not be attractive. **Frank Gambino** continues to work from life with the basics of drawing, a stick of charcoal and a sheet of paper. As he states: "My work is a record of the time I spend drawing the people who are in my pictures." It is not just a finished result that we consider, but also the event of making a drawing. Gambino has described his drawings as 'big ugly heads', not very flattering to the sitters but this label gives heft to the drawings as worked events.

This emphasis upon the process of making is the approach that **Anna Bisset** brings to her work. Using the subject as the starting point, she explores materials, techniques and production methods. Bisset has commented upon her time spent working in an industrial foundry saying that "making the original piece (in wood, clay or resin) and mass-producing it in metal using the sand-casting method was something I could observe every day as being an influence in techniques and methods of production". While Gambino's drawings may point to a more traditional perspective of the art academy, Bisset's emphasis upon process may be the outcome of a necessity to consider design and the links to industry. Many art colleges in Britain trace their history to the Victorian period and the foundation of design education that would strive to take account of the new manufacturing processes, an approach that would inform design education across Europe. Art academies became colleges of art and design. This relationship between functional design and the aesthetics of art have become an important factor of visual culture. Many of the practitioners in this exhibition are trained designers and part of a contemporary industry. Industry is the key aspect to **Jon Woolfenden's** work. He says: "I enjoy all things oily and industrial... I visited a turbine factory; man, machine, smell and sound akin to a scene from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*". Not for Woolfenden the refined approach of the academy. He applies paint with kitchen knives, rollers, stencils and even an icing sugar applicator. These worked surfaces reflect wrought products of the factory worker.

Guy Thomas uses the material of industry – steel – to fix the forces of nature. Thomas orchestrates the dynamic fluidity of landscape and seascape, but the organic force has become unyielding metal. Both Thomas's practice, and that of his fellow sculptor **Richard Crooks**, come out of late modernist sculpture as advocated by Clement Greenberg. Following the discourse set out by the American critic, the sculptor Anthony Caro established a truly British tradition of post-war sculpture in the British art colleges of the 1960s that would concentrate upon the formal aspects of the discipline. This bedrock of abstract sculptural practice provided a discourse that other artists could expand upon. Charles Hewlings, a tutor at Bath Academy of Art, had himself studied under Caro at St Martin's School of Art, London. Both Thomas and Crooks identify Hewlings as a mentor and an influence on their thinking in relation to this discourse. The forces of nature crash into Thomas's work while for Crooks the culture of international commerce makes its impact. In Crooks' work, imagery from a colonial and trading past, such as the humble teapot and Indian figurines, has been brought into conflict with the language of international modernist forms. Richard Crooks' practice as a sculptor has been transformed by more recent study in relation to Craft, specifically ceramics. His present work encapsulates the border skirmishes between Craft and Fine Art. Crooks' subjects are forced into compliance by the action of casting processes and subtle modelling. The result is ceramic pieces that have the weight and mass of stone sculpture.

contd.

Parallel to the work of the British abstract sculptors was the work of British abstract painters, notably the St Ives group in Cornwall. Unlike their American counterparts, the Abstract Expressionists, the St Ives painters took inspiration from the landscape. As with the sculptors who followed Anthony Caro, these post-war abstract painters would have a significant impact upon British art education. The question has always been whether the British painters just copied their American peers or whether they offered something else. It is this strand of discourse that **Mark Mainwood** engages with. Starting off with small-scale organic forms such as insects and microbiology, Mainwood produces abstract compositions that, although largely concerned with formal properties, have the ambition to contain references to day-to-day emotions and experiences.

By the 1970s the boundaries between practices had started to melt as the Postmodern era dawned. Hybridity rather than purity would become the norm. **Paul Lindt**, a graphic designer since leaving college, uses some of the abstract devices of Fine Art practice in his work. However, with Lindt's work we take a significant leap forward to art colleges of the present day as he experiments with the digital tools of contemporary graphic design to create his pieces. Avoiding obvious simulated images, Lindt constructs what he terms an 'abstract architecture'. This architecture incorporates vivid colours and the texture of photographic elements to produce a fabricated space.

The impact of technology in art colleges has always been present. Since its birth in the 19th century, photography has been the upstart. Now it is perhaps a traditional media as all are consumed in the digital revolution. **Paul Tucker**'s photographs follow a tradition of observed street photography that stretches as far back as the French photographer Atget. His seemingly ordinary scenes are the stuff made art by the American photographer William Eggleston. As with the painters and sculptors in this group, Tucker is concerned with colour and form, using the pretext of place to pull the images together into a body of work. Until recently, photography was not shown in galleries alongside other art media. By the 1980s photographers in Britain had developed the photobook as an alternative space to disseminate their work. Closely related to the artist's book (books produced by artists as art works in their own right), **Tim Daly** has developed this format to construct books that use photography to picture events that are associated with particular sites. Daly includes discarded material, such as paper ephemera or textiles, to give his pieces a sensory aspect; consequently looking at his photographs becomes haptic as well as visual.

British art colleges have changed. Most art colleges have been subsumed into Universities and become departments of the larger institution rather than remaining independent bodies. Alongside this change in organisational structure are the changes in curriculum and the changes in working methods. New media now dominate; notably, studios are equipped with computers. **Iain Cotton**'s practice dates back to even before the art academies. As a stone carver he makes work that is both ancient and permanent. Cotton's work is as much part of a craft tradition as it is a part of art and design. His word sculptures and his use of the written word have strong links to Conceptual Art practice of the 1970s and in particular the work of Ian Hamilton-Finlay. Both old and new, Cotton's work stands stubbornly in contradiction to the immateriality of digital breakdowns. As he states: "I design and carve my own letters by hand, because I want them to be human, full of life, and distinctive rather than mass produced". The British art college of the past may have had its summer. Like **Simon Ward**'s watercolour images of pressed flies, all we have are the ephemeral marks on paper. Ward's work encapsulates the delicacy of the fleeting moment, something that was hardly there.

All of the artists in this exhibition went to the Bath Academy of Art in the mid 1980s. What is apparent from the work of these artists is the emphasis upon crafted skills honed in the studio rather than conceptual critique sharpened in the seminar room. Although art and design education in Britain still thrives, it has become something different. The conferences referred to at the beginning of this essay sought to look at the state of British art education in the 1990s. Twenty years on perhaps we are still asking what should the art college of the twenty-first century be?

Essay by Stephen Clarke, an artist, writer and lecturer based in the northwest of England.

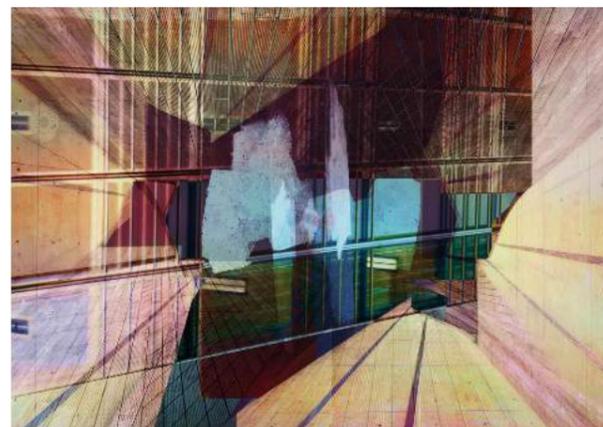
Susan Hiller, 'An artist on art education', in P. Hetherington, (ed.), *Issues in Art and Education: Aspects of the Fine Art Curriculum*, London (Tate Publishing / Wimbledon School of Art) 1996, p. 43. BBC TV film *The Artist's Eye: Tom Phillips* directed by Jake Auerbach (1989), from *The Artist's Eye* series. All quotes from exhibiting artists are taken from email communications between the author and the artists from March to August 2012.

An exhibition by former students of Bath Academy of Art:
Anna Bisset, Iain Cotton, Richard Crooks, Tim Daly, Frank Gambino, Paul Lindt, Mark Mainwood, Guy Thomas, Paul Tucker, Simon Ward, Jon Woolfenden
www.bathacademyofart.blogspot.co.uk

11th - 20th October 2012
Tokarska Gallery
163 Forest Road, London E17 6HE
www.tokarskagallery.co.uk



Mark Mainwood
Cactus Dream "Breeze"
Acrylic and water based oil on canvas



Paul Lindt
Construction No.1 with paint, glass, steel, concrete and wood
Digital montage, Durst Lambda print



Paul Tucker
The Drive
C-type digital print

Tim Daly
A Street Name Desired Car
Eleven unmounted C-type prints enclosed in vintage wallpaper folder



Iain Cotton
Bread
Salvaged White Lias limestone



Simon Ward
May Bug Rorschach
Inkjet print

