Dynamic and exciting: 50 shades of Arts research

DOUG PEERS, Dean of Arts

WITH THE END OF TERM FAST APPROACHING, and masses of exams and essays to read, it is easy to forget some of the other dimensions of Faculty life, particularly research. A number of the articles in this issue serve as a welcome reminder of the research, scholarship and practice that makes our Faculty such a dynamic and exciting place.

From research-informed creative practices to documenting hinge moments in Canadian history, and from Olympian efforts in costume design to the psychology of self-restraint, Arts colleagues are making substantial contributions to our understanding and celebration of the human condition. Such examples of our wide-ranging interests and expertise also add human flesh and drama (including, perhaps, a plot line for a CSI episode involving a stolen van containing a work of art) to the statistical evidence frequently sought to confirm our research excellence.
Two of the surest signs of autumn are falling leaves as temperatures cool and rising blood pressures as university ratings and rankings are released. I was, however, delighted to have mine reduced by the news that yet again our researchers, together with colleagues in other faculties, were responsible for this university topping the SSHRC chart for comprehensive universities in the annual Maclean's magazine university issue. I am the first to acknowledge that rankings are but an imperfect measure of research intensity, ignoring excellent scholarship which was not funded through the larger programs such as SSHRC; not to mention the fact that such rankings deal with inputs and not outputs. And there is also the wider issue of our culture’s obsession with ratings and rankings, our fixation on the numbers rather than the questions such numbers are allegedly helping to answer. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding such caveats, the Maclean’s numbers provide further evidence of our commitment to research excellence and to the spirit of innovation and enquiry to which we can justly lay claim.

We have asked one of our strategic plan working groups to look at how we can better provide timely and meaningful support to our researchers, particularly as so many of them are pursuing collaborative research partnerships that span universities as well as other sectors of society. As is widely (and painfully) known, space is also an issue. In fact, the university has been aptly described as ‘a diverse group of scholars united by frustration over parking and divided by fighting for space.’ As the number and nature of research projects evolve, so too do their demands for space. We also have a working group looking into that. Another group is looking at, amongst other things, interdisciplinarity and experiential learning – we will explore these in a future Inside Arts issue.

For those of you eager to get a head start into experiential learning while also surrendering to seasonal spirits, check out the feature on CRC Abigail Scholer wherein she describes her research that addresses such dilemmas as ‘when is one piece of cake enough?’. For my part, I am sneaking off for a week to the UK, for more archival therapy where I’ll be delving deeper into medical topographies while continuing my search for further information on an army officer turned writer-illustrator-purveyor of pornography. ‘Fifty Grades of Earl Grey’ could well become the bestseller that none of my earlier works became.

Wishing everyone – even the geese – happy holidays and all the best for 2013.
Rocky the Revolutionary: Race relations and human rights during the long 1960s in Canada

THERE’S AN OLD JOKE THAT GOES: “IF YOU CAN REMEMBER THE SIXTIES, YOU WEREN’T REALLY THERE.” BUT THERE WAS ANOTHER SIXTIES, INTENSELY MEMORABLE AND DEEPLY ENGAGED IN SOCIAL ISSUES, THAT ACCOMPLISHED A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF SOME OF THE ORIENTING NOTIONS IN CANADIAN SOCIETY.

“I first met Rocky at a civil rights demonstration in Toronto in 1965”

The career of B.A. “Rocky” Jones is a quintessential example of the memorable Sixties, not only for his participation in several of the signal movements of that era but for the resonance of his contributions in many of the institutions promoting human rights and social equality today. Journalists in the 1960s dubbed him “Rocky the Revolutionary” for his endorsement of “Black Power” and his dealings with the Black Panthers, but what was genuinely revolutionary was his articulation of a “systemic” definition of racism, requiring remedial programs for the historic victims of discrimination.

I first met Rocky at a civil rights demonstration in Toronto in 1965, and our friendship grew when I moved to Halifax to pursue a PhD in History at Dalhousie University in 1968. Through Rocky I became involved with “The Movement” and some of its projects. For example, we founded the Transition Year Program at Dalhousie for Black and Mi’kmaq school dropouts. It still exists, and has in the past forty years produced over a thousand graduates who now provide a leadership cadre for their communities.

As a youth in Halifax, George Elliott Clarke delivered newspapers to the Jones residence. Rocky was his hero, and became his mentor. It was on Rocky’s advice that George came to study at UW as an undergraduate, and it was here that George and I became friends. He has subsequently been celebrated as Canada’s leading African-Canadian poet and literary scholar, and has been responsible for the emergence of the genre of African-Canadian writing within Canadian literature.

On Rocky’s initiative, we three are now preparing an account of that particular Sixties and its continuing legacies, with Rocky’s career as the connecting thread. My role is to conduct archival research over the next three years. Each summer we will meet to interpret and elaborate upon the research materials through personal reminiscences and our combined understanding of African-Canadian history. During the fourth year we will collaborate on writing a book-length study which, we intend, will demonstrate the dynamic nature of this history and its implications for citizen engagement with the policies that affect their lives. And besides, it is a fascinating story.
Combining art with engineering in kinetic sculptures

I WORK IN THE FIELD OF KINETIC ART (another term for sculpture that moves) and that means that there has to be a good deal of research and development up front. I spend a lot of time considering the idea and the concept before I make a commitment to the piece. Most times I build a prototype. This could be in wood or styrofoam. I work with different people for the mechanical design - figuring out how to make the piece move is a big deal. I have a machinist and a mechanical designer that I have worked with for nearly 20 years. These are critical, long-lasting relationships - not everyone is sympathetic to working with an artist, and a perfectionist at that.

I have taught in the area of sculpture and digital imaging - which includes teaching Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign as well as video programs like Final Cut Pro. I use these programs in my own work when I do studies in movement. I have also taught Fine 392 which is a course where artists and engineers collaborate. I co-taught this course with Rob Gorbet when he was in Engineering, and it was an incredible experience because Rob is a great teacher and because the students got so much out of the collaborative learning experience.

Teaching the digital programs means that you are always learning - technology speeds along and you have to keep up with it. I like teaching the software because it brings the conceptual into alignment with the technical and it is good to get students over the hump of the software challenges - this clears the way for the conceptual. It is also really rewarding teaching sculpture. I love sculpture - it is my passion and it really feels great when you see students connecting with materials and witness their excitement over a really good project.

Working with the graduate students is really rewarding. Doing a master’s degree is akin to being in an incubator. It is both raw and profound. There are many twists and turns in their journey. I like to use the expression that the river that they step into when they enter the program is vastly different from the river they step out of when they leave the program.

I think viewers respond with the gut or the intellect - sometimes both. For me it is rewarding when someone says that they were really moved by my work. My dealer in Toronto, Olga Korper is really behind my work and that really means a lot; and she is not afraid of the mechanical nature of the work - she embraces it.

STOLEN VAN, LOST WORK

My van was stolen about a month before my show at the Olga Korper Gallery was to open. Inside the van were two editions of the mobile “solving man ray’s obstruction”. The 17’ wide mobile was to be the centre piece in the exhibition. I had just returned from working with my machinist in the east end of Toronto. Weeks of the most difficult work on the hangar had been completed and it was time for sanding and waxing. It was 11 pm on a Sunday night and as the work was too heavy to carry in by myself, I left the pieces in the van - double checking the doors before leaving it. I live in the High Park area of Toronto - a very safe neighbourhood, and the vehicle was an undesirable 2000 Dodge Caravan. It was quite a shock to see it missing at 7 am time following day. The support I received from our department Chair, Joan Coutu, and from Lynne Jelokhani-Niaraki and Dean Doug Peers really made me understand what it is to be part of a community that values educators both in terms of teaching and research. I was given course release until after the opening of the exhibition in order to remake the work. Both Olga Korper and I were so very appreciative of the support that I received.
I’m studying self-control in order to develop insights about temptations and the challenges of self-regulation. This research examines how people both triumph and fail in the pursuit of their goals.

One issue that I’m really interested in right now is the importance of flexibility in goal pursuit. For instance, in a typical self-control conflict between eating a healthy snack versus eating a piece of cake, eating the cake is seen as a failure of self-control. Yet eating one piece of cake is not necessarily problematic; it’s the accumulation of such choices that can become a source of trouble. For a fulfilling life, it may be important to know when and how to say ‘no’ to the cake, but it’s also important to know when to say ‘yes’ (e.g. your son baked it as a special surprise). This discernment is critical, yet this aspect of self-regulation has been studied less frequently.

Many of the leading causes of death in Canada and the United States are due to modifiable behaviors involving self-control (e.g., diet and exercise, alcohol and tobacco use). My research has the potential to contribute to a growing literature on what can help human beings be their best, achieve their best, with significant implications for individuals and society more broadly.

“For a fulfilling life, it may be important to know when and how to say ‘no’ to the cake, but it’s also important to know when to say ‘yes’ (e.g. your son baked it as a special surprise). This discernment is critical...”

Undergraduates can get involved in the lab as volunteer research assistants, honours thesis students, or as co-op students. This term I hired a full-time co-op student as a research assistant and that’s been a wonderful experience. She’s worked closely with me and with graduate students in my lab to program and run studies. We also have several volunteer undergraduate research assistants who are critical for getting the research done; they are involved in the recruitment of participants, running of studies, and coding of data.

Graduate students play an essential role in the development of research questions; together, we wrestle with ideas, with study design, with the most effective way to communicate our results. We have very strong graduate students in Psychology who are true collaborators in the work. As a mentor, I hope to fuel in my students (both undergraduate and graduate) the same sense of wonder and curiosity that caused me to fall in love with the field in the first place.
A professional life of Olympic scale

AFTER GRADUATING FROM SHERIDAN COLLEGE, SCHOOL OF DESIGN IN TEXTILES, I embarked on a career working in Montreal and Toronto with a company that made hand woven drapery and upholstery fabrics. I had always enjoyed going to the theatre and found out I could get a position as a seamstress, sewing costumes for theatre productions. This meant leaving what I called the “real world” of employment and embarking on a career working in the world of theatre, which has lasted 32 years and counting. Working as a seamstress at Young People’s Theatre, the National Ballet of Canada, Canadian Opera Company and Shaw Festival I made my way to Assistant Head of Wardrobe and then Head of Wardrobe for Theatre Plus, The Grand Theatre, Shaw Festival and Director of Costumes for Seamless Costumes, a Division of Mirvish Productions. Through these organizations I gained experience working on shows as a dresser, wardrobe mistress, buyer, dyer, shoe coordinator, assisting the Head of Wardrobe and developed skills working with a variety of personalities that would serve me well as a Head of Wardrobe.

After eight years at Seamless Costumes, I received a phone call from the design team for the Vancouver 2010 Olympics inquiring about the logistics of having costumes made in different parts of Ontario and Canada. In the course of the conversation they asked why I hadn’t applied for the Head of Wardrobe position for the Opening, Victory and Closing Ceremonies. My answer was a weak one but I felt I hadn’t done anything that big in that type of venue. They said “Apply”. Needless to say I did apply and was offered the job.

The task at hand was daunting at first but, lucky for me, the BC Stadium was smaller than other winter Olympic venues and certainly smaller than some of the summer Olympics. This meant only 4,000 costumes rather than 10,000 or possibly 15,000 costumes. Another tool that helped me was having worked in Repertory theatre where you are working on five shows simultaneously. I decided to break down each segment of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies as its own show, which made it easier to manage. No Olympics would ever happen without the thousands of volunteers that give their time and talent. We had 220 volunteers in the wardrobe department alone and, without them and my staff of 24, the show would not have gone on. I was so fortunate to have worked on this project; the many friends I made, the sheer size of the Games that we were a part of – it made me proud to be Canadian.

On my return to Toronto I had the opportunity to teach at a college which led me to apply for my current position here at Waterloo. It is here where I am happy to be sharing my experience and knowledge with the next generations: How the world of costumes or wardrobe works in the professional world and the different positions within that department. It is time to give back to the theatre world that has given me so much, such a varied and “never a dull moment” career.

“I WONDER IF SHE’S RELATED TO LAURA SECORD?”

Most people don’t expect ‘yes’ to be the answer. My grade 4 teacher asked me to tell the class the story of Laura Secord, but I didn’t know it. Quite put out, I went home to quickly find out that my older sister had written a speech about Laura. From then on, I’ve been prepared should anyone ask.

Most of you know the story or a version of it, and some historians dispute it, but every time I see the heritage commercial or shows about the War of 1812 I can’t help but feel a small moment of pride that I am related to this courageous woman. My grandfather and his brother had the research done and created a family tree. We were French Huguenots who arrived in New Rochelle New York in the 1700’s, and Laura was an Ingersoll who married Captain James Secord. Laura is my great-great-great-great-aunt. To top it off, I went to Laura Secord Secondary High School in grade 9. I can only thank my parents profusely for not naming me Laura.
Shantz Internship puts our MFA on the global map

In Fall 2012, the University of Waterloo Art Gallery (UWAG) hosted POST, an exhibition featuring the artistic achievements of eleven alumni who received their MFA from Waterloo in the first decade of the 21st century. POST also celebrated a unique and defining feature of our MFA: the Keith and Winifred Shantz International Internship. A significant drawing card for Waterloo’s graduate program in Fine Arts, this internship gives each MFA student an unique opportunity to travel to any location to spend a summer working with a professional artist of international repute.

Since the mid-1990s, over sixty students have benefitted from the Shantz Internship, gaining first-hand day-to-day experience working alongside practicing professional artists in such locations as Berlin, New York, London, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles and Seoul. The range of experience can include assisting the artist with the making of work, helping to package and install the work in exhibitions in major gallery venues, attending openings and related events, while connecting with other artists, curators, gallerists, studio assistants and more.

“The Shantz Internship creates the perfect MFA; a program that uncannily corresponds with three of University of Waterloo’s priority areas: innovation, entrepreneurship and internationalization.”

Such interaction between working artist and student is extraordinarily fruitful and the depth of experience gained from a prolonged stay in another country, the first such opportunity for most of the students, is inestimable. Win Shantz was enduring supporter of the arts regionally and nationally, and she recognized the critical importance of both the business side of art and the necessity for international exposure. It is through Win’s generosity that the Internship came about.

The idea for a post-graduate exhibition had been ruminating for some years and it fell to Ivan Jurakic, appointed Director/Curator of UWAG in 2010, to bring it to fruition. Narrowing the focus on eleven artists who have established a solid professional and exhibition history, POST includes works by Susy Oliveira, Scott Everingham, Sasha Pierce and James Olley, among other MFA alumni. The range of painting, sculpture and new media in the exhibition evokes the interrogation and hybridity of media and concepts that has become a hallmark of contemporary art practices worldwide. POST is consistent with a new vision for the recently renovated gallery and a revamped curatorial direction for the exhibitions program. In fact, UWAG is now positioned as a venue of note on the Canadian exhibition circuit.

Win Shantz was aware of the exhibition in the early stages of its planning. Unfortunately, she passed away suddenly in February of 2012. Consequently, POST took on a memorial dimension.

Win’s generosity is through Win’s unwavering generosity that our graduate students experience internationalized, real-world practice. Combined with the rigorous academic environment at this university, the Shantz Internship creates the perfect MFA; a program that uncannily corresponds with three of University of Waterloo’s priority areas: innovation, entrepreneurship and internationalization.
A new way to recognize research contributions

Working in large, collaborative projects and as individual scholars, researchers in the Faculty of Arts have been responsible for an astonishing increase in research intensity in recent years. Yet members of the Arts community commonly report a wish to know more about the details and impact of their colleagues’ work. Beginning in 2013, Arts will have a new way of recognizing research success: the Arts Research Awards. These awards, and the annual research party at which they will be presented, are part of a more open internal conversation about the content, quality and impact of our work.

One of a new slate of awards devoted to teaching, research, and service, the Arts Research Award will enable the Faculty of Arts community to recognize two faculty members annually who have made outstanding scholarly contributions over the preceding five years. It is anticipated that the social sciences and the humanities will each have one annual award. At an annual Arts research celebration event, award winners will receive commemorative locally produced artistic pieces.

Nominations for the award will be made in confidence by Department Chairs in September of each year. Award winners will be selected from the nominees by the Arts Honours and Awards Committee, with representation from faculty, staff, and students. The adjudication process will take into account all manifestations of research excellence, including volume of output, impact of scholarship, grant-winning success, research leadership, and knowledge mobilization. The research award is open to Arts tenure-stream faculty of all ranks; the aim is to recognize scholarly achievement relative to faculty members’ career stages and disciplinary norms.

More details about the Arts Research Awards will be available in advance of the intended nomination deadline.

Tell your students

The Ask Arts Alumni mentorship program connects students with alumni via an online forum. Students can ask alumni-mentors’ advice on university and career planning. Participating Arts alumni include actors, lawyers, a senior VP, and digital designer. We’ll be in touch in January about how you can help spread the word.

Feedback, please

Send your comments and ideas to wphilpott@uwaterloo.ca. Special thanks to Sherilee Diebold-Cooze for the festive elf and reindeer treatments.