

## Masters & apprenticeships

By Nathan Lynch

**“I always say that I went to ‘night school’, coz I was out all night spraying graffiti.”**

**In this semi-regular series, two luminaries of the WA art world come ‘face to face’ on an issue of great import ...**

University arts budgets are like your favourite pair of distressed denims: every year they seem to shrink that little bit more. Well the shocking truth is, dear reader, they’re not actually shrinking. It’s just that after every Christmas you gotta cram more of humanity’s finest into them.

Student numbers grow inexorably and the cry goes out for better funding. It’s an annual charade. Artsource figured it was time to strike at the very core of this convoluted debate and tackle the big question: do artists really need uni degrees at all?

To solve this quandary, we present Stormie Mills, Honours graduate of the School of Hard Knocks, and Ted Snell, one of the pillars that holds up Curtin University, and Max Pam, shutterbug extraordinaire.

### **Stormie Mills**

*Stormie is a former street artist — graffitist to the layman — who left home at 15 and backpacked around Europe to discover the urban art scene. Twenty years later, he finds himself the co-founder and creative director of magenta, the thriving Perth-based marketing firm. After years dodging the fuzz with a spraycan, Stormie now gets paid to re-face the visual landscape with ads — billboards, bus-stops, the works. Stormie espouses the delights of following one’s own muse rather than a syllabus ... but admits that it’s a long and winding way to the top. We spoke to him a day before he jetted off to London to complete a commission at the Thomas Neal Centre. Nice work if you can get it.*

“I left home when I was 15 and went to live in Europe. I got a job and went to all the graffiti jams and stuff that was happening and sort of got immersed in the culture over there. That was my apprenticeship. But I never anticipated that I would have a career as an artist; I didn’t know that was an option for someone in my medium and with my means.

I actually studied art at Applecross High School ... but I failed. Institutions work for some people but they don’t work for others. I was never suited to being in the school system.

Further education really wasn’t an option for me at that time. I always say that I went to ‘night school’, coz I was out all night spraying graffiti.

My actual experience of entering the art world was really good. I was really well supported. I kind of entered through a community arts project; I was employed to organise and facilitate programs for street artists — my peers — and we were painting various things from bus shelters to underpasses and walls and even buses.

What I see with uni graduates is that they make very good progress very early in the piece, as soon as they leave the campus. They seem to have the skills to attract recognition, exhibitions, good prices for their work and that sort of thing. They’ve worked within a system that seems to be geared up towards fostering that level of professionalism.

It all really goes back to what suits the individual. Do you have institutions or do you just let people work it out for themselves organically? I don’t think you could ever really choose one and do away with the other.”

### **Ted Snell**

*Ted Snell is an icon — like the concrete architecture of ‘old’ Curtin University. Only rather more colourful. He also wears many hats: Professor of Contemporary Art; Dean of Art at the John Curtin Gallery; art reviewer for The Australian; and a regular contributor to ABC radio and several national journals. A busy chap indeed — but not too busy to contribute to this challenging debate.*

“The visual arts, I think, is still one of the best liberal arts educations you can get. It teaches you to be flexible and innovative, to see challenges and to realise that there’s no single solution to every problem. It’s not just that you might be a gung-ho artist and off to Venice, like Ricky Swallow after graduating in 1989. That’s great, but it doesn’t happen to many people. A lot of people find their own way in the world because they’ve learned these skills of adaptability and flexibility.

In the past I think that theoretical base was always there but it was probably done in a less formal way. The master in the Renaissance would have said, ‘You really have to read Vasari, it’s brilliant’. Or people would have come into the studio and talked and discussed their ideas about art.

The point I'm trying to make is that people have always gone to accredited institutions. The reason you have to do that is there's a huge body of knowledge to come to terms with. It's a profession and like any other profession it requires technical, theoretical and conceptual skills — as well as training in the industry.

Really talented people — like Stormie — would still get that one-on-one guidance at university, just like the old days. If they want it, and need it, they'll get it.

Every year you see a few students that sort of leap out and you think, 'yep, this person's gonna make it'. It might not be because they have great hand skills — which probably would have been one of the criteria in previous generations — and it may not be because they have an excess of technical skills. It's probably because they have a burning ambition and a very unique and exciting way of looking at the world.

We've really been trying to give people the skills to operate in what is now a very formalised and professional market environment. You do have to know how to write a CV and how to apply for a grant and you have to know how to negotiate and get things up and running. You also need to have a focus about what it is that you want and where you want to end up. You know, you don't want to get trapped showing in local shops and things if you've got an ambition of building up a national practice. You've got to really know what you're dealing with.

So that's where the university's professional practice focus has come from. It's very basic stuff but, if you don't know it, you're really all at sea.

#### Max Pam

*Max Pam left school when he was 16 and is now a lecturer in photomedia at Edith Cowan University's school of communications and multimedia. Confused? Well, it's a long and arduous tale ... spiced with no small amount of celluloid magic.*

After failing at school, I landed a job working for a fashion photographer in Melbourne. So, like many apprentices, I started working as an applied photographer and then I was a photo technician at Monash University. I really had the classic Dickensian education — starting as a total flunky and just working up from the bottom. That was really my initial 'informal' education.

For me the big shift was getting out of applied photography and into a creative field. In 1970, I was really ready for it; I'd travelled overland through India and then on to London, so I was really full of the world and ready to respond to that with a camera.

It was actually being accepted into the London Art School that helped me to take my work to the next level. That formal education really rounded out the technical skills that I already had. It was a really good combo. I already had the technical skills — you needed them to keep your job — but then art school just flung open the doors to this new way of looking at things. I couldn't have got that anywhere else. But it's always about timing and how ready you are for these things.

After one year of schooling I was ready to go back to India. But that one year — taken on board massively and absorbed — was worth way more than the sum of its parts, if you know what I mean. Photography doesn't run on a timeline in terms of getting 'The Knowledge'. It could take ten years, it could take five — it just depends how intense and sustaining your passion is. Bear in mind that all the degrees that I've got now are postgraduate; I never actually finished that undergraduate degree!

I'm so fortunate to be at ECU teaching — I just think it's such a great place and a great opportunity. It's an incredible environment in which to pursue your research. My photography is my research and, as a university, it really allows you to explore that. Of course, the teaching that you do is then enhanced by what you learn from your practice, so you put that back in. I just think the university system's a really fantastic learning environment — for students and for their teachers!