

Art School Incognito

The Vancouver Island School of Art kicks off their third year with a major fundraiser and a firm commitment to social contribution



JASON YOUNG

VISA director Wendy Welch at their Quadra Street digs

To pass it on the street, you'd never know the old elementary school between Quadra and Kings is home to something of an artistic renaissance. It still looks like, well, an old elementary school. Rather than being filled with shrieking children and crumpled lunchbags, however, the heritage Arts and Crafts building now houses a diverse group of artists, at least one of whom is determined to make a difference in her community. The place is the Vancouver Island School of Art, and the person with the vision is artist, writer and VISA founder and director Wendy Welch.

A non-profit society registered with the Private Career Training Institute Association, VISA currently averages around 160 part-time students per semester with a faculty of eight and nearly a dozen guest instructors. (Full-time students are still a bit of a rarity; currently, there are only 10 registered.) Still, that's not bad for a school which started just three years ago in a 1,000-square-foot, second-floor commercial space with only 47 students. "I'll always remember that number," Welch laughs.

But when Welch spied the vacant 85-year-old school, she knew VISA had found a permanent home. After a bit of wrangling with the school board, Welch and associate director Xane St. Phillip moved their students to the new location at 2945 Quadra back in August, 2005. "We went from 1,000 square feet to 10,000 square feet," she recalls. "We always knew we'd have to get a bigger space, but we didn't think it would happen so fast."

Not that she regrets the move; far from it. "It's really important for me and the school to be part of the community," says Welch, "and I always like putting actions to my words." As such, ever since VISA moved into the area, Welch has looked for ways to integrate it into Quadra Village—like last week's Backyard Fiesta, which featured film screenings by MediaNet and the folksy likes of croquet and badminton, as well as the recent establishment of the Slide Room Gallery. No surprise, their arrival coincided with an upsurge of community involvement in the neighbourhood itself. "Quadra Village is just at a stage of new development," she explains, noting the nearby presence of the Victoria Arts Connection (home to MediaNet, Suddenly Dance, Kaleidoscope Theatre and a number of other prominent arts groups) and, ironically, the Victoria College of Art's new digs at University Canada West just down the block.

VCA's new home is ironic because both Welch and St. Phillip were instructors at VCA before leaving to establish VISA. "You know how it is," sighs Welch when I ask about her seven years teaching with the VCA. "Sometimes you're in a job and you think, 'If I was in charge, this is how I would do things . . .', so at lunch Xane and I would talk about how we'd run our own school, if we had one."

"We noticed the students in the continuing studies extension courses were often more serious than the day students, so we used to talk about the idea of making a school around people who always wanted to go to art school. You know," she laughs, "the people whose parents told them they couldn't, or whose life got in the way. That's our main student body: people who have always wanted to study art—but have never had the opportunity." And while VISA's students officially range from "18-88," Welch describes the majority of their students as "people in their 30s and 40s who already have a job."

"You know, the people who work in government jobs, but need to do something creative. But they don't just want a community rec centre course, they want something more serious—but they don't want to go to, or go back to, university." And Welch says that's the main difference between

VISA and other local art schools like VCA, UVic or Camosun College. At VISA, students have the option of studying part-time, but still counting as accreditation towards a greater program. Welch notes their "certificate program" is designed to be as no-stress as possible: there's no application process, no portfolio review and students have the option of completing the 504-hour program in one year (full time) or six years (part time). She characterizes VISA as offering "professional instruction on a flexible basis."

Another thing that appeals to students is VISA's faculty. "People really like the classes, but I took the time to make sure we got good teachers," she explains about a line-up that includes such prominent local talent as Eva Campbell, Megan Dickie, Farheen Haq, John Luna and D. Bradley Muir. "Not only do they have to be a good practicing artist and have teaching experience, but they have to be really nice people—and I don't take that lightly. Niceness is key. We have such a range of people—some are so nervous to take their first art class, so you have to have the ability to teach well *and* be patient."

It doesn't take long before Welch steers the conversation back to the community. "I love doing artwork and being an artist, but I do have a strong sense of a need to participate in community," she explains. "I want to have an active social role as an artist—writing is one way," she says with a nod to her visual art writing here at *Monday*, "but I love teaching, and I love school. This is perfect for me. It's a natural fit."

VISA is starting off their third year with a bang next week with a major fundraising event called *Art Incognito*, a silent auction featuring donated work by some of the CRD's most prominent artists—but, of course, there's a catch. "All the work will be anonymous," she chuckles. "We'll have student work, as well as work by known artists, so people won't know who they're bidding on. But it's incredible the people who've donated work: Mowry Baden, Robert Bateman, Ted Harrison . . . to me, it's a real sign of endorsement by the art community. It was interesting to put the call out there, ask all these artists—I mean, artists are continually being asked for art work. But everyone said they wanted to support the cause, and they feel Victoria needs a school like ours."

With teaching and running the school, her own art process has taken a bit of a back seat of late, but Welch doesn't seem to mind. "I love it so much," she croons. "I hate to compare it, but it is like having a child. There are certain times where it takes all your time, but these are the nurturing stages; once it gets off the ground, I can do other things again."

Future plans include (hopefully) buying the building, establishing an exchange program with the Toronto School of Art and getting university transfer accreditation. But as much as Welch loves the school, she won't allow herself to be consumed by the academic side of things.

"I insist on enjoying myself," Welch concludes. "I don't want to be one of these people that are always too busy to do anything; that seems to be a pandemic in our society, and we all get caught up in it."

—John Threlfall

Tickets for the Friday, September 8, Art Incognito event are on sale now and are \$25 for the public or \$10 for VISA students. There will be a free preview from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday and Friday, September 7 and 8. To get a sneak peek, check out <http://artincognito.com> (under gallery) to see some of the work. For more information, contact 380-3500 or visit www.vancouverislandschoolart.com.

artsy type

No more Moore

If you've wandered along Broad Street lately, you may have noticed a gap where **The Moore Gallery of Fine Art** used to be. Yes, you read that right—used to be. Alas, it's a hard reality that even in such an art-heavy city as this, there are only so many galleries to go around.

"It's difficult to carve out a solid portion of the local market, particularly with a population of only 370,000," says **Caroline Moore**. "Victoria can only support so many galleries." Moore also notes the "downturn of the Americans who buy art" due to the strong Canadian dollar. "They were very supportive of the gallery. Original works of art are big ticket items."

Still, at least Moore can look back on things with a smile. Not only



Caroline Moore picking up her **M** Award from the lovely Flora

did she pick up an **M** Award earlier this year for Favourite Group Show of 2005 (*The Limners*), but she can also feel good about adding to the colour and diversity of the local art scene. "The highlight for me was, of course, meeting and working with the *Limners*," she says. "And the Arthur and Travis Shilling exhibit. It's a wonderful experience to support the career of a young artist who is on a path to becoming one of Canada's famous painters."

Moore's current plans? "Well, I'm working on a project as a consultant with a first nations organization. We'll see what happens from there. My background is in negotiations and facilitating relationships, so maybe something will come up. But I do want to take this opportunity to thank all of the artists and people from Victoria, including the media, who supported the gallery."

Nice. Nothing like going out with class.

You will submit!

The call is out for the Community Arts Council of Greater Victoria's **Practicing Artist Award** in the discipline of music composition. The deadline isn't until December 15, so if you're a composer for a chamber music ensemble of three to eight instruments, and your piece is five-to-15 minutes long, you may just qualify for \$2,000 in awards. For full details, call the CACGV office at 381-2787 or e-mail info@cacgv.ca . . . Also in the call for artist line is the **National Screen Institute's FilmExchange Canadian Film Festival**.

What's touted as "Canada's Coolest Film Festival" (although I'm sure the VIFVF would argue that one) is currently on the hunt for the best Canadian dramatic shorts and features to screen February 28 to March 3, 2007, at the NSI Film Fest in Winnipeg. Deadline for submissions is 4:30 p.m. central time Wednesday, November 1, and you can get all the details at www.nsi-canada.ca . . . Finally, the **National Campus and Community Radio Association (NCRA)** is looking for five part-time regional coordinators across Canada for its increasingly cool "Dig Your Roots" CD project—including someone for the Pacific region. This next DYR project is focussing on experimental jazz, so if you're of a jazzy mindset and have a firm grasp on the BC/Yukon scene, get in touch—fast—as the deadline is 6 p.m. (eastern) this Monday, September 4. You can send your application as a PDF to hiring@ncra.ca. For more information, contact the NCRA at (613) 321-1440 or visit www.DigYourRoots.ca.



—John Threlfall