

CREATIVE  
MINDS

BY RICK GIBBS PHOTO BY GARY MCKINSTRY



At her Vancouver Island School of Art, Wendy Welch encourages the art of risk-taking

# DON'T WORRY just create

**BE WARNED.** When you hear 67-year-old Kumiko Fujinama's story, you just might head straight for the Vancouver Island School of Art (VISA) in the Quadra Village, locate founder and director Wendy Welch, and demand to enroll in every course she and her fellow instructors offer.

Four years ago, not even knowing how to hold a brush properly, Fujinama took a risk and enrolled at VISA. Today she's a fully-fledged artist under contract with the prestigious Jennifer Kostuik Gallery in Vancouver.

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"I always dreamed of learning art, but I didn't have the guts to try. I was afraid of failing," says Fujinama, who credits Welch and VISA with encouraging her to carry on despite initial challenges created by her lack of experience.

Other students echo Fujinama's sentiments. Victoria Williams, a 49-year-old government employee taking her first VISA course, appreciates the way Welch encourages students just "to do" and not worry about the outcome.

Diploma student Trish Lawton, 56, who has been commuting from Nanaimo to take classes, says all the teaching at VISA is "top notch" and that she was initially attracted to the school because "it didn't feel like academia."

That encouraging atmosphere isn't accidental. While teaching at the Victoria College of Art (VCA) on Bank Street, Welch saw the need for a school with a flexible curriculum that was connected to the contemporary art scene and offered mature students the opportunity to study part time. In the spring of 2004 she applied for the directorship of the VCA, deciding that if she didn't get it, she would open her own school.

VISA teacher John Luna, who at the time was seeking work in Victoria, remembers Welch discussing the possibility of a new school and himself saying, "Well, great, give me a call in a year." Welch replied, "No, I'm going to do it now," adding a teasing, "I'm a woman of action — watch out!" Luna chuckled but would soon learn she was serious.

Welch asked Marlene Bouchard, one of her VCA students at the time, if she'd like to help should she establish a school. Bouchard, 34, now a VISA graduate and full-time artist, recalls thinking that Welch's plans were ambitious but offered to contact her after returning from a few months of travel. She called in mid-September. "Oh, hi," said Welch, "I opened a school and we're moving in tomorrow — do you think you could drive the U-Haul?" The VCA had chosen someone else to be director and Welch had been true to her word. By July she'd procured a 1,000-square-foot space in a mixed industrial area on John Street. By September she was opening the school with 30 students already enrolled.

To establish VISA she had to get a line of credit even though she didn't own a house or car. Fortunately the banker suggested looking beyond conventional assets, and Welch, who spends most of her spare income on art, mentioned she had a significant inventory of purchased and personal works and wondered if they would be of any value. The collection was appraised and Welch got the loan.

VISA soon outgrew the space on John Street and Welch set her sights on leasing the former Quadra Street Primary School, a 1921 Arts and Crafts building owned by the

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Victoria School Board. She got a firm no, which she promptly ignored. Luna recalls a prolonged period of Welch regularly saying, "I'm going to get that property."

She eventually did, following a series of what she describes as "tag team" approaches to individual board members. "It's surprising what people will do when you are persistent," she says.

She's also charismatic and, according to Luna, very good at involving others in her ideas. Welch describes herself as "social" and "community-minded," and believes she was born for the classroom. "Even if I was one of those rare artists who can make a living through art alone, I'd still teach," she says, noting that she loved to play school as a child growing up in Montreal.

One evening at a course called *Slasb: Paper Under the Knife*, Welch's teaching skill is immediately apparent. As students enter, she involves them in friendly conversation about the projects they've brought to class. "How was it?" she asks one student. "I like how they all have their own personalities," she says to a few others — referring to the projects — as they wander in.

The students post their work for discussion. "What do you like about this one?" Welch asks the class, pointing to the first of 12 multi-layered, cut paper "drawings" on display. When one of the works partially falls apart, reconfiguring itself on the wall, she jokes about art having a life of its own and discusses the excitement of installation art, one of her specialties.

As the session develops she employs a kind of Socratic dialogue, drawing out the students' knowledge, encouraging them to think creatively, and introducing various concepts. She explores the differences between art and craft and ponders the balance between spontaneity and deliberateness. She concludes the session by saying, "What a pleasure it is to see all this work."

When Vancouver gallery owner Jennifer Kostuik visited VISA at Welch's invitation to speak and critique student work, she discovered not only Fujinama's work but also a vibrant school of over 300 students, a number that impressed her. Amazed that VISA even exists given its limited resources (it receives no government funding), she credits Welch with creating an art school as good as any she's seen.

Welch has had offers to teach at university where she could earn more money, but she's absolutely committed to VISA. She's proud that students come to the school with limited ideas of what art can be and leave with their eyes opened. "I can see how art fundamentally changes peoples lives at the school," she says. No doubt Kumiko Fujinama and many others would agree.

*Cost for VISA programs start at \$12 for drop-in life drawing and rise to \$2,400 for a year's tuition for a degree program. Visit [vancouverislandschoolart.com](http://vancouverislandschoolart.com) to learn more about VISA's programs and its upcoming Art Incognito fundraiser on Sept. 10. Wendy Welch's work can be viewed at [wendywelch.com](http://wendywelch.com). VB*



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