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The next generation of YBAs: what does the future hold?

It is the college that gave the world Damien Hirst. Are today's Goldsmiths graduates aiming to shake up the world?

By Jonathon Jones
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LONDON - The atmosphere is hot and still. The only noise is the sound of examiners' footsteps as they pad from one exhibition space to another – looking, absorbing, assessing. I'm in the studios of Goldsmiths College in London, where MA art students have just installed their degree shows and are nervously waiting to see what grades they will get. For them, education is over. Look out world, here they come.

A good degree isn't everything, of course. A tutor here tells me that, contrary to popular belief, Damien Hirst does not have a close relationship with his former college because he has never forgiven them for awarding his work a 2.2 (lower second class). Still, Hirst's name is synonymous with Goldsmiths. In 1988, while still a student here, he curated *Freeze*, a seminal show in a Docklands warehouse that, as well as his own work, featured pieces by Angus Fairhurst, Mat Collishaw and other fledgling YBAs. Goldsmiths and its then professor, Michael Craig-Martin (creator of the Tate's infamous glass of water on a shelf), were credited with giving these students their go-getting attitude.

That was then. I've come to Goldsmiths to see how final-year MA students are feeling about their futures now, in the shadow of recession. Four budding artists from the class of 2009 meet me in a lecture room and I quickly sense that everything has changed for this generation. Their idea of a life in art has little in common with the fiercely ambitious artists the college was turning out in the early 1990s. Is it the economy? Is it the sheer number of artists competing for

attention in today's Britain? Have tutors' attitudes changed here since the retirement of Craig-Martin? Whatever it is, these students seem to have no illusions at all about their chances of making it big.

Jason Underhill, a tall, bearded 26-year-old from California, has the studied air of an independent film-maker. And that's what he is, albeit one who is just finishing a fine art MA. His graduation piece is a film called *Howlin'*, about aimless young people in an American city. It features bodies turning up in a supermarket freezer, and two characters looking down on a town they see as a scar on the beautiful wilderness.

There's clearly an ambition here to say something as well as to make something, but Underhill – whose work featured in last year's prestigious *New Contemporaries* exhibition in Liverpool – does not seem in any danger of getting overexcited about success. "I chose Goldsmiths because I needed to reconsider my position," he says. "My ideas felt half-formed, possibly because I didn't know how to address a place like California. I thought that some distance could help me articulate things."

Annie Hémond Hotte, born in Montreal in 1980, is a painter. Although she started out on a musical path, she now can't imagine life without painting: "My family are not very artistic so I had to fight a bit when I decided I wanted to paint. I didn't want to do anything else." Like the others, she's on the fine art MA and her degree show features large-scale paintings of Pinocchio-like characters. They drip with thick, waxy colour.

Tina Hage, a photographer born in Haiti, studied media arts in Cologne before

moving to London. At first, the photographs in her degree show seem to zoom in on moments of crisis in crowd scenes; then you realise that Hage, in her early 30s, plays all the parts. She is the quietest of the group and reticent about her art, preferring to let her digitally manipulated fictions speak for themselves – which they do, rather well.

Jon Moscow, also in his 30s, feels art is his vocation and he's not too bothered what the world makes of him and his fellow students: "We consider that we are artists already – I became an artist for the art, not for the art world." Moscow, from Cleethorpes, used to be a chartered accountant. But, during the 1990s, when Hirst's generation were becoming famous, he quit to follow his artistic urge. He has exhibited in Düsseldorf and London. His room in the degree show is filled with sculptures and significant objects, arranged in a surreal style. "I make rooms," he says of his work, before highlighting one of its drawbacks: "How do you sell a room?"

Much may have changed in art schools, but one thing seems to have stayed the same: the cool demeanour of the students. You could almost imagine this lot in a band together, with Moscow as the Jarvis Cocker figure. Goldsmiths is renowned for equipping its charges for the reality of a career in art: if charm is part of what it takes, they have plenty. However, while all four are determined to put art at the centre of their lives, they are sceptical about actually making a living from it, especially during a recession. "There's nothing we can do about it," says Hotte. "But you can't say, 'the art market looks bad so I'll stop producing work.' It wouldn't make sense."

Their response is to look forward to lives as artists, with the intention of supporting themselves by other means. "There are statistics from the Arts and Humanities Research Council," says Moscow. "They make depressing reading if you're interested in making a living from your art. A tiny proportion of artists do that, so I don't even go there."

This approach – passionate about the work, doubtful of economic reward – has always been the best attitude for an artist to have throughout history. It costs money to be a student and they expect it to cost money to be an artist: making films, printing photographs, buying canvases. But it's something they have to do. They are what you might call hardheaded dreamers. Art, says Underhill, "is a strange relationship that you have with yourself".

"We want to keep in touch," says Hotte. "Not just in terms of showing our art, but in terms of making it, and having discussions. It's a big part of the Goldsmiths thing, to meet people who push you." This is perhaps the most important thing they've got out of their time here. You get the impression that the friendships forged at Goldsmiths will play a part in their lives for years to come, as they go out into a world they seem well-armoured for. "My biggest hope in the next couple years is to develop a practice as an artist making feature films," says Underhill. "My biggest fear is that it will take longer than a couple years to do it."