

**Report on the MFA Summer Seminar programme
Whitecliffe College of Arts & Design
January 17 – 22, 2009**

Introduction

The following report is based on participation in and observation of the Whitecliffe MFA Summer Seminar; this included assessments, critiques, tutorials and social functions. Meetings and discussions were conducted with staff and students regularly in both formal and informal situations. Prior to my arrival in Auckland I received copies of the 2009 MFA Course Manual, MFA Summer Seminar Timetable of activities, 2009 Whitecliffe Prospectus, 2009 Whitecliffe Student Handbook and all other student handouts relating to the programme and seminar. Whitecliffe publications are well designed and 'student friendly'- communicating comprehensive, clear and accurate information.

The Whitecliffe MFA Summer Seminar programme has international compatibility with that of other Higher Degree by Research (HDR) programmes. However, what distinguishes the Whitecliffe programme from many others is firstly, compulsory attendance in a total of eight six-day seminars over two academic years and secondly, the Whitecliffe continuous assessment procedures. These procedures require students to meet formal assessment events at each stage of the programme before progress can be made from one level to the next. Although other examples may exist in New Zealand or overseas, I am unaware of them – normally, research degrees in visual art are examined once only at the completion of the programme following the installation of the thesis exhibition and submission of the dissertation/exegesis.

The seminar method of delivery continues to be a preferred model for visual art degree courses, particularly Masters by coursework programmes designed to accommodate off-campus education or low residency participation. Although registered as a low residency HDR programme, Whitecliffe students enjoy a high level of contact with faculty staff and supervisors throughout the duration of the course. This level of contact is a positive feature of the programme and demonstrates a very high level of good practice and duty of care and this was clearly evident in the positive responses from students during the summer seminar.

The Summer Seminar

The Summer Seminar is thoughtfully structured to permit new students entering semester one to access and experience exhibitions/installations and participate in the mini critique sessions of senior students as they prepare for assessment to enter semester three of the programme. Also during the Summer Seminar, semester four students have installed their thesis exhibitions for final assessment and public display allowing all students, MFA Faculty and external examiner the unique opportunity to compare and contrast the achievements of all MFA year levels simultaneously.

The theme for this year's Summer Seminar was *The Contemporary* with invited artists, curators, theorists, faculty members and two recent MFA Alumni/artists addressing the topic. The Alumni speakers provided one of the creative and scholarly highlights of the lecture series and added to the excellent presentations of the other speakers. Students, including new intake students participated in subsequent tutorials and mini critiques exploring and testing many of the opinions and ideas expressed by the speakers but in the context of their own research and practice with great success.

Tutorials

Throughout the week a sequence of 'tutorials' were conducted under the common heading *Research Toolbox*. Those presented were the first six sessions of a total of ten, timetabled to be delivered over the first three semesters of the programme covering topics that included - *Information Technology, Research and Ethics, Content and Context, Research Essays/Dissertations* to the subject of *Written Scholarship*. In addition to the *Research Toolbox* sessions a parallel sequence of tutorials were conducted introducing new students to topics such as the preparation of a *Research Contract* or *Dissertation*.

These sequential 'Research Methods' subjects are not electives, nor are they 'soft-options'; they are demanding HDR subjects and a compulsory component of the programme. Most importantly, as subjects, they are intelligently designed to compliment the studio research while concurrently preparing students to engage critically with their own creative practice and that of others as they acquire the necessary skills that will enable them to meet the intellectual and scholarly demands of the Whitecliffe Dissertation and Research Studio expectations.

Fine Art Studio

The studio programme is designed to guide students in the initiation, development, management and completion of an original studio research project that can be measured, tested and successfully demonstrate - the integration of studio and contextual concerns resulting in a public exhibition of professional standing.

As expected, of the twenty-eight participating MFA students attending the seminar the quality of work was varied. A small number could be considered below average, a substantial middle band that would be recognised as solid HDR students anywhere and the top ten percent that also included a couple of truly outstanding MFA candidates. It should be noted that a number of these students, including those considered outstanding, had completed their undergraduate degrees at Whitecliffe. This span of student achievement and quality is similar to most other tertiary art institutions.

Students are required to attend and participate in regular critiques conducted during each seminar of the twice-annual seminar series. A Seminar critique can be formal as in the *Studio Assessment*, which, similar to assessment procedures in the Dissertation, marks the student's progress through each stage of the programme. Informal, as in the *Group or Mini-Critique* involving interactivity between the student, his or her supervisors, Faculty, visiting guests and including, the participation of other students. It should be noted that in each of these critiques students are required to present their work under exhibition conditions.

At the completion of the programme and following a successful *Submission Review*, students proceed to their final exhibition. Exhibitions may be held off campus at a venue approved by the Senior Faculty and this year I had the privilege to view and examine an exceptional site-specific 'intervention' at the Manukau City Police Lockup in South Auckland. A professional catalogue containing illustrations of works including an artist statement/essay must accompany all exhibitions, which are examined both internally and externally, and this accounts for 80% of the Final Assessment.

Dissertation

The Dissertation contextualises the student's studio project and positions the research outcomes within contemporary and historical visual art practice and theory. The Dissertation requirement of 8,000 to 15,000 words in length accounts for 20% of the final examination, a standard for this level of study. As the retained evidence of the research the document's style and binding is similar to other academic documents or thesis at this upper level of research training and study.

In addition to compulsory tutorials conducted throughout the programme students are appointed a separate Dissertation supervisor to assist them in completing the task. At each stage of its development the Dissertation is continuously assessed; one essay/chapter in the first instance then two essays/chapters in the second. Students successfully completing the second may advance to the final submission to be examined by an internal and external Dissertation examiner.

To determine readiness for the final submission students are required to present an oral presentation of their research findings. This presentation of 30 minutes duration is a formal assessment task.

As we are all aware, many HDR students find themselves at the end of their studies and still trying to complete their Dissertation and in some cases, desperately struggling to write up the complete document in the remaining few months of the programme. This situation is often self-inflicted and usually supported by 'tolerant' supervisors and is a much more common occurrence than many Art institutions care to admit. This unacceptable situation is avoided at Whitecliffe by the sequence of checks and balances written into and implemented within the programme, these academic 'hurdles' are thorough, fair and not overly bureaucratized. This is best practice and demonstrates the care taken by

academic staff to ensure that a student's progress through the degree is educationally and intellectually rewarding and as seamless as is possible.

Online Learning

In addition to the seminar series, supervisory meetings and access to the Parnell campus, its workshops and its library students are also required to log onto *Blackboard*, at least once each week. This online interactive learning programme is the student's daily link to Whitecliffe when not on campus.

Reporting and Quality Control

Comprehensive guidelines have been implemented regarding the supervisor student relationship including conduct, supervisory meetings and reports. These guidelines are strictly adhered to and benefit both student and supervisor and add to the reputation of the programme.

Evaluation

Students are invited to evaluate the programme at the completion of each seminar and their opinions are taken seriously and where appropriate, acted upon by Faculty. In addition, on the final day of each seminar students attend an exit interview with the Deans.

New-to-course students

To gain entry to the MFA, applicants must hold a first degree in the discipline or, provide evidence of equivalence in prior learning or professional practice and demonstrate the capacity to complete the programme.

This year's new-to-course students were all 'mature' and although qualified, varied in levels of artistic sophistication and scholarly achievement – a standard intake for this type of programme. Beginning on the fourth day of the Summer Seminar, new students participated in *Studio Introductions* and presented selected works to Senior Faculty, prospective supervisors and senior students.

When 'speaking to their work', students were encouraged to consider their initial *Letter of Intent* and speculate upon the possible shape of their proposed research project. In their presentations a number of students were able to adopt a self-critical position as demonstrated by their research language usage, albeit elementary, but obviously gained during the first three days of the Summer Seminar. Even at this very early stage of the program the seminar was having a positive effect and contributed to student confidence when engaging in critique.

The *Studio Introductions* give Senior Faculty the opportunity to assess each new student's research compatibility to a prospective Studio Research Supervisor. However, in some instances and with the approval of Faculty, students may nominate a suitably qualified supervisor.

Final Exhibition and Assessment

Assessment processes and procedures outlined in the Course Manual provided clear, unambiguous and to the point information. The final examination was in two parts, exhibition and dissertation; each part assessed separately and further verified that the Whitecliffe MFA programme was providing the best possible opportunity and conditions for the conduct of research training and development. Students demonstrated clear evidence of artistic and intellectual achievement, commensurate with their respective grades, to construct intelligent, original and persuasive visual research projects resulting in individually meaningful cultural contributions.

At Whitecliffe, the external examiner for studio research will conduct the examination without the need to access a student's dissertation and as already stated, the dissertation is examined separately both internally and externally. However, the documents are available for viewing on request and I found them helpful in gaining further insight into the research methods and the context of individual projects. With respect to my fellow examiners and commensurate with the grades awarded to each student, the dissertations were imaginatively structured and well-written explanations of each student's research proposition and stated position as an artist.

Staffing and Facilities

Within the Faculty there is a well-qualified staff. They are research active with national and international experience and academic qualifications. As teachers, they are genuinely student centred and demonstrate the ability to work successfully as a team.

The studio and ancillary facilities are more than adequate to conduct a low residency MFA programme. At the point of writing, Fine Art is moving from their excellent studios in Newton to an equivalent space next to the Parnell campus. The site was being fitted out during the Summer Seminar and I did not have the opportunity to visit but it should be noted that the studios/workshops are designed for the undergraduate programme and therefore outside the brief of this report.

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