



Molding the Future

Artist Inspires and Motivates Students

For artists, the memories, images and reflections of the past are often visible elements within their works of art. As the great artist Pablo Picasso said, “Art washes away from the soul the deepest of everyday life.”

Growing up around tools, cars, and engines, the sounds, smells and images of a mechanic’s garage have served as inspiration for artist Michael Schmidt.



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“My grandfather and father were mechanics — men who worked with their hands. Watching them and growing up around a garage has taught me the importance of discipline in my work,” Schmidt said he is reminded of a childhood memory that was pivotal in his propensity for order. “In my father’s shop, every piece of equipment had its place. Once, I borrowed a hammer, and when I returned it, I failed to properly hang it the same direction as before — my father instantly knew the hammer had been used by someone else.”

Schmidt’s artwork obviously displays his passion for order and the industrial environment. His current work reflects industrial form such as oil cans, metal cans, silos, factories, and the occasional porcelain bowl or cup.

His profession as an artist was more of a chance occurrence. As a graphic design major at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Schmidt took a basic ceramics class during his junior year. By the end of the semester, he discovered his passion for ceramics, especially that of functional pottery.

In this class, he also realized his desire to teach. Throughout the remainder of his undergraduate and graduate studies, he was mentored by faculty members who not only helped him refine his artistic skills but also provided him with the foundation to mentor students.

The associate professor understands the importance of mentoring his students through the academic process and not just the academic lessons. It is part of his work as both an artist and a teacher. While Schmidt urges his students to excel, he continues to make a name for himself and Valdosta State University in the art community.

The 2009 recipient of Valdosta State University’s Faculty Award in Service has been featured in more than 80 juried and invitational exhibitions from Georgia to Montana. He has been featured in publications such as “500 Vases,” “500 Cups,” “Image Transfers on Clay,” and “A Guide to Georgia Potters.”

Schmidt realizes that continuing his scholarly endeavors will not only bring notoriety to the university’s excellence in fine arts but also enhance his teaching abilities and credibility as an artist.

“When I was a student, I looked at my graduate professors and they were in books and exhibitions. Their names were recognized,” Schmidt said. “They were recognized not only for their work but for their teaching and their program. That’s something I aspired to very early on as a student aspiring to be a teacher.”

As a teacher, Schmidt has found ways to inspire and motivate his students, so in turn they can succeed in their lives and careers.

Mathew McConnell, resident artist in Auckland, New Zealand, credits much of his success to the time he spent studying under Schmidt at VSU. “I don’t know if I would have made it without Michael. I really, sincerely believe that Michael was the biggest single factor in the period of my life when I was just forming an understanding of what it means to be an ‘artist.’”

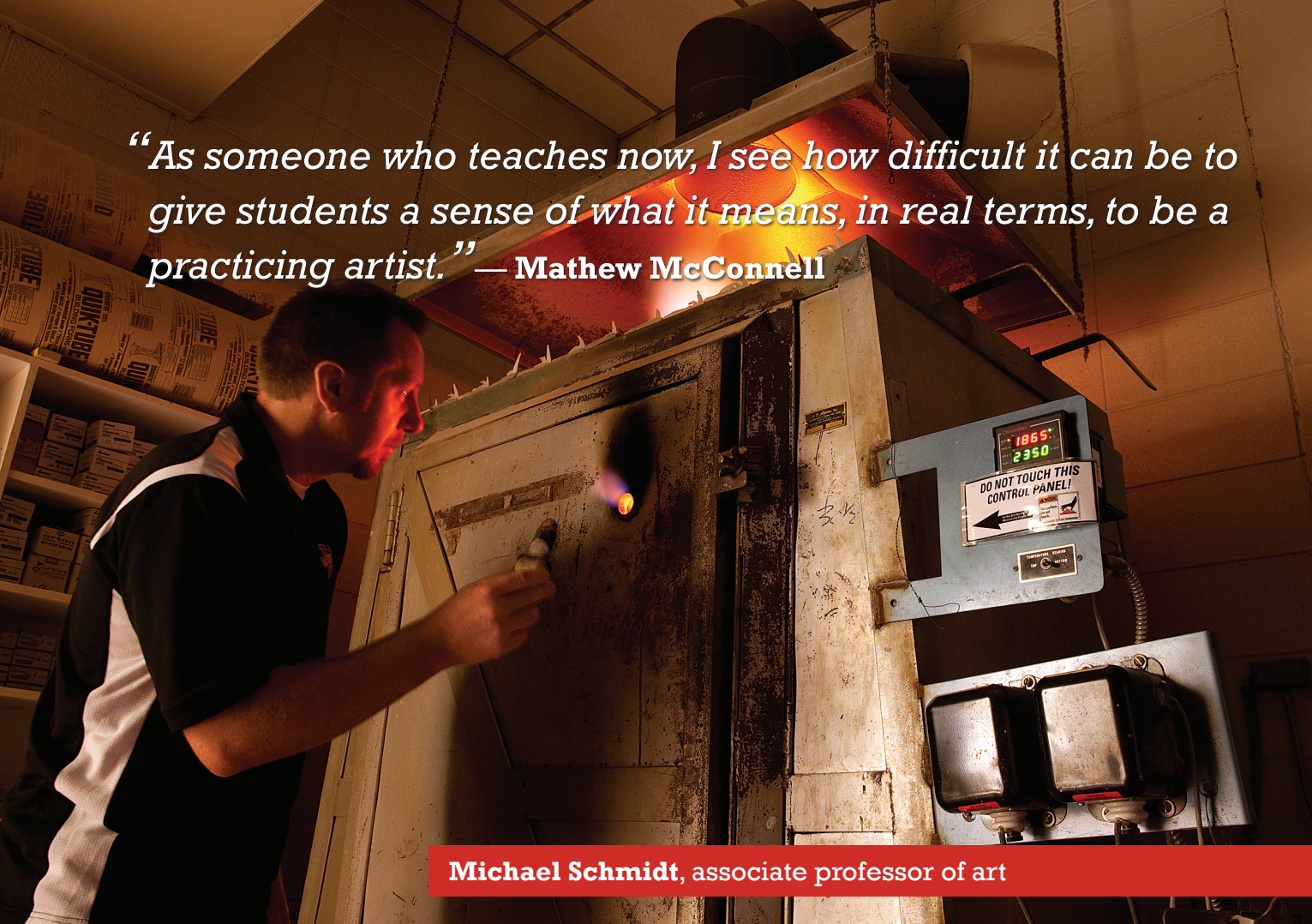
Schmidt admits that if he was not in academia, he would still follow his passion in the arts, aggressively working to improve his skills and to publish and display his work.

Schmidt’s passion for the arts and his understanding of what it means to be an artist is what distinguishes him as a professor. However, the satisfaction that he gets from seeing students such as McConnell succeed is why he teaches.

“I think that’s why you teach: to see students succeed and to see them pass it on,” Schmidt said. “It’s pretty cool to see my students who graduated years ago go on to graduate school or residency programs — it’s like the family tree is growing.”

He encourages his undergraduate students to exhibit their work, not just at VSU but in other venues.

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Michael Schmidt, associate professor of art

“I tell my students all the time: If you’re going to be a musician, you have to play music, and the ultimate goal, I think, is for people to listen to the music, not just play it in your closet and not share it,” Schmidt said. “So as someone who works in a visual medium, I want people to be able to see the work, especially working with cups and functional things. I want people to use them in their kitchen, not just stare at them.”

Schmidt’s knowledge of the practical and professional side of art and his willingness to share and learn with the students provide VSU’s budding artists with the motivation and passion necessary to excel in their medium. His connection to students and the respect that his students have for him emerge in the classroom. That connectivity resonates with the students years later.

“Michael’s advice, guidance, and recommendations set me on a course that I could not have otherwise found,” McConnell said. “I can say that I felt truly cared for as a student under Michael’s tutelage, and I could not have had the successes I am now experiencing without his commitment to me as an individual. I always felt that Michael saw me as a person first and a student second, and while it was clear that Michael was the instructor and I was the student, somehow, he always made me feel as if we were on the same journey together.” Interestingly, Schmidt uses dissatisfaction as a motivational tool, one which he passes on to his students. By showing

works from across the nation and attending national conferences with students, he gives scope to the trends in the medium. By providing students with this capacity, he makes them realize that they must continuously work hard to compete in this competitive field.

“It is a good motivational tool to feel like you’re not the best,” Schmidt said.

This philosophy comes from personal experience, which he uses to inspire students to reach higher level of achievements.

“What set Michael apart, for me, was his willingness to share his own confusions, insecurities, and ambitions with me,” McConnell said. “Being an artist is a difficult task, and Michael never hid this fact from his advanced students. As someone who teaches now, I see how difficult it can be to give students a sense of what it means, in real terms, to be a practicing artist. Michael was very good at pulling back the curtain and showing us the difficulties and the successes alike and how real-world achievement is determined. In a way, I could say that Michael was one of the very few instructors I’ve had that brought all of his artistic self to the classroom.”

It is important for Schmidt to connect with students through personal experience and feelings as well as to provide them with an example of professionalism. Schmidt’s ability to stay focused as a teacher and as a working artist makes him a valuable asset to his students and the university. ■