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1ST ANNUAL TALENT SHOWCASE
INTRODUCING THE RISING STARS OF DESIGN, ILLUSTRATION AND PHOTOGRAPHY
After seeing award-winning work in HOW’s design annuals submitted by students in unexpected places, we decided to investigate. Meet the talented people working and studying at three off-the-radar design schools.

When you think of top-tier design schools, which schools do you think of? Rhode Island School of Design? Cranbrook? School of Visual Arts?

What about Mississippi State, Portland State and Temple? They may not be on your radar, but these three hidden gems have been wowing us with their award-winning student work for years. They’re not the usual suspects, but the students and faculty at these lesser-known schools are every bit as talented as their rivals at bigger-name programs.

The three schools couldn’t be more different in size and location. But beyond those two defining characteristics, they have a lot in common, including passionate and dedicated professors, talented and creative students, active on-campus groups, tons of enthusiasm and a collection of awards.

Faculty members at all three schools encourage their classes to enter design competitions. These national awards not only give the schools great exposure and boost their reputations, but they also motivate the kids. Jamie Mixon, who’s been teaching in the graphic design department at Mississippi State since 1991, says that the awards that students win give subsequent classes something to shoot for and the confidence to do it.

The students at all three schools are also extremely proud of the programs, largely due to the design awards they’ve won. Meredith Brenner, a student at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art, says, “Every time I look at the results of a design competition and see tons of Tyler names, I feel so lucky to be a part of the design community here.”

Although there are plenty of opportunities available at these schools and others, illustrator and designer Jessica Hische, a Tyler alum, points out that college is ultimately what you make it. “If you think you’ll go to a top school and [automatically] get a top education, you’re wrong,” she says. “You have to push for your own education, no matter where you are.”

BY SHANON LYON

ART SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

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Mississippi isn’t what you’d call a hotbed of design. But in the small town of Starkville, among the 24,000 inhabitants is a group of students and teachers at Mississippi State University who are as passionate about design as they come. And they’re good at it, too.

The first real “yes we can” moment for the graphic design program, which is part of the College of Architecture, Art + Design, came in 1996, says professor Jamie Mixon, when a student won a national USA Today collegiate challenge competition. The winning design was published as a full-page ad in the paper. After that, she says, people began paying closer attention to the high-quality design work coming out of Mississippi State.

Most students attribute the success of the program to the dedicated and passionate professors. Whether they’re helping recode a crashed website the night before its launch or finding the perfect wood-grained paper to squeeze through an Epson printer, CAAD faculty go well beyond their teaching obligations, according to the undergrads.

Each of the professors has specific areas of expertise, says student Andrew Le, who describes them as a group of superheroes. “They really excel at what they do,” agrees recent graduate Will Bryant (who’s profiled in this issue on page 45). “They maintain a friend and mentor relationship with students. It’s an amazing experience to really get to know someone who challenges you and who devotes so much time to your life.”

Getting the students to believe in themselves and look beyond the borders of Mississippi, Mixon says, is one of her biggest challenges. “Part of my job is to open their eyes and encourage them to be brave and imagine another kind of life,” she says. “I’m always going to challenge them to think bigger and aim higher.”

MSU grad Catherine Yerger, a merit winner in HOW’s 2007 Promotion Design Awards, says that her experience in Starkville gave her the confidence to leave Mississippi after graduation and start a design firm with fellow graduate Kristen Ley in Charleston, SC. “They wanted us to succeed,” she says. “And that gave Kristen and me enough gumption to move out to Charleston on a whim. We opened our own graphic design studio, Cultigraphic Creative, about one month after graduating, and we’re still going strong.”

Yerger’s partner, Kristen Ley (who won a national gold ADDY award while at MSU) couldn’t agree more. “They definitely inspired me to push myself beyond what I thought I was capable of,” she says. “I entered
every design competition I could get my hands on and went to conferences. I became the person who brings in extra options for class—not because I wanted to over-achieve, but because I wanted to challenge myself and discover new solutions and concepts.”

Student Carl Carbonell describes people in the Deep South as being “starved for good design.” The small faculty of six professors works hard to expose students to a variety of graphic design and bring as much of it as possible to Starkville. The school has hosted Mike Perry, Ray Fenwick, Randy J. Jung and Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr., among other visiting lecturers.

The school offers a bachelor of fine arts in graphic design and requires students to go through a competitive third-semester portfolio review. Just a few years ago, only 28 students were accepted into the program. In 2008, 69 prospects applied for 42 spots.

Prior to their third-semester portfolio review, MSU design students don’t even touch a computer, Mixon says. “Our students are fine artists first,” she says. “We’re so proud that they have those hand skills. They can really make any kind of image.”

Despite all the enthusiasm and passion, Mixon admits that their facilities are less than desirable. But Bryant describes the art buildings as “full of spirit.” “The art department at MSU is like a bright, thrifty couch in a room full of still office chairs,” he says.

Because of the location (which doesn’t come with too many distractions) and the small size of the program, the graphic design undergrads are close-knit and have fun together. “There’s a genuine camaraderie between us since we spend so much time together,” Le says. “We’re also all connected online, so there’s always someone willing to give feedback and criticism on whatever we’re working on. I can’t speak for everybody, but I like to think that we’re all just crazy about graphic design.”

“We’re just working away down here in Mississippi,” Mixon says. “We really believe in the talent of our students, and that’s it. It’s not our facilities or the location. It’s a dedicated core group of faculty with a common goal of seeing our students through.”

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