State of the Arts: Dordt Students and Alumni Explore What it Means to Pursue Fine Arts as a Calling

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State of the Arts

Dordt students and alumni explore what it means to pursue fine arts as a calling.

Ellen DeYoung (12) (second from right) is among the growing number of Dordt alumni to join the Twin Cities arts scene. She recently stage-managed a production of Tartuffe, which was performed for a moving audience in various rooms of a historic mansion.
Andrew DeYoung (’05) is about to publish his first novel, an intergalactic love story for young adults called *The Exo Project*. He says the book reflects his interest in the ways “more lowbrow tropes and conventions can meet up with higher-brow literary thematics.”

“The novel is science fiction,” he says, “and it’s about a boy who travels 100 light years across a galaxy and meets a girl. But it’s also a story about struggling with the culture you’ve been raised in, and with the values handed down to you by your parents. The story asks the question: ‘Is there a better way to be as a people and a world?’”

DeYoung wrote his first novel at Dordt under the mentorship of Professor Emeritus Dr. James Schaap. Like most first novels, it ended up in a drawer. So did his second one, though it got him a literary agent. *The Exo Project*, his third, will come out in April, and it’s part of a two-book deal with his publisher. He says committing to the writer’s life takes persistence, discipline, and a willingness to fail. Often many times.

DeYoung is also director of product development for the Sparkhouse division of Augsburg Fortress, a large Twin Cities publisher. He heads up an editorial team that produces illustrated children’s books, and he’s written a few of his own under a pseudonym for “the under-five set.”

Erika Hoogeveen (’02) says she’ll never forget the time a woman came up to the group after a performance and thanked them, saying, “You made us feel like we were really human.”

“Inmates become an almost forgotten population,” Hoogeveen says. “The experience of having someone come and play for them is a way of showing them their lives are valuable.”

She says watching string musicians play together live—reading one another’s tempo in the movement of their bows, anticipating changes, making mistakes and recovering—can be like a small glimpse of the unity God calls us to embody as the church.

Aside from performing a regular concert season with the Mill City Quartet, Hoogeveen teaches violin lessons in her studio at home and serves as concert master for Dakota Valley Symphony.
the play’s imaginary “fourth wall.” Even the actor’s routine movements—dusting, moving a lamp—invite the audience to become part of the action of the play. From their seats, spectators can hear the actors’ footsteps, see their chests rise and fall, observe subtle changes in posture and expression. The audience, too, is part of the performance—the actors respond to its sudden hush or laughter, its attentive silence.

“That’s what actors thrive on. The energy that people bring into the room,” says Logan Radde (’16), who’s acted in several mainstage productions and directed And Then There Were None as his senior capstone project. “The audience is always part of the show. You show up at the theatre, you’re part of it.”

In Dordt’s fine arts programs, students learn to see the arts as a meaningful way of participating in God’s redemptive work in the world. That’s because art, even the...
most playful or humorous, has the power to change us, and to point us toward who we are called to be as God’s people, says Ter Haar.

ARTISTS, HERE AND THERE

Across Dordt’s campus, many students and professors devote a large part of their day to creating things that, strictly speaking, are not useful. Students layer oil paints on canvases, compose songs at the piano, or sit perched on a catwalk, installing colored lights. To learn to do these things well, they spend time in study and practice: working through scales on a violin, logging hours with their nose in an art history book, or meeting for improv games in the theatre.

This work is at once playful and deeply serious. And it continues beyond campus, too, when graduates of Dordt’s fine arts programs wend their way to places like the Twin Cities, one of the Midwest’s most vibrant cultural centers. Home to a thriving arts scene, the Cities have become the post-graduation destination for a growing number of Dordt alumni artists. Some of those graduates are making a life for themselves in the fine arts, while others have found their livelihood at the intersection of art and application, working in fields like the graphic arts or design, creating websites, interactive museum exhibits, even floral landscapes.

At Dordt, and out in the world, these artists are figuring out what it means to pursue artmaking not just as a profession, but a calling, and to do that, many of them agree, takes bravery.

“When I dropped my communication major my junior year, it was scary,” says Tricia Van Ee (’02), who has performed in operas and classical concerts as a soloist in the Twin Cities. “I knew that music wasn’t going to be a very straightforward job path, and that I would need to be open to where that path led me—even if it wasn’t exactly what I had planned.”

Jenna Wilgenburg (‘19), a sophomore art student at Dordt, felt the same trepidation. “Whenever I tell someone I’m an art major, their first question is usually skeptical: ‘What are you going to do with that?’ When I decided on my major, I was really excited about it. But honestly, I was
also scared. Ultimately, I think you have to follow your passion and gifts, and trust that God will use them in some way.”

**ART AND ATTENTION**

But how does God use an abstract sculpture or sci-fi novel? What does an opera or symphony have to do with the kingdom of God? Dordt students are busy working that out in their classrooms, on stage, and in the art studio, exploring the materials of their craft, and situating that exploration into a wider—and cross-cultural—history of art’s theory and practice.

Art Professor Matt Drissell says the value of art, and its power, has much to do with the way we move through the world as creatures, with bodies.

“God has created us to be these profoundly multidimensional beings. We’re not just brains that go around analyzing things,” he says. “We don’t experience the world in just one way; we experience it with the full range of our senses. The visual is an important dimension of that.”

Drissell is a visual artist who works in a variety of media, and he spends much of his time in the studio with students, instructing them in their work, often painting and drawing alongside them.

“Today, so much of our experience of the world is abstracted or digitized. We’re not engaging with the materials around us,” he says. “But when you go into the studio, you deal with paint. You deal with glue. You deal with gravity. You’re colliding with a cultural legacy that goes all the way back to people painting figures on cave walls. You’re getting at what it means to be human and to engage intellectually and creatively with the physical world around you.”

Andrew DeYoung (‘05), a novelist and children’s book publisher who lives in Minneapolis, understands this kind of engagement in terms of attention.

“As a writer, you’re often paying attention to a single thing—whether it’s the way the light falls on a snowbank, or a
FEATURES

TWIN CITIES ARTISTS

MATTHEW KUNNARI: FLORAL LANDSCAPE DESIGNER, VISUAL ARTIST

“I remember discovering in my art classes at Dordt that I was deeply interested in color,” says Matthew Kunnari (’06). “I'd be driving down the road, and I'd be struck by certain things: the yellow paint on the center line, the red stop sign, a blue sky. I’d feel compelled to return to that image in the studio.”

Now his medium is flowers.

Kunnari lives on the grounds of the historic Pillsbury Mansion, next to Lake Minnetonka, where aside from tending plants and designing landscapes, he spends time painting in his bright artist’s studio in the estate’s carriage house.

The room is filled with brightly colored still-life paintings, arranged on easels or up against the wall. “I like to paint the things that have been left behind. A table after everyone has eaten, or a sink and counter filled with dishes,” he says. The paintings are unconventional, but beautiful.

“As an artist, and also as a gardener, you learn patience,” he says. “You're in it for the long game.”

ELLEN DEYOUNG: STAGE MANAGER, THEATRE TOURING COMPANY COORDINATOR

Ellen DeYoung’s (’12) last gig as a stage manager involved dressing in a maid’s uniform and ushering audience members from room to room in a dark Twin Cities mansion. “I’m used to being in a dark tech booth during performances, so this was definitely out of the ordinary for me,” she says.

The play, Tartuffe, was an experiment—rather than accept the spatial conventions of seats and stage, the Wayward Theatre decided to bring theatre into spaces people already move through and inhabit.

DeYoung is often part of inventive, boundary-challenging productions—usually behind the scenes, as resident stage manager at the Wayward and Mission theatres in the Twin Cities.

During the day, she helps coordinate national tours for the National Theatre for Children, one of the largest touring children’s theatre companies in the country. The troupe often performs in low-income schools, and for many of the students, it’s their first time seeing a play.

“I feel so privileged to witness the students’ joy in having a real person in front of them, communicating something educational through their performance. The kids are having so much fun, they don’t even realize they’re learning,” she says.
Faculty Notes


Chemistry Professor Dr. Channon Visscher co-authored an article titled "On the Composition of Young, Directly Imaged Giant Planets" in the Astrophysical Journal in October. He also co-authored a paper called "The fate of moderately volatile elements in impact events—Lithium connection between the Ries sediments and central European tektites" in the Meteoritics & Planetary Science Journal in December.


Henreckson was asked to serve on the steering committee for a new program group in the Evangelical Theological Society called "Public Theology," which will host theological conversations about how Christians might pursue the common good in the church and in society.

The following update was misattributed in our last issue:

Adjunct Education Professor Dr. Thomas Van Soelen published a book titled Crafting the Feedback Teachers Need and Deserve: A Guide for Leaders. He also published several articles: "Teamwork Boosts Student Learning and Professional Community for the Phi Delta Kappa Common Core Writing Project," "Navigation Aids: 9 Shifts in Practice Smooth the Transition from School to Central Office" in the Journal of Staff Development, and "Evaluation and Support: It Doesn't Have to Be One or the Other" in Principal Leadership.

Art Professor Matt Drissell had students in his Core 160 course gather to view and discuss Wilgenburg's work, and it prompted lively conversations about the ways our culture perpetuates a narrow and unrealistic standard of beauty, often turning women's bodies into commodities.

different than yours. Curiosity, wonder, awe, empathy—these qualities all have their beginning in imagination."

Art doesn't move us with facts or arguments, Drissell says. The language of art is image, metaphor, texture, pattern. And that's the source of its power. Art can move us toward an appreciation of the beauty of the created world and of our own creativity as God's image-bearers. But it can also challenge or upset us. It can start conversations. It can draw us to a deeper understanding of the world's brokenness and suffering. And by inviting us to respond imaginatively to what's offered, art can move us to action and teach us, however tentatively, to hope.

ART THAT CHALLENGES

When Wilgenburg decided on her final project in Drissell's Painting I class, she wanted to start a conversation. She began with three square panels, arranged in a row. Each features part of a woman's figure, graceful but imperfect, floating in negative space: a curving collarbone, the expanse of a back, legs bent at the knee. To display the piece, she set up a projector, and used it to project a variety of images over the panels. One of them was a Victoria's Secret ad featuring a line of similar-looking models, long limbed and nearly bare, behind bold white text:

“With this piece, I wanted to challenge people to think about how God created us, carefully knitting each of us together. And I wanted viewers to consider the ways our culture judges the value of what God has created,” Wilgenburg says. "Making art as a Christian doesn't necessarily mean painting scenes from the Bible or exploring obviously Christian themes. Art can challenge us to open our eyes to new things and to challenges in the world that go beyond our own experiences."

Jason Kornelis ('11) says theatre, too, can raise challenging questions. He's now an actor in the Twin Cities, but during his senior year at Dordt, he directed Bat Boy, an "edgy and out there musical." The show is about a character—half boy, half bat—discovered in a cave and trying to integrate into a small, deep

“"The Perfect 'Body.'"

“"It takes a kind of chutzpah, an audacity, to create beautiful things in a culture that values efficiency, productivity, and profit.”

– Music Professor Dr. Benjamin Kornelis

South community that is "very distrustful of outsiders." Kornelis describes the production as part social commentary, part "very strange homage to B horror movies."

“You can challenge people through all kinds of storytelling, but theatre kind
Rachel Clemens (’09) has gotten used to sitting down with executives from global corporations like Microsoft and Pepsi. She’s a practice manager at SAP, a multinational company that creates software that businesses use to optimize their hiring processes.

Clemens works on the “front end” of the software platform. Her design courses at Dordt, along with internships near Dordt and in Chicago, prepared her to design elegant, functional websites.

“When it comes to designing a web page, design and functionality are inseparable,” she says. Clemens designs the “front-end” of websites—the part users see and interact with. “It’s surprising how often I design something I think looks pretty good, but then when we put it into practice, we realize it doesn’t work very well,” she says.

“Along with my degree in art, I was a business major. I’ve never really been interested in creating art for art’s sake. I’ve always been interested in how to communicate something clearly, or make someone’s life easier through good design,” she says.

Sarah Zwier (’06) spent one of her last semesters as a Dordt student interning for the Field Museum in Chicago, and she continued working there for several years after graduation. “That’s where I really cut my teeth in exhibit design,” she says. “I learned to take concepts from my design courses at Dordt and apply them to three-dimensional environments.”

Now she works as a graphic artist at the Science Museum of Minnesota. Recently, Zwier helped design and install an exhibit about sports science. Today, the space is filled with kids and parents, practicing their baseball swing in front of a slow-motion camera or racing down a track alongside virtual competitors.

“When Zwier first chose to study art at Dordt, she wondered if she “was the right type of creative person.”

“Along with my degree in art, I was a business major. I’ve never really been interested in creating art for art’s sake. I’ve always been interested in how to communicate something clearly, or make someone’s life easier through good design,” she says.