

Fledgling artists take flight

DEGREE SHOWS

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Once again, the season of art-school degree shows is upon us. Unlike the work of other students, that of art students can be seen and assessed by all, not just their tutors. Moreover, their products are for sale, providing them with a chance to pay off their bills and take their first steps to independence outside an institutional environment.

For the past 15 years, art students have never had it so good. The booming economy and flourishing art market meant that they were making sales from their degree shows, and, more importantly, they were gaining contracts with commercial galleries that could ensure their future.

But this year, things are different. The recession means that fewer collectors and gallery owners are likely to offer material support. Although fewer than a handful of galleries have closed since last October, those that deal with young emerging artists are feeling the pinch.

"The students are incredibly concerned," says Kay Saatchi, formerly married to the collector Charles Saatchi, and now a collector and curator in her own right. There has probably never been a less conducive moment for embarking on a career.

Already the season is in full swing, with exhibitions for the undergraduates from the Slade School of Fine Art, and a blink-and-you-missed-it show for Chelsea College of Art and Design postgraduates, which closed yesterday. A show to watch out for is at Central St Martin's College of Art and Design (BA exhibition from June 19; MA from June 30). St Martin's makes a point of

encouraging talent-spotters to view its shows by boasting several Turner Prize nominees among its alumni, including Mark Wallinger, Steve McQueen (this year's representative for Britain at the Venice Biennale), Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor, as well as Enrico David, who is on this year's shortlist.

The Royal College of Art, which is considered the most professional outfit of all, is no less bashful about trumpeting its former star students from David Hockney and Bridget Riley to Tracey Emin and Chris Ofili. The college's new crop of graduates are presenting their work this week – sculpture students in their Battersea studios from Thursday, and painting students, alongside printmaking, photography and several craft-based disciplines, from Friday, at its Kensington galleries.

But this year the painting students are making an extra effort. After the degree show closes, they are moving to the much larger space at the Rochelle School in Shoreditch, east London, from June 17 to 25, where they will exhibit more, and bigger, examples of their work in an exhibition called *Through the Wall*. In a move that is reminiscent of the last recession, when Damien Hirst and fellow students of Goldsmiths College set up the historic *Freeze* exhibition in an East End warehouse, the students have driven a bargain price for renting the space, which is owned by Littlewoods Pools heir James Moores and his "A" Foundation.

David Rayson, professor of painting at the Royal College, believes this recession will be no barrier to artistic progress. "Artists thrive in these times," he says. "They make more



RCA student Sharon Green's *Emergency* (£1,100)

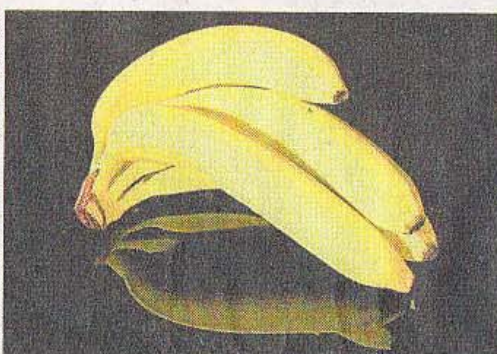
homespun work, on their kitchen tables if necessary." The danger of the booming market was that students became overburdened with hype, which affected the individuality of their work, says Rayson. Now they are more focused on "what they want to be or comment on" he says.

"They are also actively seeking out opportunities, looking at empty shop spaces behind Marble Arch. The recession won't stop the artists."

For those unable to visit the innumerable regional city degree shows, there are ways to sample them in London. *Free Range*, for instance, is a massive display of works by more than 3,000 design, fine art and photography graduates from as far afield as Falmouth, Swansea, Nottingham and Staffordshire. Held at the Old Truman Brewery in east London from Thursday until mid-July, it rotates its displays weekly.

A more selective show is the DLA Piper Award exhibition, which has just opened at the Sarah Myerscough gallery in Brooks Mews behind Claridge's. Last summer, Myerscough trawled more than 30 colleges looking for talent, and here exhibits the best. It's "serious art for serious times", says art critic Sue Hubbard, who served on the selection committee.

Referring to the haunting images of American photographer Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression, Catherine Usher of solicitors DLA Piper, who sponsor the show, asks: "Will our current economic unease bring forth similar talent?" The answer to that, of course, is that you won't know unless you've been and looked.



From the Royal College of Art degree show (from left): *Rope Loop* by Lewis Ronald (£400); *Golden Vista* by Zoe Maxwell (£550); *Poet* by Giulia Resteghini (£550 for set of nine prints)