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MAKING ARTISTS

Warhols of Tomorrow Are Dealers' Quarry Today

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Titus Kaphar in his studio.

Jack Tilton arrived at [Columbia University](#) on a recent Saturday with a camera around his neck and a venture capitalist by his side. It was a busy day for Mr. Tilton, a Manhattan dealer known for exhibiting the art of graduate students. He looked at the work of 26 students in their first year of a Master of Fine Arts program at Columbia, then struck out for New Haven to do the same thing at [Yale](#). John Friedman, the venture capitalist, made that part of the tour a week later.

"I've collected for north of 30 years and have about 700 works of contemporary art," Mr. Friedman said. "I mentor a lot of students from Columbia and Yale."

Though the conventional image of an artist's mentor is not generally a venture capitalist, such a presence is not so surprising in an era when collectors from Wall Street are underwriting high prices for contemporary art. The art world is, in the end, a numbers game: as collectors, art fairs and galleries keep growing, while first-rate artworks for sale decrease, dealers and collectors are scouring the country's top graduate schools looking for the Warhols of the future.

But many educators say the appetite for graduate-student art is too much, too soon. And so some top

art schools, like Columbia's, are taking steps to protect students from the hordes of hungry dealers and collectors who regularly descend on campuses.

"It's a double-edged sword," said Bruce Ferguson, dean of Columbia's art school. "The potential for making a living is greater for these young artists, but so is the danger of being overexposed or pre-exposed."

For most Wall Street collectors, the investment is minimal; prices for student art seem cheap when compared with the seven figures some contemporary art is beginning to fetch. At a recent student show at Mr. Tilton's gallery, prices ranged from \$2,000 to \$16,000, depending on the work's size and complexity. If one of these students suddenly becomes a star, it could mean a large return on the buyer's investment.

[Michael S. Ovitz](#), the onetime Hollywood superagent, is a veteran scout of student art, although he is quick to say that he is not a speculator. "It's critical to support all ends of the market, and that includes up-and-coming artists," he said. "It's educational to see how these young people chronicle the history of our culture, and it's fun to try to discover a needle in a haystack."

Yet Tobias Meyer, director of Sotheby's contemporary art department worldwide, calls it "a hunting sport."

"Collectors want to beat the galleries at their own game," he said. "This insatiable need for stardom has made buying student work the art-world version of 'American Idol.'"

Neither students nor teachers dispute the benefits of collecting an M.F.A. from a competitive school like Columbia, which, along with an education, provides instant exposure to established artists, dealers and collectors. Applications for next year are up by about 25 percent, said Gareth James, chairman of Columbia's visual arts division; last year just 26 applicants, 3 percent of the total, were accepted to the two-year program, which costs nearly \$70,000.

For that sum, students receive their own studios and a chance to study with art stars like Kara Walker, Janine Antoni and Andrea Zittel. They pick a mentor, receive group critiques of their work and attend lectures by some of today's most sought-after artists.

They also enjoy proximity to the thriving New York art market — and a measure of protection from it.

Beginning this year, first-year graduate students were not included in Columbia's open-studios event, held each December, when the school community and the public are invited to see students' work. The intent was to give these students more time to develop without the anxiety of showing what they can do just three months after they've arrived.

"It takes the pressure off them," Mr. James said. "We would rather have ignored the issue and let it pass as a fashionable phase, but it became so intense, we knew it had to be addressed."

Robert Storr, a longtime teacher who was recently named dean of Yale's art school, warns that the students who are the commercial stars of their class today will not generally turn out to be the artists remembered tomorrow. "These anointed stars are much less likely to mature," he said. "They get sidetracked and confused and are not giving themselves time to grow and develop."

The phenomenon is not limited to the Ivy League, but it is most noticeable in the New York and Los Angeles areas. Barbara Drucker, chairwoman of the department of art at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, says that she has noticed that over the last 10 years arts education has become more profit-oriented.

"Personally, I don't think it's a good thing," she said, "but it's the culture. People want it younger and younger."

What is it like to be a student in today's overheated contemporary art world? Looking around her studio on West 125th Street in Manhattan — a cluttered space chockablock with colorful collages, prints and paintings — Mara Sprafkin, a 26-year-old second-year Columbia graduate student, pointed to a painting that will be part of a summer group show at the Gerald Peters Gallery on the Upper East Side.

"If you do this amazing body of work in graduate school, and you hook up with a dealer and become known for that kind of work, how do you build on it?" she mused. "It's risky when you're young."

In a nearby studio, Emily Mae Smith, also 26, was surrounded by several realist paintings she is

racing to finish for the second-year students' thesis show next month. On one wall hangs a canvas of a woman's grotesquely long, oddly colored nails. On another is a nine-and-a-half-foot-tall painting of bald eagles inspired by a \$14.99 fiber-optic statue she found in a mail-order catalog.

"There's a lot of good student work out there, and everyone's different when it comes to handling the attention," Ms. Smith said. "I don't want to be discovered and then canned in five years. I'm in this for the long haul."

Thoughts of Charles Saatchi — the London advertising magnate who was the first to scoop up work by the so-called Young British Artists a decade ago, and then the first to dump much of it on the auction block— still cast a long shadow. The market for some of those artists never recovered.

Each year, Rochelle Feinstein, a painter and Yale professor, makes her students read the reviews of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. "Then I ask them how many of these artists they have heard of," she said. "It's quite sobering."

Many of Ms. Smith's peers say they worry about art-world hype and look skeptically at art stars, including Dana Schutz, a 29-year-old Columbia graduate who has already garnered a great deal of media attention and has had solo shows in Paris, Berlin and Manhattan. They also keep a curious eye on classmates who are already successful. One of them is Natalie Frank, a painter whose studio is filled with her politically tinged depictions of wars, ranging across eras and genders. At 26, she had a high-profile winter, with a painting in Mr. Tilton's show of student work and a solo show at the Briggs Robinson Gallery in Chelsea.

A degree from a place like Columbia or Yale was a big part of the draw for collectors considering works at Mr. Tilton's student show in January and February. Called "School Days," it consisted of work by 19 artists from Yale, Columbia and Hunter College; 70 percent of the works were sold before the show even opened.

"As soon as our e-mail list went out, we were flooded with calls," said Janine Cirincione, the gallery's director. "We couldn't believe it." The work was predominantly figurative painting, along with several abstract works, a smattering of sculpture and two video pieces.

The guests at the opening, rather than sipping white wine, were guzzling Rolling Rock beer from the bottle. One Yale student, Titus Kaphar, 29, could not help being noticed. Instead of the artist's uniform of faded jeans, he wore a bright yellow sweater, plaid necktie and matching tweed vest and cap. Mr. Kaphar is a painter inspired by the portrayal of black people in the work of 18th- and 19th-century painters like Copley, Delacroix, Blake and Eakins. In his own work, faces are often left blank.

"The commercial art world is not discussed at school," he said.

"There's not a whole lot of career counseling," he added. "They seem to want you to focus on your work, almost in a naïve way, almost wanting you to deny there is a commercial art world."

Neither Yale nor Columbia offers a course in how to get a dealer or navigate the perils of the art world. Mr. James said that Columbia did have a course called "Building and Sustaining a Career," which deals with everything from helping an artist with taxes to writing a grant application.

Still, some collectors, realizing that they may not be doing students any favors by buying their art, have already stopped. "It was good at a time when few people were doing it, but I don't go to open studios anymore," said Dean Valentine, a Los Angeles collector. "It's giving the artists the wrong idea about what to expect. The chances of finding the next Warhol in a student show are zero."

Dealers worry that collectors may be getting the wrong ideas, too. Ms. Cirincione said that she and Mr. Tilton named the show "School Days" to "imply that it's still the beginning."

"We are very careful not to make any claims that we know for sure these artists will go straight to the top," she said. "We can't know that. We just like the work."