

ARTISTS' IMPRESSIONS

The Wimbledon College of the Arts is providing opportunities for students to engage with professional artists, build portfolios and establish themselves on the scene

BY JAMES WOOD



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Artists have flocked to London for generations, believing it to be the best chance of improving their professional prospects. The capital is famed as a place where they find success and in which abundant galleries, creative communities and some of the world's best educational facilities can be found.

For many, these positives outweigh common problems such as earning enough to meet the high costs of living and the competitive nature of pursuing artistic careers.

Obtaining a place at a top London art college can hold the key to success. Wimbledon, in the borough of Merton, is home to one of six constituency colleges of the University of the Arts London (UAL), the Wimbledon College of Arts. Traditionally, Central St Martin's was seen as the college that talented young people most aspired to, but these perceptions are changing fast. Since its inception 30 years ago, UAL is now hugely sought after – not just in the UK, but globally too.

For painting BA student, Amanda Roberts, this fact hit home when she was on holiday in Barbados. "I spoke to somebody there who I had never met before with a common interest in art who was really impressed when I told them I go to the Wimbledon College of Arts," she says. "I think it really shows how the college's excellent reputation is widespread."

ARTISTIC LEGACY

The facility became part of UAL in 2006. It was previously known as Wimbledon School of Art, which was established in 1890 and moved to its current home on the leafy Merton Hall Road in 1940. It boasts an impressive range of alumni, including Will Piece, who graduated in 2003 and works on the stage production of *The Lion King* in the West End and Turner Prize winners Tony Cragg (1988), Peter Doig (1994) and current alumna Josephine Pryde, who is nominated for this year's award, to be announced in December.

With 800 students on fine art, theatre and screen courses at the college, studying at Wimbledon allows students to develop a niche, as Jayne Knowles, the associate dean of the college, ►



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- 01 Students enjoy close mentoring at the college
- 02 Artwork by BA student, Lucy Harrow
- 03 The college studio is rated BREEAM 'outstanding'

explains: “We have the benefits of being part of both a smaller and larger institution. Students learn in our workshops, studios and on-site professional theatre from expert tutors and technicians who either work in the industry or have their own practices.”

For some students, this offers multiple benefits. Roberts, who is just about to enter the third year of her BA degree at the college, says: “I really like the fact that a number of tutors are practising artists. They all have experience of selling their work and putting on exhibitions, so not only do they help on a practical level – sharing incredible knowledge of art history – but they also offer advice on how we can make a living once we leave. In terms of the actual business side of things, you learn a lot of entrepreneurial skills that are useful for the future.”

Close teacher-student relationships are important to college leaders, but collaboration between pupils taking different courses is also encouraged. A free-to-attend festival at the end of the year showcases a wide range of work, with students collaborating on pieces of theatre and art and exhibiting work around the facility.

GLOBAL REACH

Opportunities for extracurricular activities abroad are also on offer. The college selected and curated an exhibition in Beijing at the end of 2015, featuring European theatre and performance design, after being invited to do so by the National Centre for Performing Arts in the Chinese capital. The Evolving Design for Performance project featured work from alumna in just 12 European theatre academies, including Wimbledon College of Arts.

Associate dean Pryde says: “We have excellent relationships with organisations and institutions all over the world. Our students are able to take part in exchange trips, and benefit from visiting practitioners, experts and a range of international academics.”

The college also believes it essential to have close relationships with industry. Each year our graduation students receive awards, with the aim to give their careers an important boost.”

One of these is provided through the college’s Wandle Prize, a collaboration by futureMerton, UAL and Merton Abbey Mills. A graduating student is chosen as a recipient of rent-free studio space for

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05 ‘Steely’ Arthur The Stag at Wimbledon tube station

06 Students value collaboration at the arts college

01 The leafy environs of the arts college

02 Dress by costume interpretation student, Elizabeth Wang

03 Student Manon Teychenne-Simoes’s painting ‘Clara’

04 Work from set design student, Ariadne Bicknell



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a year at Abbey Mills, as well as mentoring and support to develop their own business or career.

Pryde says: “That is an exceptional opportunity for graduates, which also benefits the local area, as it retains their creativity and entrepreneurship and feeds it into the community beyond the college.”

Ties to the surrounding borough of Merton are encouraged and for students and teachers alike, the college offers the advantages of being located fairly close to central London, with excellent connections to some of the UK’s major film and television companies, as well as theatres and galleries. Students are encouraged to make the most of these during their time at Wimbledon.

But being located away from the centre of London has benefits too, with a chance to work in a more serene green space and the outdoors. Dimitri Lin, who graduated in summer 2016 from a fine arts course, says: “There’s definitely something unique about Wimbledon. The old-school

art school feel of the place and the relatively tranquil setting gave me a much-needed chance to concentrate on my work with few distractions.”

The latest addition to the college is a studio building that opened in 2015 and is used by students on BA theatre and screen, set design for screen, BA fine art and print, and time-based media courses.

As well as providing better facilities for students, the building was developed with good practice in sustainability at the top of the agenda.

The building, designed by Peynoyre & Prasad, is highly sustainable and is the recipient of the Ashen Prize 2016 at the New London Architecture Awards, which champions sustainable projects that demonstrate high levels of energy efficiency. Solar panels provide 100% of the energy required to light the space, which also contribute to the heating and so far have produced less than zero carbon emissions.

THE GRADUATES

As the latest set of graduates donned caps and gowns to receive their degrees in July 2016, many will have been hoping to follow in the footsteps of BA print and time-based media graduate Henry Day, who designed a geometric sculpture called Rebound Symmetry for business improvement district, Love Wimbledon. The installation made of 350 tennis balls is hanging above The Piazza in the centre of Wimbledon to celebrate the town centre’s links with the famous lawn tennis tournament.

Local artist Isabelle Southwood is also a graduate of Wimbledon College of Arts and created the iconic stag sculpture outside Wimbledon station in 2012. ‘Arthur the stag’ is made from steel and stands at three metres high and three metres wide. Southwood sought to create the impression that the stag has wandered from his rural landscape up the hill into the busy urban environment of Wimbledon.

With close ties to organisations in the Merton area and an international reputation for the quality of work its students produce, alumni at the Wimbledon College of Arts and the quality of teaching are continuing to improve.

For the future, the college aims to continue attracting talented students from around the world, adding diversity to this part of south-west London, and in the process improving the quality of life for residents with striking sculptures dotted around the town, and theatre performances at the borough’s venues and art exhibitions. ●