Masters of Art

When Features Editor Debbie Grossman and I started kicking around the idea behind “The MFA Question” (page 20), we came at the issue of the value of an advanced degree in photography from two different experiences. She has an MFA; I do not.

In fact, Debbie is one of three editors on our staff with photography MFAs. She earned hers from the School of Visual Arts in New York City while she was already working full-time for Popular Photography. Her thesis project, My Pet Town, drew the kind of acclaim emerging artists dream of—including a solo show at the Julie Saul Gallery and acquisition of a full series of prints by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “I went for an MFA for my own personal satisfaction,” she says. “I just wanted to find out if I was really an artist; I wasn’t expecting to get a career out of it.”

Both Adam Ryder, our assistant tech editor, and Fiona Gardner, our photo editor, had more concrete goals in pursuing their MFAs from SVA and Columbia University, respectively: A few years out of school, they found they already had the kind of acclaim emerging artists dream of—including a solo show at the Julie Saul Gallery and acquisition of a full series of prints by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “I went for an MFA for my own personal satisfaction,” she says. “I just wanted to find out if I was really an artist; I wasn’t expecting to get a career out of it.”

Both Adam Ryder, our assistant tech editor, and Fiona Gardner, our photo editor, had more concrete goals in pursuing their MFAs from SVA and Columbia University, respectively: A few years out of school, they found themselves stuck in dead-end jobs and yearned to pursue photography in a more serious way. “Somebody told me that the best thing I’d get from grad school was a network of professional connections, and they were right,” Adam says. “Every job I’ve had since then has been through someone I met at SVA.”

Her degree gave Fiona a career boost straight out of school, too. And, she says, “I learned to conceptualize much more clearly.” Like many MFA grads, she also teaches at the university level—in her case, at Pratt Institute. “Every job I’ve had since then has been through someone I met at SVA.”

So while you may think of an MFA as a first step in an art or academic career, it might lead you in an unexpected direction. Even to Pop Photo.

Miriav Leuchker

TRAVELING LENSMAN

Ringling grad Dylan Johnston incorporates his love for adventure into his pursuit of art

WHEN STUDYING photography at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida, Dylan Johnston discovered the work of Corey Arnold, whose imagery delineates rugged life on a fishing boat—captained by Arnold himself. “I had been a fisherman since I was a kid, and when I came across Corey’s work, I realized the grungy stuff I love to do could be art,” recalls Johnston, who grew up in Orlando and spent his childhood around the ocean. “I was doing a lot of random photography before that. I switched gears and thought, ‘I could make beautiful work about fishing!’ It was an eye-opener.”

Johnston was inspired to do two things: ask for Arnold’s 2011 book Fish work: The Bering Sea for his
birthday from his parents and write the photographer about an internship: “I emailed him twice and he didn’t get back,” Johnston says. “I was sort of humbled. But then my birthday comes around, and my mom has ordered the book and I don’t know about it. It hasn’t come in yet. Corey has a phone number on his website, and my mom calls the number expecting to get some book-store—but it’s Corey’s personal phone. So she talks to him: ‘I ordered this book for my son, he loves your work, he emailed and he wants to intern for you.’ And he went back and saw my emails, and he didn’t get back,” Johnston recounts. “He had me scan negatives, help him pick out photos, world for clients, then to his gallery I helped with photo shoots. It was such an amazing experience, to be with that caliber of an artist. I was still trying to figure things out.”

Johnston returned to Ringling with a new sense of focus. After graduating in 2013, he flew to New York City with a suitcase, a camera backpack, and an eye toward assisting successful photographers—and becoming one himself. Now based in Brooklyn, he’s working out a balance between the two.

“I’m all over: I’m freelance so you with a big digital camera. Film tools? “Plastic bags and gaffer tape,” he says. “Cuts down! It’s a challenge on a rocky boat. Someday I might invest in an underwater housing.”

To promote his work, Johnston did intern in a booklet (thanks to Blurb) that showcases various projects. “Each spread is a story,” he says of the booklet simply titled Dylan Johnston, which he printed and signed in an edition of 100, with matching envelopes; he sends copies to editors and art directors. “It’s the best calling card. I often email people and send around PDFs, but I love having tangible goods.”

Meanwhile Johnston updates his website with more recent work, including a six-month sojourn last year in Colombia—which he published on the website Roads & Kingdoms—and his ongoing series of portraiture and street shots in Harlem of rapper ASAP and friends.

While his work has been used by outlets such as Sport Fishing and enRoute, Johnston hopes to get more assignments combining travel and portraits. “Of course I’d love to work for National Geographic,” he says. “If you’re shooting for the client it’s huge; you’re still making art. But I think you’re a true artist when your stuff is hanging on the gallery wall. A solo show is a dream of mine.”

He cites the career path of mentor Corey Arnold, who seasonally captains his own fishing boat in Alaska, photographs his adventures, and then returns to Portland to resume his photo practice. “I’m kind of colorblind so I could never be a captain or a pilot,” Johnston says with a laugh. “But anything that’s an adventure I want to do. I’m into travel, I want to do documentary, and I’m still working on portraiture. Whether it’s a stranger or a friend, I love nothing better than a quality portrait.” —Jack Crager