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| By Chelsea Holden Baker | Photographs by Jarrod McCabe

DR. GEORGE SMITH, THE FOUNDER OF THE WORLD'S FIRST PHD PROGRAM IN THE VISUAL ARTS, TALKS ABOUT HIS JOURNEY TO EDUCATIONAL EMANCIPATION.

After a lifetime as a good-natured but reluctant academic, George Smith, horn-rimmed PhD, art collector, and former dean of the Maine College of Art, has realized his vision of a doctoral program in philosophy and art theory, where visual artists and creative professionals can work through a dissertation and graduate as doctors—the first program of its kind. Smith founded IDSVA, the Institute for Doctoral Studies in Visual Arts, in 2007 with the help of his wife, Amy. The nonprofit organization begins the academic accreditation process this summer. *From his quiet home—and the heart of the international IDSVA program—in Portland's West End, Smith talks about the journey and the destination.*

I'm not a visual artist, but as a young person I was interested in writing poetry. I did a lot of that in college, I was on the reading circuit, and then I enrolled in an MFA program for poetry.

The woman that I was to study with was a very famous American poet at the time: Anne Sexton. But she committed suicide just before I enrolled.

So I spent a year at the advanced poetry workshop at Harvard and decided I needed to get some academic background because I never went to class in college! I did an MA in literature and got interested in the history of ideas. I did a PhD in literature at Brown, but was seduced by writing criticism rather than poetry. Writing poetry is the same as making art; each word is like a brick. You have to move everything around all the time. It's very labor intensive. But lucky accidents happen. When I was at Brown I taught an interdisciplinary course. I wrote the first interdisciplinary dissertation there. It was an unknown thing then and greatly resisted. The title of the course was kind of sexy: Art in the Fast Lane: Paris and the Rise of Modernism. I remember one day going to my office, and there was this long line out of my building and around the corner. And I said, "What the hell are all these students looking for?" They were looking for me. The course had a 17-seat limit, but the registrar forgot to put the limit on the signup, and something like 10-percent of the university registered. So I let in thirty students with the understanding that people could bring dates to the lectures. They had to move the course to an auditorium because everybody brought dates and the dates brought dates, and so forth. It became tremendously exciting. As a result, I decided to teach the course in Paris.

In Paris, we would read Henry James and go to the streets that appeared in *The Ambassadors,* and go to where Picasso worked, and I could see the difference between that and lecturing at Brown. It was a no-brainer: this was the way education actually happened. And students would be at cafes until ten, eleven, twelve, one o'clock in the morning arguing. Even then, I knew that the right kind of education was one that got students out of the classroom and into real experience. This notion of what is called the "experiential continuum" is something that comes from John Dewey, the American philosopher, who defined the most effective education as one in which each thing is built on the next thing.
I tell people that I moved to Portland from Boston looking for a parking space. That was about 25-years ago. My former wife and I bought a house out on Long Island here in Casco Bay. I got a job teaching at Bates, which gave us an excuse to buy a house in Portland. But I'm impetuous, and we signed the purchase and sale before I signed the contract for the job. Of course, the job fell through, but we came anyway. I was driving back and forth to Brown to make a few bucks, and I got a job teaching an art history course at Westbrook College, which is now University of New England.

My mother was an artist, a painter, and I'd always had an interest in visual arts, but I'd never taken an art history course. I hornswoggled my way into it, then I started teaching literature courses. Along the way, a little theory course opened at Maine College of Art. They had never had a theory course at MECA. In those days, there was a real question as to what an art school does. MECA's position as a very small school was, "We teach people how to make paintings, and we teach people how to make sculpture." It was more about technique and studio practices as opposed to the philosophical principles that inform that practice. Given where I was coming from, my interest was both of those things.
The school became an exciting place. There was a focused interest on where the school had been for the past 25 -years and where it needed to go. And rather than seeing me as the harbinger of criticism, they opened up a wonderful conversation. The next year, Ray Allen, the dean of the school, left to take a job at Maryland Institute. They asked me to come in as interim dean and I did that, and it was decided that I should become the dean.

But I've never been interested in administration. I was reluctantly appointed the vice president of the college, and the dean of the school, and I got to work changing the school, adding courses in theory. We moved into the Porteous Building and there was this real thrust toward the future. It was decided we should start an MFA program. I told the president that we didn't need another MFA program in the United States; that we had plenty of people driving cabs who had MFAs. It would be scandalous to start another one. So, I cut a deal. I said, "If I can find an MFA program of a kind that doesn't yet exist in the United States, that will give us a justified cause for going forward. Otherwise, forget it."

I studied the MFAs in the United States and recognized two things: there was no MFA that had a theory or philosophy component to it. And there was no low-residency MFA. I decided that we would start an MFA program that had those two new ideas built in. When I proposed this to the regional accrediting agency, they said, "No, no, no, and don't come back. You can create the program, but in five years we won't give you accreditation."

We developed the program. We had people from Utah and Alaska, Southern California—all over the United States. And we would find people who lived close to them to be their studio advisors—incredible all-star artists that were living in places like the desert in Utah, who happened to live a hundred miles away from a student. And then we had them coming to Portland for eight weeks in the summertime, which they still do at MECA. We'd bring in a major star for a week, world-renowned artists every week. Each one would come in like a hurricane and blow all the boats out of the water.

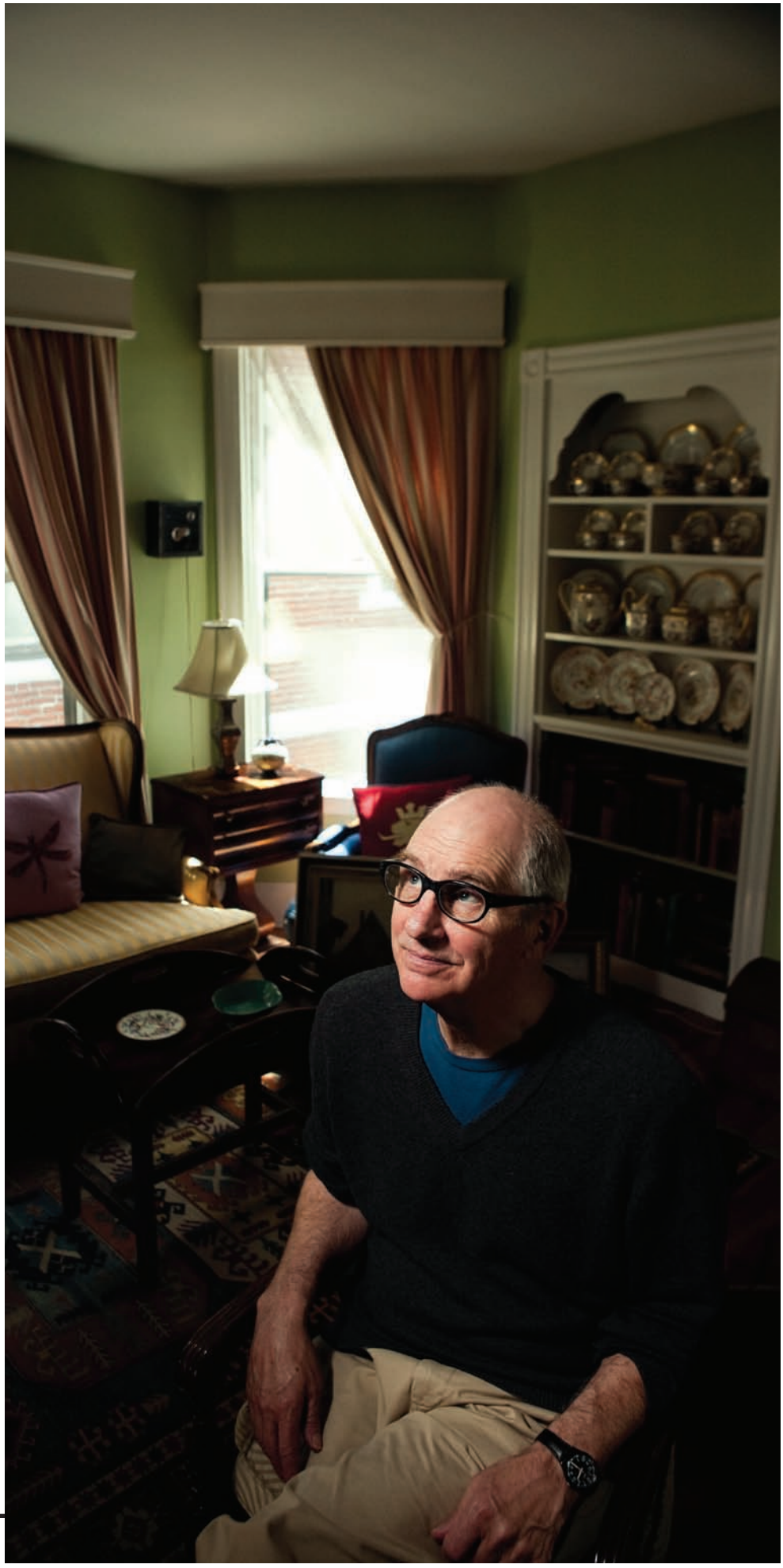
When the accrediting agency came back five years later, they were shocked and amazed at what our students were doing. Because they go to all the other MFA programs in New England to accredit them, they know what everybody's doing. They were stunned and they told us so—which they're not supposed to do. And not only did they give us full accreditation, they flew me to California to meet with all of the deans, all of the provosts, and all of the presidents of all of the art schools in the United States to tell them what MECA had done, and to show them the work that our students were doing. And from that, basically, the MFA

programs in the United States changed. Now, I doubt very much that you could find an MFA program that doesn't have at least one theory component to it.

Teaching artists the history of ideas, exposing them to a rigorous intellectual training, is tremendously important to their studio practice. There are a number of reasons, but a simple one is that most artists think their weakest skills are language and academics. And they feel as though making and representing visual imagery is their strongest thing. So if you take this weak side and you make it as strong as the other side, suddenly you have an amazing powerhouse. And they feel it. You can see them coming into self-confidence they never had before. In America, artists are trained to think that they can't talk and they can't write and they can't read, that their life is about representing without explaining. So when you strengthen that weak link, you have a person who has come into the full dynamism of their creative life. The horizon of their visual range increases.

Their studio practice changes altogether, but it's because the human being changes. The idea behind this whole approach is to recognize that when you train a studio artist in the studio, you're teaching them how to do things in the studio. But after a certain point, you can't make them any better at what they do that way. What you have to do is change the person that goes into the studio.

At MECA, students were giving me amazing 100-page theses that were like half a dissertation, or a third of a dissertation. They were absolutely brilliant, but there was no place for them to write a dissertation—no place for an artist to go and do a PhD. And I had run my course at MECA. A new president came in and I got canned. It's great that I got fired because if I hadn't I would still be there repeating myself.



George Smith in the living room of his home in Portland's West End.

And I had this dream to establish this PhD program. I knew from the resistance that I had gotten with the MFA program how incredibly difficult it is to do anything new in academia, which is an incredibly conservative institution. And I also knew that what I had in mind—because it had never been done before anywhere in the world—was going to be an uphill slog. So, the idea was to start a school within which this program could exist, and that's how IDSVA got started. I ran up the program design and submitted it to the Maine State Board of Education. We ran the legislative process with the sponsorship of Glenn Cummings, who at the time was the speaker of the House of Representatives and is now a deputy assistant secretary at the United States Department of Education.

We had to appear before the education committee of the legislature to secure preliminary approval to get a vote in the legislature. We had to pass a bill to be given the legal authority to grant the PhD. As we appeared before the education committee, everything was going quite beautifully until one cranky old farmer said,

"So, you're telling me that none of your students are going to be doing anything in the state of Maine? Is that right?' And I said, 'Yes, that's right.' He said to me, 'How the hell is this going to help the state of Maine?' And you could see everybody on this panel, they're all looking at each other."

I said, "Well, my great-great-grandfather was Sam Percy, whose name might ring a bell with you because Percy and Small was the schooner yard in Bath that is now the Maine Maritime Museum." And he looks at me and says, "Of course I know what Percy and Small is." And I said, "Well, then you'll know that Percy and Small built more schooners than any other yard in the world, and that from those schooners Maine developed the reputation that it has today for advanced design and technology." "Of course I know that!" he said. I said, "Well, you'll also know that we very rarely sold one of those schooners on the coast of Maine. They were all in Shanghai, Liverpool, Australia, New Zealand. Well, just like that, the IDSVA students travel around the world, and with them they bring the name of the state of Maine as an advanced, technological, and design-centric place." And the guy says, "I guess you've got a point." We got full approval from the Board of Education, we got a unanimous vote in the Senate and a unanimous-minus-one vote in the House. We got the legislative bill passed; we got the law signed by the governor on March 1, 2007. And in May of 2007, we started our first class. That first class is now our third-year group, and they're going to Brown this summer to do their qualifying exams and start writing their dissertations. Almost all of them are artists. Most of them are studio faculty in places like MassArt and UCLA.

The IDSVA students start in Italy, at Spannocchia, a restored feudal castle and farm. We use Spannocchia as the representation and rearticulation of feudal history. And then we take our students into Siena, which is a medieval banking city. And then we take them to Milan and Florence, which are Renaissance cities. And then we take them to Venice, which is a Baroque city. And then we take them to Paris, which is a nineteenth-century bourgeoisie-industrial-revolutionary city. And then we take them to Harlem, which is a post-industrial urban environment, and Manhattan, and so forth. They actually go around the world to these different places and they engage in discussions about the relationship between feudal agrarian culture, medieval urban culture, and Foucault, Derrida, Plato, and Aristotle, and how all those things come together in a topographical, archaeological representation of historical consciousness. And we do it in a way that I think has never been done before, except in settings like medieval apprenticeships, where if you were going to learn how to become glassblower you'd be sent to Lyon to learn carpentry so that you can build your frames. Then you'd be sent to Germany to blow glass, and then you'd be sent someplace else to learn welding.

We go to Milan to study ***The Last Supper,*** in situ. And then we go across town to another cathedral, where Dan Flavin, the contemporary American artist, does this beautiful light installation. There's always this dynamism going on between what you're reading and what you're talking about, and where you are and the space that you're in. The idea is to get two things happening. One is palpable educational experience. Not reading books, but standing in front of ***The Last Supper.*** The other is a counterbalance to online education. We've given up the brick-and-mortar concept of education, the "campus." We take online education—which is by itself an ineffectual yet highly profitable way of delivering information, but not knowledge—and low-residency programs—which are by themselves relatively ineffectual—and we bring these two things together. Then you have a powerful way of delivering education that is about the acquisition of knowledge, not the accumulation of information. We start all of our seminars in these residencies. We try to get our students to understand that all ideas are contemporary. We want to understand how those ideas come together as a dialogical enterprise, as opposed to a sequential "this happened then, and this happened then" kind of thing. And what happens from that is this plasticity. They can move back and forth across the rivers of knowledge and history in a fluent way. They don't see classical philosophy as the origin, and the great moment in ideas, but simply one of the ideas that is still articulated in contemporary thought. They begin to understand something other than a dialectical, hierarchical notion of knowledge as domination; they begin to see it as this horizontal dynamic of ideas. We say to the students: imagine that Plato and Aristotle are with Foucault and Derrida, and John Rajchman and Balibar and Stephen Greenblatt, around a table and that you are their waiter, serving them, and overhearing the conversation. As you study, and as you learn the language that they are speaking, you eventually get a seat at the table. Your PhD is your ticket to sit down. You're now one of the people who are leading that discussion, saying, "Okay, what's the future of the history of ideas? What's the future of aesthetic representation? How do I fit into that future? And what is my responsibility for creating that future?"

The Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts
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