

Teaching the Next Generation of Artists

Fairy tales come true at Sarasota's Ringling College of Art and Design

by Janina Birtolo

During the past several years, animated films—once targeted only to children—have become a popular mainstay of the movie industry. Such films as *Ratatouille* and the trio of *Shrek* offerings have appealed just as much to adults—if not more so. And other films—*Spiderman*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*—have used so much computer animation that the modern art form has become a vital component of moviemaking.

But what should make Southwest Floridians take pride in all this is that chances are the artists who created these films and exciting effects very likely got their training in Sarasota.

That's where the Ringling College of Art and Design has been teaching the next generation of artists for more than seventy-five years. As times—and art needs—have changed, so has the Ringling. Today, it's considered one of the premier art schools in the world. In 2006, *BusinessWeek* put Ringling in its top sixty. *3D World* magazine has rated the school #1 in computer animation in all of North America for two years in a row and, last

year, ranked it as the #4 college in the world.

"To have a magazine like *3D World* from the United Kingdom say our animation program is number one in North America is really something," notes Larry Thompson, president of Ringling. "It's something we believed, and it just confirmed our belief, but it was certainly a real pleasure to have it confirmed by such an impartial source."

Jim McCampbell, head of Ringling's computer animation department, adds that the *3D World* awards are reflective of more than the magazine's editors. "Apparently, the voting that took place was not just done by the magazine," he explains. "They polled industry professionals to find out what they considered to be the top animation schools, so it was definitely a very big honor to be selected."

The interest of industry is confirmed by the more than fifty companies that annually send recruiters to Ringling.



(top) Ringling College's Computer Animation Trustee Scholar Guillermo Careaga '06 and his thesis animation, "Sugar Rush." (bottom) The 41-acre campus offers Digital Film majors a multitude of sites to shoot.

Firms as diverse as LucasFilms and CNN, the CIA and Target Corporation, and Hallmark Cards and ESPN regularly hire Ringling graduates.

"We've had students that have gone to NASA," McCampbell reports. "We've had students that have gone to do accident reconstruction type of animations for law firms...medical visualization...to



(above) The Ringling College Design Center is an on-campus internship program. (below) Jace Gostisha '06 makes extra money by creating miniature sculptures of historic circus people and activities.

work at Ford and General Motors, designing and visualizing cars.”

While the computer animation department may have grabbed recent headlines, the truth is it's just one of many things Ringling does well. The approximately twelve-hundred students who attend annually can also choose majors in digital film, fine arts, game art and design, graphic and interactive communication, interior design, illustration, and photography and digital imaging. Starting in the fall of 2008 or 2009, additional majors in advertising design, the business of art and design, broadcast design and motion graphics, painting, printmaking, and sculpture will also be offered.

Some of the challenges students face in their classes are both intriguing and imaginative. Wood sculpture students, for example, are charged with designing

a boat that can cross the Whitaker Bayou behind the fine arts building. The catch? They have to do so using only one sheet of 4' x 8' x 1/4-inch plywood, two 2 x 4's, one pound of fasteners, and one roll of duct tape. Despite the limited and regimented materials, the resulting array of designs is incredible.

Seniors majoring in computer animation are required to create two-minute films that tell complete stories and are entertaining. The films are compiled into annual highlight DVDs—which are worth a trip to Ringling's Verman Kimbrough Memorial Library to watch. The library, open to the public, also houses many of the handmade artists' books that fine art students are required to create. Like the films, they are enchantingly diverse.

Exhibitions of students' work are regularly presented in the Crossley Gallery, run and managed by the students themselves. The annual *Best of Ringling* student exhibition, however, is housed in the on-campus Selby Gallery, known as Sarasota's premier gallery for contemporary art. Throughout the year, the Selby also hosts shows of works by nationally and internationally known artists, illustrators, photographers, and designers—many of whom are on the faculty at Ringling.

The college was originally founded by circus impresario and real estate magnate John Ringling in 1931. He saw it as a natural extension of his art museum and had hoped to include the school on the same grounds. Financial hard times, however, prompted him to buy an old hotel three



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(top) The Game Art & Design studios where students can review and test video games. (middle) A first-year student works on a large format painting. (bottom) The College's printmaking studio.

miles away. In its first year, the Ringling welcomed seventy-five students.

“The first sixty years, Ringling College was much more of an informal mom and pop kind of school,” Thompson notes. “Always with good instruction, but it was a lot of sort of

painting on the beach, not necessarily a sophisticated college.”

In the last two decades, though, Ringling has come into its own, reaching a level of sophistication and excellence its founder probably couldn't have imagined. This is the place where the artists of

tomorrow are—today.

“What Ringling College is all about is destroying that old myth of the starving artist,” Thompson says with satisfaction. “Because the artists are not starving any longer. Because our economy has changed so much and art and design have become critical to so many industries, our students are employed. And they are very gainfully employed—in things they are very passionate about and love.”

Earning a living as an artist may sound like something of a fairy tale, but at the Ringling College of Art and Design, it's one that's continually coming true. And if someone ever makes a film of *that* story, you can bet Ringling graduates will be creating the animation and special effects!

From May 9–30, the Selby Gallery at Ringling College of Art will host two exhibitions: Teachers, Too, which features works by the continuing studies faculty, and Past Present: The Art of Frank Colson, which displays ceramic work by the noted Sarasota artist. For more information about the exhibits or about Ringling College of Art and Design, visit www.ringling.edu.

Janina Birtolo is an award-winning freelance writer and television producer with a fondness for the environment and the arts. She also writes and performs one-woman shows based on historical characters.



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Ringling College's Selby Gallery brings the work of nationally and internationally known artists, illustrators, photographers, sculptors, and designers to Sarasota.



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