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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Art

Figuring It Out: Bard's Low-Residency M.F.A. Program

by Steel Stillman

In August of 2001, just months after earning a B.F.A. in painting from RISD, Adam Marnie moved from Providence to Brooklyn. He had grown up in a small town outside of St. Paul, Minnesota, and was 23 years old. For the next several years, like many young artists, he supported himself with a string of odd jobs: carpentry, art handling, artist's assistant. Often he didn't have a studio. His practice suffered and his debts mounted. As he moved from one cheap living situation to the next, he felt increasingly isolated. "Many friends didn't even know I was an artist," he told me last winter. Toward the end of 2008, forced to vacate yet another studio, Marnie photographed the work he had on hand and decided to apply to M.F.A. programs. Now 30, he'd been toying with the idea for a while, weighing its cost and his reluctance to become a student again against the frustrations of more of the same. The painter Amy Sillman was instrumental in his decision to focus on Bard, in Annandale-on-Hudson, a few hours north of the city. The two had met by chance at a café in Williamsburg. "Adam was with a friend of mine," remembers Sillman, who has co-chaired Bard's M.F.A. painting department since 2002. "He had his hood up and seemed kind of remote. I couldn't tell whether he was a hoodlum or one of those haunted hipsters you see with skateboards on Bedford Avenue. But my instinct was that he was a good guy." Sillman wrote Marnie a recommendation for Bard, and he was accepted.

Founded in 1981, the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College has spearheaded a recent innovation in education—the low-residency M.F.A.—which has begun to transform the experience of art school. Under this model, students gather for several multi-week sessions of intensive on-campus work, interspersed with long periods of independent study, and earn their degrees in two or three years. The number of these programs grows annually, driven by economic and social realities that have led educational institutions to seek out more flexible, cost-effective learning experiences. Now one of the top-rated M.F.A.s in the country, Bard's program rivals those of Yale, Columbia, and UCLA—none of which offer low-residency degrees—and its paradigm has been used as a template for newer programs at

Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art, New York's School of Visual Arts, and others. All M.F.A. programs aim to develop and empower aspiring artists, but Bard goes about it differently, eschewing classes, syllabi, and grades. Instead, its curriculum is almost entirely practice-based, built around a series of "conversations" that address the specific needs of each student. Most of these conversations are conducted over the course of three consecutive summers, during eight-week residencies in June and July.

The program was conceived by Bard's president, Leon Botstein, in the late 1970s, but the poet Robert Kelly wrote its constitution. Kelly, who has been on the undergraduate faculty since 1961 (and who chaired the M.F.A.'s writing department until 1992), told me that in the '60s and early '70s, Bard had become avant-garde shy, and that Botstein saw the program as a way to bring the college into the late 20th century. "The idea," Kelly says, "was to create a graduate school for people who didn't usually go to graduate school—people in the midst of their lives who wanted to reanimate their connection to art. It had two basic principles. The first was that music, writing, and the visual arts would be brought together: everybody would have to work with everybody. The second was that instead of formal instruction, we would focus our attention entirely on the students' work in three conversational settings: one-on-one conferences, departmental caucuses, and whole-school critiques." This arrangement remains in place today—a nested set, as it were, of individual-, family- and community-based discussions, whose centerpiece is the requirement that students meet privately with at least 30 faculty members each summer.

One of Kelly's successors as chair of the writing department, the poet Ann Lauterbach—who shares that post with Anselm Berrigan and has been teaching in the program since 1992—describes Bard's approach as "anti-academic." She elaborates, "If one thing is quintessentially academic, it is the notion that a given field of study has depth, in the sense that you can follow or dig down and perhaps exhaust all there is to know. Our view is that knowledge is infinite and infinitely capable of new combinations." The notion that learning proceeds along multiple pathways undergirds Bard's interdisciplinary principles, which apologists claim were inherited from the avant-garde postwar experiment at Black Mountain College. But Kelly, who had close ties to the North Carolina school, perceived its limitations: "Black Mountain became a think tank for cross-fertilization without truly practicing it. By the time it closed, the faculty had gotten more out of their own interaction because there were so few students to learn from. Here we improved on the model by turning it around and getting the students involved." There is one quality, though, that Bard has inherited directly from Black Mountain: the anti-authoritarianism manifest in its resistance to formal instruction. As Kelly notes: "The main thing wrong with classes is



All-school crit, Summer 2012; presentation and works by Harrison Haynes M.F.A. '13. (Photography), standing. Photo: Dani Leventhal.

that somebody teaches them. To be any good as a teacher, you have to remain a student. The goal here was to be masters in our own disciplines and students in the others.”

Unlike many other graduate art programs that, in recent decades, have replaced medium-specific practices with vague categories like “post-studio” or “new genres,” Bard has maintained medium-specific departments. There are “discipline caucuses” in film/video, music/sound, painting, photography, sculpture, and writing—conceived not as isolated domains but as nodes in a network of overlapping, sometimes contradictory histories and practices. The parameters for what kind of work belongs where are determined on a case-by-case basis. Students are required to choose a particular discipline when they apply, based not so much on the material characteristics of their work as on the kind of critical conversation or historical narrative they’d like it to engage. In 2004, Lucy Raven, an Oakland- and New York-based filmmaker whose work was included in the 2012 Whitney Biennial, applied to the sculpture department with work that on its surface seemed more like video or photography, and wound up making *China Town*, a film about copper mining assembled from 7,000 still photographs. Sillman, who herself graduated from the program in 1995, told me: “At Bard, it can often seem as though discipline-specific conversations spin in one direction and interdisciplinary ones spin in another, but what results is a kind of friction that leads somewhere new.”

The history of modern and contemporary art is replete with examples of practices that bridge visual and non-visual disciplines—think of Antonin Artaud, Joe Brainard, and John Cage—but Bard’s may be the only M.F.A. program in the U.S. that combines music, writing, and the visual arts. Its interdisciplinarity is not trouble-free. Many mention the lack of a shared vocabulary as a stumbling block; and, over the years, crib sheets and glossaries have been employed to make cross-disciplinary conversations easier. But one person’s difficulty can be another’s boon: “Some of the most successful studio visits I’ve had have been in disciplines like music or video where I have less experience,” the sculptor and Bard teacher Nancy Shaver says. “The experience is often valuable for the students: there is much to be learned from non-specialists.”

Marnie began at Bard in June 2009, when he enrolled in the sculpture department. But it wasn’t until the first official day of the program that he realized what he had gotten himself into. “It was right after registration, and we were all standing outside,” he told me. “Everyone was there—students and faculty members—and I must have shaken hands with 50 or 60 people. It was easy to pick out the new students: we were the awkward, shrunken-looking ones, whereas the returning second- and third-years were bright-eyed and smiling. Then suddenly the real action began, and students started lining up around faculty members to schedule one-on-one appointments. I felt uncomfortable and intimidated; it was a sink-or-swim moment.”

The work he had shown up with included a batch of collages that combined elements from 17th-century Dutch still life painting, Bridget Riley’s Op-art and pornography ripped from *Hustler* and other magazines. At the departmental caucus, several commentators wanted to know what kind of pleasure he

took in cutting up pictures of women. “The Bard community is extremely alert to gender and sexuality issues, and there I was, a straight white male, getting lambasted,” Marnie recalled. In studio visits, one female faculty member told him to stop making the porn collages. Another teacher, Stephen Westfall, who co-chairs the painting department with Sillman, recommended not showing them at the first-year crits, which were about to begin. Marnie’s head was spinning: “It was insanely disorienting to have a variety of people sit with you for an hour, back to back to back, and tell you the most contrary things.”

Until just prior to the crit that would introduce him to the entire community, Marnie wasn’t sure what to present: “I knew I could either assert my will and be disruptive, by showing the collages, or climb out of my narrow tunnel and have faith that grad school would offer me something larger than I yet understood.” In the end, he displayed an assortment of sculptural elements: assemblages made from broken-up chair parts; a rolled blanket with smashed earthenware cups inside; and three skinny wood poles, one of which he moved partway through his presentation, as though to underline the fact that his work was still very much in progress. “People saw the aggression first,” Marnie said. “But as the comments continued, a wide range of topics and possibilities opened up. It was overwhelming, but I knew that I had a friend taking notes and that I’d be able to process it all later. Over the next week or two, faculty members were able to expand on their responses in one-on-one studio visits. Though it doesn’t feel like it when you’re presenting, those large crits are as much for the community as they are for you. They’re shared experiences, and there’s something vaguely therapeutic about them. The first time felt like an initiation. After that I belonged.” Following that first school-wide crit, Marnie took his work back to his studio, covered it in spray paint and began cutting it up into chunks. “By the end of July, I’d taken most of what I’d made in the first few weeks and thrown it in a dumpster.”

More than 400 people apply to Bard each year for 28 to 30 positions distributed nearly equally among the six disciplines. Most of the students who are accepted are several years beyond their undergraduate studies; roughly half come from New York City and the other half from all over the world. Generally, they are in their late 20s and 30s, with jobs, relationships, and already existing art practices. Many of Bard’s students are paying a substantial portion of the program’s \$53,000 total cost themselves, and this for risking some measure of their autonomy. “The students who do well here,” the critic Michael Brenson, who has taught at Bard for 14 years, told me, “are the ones who can adjust to living in an almost constant state of precariousness. If you believe the thing that somebody tells you in one hour, in all likelihood you are going to have an appointment with someone else two hours later who will give you a completely different take.” Dawn Cerny, a sculptor from Seattle who graduated in 2011, observed, “I went to Bard to shove my career off a cliff and maybe never find it again. In my late 20s, I was rising in the Seattle art community and becoming increasingly skeptical about my own reputation. I went to Bard to become unsuccessful—and I succeeded.”

For the 80 students who were on campus last summer there were 65 faculty members—all practicing

professionals who are either well-known in their fields or becoming so. Summer low-residency programs (others are offered by the San Francisco Art Institute and the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, for instance) benefit from being able to attract artists who teach elsewhere during the regular academic year or who have such busy professional schedules that they wouldn't be able to teach otherwise. Two-thirds of Bard's faculty are part-timers who rotate in and out on stints that average three to four weeks; but for all, during the time they are there, there is nothing part-time about their engagement. Most live on campus alongside the students, take their meals in the college cafe and participate in the 24/7 life of the program. As Taylor Davis, who earned an M.F.A. from Bard in 1997 and now co-chairs the sculpture department, told me, "We're on top of each other the whole time, working like dogs." The faculty varies widely in age and sensibility—every discipline includes young adepts (photographer Sam Lewitt; composer Marina Rosenfeld) and old hands (filmmaker Les Leveque; painter Dona Nelson), and aesthetic preoccupations that run the gamut. Isolated from the outside world and its obligations, with students and teachers regularly crisscrossing between the same few buildings, people get to know one another quickly. "It's like living in a kind of cult," says Sillman, affectionately.

Following his inaugural summer at Bard, Marnie went back to New York and embarked on his first independent study period. In the quiet of his studio, the summer's din subsided. Advocates of low-residency programs claim that their oscillation between high and low intensities makes them particularly appropriate for artists, whose working lives often alternate between periods of engagement and reflection. Marnie describes the independent study as a soul adventure: "You're out there on your own with lots of time to doubt everything that happened or was said during the summer. Things either stay with you or they don't. Six months later something you were barely paying attention to at the time comes back as the most important thing you've ever heard." That winter, when he wasn't doing odd jobs, he worked hard in his studio and was included in his first New York exhibitions, group shows at the Asia Song Society and at Andrea Rosen Gallery, where he worked part-time as an art handler.

When he returned to Bard in 2010, the parameters of his work were expanding. Second-year students are protected from the full-on glare of whole-school crits; instead, while continuing to receive a steady stream of faculty visitors, they concentrate on their work, which they present in late July to an interdisciplinary panel of 20 students and teachers. Marnie was still making collages with porn and still life motifs, but he had also begun plastering huge photographs of flowers on the wall, before ripping away at them, leaving large gashes behind. He was also developing an entire lexicon of punched sheetrock panels, often framed behind glass and assembled in boxes that sneered at minimalist decorum. There were orifices everywhere. "I was comparing languages," he said. "Holes in flowers; flowers in holes; holes in the body; the body and sex; sex and the flower. I was mixing together mediums and genres, just letting things happen: sculpture, photography and painting; presence and absence; positive and negative."

"Adam's arc became clear in his second year," says Kenji Fujita, who co-chairs the sculpture department

with Davis. “He’d entered the program needing two things: to get a handle on the autobiographical elements in his work; and to move beyond his uncritical, almost romantic love of art and its forms. As he unpacked all that, his work became less hermetic and more ambitious.” Marnie participated in every group activity, whether required or not, sat in on departmental caucuses in other disciplines, and began speaking up more in large crits. “I could feel a kind of apprehensiveness leading me on,” he told me. “My fears were showing me what I needed to learn.” As Brenson put it: “By the end of Adam’s second summer, the violence and aggression in his work, which had been overt the first year, had become cagey and considered. He became a self-conscious artist in the best sense: he figured out what he was doing.”



Third Year M.F.A. students, Summer 2011; Adam Marnie, standing, front row, right; Dawn Cerney, standing, back row, second from right. Photo: Pete Mauney.

Bard’s M.F.A. program is entirely artist-run. It is led by a committee comprising the two co-chairs of each of the six disciplines, and Arthur Gibbons, who has been the school’s director since 1990 and teaches in the sculpture department. Called the graduate committee, it formulates and oversees all aspects of the program, including admissions and hiring, and reviews every student’s performance. The graduate committee operates flexibly, without much formal bureaucracy and with little interference from Bard’s administration. “The secret of our program is that we’re here in the summer, when most of the college is shut down,” says Gibbons. “We’ve developed a form of self rule and we’re left alone.” Occasionally a student or faculty member will complain about a particular decision made by the graduate committee or more generally about the program’s seemingly make-it-up-as-you-go-along model, but, as is typical at Bard, those grumblings are heard by all. “The kind of reflexivity that illuminates aesthetic issues illuminates institutional ones as well,” says Sillman. “The problems aren’t always solved, but because so many of the conversations are open, everyone has a voice.”

Nearly 20 years ago, the graduate committee initiated what has come to be called the seminar, an annual school-wide conference organized around a particular topic or theme, bolstered by assigned readings, small-group discussions, and presentations by prominent thinkers in the arts (Fredric Jameson, Terry Riley, and Claire Bishop among them). The biggest challenge to running an academic-like conference in the midst of the summer’s eight-week semester is time, and, over the years, the readings and discussions have expanded and contracted to accommodate people’s busy schedules. Sillman calls the seminar the M.F.A. program’s “ever-evolving prehensile tail. Every year it’s structured a little differently, and there’s often something kind of messy about it; but we read interesting texts and our disagreements are usually productive.”

Several times a summer, faculty members give 20-minute presentations of their work to the entire community. These events, like the large crits, are mandatory. One evening in 2011, Cheyney Thompson, who has taught in the painting department since 2005, gave a presentation that caused considerable consternation. In the preceding year, Thompson had had four solo exhibitions around the world. For his presentation, he screened two video slide shows: one, comprising installation shots of those exhibitions, was accompanied by a Ryuichi Sakamoto pop song; the other, featuring travel photographs taken by his wife Eileen Quinlan (who co-chairs Bard's photography department) on the occasion of a group exhibition in France (in which she, too, participated), was accompanied by a mock-theoretical text read by a computer-generated voice. Thompson meant to be mildly provocative: "I'm uncomfortable," he told me, "with the extent to which Bard's program privileges language over the more significant communicative forms that are embedded in particular art practices. So I decided instead to do my presentation in the form of music videos and leave my voice out. The second video was intended as a contribution to topics we'd been discussing in the painting caucus, which circled around the problems of artists working together...beyond the borders of their proprietary work." But some viewers were put off by the sheer volume of Thompson's production—dozens of sculptures made in a single year—and by images of young, cool, talented people capering about in an old chateau. "My first reaction was that Cheyney was all tangled up in the art world commodity juggernaut and that he was romanticizing it," sculptor Cerny told me. "He seemed to be celebrating everything that Bard is so suspicious of. But then it occurred to me that he might have been presenting a morality tale about an art world that looked amazing and fun, but was in fact something else."

Inadvertently or not, Thompson's presentation raised an important question: What does it mean to succeed as an artist? The issue has particular valence at Bard, where success varies tremendously among its several disciplines: success for a musician or poet looks nothing like success for a sculptor or photographer, and usually lacks the monetary reward. Unlike other prominent M.F.A. programs, Bard has no workshops in how to get ahead in the art world, and the school has a policy of not inviting critics, curators or dealers for studio visits—they are encouraged instead to attend the thesis exhibition. "If we brought them in, the atmosphere would change in a heartbeat," says Gibbons. "No one would talk to anyone—it would all be about competition." He acknowledges that students often have careerist ambitions, and that informal conversations on the topic proliferate, but "our feeling is that students are better off working out their relationships to the art world on their own."

Third-year students spend most of their last summer preparing for their thesis exhibition, a mid-July group show at the UBS/Bard Exhibition Center, a rambling 16,000 square foot former industrial building in the nearby village of Red Hook. In 2011, Marnie's thesis installation centered on a series of three narrow free-standing sheetrock walls, lined up one behind the other, proceeding to the rear wall of the gallery. There, he had pasted a large colorful photograph of a vase of flowers and then torn parts of it

away, flaying not just the image but the wall itself down to its studs. Each of the processional walls—one was hung with a framed piece of punched sheetrock; another with two smaller still life photographs, one of which had a precise hole cut through it—was pierced, providing sightlines to the space beyond and a clue that the installation in its entirety was based on the idea of a camera obscura. The installation materialized not just the act of viewing but the experience of being viewed. Reflecting on the distance Marnie's work had traveled since his early collages, Westfall was impressed: "Most people get into art because they're trying to put things together. It was clear from the first that Adam's great gift was his enthusiasm for tearing things apart. His early work with porn had been punk. But in the course of three summers, he extended his formal range and progressed from making fetishized art objects to staging fully realized optical/physical installations, while remaining committed to his original subjects—the transitory domestic perfection represented by still life, and the irruptive power of sex."

In the days following the opening of the thesis show, graduating students meet with an interdisciplinary committee of five faculty members—their thesis review board—to determine if their work merits a master's degree. Visual artists meet their committees for an hour or two in the UBS gallery in front of their work, and there is usually an element of ritual to the proceedings. Marnie, who'd dreamed the night before that his committee would be faceless and say nothing, prepared a table of food and coffee. His committee consisted of video artist Sadie Benning, writer Berrigan, photographer Quinlan, and sculptors Shaver and Mark Wonsidler, all of whom talked a good deal. In true Bard fashion, instead of responding, Marnie took notes. Earlier in the summer he had written a statement about his work—an anthem almost, of 20 commands, each starting with the verb "picture." Among them were: "Picture this room being ripped to shreds ... Picture sculpture as being the only real thing ... Picture the real thing as being inadequate ... Picture this lack as an offering toward a future resolution." This statement, like his sculptural installation, traced the progress he had made at Bard. It recast what had been inchoate in his experience and gave it form, shape and expression; and it stood for himself and to others as an articulated wish for a resolution he now understands may always be deferred. Marnie's final review was a success. "It was beautiful," he told me. "At the end, we all shook hands and hugged and they welcomed me as a peer." Two months later, he had a solo exhibition at Derek Eller Gallery, in New York, which now represents his work.

Bard's M.F.A. program faces perennial challenges. Money tops the list. It is run on a shoestring (with offices in a prefabricated structure behind the college's visual arts building) and has virtually no endowment. Faculty pay is low. And though its tuition is half what Yale and Columbia charge, the program struggles to offer financial aid (nearly everyone receives something but nobody gets a free ride), which results in a less diverse, more indebted student body. The need for greater economic, racial and cultural diversity is not unique to Bard, but the lack of institutional wherewithal hinders its ability to make large-scale adjustments. That has not stopped the graduate committee from pursuing a more ground-level approach. Photography department co-chair Zoe Leonard told me: "It's part of my job—in being able to influence hiring and admissions decisions—to nudge the program in a more inclusive

direction. As teachers, we focus attention: it is our responsibility to destabilize the canon and expand the community.”

Next summer will be the 33rd year of Bard's program. Art schools go through phases. If they're lucky, they have periods of significant vitality (think of the Dusseldorf Art Academy in the '60s, or CalArts in the '70s and early '80s). “Art schools are notably changeable institutions,” says the writer David Levi Strauss, who has taught at Bard for 11 years, and who runs the M.F.A. program in Art Criticism & Writing at SVA. “Something like this is built—it doesn't just happen—and the people involved have to lift every brick. Black Mountain's heyday only lasted a few years. Ultimately it's all about who the people are—students as well as faculty—and Arthur and the graduate committee have done a great job holding it all together.” But therein, for good or ill, lies the program's vulnerability: because its principles and practice derive entirely from the values and deliberations of the artists who teach there, its future will always be up for grabs.

Bard is not for everyone. Like high school, it can be cliquish, and students have to withstand the pressure of being constantly seen and talked about. Even its adherents have complaints: about the lack of structure and reading, for example, or the school's perhaps inevitable elitism. Some fear that the program's success—its still-growing reputation and the resulting expectations—may inhibit unfettered aesthetic discourse in the future. One thing everyone agrees on, however, is that there is never enough on-campus time for work, reading, collaboration or reflection. Still, beyond the kvetching, something deeper resounds. Marnie related the following, but nearly everyone I spoke to—students, faculty and alumni—had a version of their own: “There were moments every summer, usually around week four or five, when the conversation was vibrant and everything cohered. We'd all agreed to be there, our relationships with people in the outside world were crumbling and nothing else existed. We'd be walking from one crit to another and the conversation would still be going because we were all enmeshed, chewing on each other's thoughts and thinking as one. At times like that, Bard was an organism, a boundary-less playground—and it felt like, together, we could figure it all out.”

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Adam Marnie Thesis Show Installation, Summer 2011.
Photo: Pete Mauney.

