

# CHOUINARD: A LIVING LEGACY

## THE LAST YEARS (1960-1972) – Nobuyuki Hadeishi

The only record of the last day at Chouinard – the commencement ceremony of 1972 – was made by photography instructor Gary Krueger. One of his photos shows the faculty, friends, relative, and graduates seated in the patio. This picture tells the story of Chouinard. Though many teachers are missing, old-timers were there, including Watson Cross and Don Graham (in the lower left looking pensive).

Graham was chairman of the faculty, essentially our boss. Next to him is Lou Danziger, advertising design teacher. In 1970 he refused an offer from the CalArts administrators to teach at the transitional facility – Villa Cabrini, a former Catholic girl's school – because he felt needed at Chouinard. The head of the basic design program, Bill Moore, is in the next row in the characteristic pose he took when not happy with student work. Missing is his trademark cigarette.

For 34 years, Bill Moore taught the basics of design as if they were a true science. He was the most feared instructor, both hated and loved. Whenever Chouinardians get together, his name comes up. At the center of some of the great Chouinard controversies in the 1960s; he once torched a work by Ed Ruscha in the school gallery with his famous Zippo lighter. As he burnt a corner of Ruscha's piece, which incorporated cigarette butts as design elements, he said with authority, "What this piece needs is a little burnt edge to complete it."

By 1955, Nelbert Chouinard had retreated from administrative involvement in her school and Mitch Wilder was hired as director. Wilder, a respected administrator, had been director of the Colorado Springs Arts Center and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation prior to Chouinard. Until he arrived, Mrs. Chouinard had been helped by James Normile, her humanities teacher and registrar, along with Don Graham and Harry Diamond, an illustrator, successful art director, and head of the ad design department, who was married to Mrs. Chouinard's niece, Fran. Their daughters, Karen and Suki, attended Chouinard and spent hours in Vivika and Otto Heino's ceramics workshop.

Walt Disney, assuming an active role in the school at this time, had established a professional relationship with Mrs. Chouinard in 1929. In 1956 he had stepped in to save the school from financial disaster caused by a bookkeeper who had been embezzling. Without Walt's money, Nelbert might have been forced to close the school in 1957.

By 1969 the Disney interests had owned the school for eight years and had changed the name to California Institute of the Arts in 1962. The school continued without other changes until Disney's death in December 1966. Both Mrs. Chouinard and Disney had trusted Wilder, the new director, to oversee the school's finances without interfering with instruction. When Mrs. Chouinard retired in her late eighties, the school was in the hands of the department chairmen and Wilder. By the time she died in 1969, her school had no resemblance to its former self.



Commencement ceremony at Chouinard in 1972

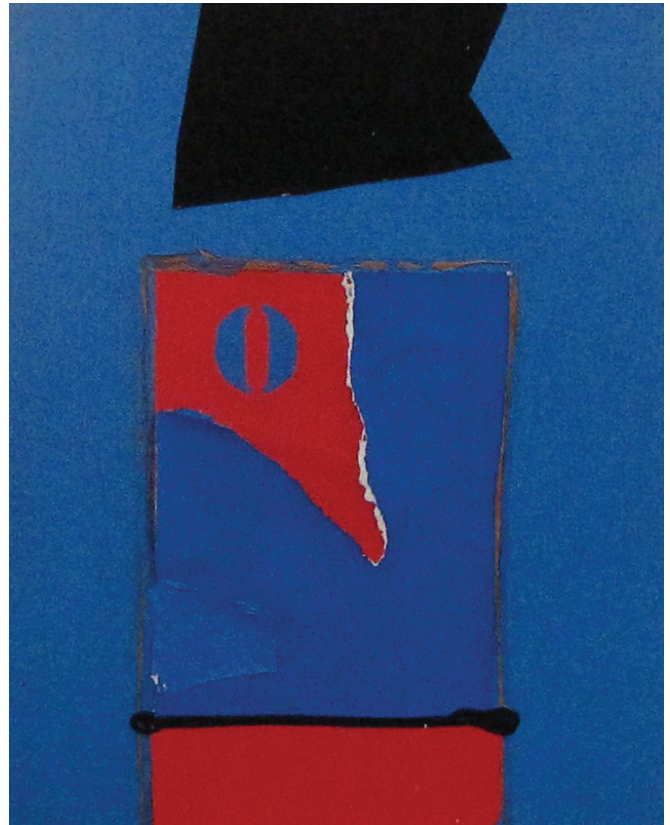
In 1960 Wilder brought in Gerald Nordland to deal with aesthetic matters, appointing him Dean of Faculty. Nordland was an art critic for *Frontier Magazine* and knew most of the artists in Los Angeles. Though trained as a lawyer, his law practice ended with the Army in Korea. Then, he studied art history at Yale and wrote a book on Gaston Lachaise.

The Wilder and Nordland team continued with Mrs. Chouinard's basic aesthetic philosophy. Together with the faculty, who had helped develop the then current curriculum, they created a new formal curriculum – The Chouinard Plan, a hundred-page book Nordland compiled “from the best thinking of the faculty” as the official document for re-accreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges and the National Association of School of Art.

Nordland supplemented the core faculty with John Altoon, Connor Everts, and the first photography instructors, Edmund Teske and Alex Hovsepian. (“Core faculty” implied tenure, yet no structured tenure system existed at Chouinard.) Robert Irwin had joined the faculty a year earlier. Everts and Irwin had been Chouinard students on the GI Bill in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Altoon, a buddy of Irwin's at Dorsey High, had studied at Otis. After teaching at Chouinard in the early 1960s, Altoon abruptly resigned for health reasons.

Another influential teacher, Richards Ruben (1954-1961), taught drawing, painting, and printmaking. Ruben had studied at Chouinard with the enigmatic painter and school legend Lawrence Murphy, a former member of Gertrude Stein's inner circle in Paris. Murphy drew constantly, a passion he passed on to Ruben.

Having now seen drawings by Old Man Murphy, I recognize his profound impact on Ruben, who became the avant-garde painting guru at Chouinard in the mid-1950s. Murphy opened space on the working surface in ways different from Cezanne or the Cubists, using twisting movements, more like carving into the surface (similar to the way Arshile Gorky or John Altoon would later define form), a shifting of axis to express space and volume, unlike the movements used by the more Cezannesque Don Graham, who emphasized the flat surface with open passages, more in tune with Hans Hofmann's “push-pull” handling of space. Murphy's students achieved a more tactile feel in their work while Graham's students developed a more graphic or two-dimensional spatial feel.



*Blue O* by Emerson Woelffer, 1979



Above: *Fraction Elopse #1* by Larry Bell, 1997



Right: *Tornado Etching* by Joe Goode, 1993

Despite such differences, all good Chouinard instructors possessed the ability to communicate via a graphic language – primarily drawing. In the fine arts department we learned to “read” works, both ours and others, by listening to group critiques led by instructors. Both Graham and Ruben spent hours going over student work. It was not unusual for students to turn in four or five sketchbooks, a week's worth of work. What we learned was not what was on the instructor's mind, but on ours. I often thought of Don Graham as a mirror.



*Who's the Boogie Man?* by Edmond Bereal, 1999

nor Everts, Altoon's friend and a Chouinard faculty colleague, told me recently about a time "when John was teaching a night class in drawing and he went into the next studio where Leonard Cutrow was having his students draw a suit of armor. He said to Cutrow in his characteristically booming voice, 'Why can't you have them draw something soft and nice like a nude?' This made Cutrow furious and they got into an argument." The next day Altoon called the entire Chouinard community into the patio, where he apologized to Cutrow and promptly resigned from teaching.

Altoon died of a heart attack not long afterwards. He was one of the most gifted artists and teachers at Chouinard, perhaps a genius, who was barely in his forties. He had regularly used shock to help students be freer with their drawing.

After the mid-1950s the influence at Chouinard shifted to the new generation of instructors. While indispensable to the school's Foundation program, most older generation instructors were no longer working as artists nor did they push students to seek new ground. John Coplans, editor of *Artforum* in the 1960s, believed that Chouinard students were good artists not because of what they learned in the classroom but because of what they gleaned directly from the art world. The Chouinard Plan called for outside professionals (including Coplans) to lecture and evaluate student work. For example, Coplans taught art history, along with eminent art critic and historian Jules Langsner, a friend of Jackson Pollock, Phillip Guston, and Reuben Kadish.



Above: *Teapot* by Ralph Bacerra, 2001

Left: *Belief* by Terry Allen, 1999

Ruben would spend at least an hour, sometimes longer, at the end of each session going over each student's work. He would not miss even one drip on a canvas nor the positioning of a single, careless stroke. Soon each of us was paying close attention to everything we put on canvas. In time we learned to "read" others' works as well as our own. This ability to show students the patently ambiguous became the primary focus when we ourselves began to teach.

Ruben dug deeply into our minds (and his) during those critiques, often sharing philosophical and aesthetic problems. One memorable evening, after having taken his evening class for two years, I finally understood nearly everything he had been telling us. When I told him that, over drinks at the William Penn Hotel, he responded, "Could you explain it to me because I don't know what I was saying tonight." At that moment I understood that it wasn't about him. The revelation was within me. Ruben eventually left Chouinard to teach at Pomona College and then NYU, Cooper Union, and Parsons in New York.

Then there was the incomparable Emerson Woelffer who came to Chouinard in 1959. He was a transition teacher, an artist with great taste and sophistication. Robert Motherwell, his associate at Colorado Springs Art Center, had told him, "Emerson, you and I are the most tasteful artists in America today." While Motherwell thought of himself as an Abstract Dadaist to whom randomness was a dignified and acceptable form of art-making. Paul Brach, dining with the Woelffers one evening, challenged Emerson to destroy one of his own paintings if he was sincere about the work not being precious. Shocked, Brach told me, "Emerson picked up the most beautiful one and slashed it. I tried to stop him but he wouldn't listen. I won't challenge Emerson again." Woelffer fit nicely at Chouinard at a time when Dadaism was coming into vogue, especially with the showing of Rauschenberg and Johns at the Ferus Gallery. Abstract Expressionism had departed with Richards Ruben. Con-

The artists that Nordland brought to Chouinard included Man Ray, Ad Reinhardt, Larry Rivers, Reuben Nakian, Esteban Vicente, and Raymond Parker. Additionally, art directors, accountants, art dealers, and museum people shared their expertise about how artists deal with the real world. Chouinard continued to be a practical school in the tradition of its no-nonsense founder.

Later, the humanities and sciences were added and taught by people from unusual places, including a cacti specialist from the Observatory and teachers recruited from USC, UCLA, and Occidental College. Once, we spent a whole semester visiting the Cactus garden at the Huntington Library and going to Palm Springs, Joshua Tree, and other desert environments to draw succulents. Academic subjects, however, were secondary to the primary goal of becoming artists. English and literature courses often convened during lunch. The astronomy class was held at the Griffith Observatory. The basic requirement for humanities instructors was to be interested in art students. Without that, they were not hired.

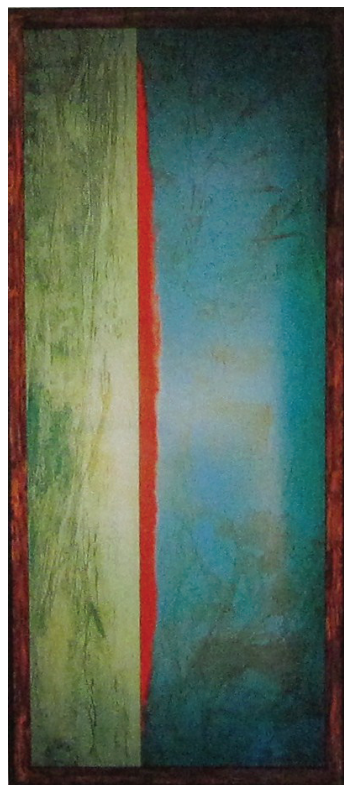
Robert Irwin was the first Chouinard instructor to depart from the conventional notion of art instruction. He stressed the importance of the individual, how each student must search within rather than build on the past. He pushed students to ask themselves why they were doing art, a question Irwin himself couldn't answer. Irwin had deduced, by looking at previous art, that important artists challenge viewers to look at art and life in a new way. He saw art-making as inquiry. Students who studied with Irwin at Chouinard include Ron Miyashiro, Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, and Joe Goode, advertising design majors who switched to fine arts because of him.

We spent all of Irwin's summer session at a Palos Verdes beach trying to draw water and sand. The clear sky made it difficult to create interesting drawings. Some of us succumbed, body surfing instead of drawing. Irwin fascinated us by talking about creating ephemeral art. He spoke of an island in the Pacific where the only art was drawings made on the beach; no permanent artifacts existed there. And there was the Zen garden in Kyoto whose rocks were mostly buried, yet still part of the art.

With the departures of Ruben, Irwin, and Altoon, the attention shifted to Connor Everts, Matsumi Kanemitsu, and Emerson Woelffer. Kanemitsu came to Chouinard in 1965 to take over Woelffer's class while Woelffer took a sabbatical in Italy. Evert's task was to develop the printmaking department. Along with Woelffer and design instructor Sy Steiner, Everts organized a three-class gathering on the last Friday of each month that featured poets, artists, and writers as guest speakers. The vacant lot north of the Annex was cleared and turned into a patio called



Above: *Slap Down* by Gary Wong, 1994



Left: *Desert Seascape* by Boyd Elder, 1999

Below: *Light Trap* by Laddie John Dill, 2001



“The Beer Garden.” Events held here soon attracted students from the main building. The interdisciplinary nature of these “happenings” resulted in several play productions in the Chouinard patio, including Sartre’s *No Exit*. When I returned from Japan in 1966 to teach, the “Beer Garden” and Connor Everts were gone. Shiro Ikegawa, Joe Funk, and I took over the printmaking department.

In the 1960s the ad department was the largest at Chouinard, famous for giving “assignments that required the exploration and celebration of the ‘esthetics’ of the most mundane, vulgar objects and materials in our environment...,” according to department head Marv Rubin, “Students were exposed to artists not included then in any segments of the fine arts department, e.g., discredited Dadaists, surrealists, calligraphers, and pop-artists.” The ad department was freer to incorporate ideas, new and old, than the fine arts department which was at least partially burdened by history and tradition. As avant-garde as the fine arts department was, it had prejudices about certain aspects of some art movements, specifically photorealism and surrealism. Everything else was encouraged, but it was not the “anything goes” approach of the ad department. Rubin credits the loose structure at Chouinard “for allowing independent-minded students to migrate among the departments.”



*Venetian Fragment - Diptych A* by Richards Ruben, 1991

were esthetically all minorities at Chouinard. The only consistency was that drawing continued as the main emphasis. There were disagreements on how to draw, or what constitutes good drawing, but not about whether drawing was important. Some artist like Irwin believed in having students begin by drawing objects (including the human figure) exactly as they saw them, with no expressive lines permitted. Paradoxically, teachers Watson Cross and Herb Jepson encouraged students to experiment – Jepson emphasizing the psychological aspects and Cross being more image-oriented, leaning toward illustration with no concern for space-time, figure-ground, or other contemporary issues being explored elsewhere.

A surprisingly important department was ceramics, headed by Otto and Vivika Heino, a husband and wife team who came to Chouinard via USC in 1957. Vivika, who had studied at Alfred University, turned Chouinard’s small hobbyist group into a major department with the help of Otto, her former student. Before leaving Chouinard, they denoted a large professional kiln. They also founded the popular Annual Chouinard Pottery Sale in which students and faculty participated. Though many high-quality pieces were made by teachers, everything was simply stamped with a “C.” Proceeds funded state-of-the-art pottery wheels and other equipment. Ralph Bacerra, a gifted student of the Heinos, took over the department after they left and remained chairman until the end. While the Heinos were conventional ceramicists, Bacerra is an experimental artist whose works blur the boundaries between conventional ceramics and pure sculpture. Other well-knowns from this department were Jun Kaneko, Mineo Mizuno, Adrian Saxe, Peter Shire, and Juanita Jiminez (who also taught). Though not a required course, a majority of the students took ceramics, getting a feel for the tactile quality of earth and an appreciation for the natural processes of forming and firing clay.



*Hollywood* by Ed Ruscha, 1968

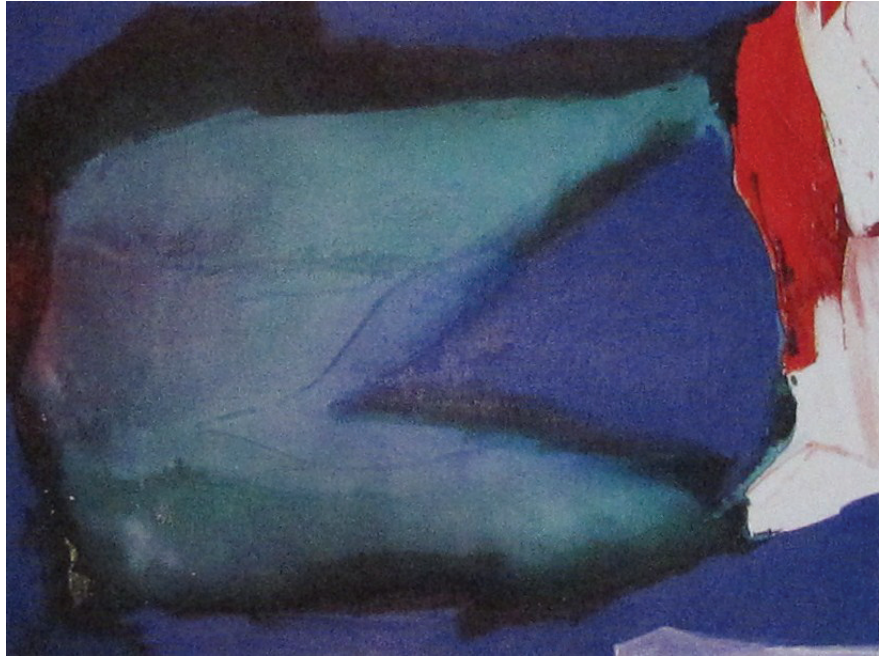
Though Vivika Heino has passed away, Otto works harder than ever, lamenting that the kiln they donated Chouinard was taken to the CalArts campus in 1972 but never fired. Bacerra told us, “They got a bulldozer, dug a big hole, and buried [it].” Said Heino, “They don’t think ceramics is fine art over at CalArts!”

The required Materials and Methods course taught students to work with three-dimensional materials. Instructors Malcolm Leland and John Canavier guided students in welding, working with plaster, cutting with a torch, and shaping papier mâché, a favorite of Canavier’s. In front of the Convention Center in downtown San Diego stands a work by Mel Edwards, a young sculpture teacher at Chouinard who eventually went to New York. In the San Diego Civic Center is a kinetic bronze and water sculpture by Leland. In the final two years, Stephan von Huene taught sculpture along with Canavier, as well as drawing and painting.

As of this writing, the Chouinard school building remains intact, surrounded by empty land awaiting development. It is an eerie sight. As I walk through the building, I hear choral music, a strange contrast to the noon-time, rooftop music of my time, with Ed Be-real on conga and Llyn Foulkes on bongos.

I stand on the balcony where Gary Krueger took those last graduation pictures. Behind me is the studio where I taught freshman painting. A well-dressed woman emerges from the center studio and politely speaks to me in Korean. I don't understand her, so I say in English, "I didn't mean to disturb you. I used to teach here." She nods pleasantly and returns to the studio where, to my surprise, a roomful of well-dressed people is staring at me. It's a church choir. I have disturbed their rehearsal. They are in the very room where I had drawing classes with Irwin and Eva Dickstein Roberts in 1958.

With soothing choral music drifting through the air, I envision the building coming to life again. It still has that art school feel, with lots of stored up, positive energy in those thick cement walls. The building rests peacefully...quiet, serene, because Mrs. Chouinard is still here. I feel that, at any moment, her students and faculty will burst through the entrance and the controversies will begin all over again.



*Silent II* by Matsumi Kanemitsu, 1971