

# GRADUATE PROFILE

by Lisa Ritter

**N**ow in his third year in the School of Art's M.F.A. program, Dr. Sean Bidic hasn't heard of any other reconstructive surgeons who are pursuing a formal fine arts master's degree.

And it seems that in 1999 the admissions committee in the School of Art hadn't either. In fact, after Bidic had submitted his application portfolio of some of his best work—surgical reconstructions of faces, hands and large wounds—he wondered why he hadn't heard from the school, and ended up calling former School of Art chair Bryan Rogers to ask about his admission packet.

"They weren't certain if the application was sincere," recalls Bidic. "But even if I weren't a doctor, I would think they would still be intrigued by a prospective student presenting surgical reconstruction as art." (See hand image, right, which was included in Bidic's admissions portfolio.)

But Bidic really was a doctor—having completed four years of medical school at Columbia University and three years of junior general surgery residency at the University of Pittsburgh. At a point where the residency program suggests a hiatus for residents to do some sort of surgical research, Bidic decided that although he was interested in medical research, he also wanted to explore the art-related side of plastic surgery. And even though none of their residents had taken this particular route before, the University of Pittsburgh's plastic surgery division was "enthusiastic and generous" about Bidic's unusual pursuit.

Bryan Rogers thought that the best place for Dr. Bidic might be in Carnegie Mellon's STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, where performance artists like Stelarc had found a home. But Bidic insisted that he wanted to go through the rigors of art school.



***His dream job, Bidic muses, would be to have dual appointments in both a medical school and an art school.***

"There are issues of society-generated physical human norms and culturally influenced visual aesthetics that drove me to apply to the School of Art," he explains. "Some of my colleagues study traditional art crafts (sculpture, painting or drawing, for example), but none have pursued a formal fine arts master's, which includes art history, critical theory, philosophy and exposure to new media—all with a contemporary influence. Many of my medical colleagues are confused as to how I am in my third year of study and have yet to paint a picture or mold clay."

Although the two disciplines seem worlds apart, Bidic has noticed several basic similarities between art and medicine. For instance, documentation is very important in both disciplines: visuals go into the art student's portfolio, while pre-, intra- and post-operative photos of reconstructive surgery help in patient edification, medical-legal issues, resident education and student teaching. Additionally, the student spends the first year in both areas learning the language and understanding the history of the profession.

But the remainder of each program drastically differs from the other. In medical school, the last two years consist of a regimented curriculum that the student must follow and master, while the last two years of art school "open up" and let the student "be creative, make as much work as possible and experiment with different media and genres." This was definitely a challenge Bidic was up to. Applying the work ethic that became ingrained in him during medical school and residency, he did five shows last year incorporating photography, sound art, video art, performance and architectural design. He has shown or performed works at—among others—the Andy Warhol Museum, the Center for Contemporary Art in Cleveland and a Performative Arts Symposium at Penn State University.

Bidic has found his niche at Carnegie Mellon, where his work has embodied the interdisciplinarity and community service that the university values. In his first two years in the M.F.A. program, he has taken an acting class and taught fellow art student Todd Pavlisko surgical techniques so that they could collaborate on a performance piece together. ("Todd's skills truly rival those of first- and second-year surgery residents," says Bidic. See "Developing New Realities," right.) He first volunteered with and ultimately represented the viewpoint of the blind at Pittsburgh Vision Services through a mixed-media audiovisual installation presented at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. (See "In the Absence of Voyeurism," right.)

Currently, he is collaborating with Robotics Assistant Professor Yoky

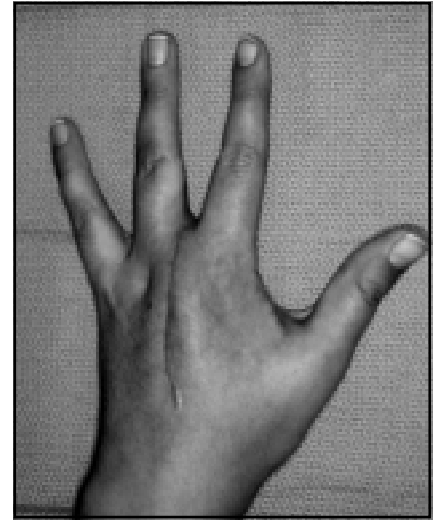
*continued on following page*

***"Communication and exchange create art," says Sean Bidic.***

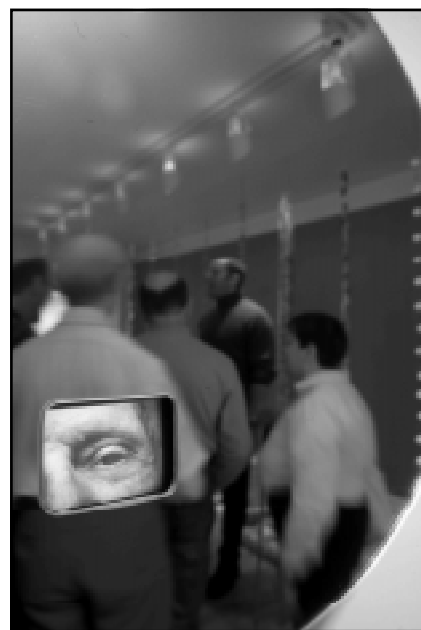
***Below are some of those creations.***

**"A Balance of Form and Function"**

Photography  
Photographs by Artists,  
Made for a Variety of Purposes  
Foreland Street Studio, Pittsburgh  
September 2001



At right is one of the images Bidic submitted to the School of Art as part of his application portfolio. Bidic both performed the surgery on and took the photographs of the hand of a 19-year-old woman who had a painful and debilitating atriovenous malformation. Bidic amputated the woman's middle finger and reconstructed the palm bones (metacarpals) to render a functional and aesthetic result. For the show, Bidic made a poster with the pre-, intra- and post-operative images. Cultural issues that arose from the patient were mentioned in the text describing the images: "Although initially elated about the removal of the diseased digit, the patient was saddened at the one-week post-op visit by the prospect of a man placing a ring on her now middle finger."



**"In the Absence of Voyeurism"**

Sound and video installation  
2000 Pittsburgh Biennial  
Pittsburgh Center for the Arts  
September 2000

Bidic started out as a volunteer at Pittsburgh Vision Services because of his desire to interact with the blind. He soon realized that his new friends had some interesting thoughts regarding the visual dependence of sighted people and how the blind experience beauty and quality in their lives without sight. He decided to record the conversations and videotape their sightless eyes. The effort culminated in a sound and video installation that was a "slave to two masters": a piece that could be experienced by both the sighted and nonsighted. See left and below.



**"Developing New Realities"**

Performance/audio installation  
Interchange: Simultaneity in Action  
West India House with the John Adams Institute  
Amsterdam, Netherlands  
February 2001

In an attempt to blur societal titles like "doctor" and "artist," Bidic and fellow Art student Todd Pavlisko studied each others' primary professions (Bidic studied acting and performance art; Pavlisko studied human anatomy, physiology and surgical manipulations) in order to realistically present this work. In the first part of the installation, Pavlisko inserted a thoracostomy tube into Bidic's arm, through which media was transmitted. In the second part, performed in Amsterdam, the two set up stations for the audience to view the operation, with microphones that allowed the viewers to speak to one another through Bidic's arm.



## Graduate Profile

continued

Matsuoka, graduate students Aaron Greenfield and Dave Wilkinson and undergraduate Ray Ayala on a robotic hand and arm. The project—which examines the link among language, behavior and computer interface—is a major component of Bidic's thesis. He hopes that it will have clinical applications for victims of stroke and spinal cord injury as well.

What's next for Dr. Bidic? He is "definitely going back" for the two final years of his University of Pittsburgh fellowship. "I like the surgery and patient care aspects," he says. But he will also certainly keep in touch with friends and colleagues he's met at Carnegie Mellon. His research with Robotics will continue even after he's back at Pitt, and he is unlikely to relinquish the creative space he's found in the art world.

His dream job, Bidic muses, would be to have dual appointments in both a medical school and an art school. Most reconstructive surgeons view their work as sculpting of the body, he explains, "but there's so much more to it than that. What are we trying to restore? There's a delicate balance between form and function. So often we exaggerate forms to cater to societal norms." One of the valuable lessons that he's gotten out of the M.F.A. program is being able to "critique the current culture," a far cry from med school's by-the-book curriculum.

"Going to art school has changed my life in an excellent way," summarizes Bidic. "Peers, advisors and teachers have pried my eyes open to see some different themes in our culture. Going through the treadmill of medicine, I wasn't exposed to that. Now I regard society and my medical profession in a different way."

You can read more about Sean Bidic in the September/October 2001, issue of *Arbyte: The Magazine of Digital Arts & Culture*.

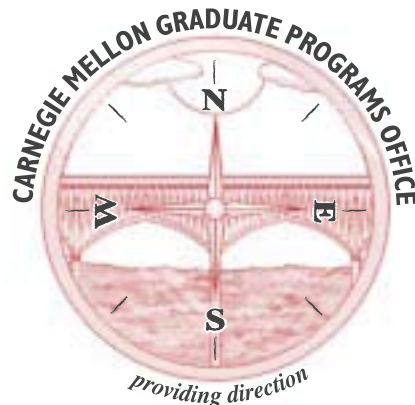
## Graduate Programs Office Video Library

The Graduate Programs Office (GPO) has available for borrowing a variety of titles that may be of interest to graduate students. Titles currently available include recent Alcoa Foundation Lectures featuring Emery Brown, M.D., Ph.D.; Ellis Marsalis; Eliana Rivero, Ph.D.; Barbara Smith, Ph.D.; and the Race in Pittsburgh Panel.

Also available are "Bringing Young Minority Women to the Threshold of Science"; "A Century of Women: Work and Family"; "A Century of Women: Sexuality and Social Justice"; "A Century of Women: Image and Popular Culture"; "Double Helix"; Dr. Louise Fitzgerald's lecture on sexual harassment; "Mentors and Mentees: Scenarios of Mentoring Relationships"; "A Question of Color"; "Science for Life: Do It for Yourself"; and "The Way Home."

If you are interested in borrowing a video from the GPO Video Library, e-mail [kst@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:kst@andrew.cmu.edu) with your name, the title of the video you want to borrow, and the day and date you want to get it. You will then be informed if your selection is available, and when you can pick it up.

When borrowing a video you will be able to pick it up from the door of Warner Hall 419 the day you are scheduled to get it. The video must be returned by 5 p.m. the next business day (Monday-Friday).



### Professional Development Guru #1

*The first in a series of introductions to smart role models*

Donald Norman is Professor of Computer Science at Northwestern University and has advanced degrees in both psychology and electrical engineering. He was schooled at MIT and the University of Pennsylvania. His professional bio ranges across academia and industry and includes such work venues as Apple Computer, University of California, Harvard University, Merrill Lynch and Georgia Tech. He is a strong advocate of human-centered design and simplicity, and is perhaps best known for his book *The Design of Everyday Things* (Currency/Doubleday, 1990). By his own account, his philosophy is best summed up by the epigraph to his book *Things That Make Us Smart: Defending Human Attributes in the Age of the Machine* (Perseus, 1994): "People Propose, Science Studies, Technology Conforms."

By now it should be clear that Norman is, in many ways, a wonderful role model for graduate students here at CMU, many of whom are engaged in cutting-edge research and, very often, trained across the disciplines. In the area of professional development, not only his experience, but his analytical method provide especially relevant information and direction for graduate students close to completing their degrees. He has, for instance, recently published an insightful meditation on the training of students in the behavioral, cognitive and social sciences (BCSS) and the disconnect between that training and the world of "product-driven industry." Norman observes

that "the skills currently taught within the Universities are simply inappropriate to the needs of industry" even while the talents of BCSS students are sorely needed in the world of product development. He then goes on to analyze the culture differences between BCSS academia and industry:

The BCSS student is taught analysis: industry needs synthesis—design. The scientific community seeks truth and perfection. Industry needs doers, not analyzers. It needs quick, approximate answers that are "good enough" for the purpose: Engineering approximations rule the day, not precision.

Since industry sorely needs the communication, social interaction and group dynamic skills of the BCSS community, Norman constructs what he calls an "applied-discipline curriculum" to better prepare BCSS students for the world of industry.

For additional cantankerous, yet thought-provoking, forays into the application of intellectual work to user-centered design, see Norman's *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (Harper Collins, 1988) and *Turn Signals Are the Facial Expressions of Automobiles* (Perseus, 1993).

Also, look to the Graduate Programs Office website ([www.cmu.edu/adm/apaa/gpo](http://www.cmu.edu/adm/apaa/gpo)) in mid-November, when our new Professional Development link will be up and running. This new site will feature bibliographies of books about professional development, sortable by discipline, seminar topic or career path; useful professional and career development website links; the schedule for this year's professional development seminar series; and an article of the month. Each month we will also feature an interview with a professional who discusses his or her career choices and career path.

There is life after graduate school. And we are going to help you learn exactly which you want, why and how to get there.

—Nancy Klancher  
Director, Graduate Programs Office

## Why Carnegie Mellon Didn't Participate in the Chronicle of Higher Education Survey on Graduate Student Stipends

by Nancy Klancher  
Director, Graduate Programs Office

Recently, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published comparative findings on graduate student stipend levels at top research institutions. Of the 61 American institutions in the Association of American Universities who were asked about stipends in six fields, more than 70% of the institutions responded. Carnegie Mellon was not one of them.

Our decision not to participate in the *Chronicle* survey was largely due to the decentralized and therefore inconsistent nature of our data. The good news is that graduate program administrators are now actively collaborating with the Registrar's Office to implement a new graduate data-gathering tool. The "grad data screen" is slated to be piloted this spring. It will gather all sorts of financial, demographic and academic information on graduate students that will allow trends in graduate student careers to be followed more closely and therefore add a firmer foundation to CMU's graduate policy-making.

Major findings of the *Chronicle* survey were as follows:

1. Several Ivy League universities have made substantial increases in their stipend levels over the past year, widening the gap between stipends at elite private institutions and most public universities.
2. Those increases were not the norm. Most institutions surveyed were increasing their stipends by 1-5%, as opposed to the 12-20% reported at places like Princeton and Yale.
3. Almost all the institutions surveyed said they provide some health insurance benefit for graduate assistants.
4. Of the institutions that do provide health-insurance benefits, about half cover the entire cost; most others pay a substantial portion, usually 50-90%.

For a full version of the *Chronicle* article, go to [chronicle.com/free/v48/i05/05a02401.htm](http://chronicle.com/free/v48/i05/05a02401.htm).

## Friends and Colleagues Celebrate the Work of Stephanie Byram

A program celebrating the work of Carnegie Mellon alumna and postdoctoral fellow Stephanie Byram was held Saturday, Nov. 10. Byram died on June 9 at age 38, after a long battle with breast cancer. She received her doctorate from the Department of Social and Decision Sciences and was a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology.

In the seminar, individuals who collaborated with Stephanie Byram described their work with her, putting it in practical and theoretical context. Their talks explored the reason for studying those issues, how Stephanie and her colleagues chose to study them and what the results mean for life and science. These talks celebrated Byram's work by sharing it with a broader audience and showing how her work continues after her passing.

Participating in the seminar were Michele Colon, Robyn Dawes and Baruch Fischhoff, Roberta Klatzky, Jenn Lerner and Michael Scheier (Carnegie Mellon); Lisa Schwartz (Dartmouth Medical School); Ann Bostrom (Georgia Tech); and Steven Woloshin (Veterans Administration). The seminar was organized by the Department of Social and Decision Sciences, the Department of Psychology and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

## Fitness News

Yoga is the new de-stressor of choice. Yoga has been shown to ease, tension, relax the mind for better academic and personal focus, ease lower back pain, and give you a better over all well-being. The question is not why *would* you do yoga, it is why *not*!

This semester, you can participate in a yoga class Sundays, 6:30-7:30 p.m. in the UC. Starting next semester, the class will run Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12 noon-1:15 p.m. in the Skibo Gym.

Group exercise cards can be purchased at the UC and are good until August 2002.

—Donna Morosky, Director,  
Fitness and Health