



Opposite page: *The Life Room*, c.1979, by student Helen Clapcott
This page: student Catinca Malaimare performs her work *Screens Left Turned On At Night* for her 'Premiums' presentation in 2020

Reputation The fall and rise of the RA Schools

After a period of stagnation in the late 20th century, the Academy modernised and emerged as one of the most sought-after art schools, argues *Lucy Howarth*

Writing any kind of history of an art school is fraught. Records can be idiosyncratic, pedagogies unwritten, witnesses unreliable. What happens at art school happens in the studio, through practice. Also, art schools are often related through an intricate web of personal connections; artists educated in several institutions go on to teach at several others.

The Royal Academy is not primarily an exhibition venue, or a good spot for lunch

(although it is certainly both of those things). Since its foundation in the late 18th century, the idea has always been for the established generation of artists to support and assist those coming up. Astoundingly, there are no fees charged for the three-year, full-time postgraduate programme. With the opening of the renovated studios this summer, intake numbers can return to around 16 students per cohort, for what is a remarkable opportunity.

The RA Schools operates the conventional

art school modes of lectures, group critiques ('crits') and one-to-one tutorials, but the course is in many ways distinct from other postgraduate art programmes. Small student numbers mean that visiting lecturers – always distinguished artists – are hand-picked according to current interests, allowing the discussions to be specific and bespoke. Because the RA is primarily run by Academicians (and only an Academician can be appointed Keeper in charge of the RA Schools), it can operate as a fiefdom, for better or for worse, and possibly has done in the past.

In the second half of the 20th century, the RA Schools was an island in the storm-tossed seas of British art education. While state-run art colleges were swallowed up by polytechnics, which then converted to universities, and were impacted by reports and advisory councils, the charitably funded RA Schools was untouched. There was no threat of merger. Its students didn't strike, revolt or occupy the building like at Hornsey College of Art in 1968. When tussles broke out, in the late 1980s and 90s, it was to protest against compulsory life-drawing. It was made optional by Norman Adams, who as Keeper permitted

a wide variety of practice; then reinstated by his more traditionalist successor, Leonard McComb; before being finally made voluntary by Brendan Neiland in 1998.

The Keeper during the post-war years, Henry Rushbury, was hardly avant-garde but encouraged printmaking on site, embracing image-making in multiples by mechanical reproduction technology. The traditional hierarchy, with painting at the top, survived – the RA's founding President Joshua Reynolds, through his series of lectures, the 'Discourses', had prioritised drawing, and then painting, sculpture and architecture (the 1960s saw the demise of the RA's architecture course). Rushbury's successor Peter Greenham, Keeper from 1964 to 1985, fought hard to retain the fee-free status of the Schools. His other significant move, or lack thereof, was not to follow almost all other art schools in throwing out their sculpture casts – the Academy's all remained, albeit treated in a lackadaisical way. This inertia seemed retrograde at the time. The RA has an exceptional historic cast collection, one that was particularly difficult for a conservative institution to dispose of; these incongruous *plaster* presences, so

embarrassing then, are more wonderful than troubling in postmodern times.

Yet the incredible weight of heritage at the RA became a problem, more so than it was for relative newcomers such as the Royal College (established in 1837) and the Slade (1871). The long shadow of Reynolds, the Life Room with its iconic semicircle of benches (*The Life Room*, c.1979, by Helen Clapcott; opposite), the classical casts, Burlington House itself – what do you do with it all? It would hardly have been possible to embody Bauhaus ideals or International Modernism from such a position. While St Martin's School of Art was creating innovative curriculums in the 1960s and Goldsmiths College rose to prominence in the 1990s with the Young British Artists (YBAs), the RA stagnated. Financing issues also played their part: Curator John Brine left his role managing the Schools in 1961 to run Bromley School of Art for more than double the salary.

When Neiland became Keeper in the late 1990s, he instigated big changes, not least an expectation that students worked daily in the studios, and that the bar was closed until 6pm. New appointments were made by the Schools' Curator John Wilkins. Neiland's stated

aim was to secure artists who were interested in contemporary concerns, and he relied on Wilkins to do this: Alain Miller, Richard Kirwan and Vanessa Jackson (now an RA) arrived as year-group tutors.

A former professor at the University of Brighton, Neiland was a committed educationalist. He was also a steely realist, and not only in his painting style. He expanded the workshop provision to include digital printing, and all practices were welcomed, alongside the still-central tenet of drawing. Neiland hosted convivial sausage-and-mash dinners for leaders of undergraduate art courses to encourage them to recommend the RA to their students.

Progress at an art school comes incrementally. Potential applicants look to the work of recent graduates to assess the strengths, emphases and identity of a programme, and it can take a while for an implemented change to 'bed-in', no matter how energetically it is embraced. The public perception of the RA was propelled forward hugely by the 'Sensation' exhibition in 1997 – marking the canonisation of the YBAs in its hallowed halls. The prestige of »



Above left : a student sculpts a traditional portrait bust, c.1980

Above right: current second-year student Alex Margo Arden at work in her studio in 2023

» such shows rubbed off on the Schools; its Piccadilly location, close to the burgeoning high-end commercial art world, gave it huge appeal to young artists. Moreover, the state's introduction of university tuition fees in 1998 threw the RA's free offering into sharp relief.

The painter Maurice Cockrill was elected Keeper in 2004, a safe pair of hands with an openness to all forms of art. The Schools still had to address its poor record on the representation of women in its most senior positions (female students, after all, had not been admitted until as late as 1860 and even then their participation was severely curtailed). The first female Keeper was Eileen Cooper, elected in 2011; today it's Cathie Pilkington, following Rebecca Salter, who in 2020 became the first woman to be appointed the Academy's President. Eliza Bonham Carter became the first female Curator and Director of the Schools, in 2006, and is still in post.

Under Cooper's Keepership, the workshops at last strived to support contemporary fine-art media in all its variety – crucial for the Schools' evolution from a school of painting with a bit of sculpture to one that celebrates all practice. This was thanks to the appointment of Mark Hampson as Head of Fine Art Processes, who made judicial investment both in hardware and the expertise of workshop tutors, who were no longer differentiated as 'technicians'. These trends were driven further by Salter and Pilkington, and now, with the redeveloped workshops, students can access state-of-the-art technical facilities for all mediums – from printmaking and sculpture to wet photography, video, sound production and performance. Contextual writing too, introduced by Jackson despite Neiland's misgivings, is approached

through a 'workshop' format, with writer Sally O'Reilly. Students occupy their own studio space – an expectation that has disappeared from many UK art schools – and they can access larger, bookable project spaces and exhibiting space in the building.

The generational exchange at the core of the Schools' approach – established artists teaching emerging artists – continues today. Several YBAs who stormed the Academy with 'Sensation' went on to become Academicians themselves, as well as Professors at the Schools, in the case of artists including Tracey Emin, Gary Hume, Michael Landy and Fiona Rae. Fiona Banner is current Professor of Perspective and Michael Armitage, a former student of the Schools, is now an Academician and Professor of Drawing. Margarita Gluzberg, Richard Kirwan and Brian Griffiths RA oversee the three different year groups as Senior Lecturers.

A significant moment is the 'Premiums' exhibition in the second year, midway through the course. This group show is an experimental foray out of the private sanctuary of the studio into the public space of the gallery, a special opportunity afforded to the unique position of a school within a museum. The preservation of time and space is paramount for the development and actualisation of practices; this continues after graduation, with alumni supporting each other, collaborating and continuing their associations.

The outlier status of the RA Schools, neither university accredited nor overseen by any state body, means that visas are no longer easily available for international students. Despite this hurdle, the Schools values its independence, and the student

body has become more diverse, after changes instigated by Bonham Carter and recent Keepers. There is now an emphasis on equality of access for areas of the country outside of London; RA students undertake placements at art colleges around the UK to encourage applications from across geographical and social backgrounds. Although there are bursaries for RA students, London living costs are intimidating, especially to non-Londoners, so this kind of encouragement and direct help from contemporaries just a year or two senior is vital. The selection process for applicants is detailed and careful, taking the panel (of seven) many months, with a commitment to include students from all walks of life, who will most benefit from the programme and be most able to contribute to the pedagogic ecosystem.

Art schools by their very nature are run by passionate rebels – there will never be consensus on art nor art education. The RA Schools was the first in the UK, and it will perhaps outlast current iterations of education for artists. Its sustaining remit remains straightforward: to pass something on from one generation of artists to the next, directly, with minimal bureaucratic interference. Many other fee-free 'alternative' art schools have sprung up since the 2012 hike in university tuition fees, but none with the distinctions and facilities of the RA. With the building renovations in 2018 and now in 2024, the RA Schools is visibly at the heart of the Royal Academy, where it has always been.

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