
SKETCH

Round up:
Canada's oldest *new*
university celebrates
young talent, big ideas



A MOMENT AT OCAD UNIVERSITY
A printmaking student preps a litho stone
Photo by Claudia Hung

ONTARIO
COLLEGE
OF ART &
DESIGN

SKETCH

OCAD University (www.ocad.ca) is Canada's "university of the imagination." The University is dedicated to art and design education, practice and research and to knowledge and invention across a wide range of disciplines. OCAD University is building on its traditional, studio-based strengths, adding new approaches to learning that champion cross-disciplinary practice, collaboration and the integration of emerging technologies. OCAD University publishes *Sketch* magazine twice yearly.

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Emerging Alumni Profile

Nate Archer: Design Incubator

by Charlene K. Lau



Above: Nate Archer

As a student at OCAD, Nate Archer (Industrial Design, 2007) kept up-to-date on design cycles and trends, reading websites and blogs including *designboom*, one of the most widely read design publications online. Little did he know that in short order he would become an editor for that very site. Mere days after graduating from OCAD, he responded to a job posting on the site for an editorial intern and was immediately hired. Archer then moved to Italy to work in *designboom*'s office in Milan.

Functioning much like a one-stop postmodern visual-culture shop, *designboom* offers online courses and features interviews alongside international exhibitions and competitions, even products from around the world. And although international in scope, it has a predominantly European readership.

So, what is it like to be Canadian in a European-heavy design scene? As a country constantly curious as to how it's viewed by the rest of the world, Canada comes across somewhat like a self-conscious teenager, compared to the self-assured maturity of Europe. With that premise as a given, Archer's observation is that Canadian designers are reluctant to promote themselves abroad. To support good local designers, he has taken on, at *designboom*, the role of ambassador for the Canadian design community, presenting this country's talent not only to Europe, but to the wider international audience as well.

Of Canadian design's status in the international marketplace, Archer says, "Europeans still don't quite have an impression of what Canadian design is all about. For the most part, they have only seen bits and pieces that don't really create a single [comprehensive] image in their minds. However, I think this is a good thing. Canadian design is quite diverse, and its multiple personalities are actually indicative of our country's makeup and ideology."

Where design powerhouses such as the Netherlands, Italy and Germany hold court, Archer sees Canada as inhabiting the middle ground — which is ideal, he says, praising the smaller Canadian design community for its strong quality of work. And he sees potential for young designers in cities like Toronto. "[This] is a relatively

young city in a constant state of renewal. Unlike crowded cities with established identities — like New York, Paris and London — Toronto is a city with room to grow, room to leave your mark."

After a year working for *designboom* in Milan, Archer moved back to Toronto to continue on his own as an editor, but not just of *designboom*'s online content. He now promotes young designers via *designboom* "marts" — a series of exhibitions that bring together upcoming as well as established designers from all over the world to international design fairs in New York, Stockholm, Tokyo, Seoul, Sydney and Melbourne. Transposing the global to the local, Archer organized "NY Local," an exhibition in 2009 featuring New York's design culture and its young designers, and, in 2008, "Seoul Design Essence," which showcased cutting-edge contemporary South Korean art, architecture and design.

In making design accessible, Archer is also creating a well-rounded profile for *designboom*, positioning it not only online but also as a strong, tangible presence within the international design community.

What about today's emerging generation of designers? If 20th-century design spoke largely of design personalities and



Above:
Nate Archer
An original piece of Canadiana, *Timpins* (2007) is a limited-edition series of pins inspired by Tim Horton's iconic donut holes. *Timpins* explore the social and cultural function of souvenirs.

iconic aesthetics, does the driving force of this new generation signify a movement towards a focus on practice? Archer thinks so, observing that young designers are undoubtedly different from those of the past. "[They] are thinking about things in a more holistic way. Their work tends to be more user-focused, drawing on the past to create products with history and a story. The days of meaningless bright plastic chairs with funky forms is gone. Today's consumers are looking for products that have meaning, that serve a purpose; and the smart designers are listening." This emphasis on accessibility illustrates a shift in the thinking of the definition of democratic "good" design. Archer favours products that are initiated and produced — right from the start — to be affordable, durable and widely available, rather than inaccessible luxury design that's remade using more inexpensive materials.

When asked about future projects, Archer is coy. For now, he is focused more on his work as an editor for *designboom* than on his practice as a designer. But although writing about design was not Archer's initial calling, perhaps it is not so different from industrial design itself. He describes his approach to writing as similar to his approach to a design problem. Inspired by his mentors — *designboom*'s founders, Massimo Mini and Birgit Lohmann — Archer is continually motivated to make design accessible through his writing and curation. Since his arrival at *designboom*, two more OCAD graduates have been hired.

Notes Archer, "Clearly, there is something in the water fountains at [OCAD]."

Read more about Nate Archer at natearcher.ca.

Charlene K. Lau is a Toronto-based art writer whose reviews have been published in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Akimblog* and *Fashion Theory*. She received her MA in history and culture of fashion from the London College of Fashion (U.K.) and is a curatorial assistant at the Textile Museum of Canada.

What about today's emerging generation of designers? If 20th-century design spoke largely of design personalities and iconic aesthetics, does the driving force of this new generation signify a movement towards a focus on practice?



Above: DESIGNBOOM.COM