

Alumni art on display

Exhibit helps school stay in touch, inspire current students

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By **KATHY A. GOOLSBY** / The Dallas Morning News

They are taught and mentored and sent out into the world with newly acquired skills, but once students graduate they often break their university ties.

Now the University of Texas at Arlington's art department hopes to re-establish connections with some former students through the Juried Alumni Exhibition, on display in The Gallery at UTA through April 20.

"This is the first time we've ever done this kind of show," said curator Benito Huerta. "We thought it was a good idea to find out what's going on with our former students, to stay in touch and see what they're doing professionally."

Works by 17 graduates are included in the show that features paintings, sculptures, ceramics, photographs and even videos. All reflect the graduates' continuing efforts to express their artistic abilities.

Just finding the artists was a challenge, Mr. Huerta said. Working with the university's alumni association, he sent more than 1,200 former art students a letter requesting slides of their work.

"I think we got less than 50 responses, which was disappointing," he said. "In the arts, there's a high percentage of people who end up not doing art within a few years after school. When I was in school, I was told less than 1 percent would end up practicing art and making a living off it."

Such statistics make an alumni art show even more important, Mr. Huerta said. It demonstrates to current students that there are people creating art after graduation.

Mark Mueller, a 1999 graduate, has three life castings in the show. He said he was surprised and pleased to be chosen for the show, which he saw as a unique way of encouraging art students.

"It helps prove to the students going now that yes, there is life after a bachelor's degree. There is a way to make a living doing art," said the 37-year-old graduate student at the University of Missouri. "The majority of my time is spent on graduate work. But I'm teaching two classes, and I'm also working as an independent artist."

Chris Cunningham, also a 1999 graduate of UTA, said the show's range of media illustrated the many sides of art. His clay pieces incorporate blinking lights that add to the experience.

"The show gives people an opportunity to see a little bit of everything that's going on, to see what other artists are doing," said Mr. Cunningham, 41. "It's always good to see what other artists have been

working on."

A former dental lab technician, Mr. Cunningham is now a graduate student at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. His work is featured at The Upstairs Gallery on Abram Street, and he has sold a number of pieces, he said.

Dallas native Kathy Ornish, 38, earned her degree from UTA in 1985 and spent a number of years teaching sculpture and ceramics at the college level before becoming a yoga instructor. She lives in Michigan and occasionally keeps in touch with at least one UTA instructor. But Mr. Huerta's letter was her first contact with UTA's art department since graduation.

She recently returned from a four-week residency in Japan, where she did sculptures. She was unable to attend the UTA show's opening reception this month. Still, Ms. Ornish said it was a nice way to bring people back to the university.

"From an art perspective, it's not a terribly meaningful thing, but from a personal level, it is," she said. "It's very important for universities and colleges to keep their alumni active, and an alumni show allows the school to bring their students back in some way."

Mr. Huerta said he would like to do additional alumni shows and that he would archive the slides he received from all the alumni artists. Besides inspiring students and showing the community what former students are doing, he said, the show serves another important purpose.

"It's a way to say 'good work' to the people in the show," he said. "We know it's tough out there, and we appreciate what they're doing."

The Gallery at UTA is in the north end of the Fine Arts Building, 700 W. Second St. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday.

There is no admission fee.

For additional information, call 817-272-5658.

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