

DISTINGUISHED TEACHER 2007-2008

HONORS CONVOCATION ADDRESS

Delivered by Prof. Douglas Wirls at Memorial Hall, May 15, 2008

First I would like to again thank the Institute, and those students whose nominations and support conferred this honor on me.

I would like to be able to say to you that I spent the year traveling to exotic lands, meeting many new people. But in actuality, with the exception of a very nice weekend in Schenectady, I was here the whole time doing my job.

I know that among my artist and designer friends and colleagues the answer to the question, “how did your parents feel about your choice to go to art school “ , would often be something like “not thrilled”. For some it was even an act of rebellion.

Perhaps it is different these days. Pratt is a much larger and more diverse place than existed in my day, with majors in fields other than art and design. but I’m sure there are some in attendance today who would identify with that sentiment.

In light of the occasion , and with respect to present company, I would say that it has turned out to be a particularly good decision for all those honored here today.

But why is it a different kind of decision to go to a school of art and design like Pratt than say, any other college or university. It certainly represents a choice that from the outset there will be a reliance on vision and most importantly imagination and a curiosity about how to use it. But legitimately the questions arise from thoughts such as – Is this practical ? – What are you going to do with it? And even, is this self-indulgent ? Perhaps for some, those questions remain.

But in considering all of my many associations with fellows who choose the path of this kind of specialization in their education, I have never noticed any deficit in intellect or capacity. To the contrary they are broad in their interests, curious, resourceful, highly literate and versatile, as I expect all of you are becoming. All the qualities needed to thrive in this world.

Perhaps this is because they all come, as you do, from a place of intense investigation of vision and imagination.

It is true that the imagination can be a difficult and at times unreliable resource, a place of pleasure and anxiety nourished from the outside and shaped from the inside, but ultimately the sole source of original thought and action.

For the past several years, you have been very active seekers of vision and you have proven yourselves to be commendable in your pursuit.

Your personal investigation is just beginning but already you know the trials of striking a balance between the inner and outer worlds. I believe that this is what makes graduates of places such as this, such interested people and valuable contributors to the culture and by extension, to the enrichment of the imagination of others.

The following is a quote from the painter Bridget Riley delivered to a group similar to yourselves.

“As someone whose job or task it is to decipher and translate a text unknown even to yourself you are asked to exercise an extra faculty. You will have to learn to listen, because it is through a special sort of listening, a sort of 'listening-in', that one learns how to speak. “

In the time to come you will have to burrow deeper and become more cognizant and reliant on your inner world and the process of looking out and searching within – indulging the self while remaining open to the world.

We would all recognize that done well this act of listening inward even self-absorption at times, and bringing forth something innovative, unique and beautiful is in the end one of great generosity.

Something all, even skeptical, parents would understand and value.

Congratulations to all of you.