

TRANSCRIPT

RCA podcast: RCA2024 Dean's Downloads with the School of Arts & Humanities

Recorded on 17 June 2024

00:00:02:02 - 00:00:19:17

Ken Neil

Our students are fantastically gifted, and by looking at the world through their creative products, you can see it in new, fresh and different ways. And that's tremendously valuable, tremendously important.

00:00:19:19 - 00:00:46:15

Etan Kinsella McLenan

Hello, my name is Eitan and welcome to the first episode of our mini series for RCA 2024. These are our Denes downloads where I'll be catching up with the deans of our four Schools at the RCA, finding out what they have planned for RCA 2024. If you don't know, RCA 2024 is a series of exhibitions, events and activities showcasing the work of graduating RCA students, and it runs from the 20th of June to the 4th of August this summer.

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Etan

For this first chat, I went to the RCA Battersea Campus to chat with Ken Neil. Ken is the dean of our School of Arts and Humanities, and they're kicking off RCA 2024 for us this summer. We caught up just as the installation of their exhibitions was being completed, so you might hear a bit of construction, a bit of noise going on around us.

00:01:05:16 - 00:01:27:01

Etan

This School sharing is always a really, really fun one, and I think that's down to the fact that there's such a breadth of programmes exhibiting so there's 11 programmes exhibiting from the School this summer that include students from our fine arts, MA programmes in Painting, Photography, Prints, Contemporary Art Practice, Sculpture and, new for this year, our MFA in Arts and Humanities.

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Etan

So we're really looking forward to seeing what they have in store for visitors. We will also see work from our applied arts programmes in Ceramics & Glass and Jewellery & Metal, and from our humanities programmes in Curating Contemporary Art and Writing. The School's exhibition is taking place from Friday the 20th to Sunday the 23rd June. It's a free event and you do not need to register.

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Etan

And then that's not all from the School in July. The History of Design programme, which is a programme delivered with the Victoria and Albert Museum, will hold a symposium and a publication launch at the V&A, and that is on the 16th of July. You can find out more about that and register via the RCA website. Now, that's enough from me. Let's get on with the chat with Ken.

00:02:11:07 - 00:02:20:05

Ken Neil

Hi, my name is Ken Neil and I am the dean of the School of Arts and Humanities here at the Royal College of Art.

00:02:20:07 - 00:02:38:13

Etan

We're just sitting here in the Battersea campus, sitting outside in glorious sunshine and right beside The Hangar space, where lots of work is currently being installed. Things are really kind of feeling very exciting here at the moment. Could you just tell us a little bit about how things have felt over the past few weeks or months?

00:02:39:10 - 00:03:01:12

Ken

Yes, well, it's a great time in the academic calendar, because all of the students, as you can see, they're about to finalise the exhibition. One or two of them still, I think making one or two adjustments today, possibly tomorrow. And then we have a private view on Wednesday this week. So, it's a very exciting time for Arts & Humanities.

00:03:01:14 - 00:03:08:04

Etan

You were telling me before that you've been here for about four years. So is this your fourth big RCA exhibitions and events then?

00:03:08:06 - 00:03:22:00

Ken

Yeah, four years. I joined the RCA in February 2020. It's great to see the students produce for the public at this time of the year.

00:03:22:02 - 00:03:33:06

Etan

And I think the kind of student work has varied from year to year. Does it change? I guess they're responding often to what's going on in the world?

00:03:33:08 - 00:04:02:06

Ken

Yeah, exactly. I could say that the work in Arts & Humanities is consistently diverse, but that diversity does turn its attention to issues of topical concern. And you know, you don't need me to list those, but conflict, migration, internationalism and so forth. So yeah, there are topical foreground topics, but the diversity is consistent.

00:04:02:08 - 00:04:09:05

Speaker 2

Can you give us a bit of an overview of what is happening for the School of Arts Humanities this year then?

00:04:09:07 - 00:04:38:17

Speaker 1

Well, what the public can see from this week, later this week is the output from most of our programmes, all of them. But one sole for the School of Arts and Humanities, if you're including the PhD. That's really 12 programmes of study. So we don't see the PhDs this occasion very elsewhere in the city, but we see all of the other programmes with the exception of history of design.

00:04:38:19 - 00:05:03:10

Ken

So for us in Arts & Humanities, that's a combination of fine art programmes, humanities programmes and applied art programmes. So a fantastic range of disciplines on show - everything from the ceramic pots to the digital artwork. So brilliant range and variety of outputs.

00:05:03:12 - 00:05:34:12

Etan

I think that's one of the really exciting things when you come to the Arts Humanities exhibition, you really do see that diversity. There's some huge sculpture - we're sitting beside a huge sculptural work outside and I think I like to see it that the students really play in their year and they kind of feel they have the space to kind of develop and take chances and grow, I guess with all that in mind. What kind of thing do you want the students to get out of the experience?

00:05:34:14 - 00:06:00:03

Ken

Obviously, it's very, very important for our students to think carefully about how to best present their work to our public and that's a very different thing from simply opening all the cupboards and tipping everything onto the table, so to speak. So we need to be selective. We need to try and make the work as efficiently intelligible as possible.

00:06:00:05 - 00:06:17:22

Ken

And of course, we need to contend with all of the practical, professional dimensions of safety, display, all of that and these practical and intellectual aspects are very important to their success in the industry on graduation.

00:06:17:24 - 00:06:27:09

Etan

There's an awful lot to see at the event. As we mentioned, it's a large School and there's lots of students involved. Do you know how many students there are?

00:06:27:14 - 00:06:35:14

Ken

I do, actually - just over 800. Great. So, yeah, just over 800 individual students works to enjoy.

00:06:35:16 - 00:06:42:10

Etan

And would you have any tips on how visitors can best navigate the exhibition?

00:06:42:12 - 00:07:07:09

Ken

I would say to keep in mind that the School comprises humanities, applied art and fine art. I think I remembered to mention the history of design is not visible. They have a symposium which is open to the public later in July. You can get information on that from the RCA 2024 website. So that's open to the public.

00:07:07:11 - 00:07:48:15

Ken

That will be hosted at the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington. So look out for that. But all of the other programmes have work on show to enjoy during the year 2024. So my tip would be remember all of those programmes and make a point of going to see programmes that are fine art orientated, humanities orientated and applied art orientated because that diversity variety of work is sheer joy and it's important to do that, I think, because if your interested in contemporary art, of course you would pick up contemporary art practice that goes without saying.

00:07:48:17 - 00:08:16:01

Ken

But go and look at the jewellery, go and look at the prints, the ceramics, go look at everything, because none of the programmes has a monopoly on contemporary work or contemporary thinking. And in fact applied art - I'm fond of saying this, but applied art has some brilliant contemporary works, so make sure you see samples if you can't see all of it. Go and see samples from the three areas that make up the School.

00:08:16:03 - 00:08:45:09

Etan

One of the other things I notice is that there's a really long list of amazing performances and talks and different kinds of activities based on the work that the students are doing. And you know, I like to think 'expect the unexpected' from our students because, for instance, our photography students are doing live performances, which you might not kind of necessarily anticipate. Could you tell me a bit more about the events that are going on?

00:08:45:11 - 00:09:24:08

Ken

There's lots more of them. I get more and more information on the website. But yeah, you make a good point that we do produce varied works. We do produce the paintings and the ceramics and we use kilns and printing presses and so forth. But yes, performances, a little bit of a leitmotif through most of our programmes. And the students are, I mean, they're interested in disciplines, specialisms, but they're also interested in practices which are

adjacent to their immediate disciplinary territory, if you like. And performance is one of these connecting practices across all disciplines. So there's plenty of that.

00:09:24:10 - 00:09:36:00

Etan

So I asked you about what you hope that the students really get out of 2024, but what do you hope that visitors kind of take away from the show?

00:09:36:02 - 00:10:08:13

Ken

Well, we want the visiting public to be mesmerised and be amazed by the standard of work at the Royal College of Arts in Arts & Humanities. Somebody visited last year and said to me jokingly that 'these students are so talented, they kind of do it despite what you Ken. Isn't that right?' And there's a degree of truth to that. The students are incredibly talented, incredibly capable, and they always surprise us by the ambition and the quality of their work.

00:10:08:15 - 00:10:35:23

Ken

But we are in the business of producing creative artefacts, creativity, fans, performance, provocations which relate to the contemporary world. So again, something I'm fond of saying, we're in the business of encouraging people to change their minds, and if they're not changing their minds, at least consider the perspectives that they can see afresh. A new experience in experiencing the work of our students.

00:10:36:00 - 00:10:57:04

Ken

And I think whatever the discipline is, print, ceramics, you know, whatever the discipline is in arts and humanities, that's a common denominator. So our students are fantastically gifted. And by looking at the world through their creative products, you can see it and you are fresh in different ways. And that's tremendously valuable, tremendously important.

00:10:57:06 - 00:11:10:03

Etan

So lots of the work that the students would produce from the kind of more fine art side or applied arts side is probably work that they would go on to sell. Is that something that is possible at this event?

00:11:10:06 - 00:11:47:21

Ken

Yes, that's definitely possible. And I encourage everybody to explore that possibility. There's a very wide selection of works available to purchase what's on display and other works from the students that you can find out about with direct contact between yourself and the students. Or you can visit the website that assists our selling and that is RCA-sales.com and again, more information is available through the RCA website.

00:11:47:23 - 00:12:05:11

Etan

You mentioned collaboration and I think the students are very skilled and talented at that kind of interdisciplinary collaboration. Is that something that you've seen at all through the preparation for these I've put this year?

00:12:05:13 - 00:12:46:08

Ken

Yeah, I think, you know, perhaps collaboration is the overused word, no sort of place creativity, possibly, but nonetheless it is properly important. The collaboration would be one of the common denominators across our 12 discipline areas. All programmes collaborate in their work, all students collaborate in their studies in terms of research, preparations, practising and public groups. So, yeah, whatever you think about collaboration being today's cliché, it is very important.

00:12:46:10 - 00:13:10:21

Ken

It's important being a great Arts & Humanities practitioner, researcher, but it's obviously very important to succeed in a company, professional industries or graduation arts and humanities. Students go everywhere, all sectors and into specialist disciplines, of course, and collaboration. This is part and parcel of your working day every day.

00:13:10:23 - 00:13:26:09

Etan

I guess perhaps one of the really valuable things of doing a postgraduate degree as well. How does the School support the students in developing their practice, more broadly?

00:13:26:11 - 00:13:58:15

Ken

Well, on collaboration, the School and college structures the learning around two very important units - one, in the School of Arts and Humanities, we call the Urgency of the Arts. And this is a unit that we deliver in term two. So it's a three term academic session. So in term two we deliver to all Arts & Humanities students the Urgency of the Arts and that sees collaboration between all our programmes.

00:13:58:17 - 00:14:27:05

Ken

So whatever programme you're on, History of Design, Painting, your work with other students in the School or issues to do with the contemporary world and the role of Arts & Humanities within that in addressing these issues, the tactics and strategies of Arts & Humanities stakes on these contemporary issues in the School. We like to call that a massive injection of nourishing content, and it is.

00:14:27:07 - 00:14:55:02

Ken

The students enjoy the contributions from our researchers, our faculty, but also from our visitors. So that's deliberate and we want to see the students collaborate across that unit. To another thing to mention is the across RCA, which we call the College wide unit, and that's a similar kind of thing for every student in the RCA. So, you know, that's high on 2800, 2900 participants.

00:14:55:05 - 00:15:19:24

Ken

It's huge, hugely ambitious. And again, we take topics of import and we have inputs from very, very well respected and influential artists, designers, thinkers, writers from all around the world. So the context that's front and centre, but the associated collaborative dimensions to those units are very important to our curriculum.

00:15:20:01 - 00:15:24:19

Etan

Is there anything that you're really excited about from the event?

00:15:24:21 - 00:16:07:19

Ken

No, I don't want to single anything out. I don't want to single any specific programme out. I don't want to single out any specific students. But I do want to say congratulations to all of the students graduating this year. Still a bit of time to go. Wee bit more work to do following the exhibition top to the end of term, but congratulations to all of our students for a fantastic RCA2024, very, very high quality. And a huge thank you to all of the staff in the School, faculty, staff, academics and administrative staff who've made it all possible, supported so ably by our professional services colleagues right across the piece. So well done to everybody.

00:16:07:21 - 00:16:42:00

Etan

Brilliant. Thank you. Thank you so much.

You've been listening to the RCA 2024 for Deans Downloads a mini-series as part of the Royal College of Art podcast.

RCA2024 runs from the 20th of June to the 4th of August across a selection of London locations. Find other episodes in the series as well as details of RCA 2024 in the show notes.

Learn more about our programmes at [RCA.ac.uk](https://www.rca.ac.uk), as well as finding news and events relating to the college and our application portal. If you're interested in studying at the RCA.