

STYLIST

WEEKLY

Inside the Studio

How VCU's sculpture program has
attracted a national spotlight.

by Carrie Nieman

VIEW FROM THE TOP

Arts critics,
renowned sculptors
and promising
young talent are
turning their
attention to VCU.
What's the secret
behind the
university's most
competitive
graduate program?

Six hours and 340 miles south of the art capital of the world, some of the best young sculptors in the country sit in a circle listening to a recording of a "Seinfeld" episode read in a monotone voice. The sound comes from a pedestal, on top of which sits an old-fashioned wooden radio. It's the work of second-year sculpture graduate student John Henry Blatter, one of 14 students in the two-year Sculpture + Extended Media program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

According to U.S. News & World Report's most recent ranking of art schools in 2003, VCU's sculpture program is No. 1. (Fine arts programs aren't ranked annually.) VCU beats Yale and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which ranked two and three, and nine other master of fine arts in sculpture programs. Last year 185 hopefuls applied to VCU's program. Just six were accepted. That 3 percent chance of acceptance makes the sculpture program the most competitive graduate program at VCU.

While other schools such as Yale and the Rhode Island School of Design have long been known for their fine arts, VCU by comparison has made a meteoric ascent. It began to gain recognition only in the late '80s. In 1997 it was first ranked at No. 5. What helped bring VCU's sculpture program into the national spotlight? According to students and faculty, it might be something as simple as Southern hospitality.

by **Carrie Nieman** • **Photos by Scott Elmquist**



Tim DeVoe, left, who graduated from the department in the spring, now teaches a class in sculpture. In the fine arts building on a recent Friday, he collaborates with second-year student Miriam Ewers over a dish of lasagna.

The students listening to the “Seinfeld” radio are in their Thursday evening critique class. Some stand, some sit on the floor. They wear paint-splattered sneakers, flannel, camo, denim. They have shaggy hair, spiked hair, disheveled hair. Along with Blatter’s piece, two other students’ works are presented during the three-hour class: a video of an instrument made out of wood and antlers being played, and a video showing the artist eating with, walking and creeping up on a human-size cricket. Each is the center of about an hour of discussion. The students speak when they feel moved to; some just look at the work pensively. Few are overtly critical. They say things like: “The object is awkward; I don’t know if you were going for this awkwardness,” or “It didn’t appeal to my sensibilities,” or “I’ve lost my patience for video, but I found this refreshing.” They ask questions about how things were put together and why the artists made certain decisions, like: “Why did you choose not to have the sound of the crickets?” or “If this instrument made a sound what would it be?” They make suggestions too.

“If you could get the audio to play out of the radio, I think that would justify the object,” says student David Herbert, who suggests “Seinfeld” radio artist Blatter listen to old-time radio and offers to lend him his recorded copy of “War of the Worlds.”

Blatter, like many of his fellow students, has already been nationally recognized for his talent. He received a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship (tuition plus a \$30,000 stipend for as many as four years). He plans to stay at VCU for three years, he says, then possibly travel abroad. Two of the four Javits fellowships awarded to studio artists this year went to sculpture students at VCU.

Last year VCU hired a new sculpture department chair: Amy Hauff, a well-known artist with a record of prestigious grants whose work has been shown at national and international exhibits. Hauff, former department chair at Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, believes that what sets VCU’s program apart is its

studio-driven focus, while other programs are more theory-oriented. “This is a school that maintains that tradition of knowing how to build things by hand, without sacrificing content,” she says. Because many professional artists have others produce work for them, she says, it’s almost unusual for students to graduate with a lot of technical skills.

First-year grad student Rosemarie Padovano, who made the antler instrument, received her undergraduate degree at Parsons School of Design in New York, and says she was impressed with the facilities at VCU. “When you look at Yale, you look at Columbia, nobody can touch this place as far as facilities,” she says.

Hauff believes that’s why her students work more ambitiously and on a bigger scale than students in other sculpture programs. Graduate students get studios the size of what might rent as an apartment in a city like New York. And it’s easy for them to pick up materials down the road at Lowe’s and drop them off right at the garage doors that open up to the sculpture department.

Second-year student David Herbert, who attended the prestigious Skowhegan School residency program last summer, has already shown in Poland and Cuba, and currently has work at the Keith Talent Gallery in London. Herbert takes pop culture references from music and movies and brings them into the fine art world. He built a replica of the piano John Lennon used to write “Imagine” and filmed a video of himself singing all the words and instrument parts to David Bowie’s “Ziggy Stardust” on homemade instruments. Now the life-size white plywood piano sits crammed in his studio with a giant replica of a VHS tape of “2001: A Space Odyssey” and a geode.

Second-year student Janelle Iglesias, who currently has a piece in Quirk Gallery’s chandelier show, has been putting together dime store rugs and connecting them with personal fabric to construct a 500-foot rag rug similar to the kind her grandmother used to make in Norway. Because Iglesias is from Queens, N.Y., she imagines her rug will be placed in the context of a city. She plans to have it span the pedestrian bridge to Belle Isle to sym-



After a three-year search, VCU hired Amy Hauff in 2004 to head the sculpture and extended-media department. The university has the largest sculpture undergraduate program and the highest-ranked sculpture graduate program in the country. Hauff says she’s focusing on making the program more international.

bolize bridging their two worlds, and because that’s the walk she would take her grandmother on if she could. When asked if her work will shrink after she graduates, Iglesias, who collects materials and often turns old works into new pieces, says, “I think VCU has done a good job in inspiring us that where there’s a will, there’s a way ... but I don’t think I’ll be collecting as much.”

Before Hauff arrived at VCU, Joseph H. Seipel had run the sculpture department for 15 years and is widely credited with its success. Seipel, whose own large sculptures have incorporated multi-media and robotics, started teaching in 1969. Five years ago the school promoted him to senior associate dean and director of graduate studies for the school of the arts. While his job now has him overseeing all of the school’s departments, Seipel still teaches a graduate class once a week.

Resources were scarce when Seipel began as chair of the sculpture department in 1985. The undergraduate program had been strong for some years, and as the largest in the country, it turned out approximately 100 VCU-trained sculptors into the art world each year. Seipel was intent on transferring that success to the graduate program, and put his focus on technology. “I knew even then that technology was going to be important in developing fine art,” he says. The school purchased video and video-editing equipment to allow students to make multimedia works, plus programs for 3-D imaging, 3-D modeling and digital imaging. The programs helped students build prototypes and determine dimensions for their work. “All of a sudden the sculpture students were using the same language as engineering students,” Seipel says.

Seipel also points to a faculty whose varied backgrounds encouraged invention. While some schools are known to be strong in particular areas of sculpture, Seipel strived for something broader, an atmosphere for all types of research. And with a faculty that included a poet, a painter, a potter, an architect and even an atomic physicist — he had professors who could complement the students’ technical know-how with an intellectual component. Hauff



When John Henry Blatter arrived at VCU, he was primarily working with video. Influenced by visiting-artist-turned-professor Stephen Vitiello, Blatter moved to sound-based work. He constructed a soundproof room in his studio to record the “Seinfeld” episode for his radio piece. He’s also working to publish a magazine as a forum for artists.



acknowledges it's hard for people to understand how you teach art. "We're teaching them to be elastic thinkers," she says. Professors push students to think about why they made their work, where it came from and how it fits into the context of history.

"We've tried hard to produce a student product that was articulate and self-motivated," says 35-year teacher and now professor emeritus Lester Van Winkle, who also served briefly as interim chair. At the same time, while the faculty challenged students to rethink their work, the professors were constantly experimenting with the way they taught classes.

The innovation and collaboration paid off. Van Winkle, for one, received a distinguished faculty award and was nominated for the College Art Association's teacher of the year. "In the evening we would go away and we'd have a beer and talk about the issues we had as far as teaching," says Van Winkle, whose wife used to own the Texas-Wisconsin Border Café with Seipel. "We were a community. One of the reasons I think I did so well is that I taught with fantastic teachers. We shared a lot of our ideas. I think we had a common philosophy

too; we were concerned with how our students did when they graduate, what they took with them."

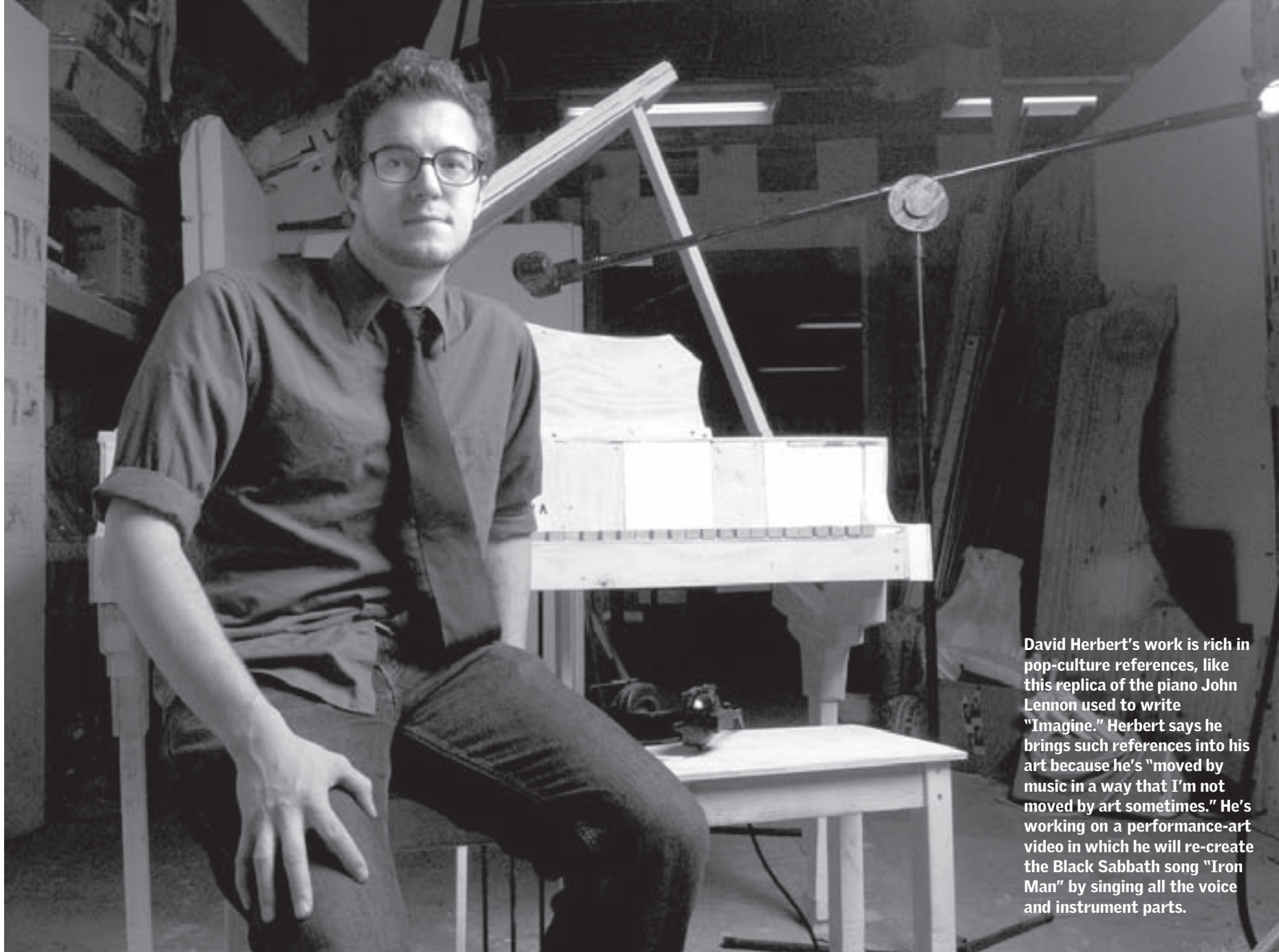
Rosemarie Padovano says she picked VCU because professor Elizabeth King "blew my mind." Padovano uses organic materials to construct instruments as a "conduit for an ephemeral experience." She'll be traveling to Southwest Virginia to study instrument-making techniques from craftsmen she met at the National Folk Festival.

With this dream team in place, Seipel tasked himself with spreading the word about the quality of his faculty. He sent them to conferences and emphasized making contacts. Seipel himself is heavily involved in networking; today he's president

of the National Council of Arts Administrators and serves on the boards of the Southeastern College Art Association and the Mid-America College Art Association. Some of this hard work has paid off. Seipel was recently recognized with a lifetime achievement award in sculpture education from the International Sculpture Center.

By eliminating a faculty position, Seipel was able to use the money to bring in visiting artists. They each lecture in some capacity (some come for one class, some stay a whole semester) and visit the grad students' studios to discuss their work one on one, providing real world advice, not to mention a future contact. The art community is a small world, and after these artists returned home with good things to say about VCU, word quickly spread. The first year, Seipel brought in 38 artists. Today he laughs at his initial overzealousness. The next year he reduced the influx of visitors at students' requests. This year there are 12.

In 1997, the first time VCU's studio art program was ranked by U.S. News, it rated No. 5. The applicant pool increased from 35 to 90, and alumni began making an impression on the art world. VCU's name



David Herbert's work is rich in pop-culture references, like this replica of the piano John Lennon used to write "Imagine." Herbert says he brings such references into his art because he's "moved by music in a way that I'm not moved by art sometimes." He's working on a performance-art video in which he will re-create the Black Sabbath song "Iron Man" by singing all the voice and instrument parts.

started showing up in exhibits and critics got curious about what was going on in Richmond. Newsweek featured VCU in a story on M.F.A. programs. The Washington Post profiled the department. New York Times art critic Roberta Smith visited to lecture at VCU.

In addition to bringing the art world to Richmond, Seipel also sends the students into it. They travel as a class to different cities once a semester. In 1999, he arranged for recent alumni to have a show at the Kim Foster Gallery in New York. Foster says at first she was not that keen on having a show of student work, but Seipel, along with one of the artists she used to represent, Creighton Michael, convinced her. "[Michael] had been down there to lecture and told me how incredible the work was," she says. That year the Village Voice listed the show as a "don't miss" and now it takes place biennially.

Foster says her VCU shows get a huge crowd, including many people from out of town: "An incredible amount of alumni come out, some of the art critics come out, they follow it. A lot of sculptors come out to see what they are doing, and cura-

tors too." The graduate exhibit also spurs more shows. After that first exhibit, the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts and the Gershan Y in Philadelphia both invited VCU grads to show in their spaces.

Sculpture school is unlike most graduate programs. For starters, there aren't any classrooms, just three big, empty white critique, or "crit" rooms, with a rotating array of students' work. Another difference: The line between student and faculty seems more blurred. Sculpture department chair Hauff drives a Vespa to work and students call her Amy. Department coordinator Connie Brown, who's been with the school for 30 years, is the department's wisecracking cheerleader, one minute cutting on an undergraduate for being a "slacker," the next squealing congratulations for one's success. Retired professor Van Winkle wears overalls and welds alongside an undergraduate art class in the foundry, working on one of his own large figurative pieces. Graduates are welcome to return to use equipment too, Hauff says.

When the graduate students are asked

what sets VCU apart, they say things like, "It's supportive," "like a family." They agree that they're competitive with one another, but supportive at the same time. They search for reasons: Is it because all their work is so different? Because Richmond's a small city? Because they all live close to school? Because their studios are all in one big room and all face one another? All those reasons help contribute to the students' sense of community — and the resulting creativity — in some way.

Seipel and the rest of the faculty make great efforts to keep in touch with alumni. Seipel estimates he gets at least five e-mails a day from alumni. Coordinator Brown sends out mass e-mails to the department and alumni applauding student and alumni successes, with news about shows, grants — even new babies. "It kind of ties us to them in a way, and I love to hear what they're doing," she says. "I hate to let them get away." These connections do make almost anything possible for VCU sculpture students.

Many of them do get away — at least geographically. New York City is their magnet. "So many of our grads have moved there

I swear Brooklyn has become little Richmond," Seipel says. "At an exhibit in New York, it's not unusual to have a 20-year-old grad and a 60-year-old alum in the same room.

"I learned from previous chairs how important community is when choosing faculty," Seipel says. And it's resulted in an attractive environment for teaching. Van Winkle, who will likely return to teach part time during retirement, paints a Utopian picture of the department: "People get along here and that makes people want to stay here and work harder. I don't think there's a better place to teach." Seipel can think of another allure: "It's really fun to hang out with cool, young, energetic, intelligent people."

While it might be exhilarating for the faculty to have a constant influx of new talent to meet, students can also benefit from the close interaction with the faculty, who are an impressive lot themselves. Each faculty member, including Seipel, is a working artist, showing in some of the top galleries. Seipel showed his large figurative work, which incorporates video and sound, with work by Van Winkle and Myron



house-like room, sectioned off from one another, rather than in individual rooms with doors. VCU's studios all open to a common work area, so the 14 first- and second-year students can work together more closely.

Students also report that while Richmond may be a little far from major art centers, it may be just the right distance to offer a respite from the commerce of art and, thus, to enable them to concentrate on their work. Without a litany of galleries and museums — not to mention bars and clubs — to distract the grads, their focus can remain on their work. And since Richmond's nightlife doesn't lure students in many directions, the students and faculty tend to socialize with one another, further cementing relationships and a sense of community.

Yet despite the nurturing that takes place during the program, VCU has not lost focus on the importance of making it in the impending real world. In fact, easing the transition for students has been such a focus for Seipel that he received a grant from the Tremaine Foundation to develop a course on professional practices for fine

arts, covering everything from how to set up a sole proprietorship to what your options are if you can't make a living at art right away.

Arriving at VCU via an undergraduate degree in anthropology, Janelle Iglesias says she sometimes wonders how she ended up in sculpture school. Raised in New York City, Iglesias is working on a 500-foot-long rag rug, a homage to her Norwegian grandmother who used to make them from her rural farmhouse. Iglesias thinks she'll run her rug across the suspended bridge to Belle Island as a symbol of bridging their very different life experiences.

Because of the size of VCU's undergraduate program, and now the success of its students and faculty, alumni may never again be very far from that Richmond community. VCU undergrad is the largest sculpture program in the country and it's had a good reputation for many years.

"They're viewed very positively because they've had some fairly illustrious alumni," says gallery owner Kim Foster, who adds that the VCU community seems to stick together and that many share studio space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In

trying to describe the VCU community, Seipel proudly cites a talk from former grad student and hot sculptor of the moment Tara Donovan. "It was great," he gushes. Her advice? "Be nice."

"I get a real optimistic feeling," says student Iglesias. "I get the feeling that anything is possible, that if you need something, someone will help you find it."

That's exactly the feeling Seipel was going for. **S**

Helfgott last June at Lab Gallery in New York City. Faculty member Elizabeth King is part of a major show at Kent Fine Art in New York this winter; Jack Risley is represented by Postmasters Gallery in New York; Gregory Volk is a well-regarded New York critic (he curated the current show at the Anderson Gallery featuring 11 international artists); Kendall Buster just won a major award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; Siemon Allen's work was just purchased by the Guggenheim Museum; and Carlton Newton is in a show right now in London (along with student Herbert's "Ziggy Stardust" video).

Unlike at other schools within commuting distance of New York, at VCU the professors don't commute to teach, so they're around to get to know. There are also more of them. VCU has seven full-time professors, while Yale, for example, has one (the rest are visiting artists).

It's made an impression on students. "I guess I feel like they're colleagues working with us," says second-year student Blatter. "All of them are available for us." Blatter says community is the biggest reason he chose VCU. He says he also noticed when visiting VCU as a prospective applicant that students were close and all knew each other. He attributes that to the fact that all the grad studios are in one large ware-



Chair of the sculpture department for 15 years, Joseph Seipel is widely credited with bringing the program into the national spotlight. He now works as associate dean and looks for ways to elevate other departments in the school of arts. He also teaches a class to help ease the transition from art school to the working world by examining the business of art.