

OWU

Ohio Wesleyan Magazine
VOLUME 88 ISSUE NO. 3 ✎ FALL 2011

Creativity

**FORWARD THINKERS WHOSE IDEAS
AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS INSPIRE
AND IMPROVE OUR LIVES**



Tom Powel '79, shooting Anthony Caro sculptures on the roof garden of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC.



MAN BEHIND THE CAMERA

By Eric Gnezda '79

Merging his interests in photography, fine arts, and economics, Tom Powel '79 has found a niche—and stardom—for his digital images of fine arts-photography.

Never surrender opportunity for security.
—Branch Rickey 1903

These words were not yet chiseled into Leadership Walkway when Thomas Powel '79 was making his way to classes as a student at Ohio Wesleyan. But the path he has since forged suggests that he heeded every one of them.

The first steps of his journey were suitably unconventional, as he combined a major in fine arts with a minor in economics. While engaged in both

disciplines on campus, he discovered which passion held sway during the fall of his senior year when he interned for the figurative painter Philip Pearlstein through the New York Arts Program.

“It resulted in an emotional and psychological crisis,” Powel says. “I discovered my deepest passion in a real way, but my first reaction was to run from it. The experience was so immersive—working in an art studio every day till midnight. I came back sure that I wanted to be an artist, but

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*Installation shot taken
of the Richard Long
exhibition at Sperone
Westwater Gallery,
NYC, May 2011.*



A digital archive image Powell made of a 20 x 24 Polaroid photo with oil paint by Julian Schnabel. (The Polaroid is a portrait Julian made of himself and friend, Mickey Rourke.)

at that point in my life the doubt was already inside of me, causing conflict about how I could be an artist and still make a living.”

After graduation, drawing upon his studies of fine arts and economics, he discerned a trail uniquely his, leading him to create his own business in a fine arts profession that is so specialized that it defies simple definition. To call him a “fine arts photographer” is to portray him with a clumsy stroke, or to use an archaic phrase no longer adequate for today’s technology. A more precise description of Powel’s profession requires cutting-edge language.

As founder and president of Tom Powel Imaging, based in New York City, he creates digital images of fine art-photographs, HD videos, 360-degree virtual tours and multimedia presentation tools for the art world’s most elite galleries, museums, collectors, and artists.

“What I do is capture images of fine art,” Powel explains. “My job is to create a photograph or video that is so faithful to the original work that viewers see the art as it is meant to be experienced—with all its depth and nuances—not the photograph of it.” In today’s burgeoning age of online and digital communications, it has become imperative for artists and galleries to have high-quality reproductions, for it is very often the images—rather than the objects themselves—that are used to promote, sell, and archive fine art.

Being both a photographer and a painter helps Powel evaluate how best to capture a given work. He and his crews, comprised of professional technicians and student interns, employ the key rudiments of imaging, from lighting through post-production. His innovative approaches, both in technology and as an entrepreneur, have earned him a reputation for revolutionizing how fine art is featured in the high-stakes world of collecting, exhibiting, and selling.

His client history is a veritable scroll of the fine art world’s A-list. Among the museums: MoMA, the Met, the Guggenheim, the Whitney ... Artists: Warhol, Schnabel, Nauman, Koons, Murakami, Serra, Wool, Sachs ... Galleries: Gagosian, Sperone Westwater, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Marian



Three photos of Tom Powel (clockwise): Tom photographing fellow classmates at high school graduation; at a family wedding; and Tom preparing to shoot an 8x10 large format transparency of a Mark De Suvero sculpture at the artist's sculpture fabrication foundry.

Goodman, L & M Arts ... Plus exclusive collectors and major publication credits, including *Art in America*, *Art Forum*, and *The New York Times*.

In a front-page profile of Powel, *The Wall Street Journal* quoted artist Marilyn Minter, who said, “I don’t know how Tom does it, but he’s the best I’ve seen.” The article continued, “He’s a star in an occupation that stands out for self-effacement.” (*If a Picture’s Worth a Thousand Words, How About a Picture of a Picture? When It Comes to Making Copies, Photographer Tom Powel Is the Real Thing*. Jan. 21, 2011.)

“If my fingerprints—literally or figuratively—are anywhere near the work,” Powel says, “I’m not serving the art, the artist or the audience. The biggest challenge is often getting out of the way of the art object, to photograph it in such a manner that the light of the painting, not the photograph, comes at you first.”

While Ohio Wesleyan played a critical

role in nurturing his artistic talents, it was his father who planted the seeds.

“My father was an inventor,” Powel says. “He taught me how to see, how to think way outside the box. For him it was all about being creative, yet thinking logically—using your right brain and your left. He showed me the importance of developing, then defining, your own method of getting things done so that you’re not restricted by someone else’s imposed practices.”

Even though his father groomed him to be independent minded, Powel entered Ohio Wesleyan assuming he’d travel the straight track to law school. In looking back, however, he sees that the internal signs pointing to an artistic path were already in place before he arrived on campus.

During his admission interview, he brought along a portfolio of his original

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Shot of Julian Schnabel explaining his largest painting, 44' x 43', titled "Ahab" 2009 at a private presentation to the collector and new owner, outdoors at an undisclosed country club polo field.



photographs and recalls talking extensively about his love for photography. “After I was accepted, I was especially intrigued with the idea of living in Welch Hall because it had a student art gallery. So I guess I was already interested in exhibiting, even though I might not have been aware of it at the time.”

Once enrolled, he waited until spring to take his first art class—in drawing. Meanwhile, he maintained his interests in economics and politics.

“The extraordinary part of a liberal arts education is the ability to explore so many different studies at once,” Powel says. “How did I end up an economics and fine arts major? Actually, both are similar in that they are disciplines of methodology. They both look at social, political, and behavioral landscapes. What’s fascinating to me is that an economy is an expression of hope about the society’s ability to distribute opportunity and resources. It’s a social discipline. But so is art. So what seemed on the outside to be incongruent majors actually fed each other. Economics fed my fascination with systems, while fine arts nurtured my needs to be creative and inventive.”

Support for the integration of these two studies came from unexpected sources, Powel says. Far from being proprietary over their respective fields, both Marty Kalb, professor emeritus of fine arts, and the late Blaine Grimes, professor of economics, encouraged Powel to look for connections between the disciplines.

“Dr. Grimes told me that my approach to art was exactly the kind of thinking you need to have in business,” Powel says, “and Marty was extremely influential because he showed me that art can help me understand the methodologies of economics. Even though my awareness of the connections between economics and fine arts didn’t fully evolve until years later, I eventually found out my intuitions were correct.”

Following his intuitions has guided him well.

In the years immediately following his studies of photography and painting, Powel explored his business interests, while he

“It’s been an adventure, for sure,” Powel says, “and Ohio Wesleyan showed me it was possible.”

“kind of put away the art for a while.” He worked for Warner QUBE, in Columbus, Ohio, the world’s first interactive television station. “We analyzed statistical data that blew Nielsen right out of the water because we were able to monitor viewers’ habits every 15 seconds,” he recalls. Promoted to the Warner headquarters in New York during the introduction of MTV and other premium channels, Powel soon got an abrupt lesson in corporate dynamics. When there were changes at the top of the company, he was shipped off to Dallas, where he fell from a corporate marketing position to selling cable packages door-to-door. Able to transcend his anxiety over the transfer, however, he became the top salesperson.

About a year later, the Connecticut native returned east when the Madison Avenue advertising agency McCaffrey & McCall hired him as an account executive to handle their premium client, J.C. Penney Company. No sooner had he started the job than the account came under review, challenging Powel not only to maintain the account, but also come up with strategies to retain it, which required him to merge marketing, economic, and creative processes.

Meanwhile, thrust back into the creative environment of an advertising agency, he felt his interest in photography resurfacing. “I had more fun hanging out with the art director than with the account executives,” he says. “I’d go on these fashion shoots and I’d find myself wanting to be behind the camera rather than off to the side supervising.”

Within months, despite the agency’s best efforts, McCaffrey & McCall lost the J.C. Penney Co. account.

“That,” Powel says, “was the final turning point.”

Intent upon reconciling his love for art

with the need to make a living, he left the firm and resumed painting, finishing a self-portrait he started his junior year at Ohio Wesleyan. Shortly thereafter, he was accepted into the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, after which he took a job at a New York gallery as an art handler, setting up exhibitions, and lighting and installing the works. While garnering the skills to put on an art exhibition, he also started taking pictures of the art for the gallery.

“I realized that there was an opportunity for me in photographing art,” Powel says. “It would be a job that would allow me to keep up my painting, while keeping me immersed in the art world.”

In 1986, using the cold-calling skills he’d learned in door-to-door sales a few years earlier, Powel walked into Metro Pictures Gallery in Soho and asked them if they needed any art work photographed.

“Yeah, we’ve actually got a couple of Jennifer Bolande works that need to be shot.”

And his business was launched. “It’s amazing how it has all fallen together, and I have to say that my understanding of economics has helped me survive,” Powel says, citing his ability to anticipate the effects of tumultuous market behaviors upon the art world.

“I continue to value and use my college experience to guide and assist me in navigating the insanely unpredictable art world,” he says, “and stay focused on my passions, in spite of the extraordinary changes the global art market faces daily.”

With practical business and problem-solving skills, Powel has integrated his love of art with his passion for invention. And the art world has been the beneficiary.

“It’s been an adventure, for sure,” Powel says, “and Ohio Wesleyan showed me it was possible.”

Eric Gnezda '79 is a singer-songwriter, keynote speaker and visiting instructor of public speaking at Ohio Wesleyan.