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## Conversations with Art Faculty: Visualizing a Polytechnic “Aesthetic Toolbox” for Hands-On, Community- Based Education

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## Conversations with Art Faculty: Visualizing a Polytechnic “Aesthetic Toolbox” for Hands-On, Community- Based Education

### Authors

Alannah Guevara, Brandice Guerra, Berit Potter, James Woglom, Julie Alderson, and Nicole Jean Hill

# Conversations with Art Faculty: Visualizing a Polytechnic “Aesthetic Toolbox” for Hands-On, Community- Based Education

*Alannah Guevara in conversation with Brandice Guerra, Berit Potter, and James Woglom; Julie Alderson in conversation with Nicole Jean Hill*

**I**N EARLY 2023, I HAD THE DISTINCT HONOR OF speaking with three Cal Poly Humboldt faculty members from the Department of Art + Film in the College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences. We discussed the theoretical, pedagogical, and interdisciplinary position(s) of art within the vast and deep framework that is “polytechnic.” We also considered the flourishing possibilities of growth that accompany the Cal Poly designation. Faculty voices in the narratives include Associate Professor Brandice Guerra, Assistant Professor Berit Potter, and School of Education Interim Department Chair and Associate Professor James Woglom. Though our discussions were tethered to a prewritten interview guide, each interview took on its own unique tone and highlighted a range of challenges and opportunities. When placed in conversation with each other, these interviews provided an exciting vision of the arts at our polytechnic university.

## **What is a Polytechnic, Anyway?**

The title of this special issue is *Becoming a Polytechnic*. Throughout these interviews, one recurring idea became clear to me: “Becoming” is not a process that occurs overnight. It is ongoing. It both preceded and continues past the official designation of California Polytechnic University, which did occur—seemingly

overnight—in February 2022. As French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari posit, “becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination” (1987:342). And so, we might consider our university’s “becoming” to be a transition that has always been in process. Indeed, within this issue you will find evidence of this. From the completed work that is highlighted within these pages to the work that is being accomplished at this very moment, it is apparent why Humboldt was selected to become polytechnic.

Another theme across the interviews was that, early in the process of becoming a polytechnic, there was a wide range of anticipatory emotions, from excitement to anxiety—likely throughout all the arts and humanities—regarding the polytechnic designation. It boiled down to one question: What place would the arts have within a STEM-focused university?

Our university was founded in 1913 as Humboldt State Normal School for the purposes of “training and education of teachers and others in the art of instructing and governing the public schools of this state” (Johnson 1913 cited in Tanner 1993:3). Our history is one rich with its focus on technical career training. We approach hands-on vocational training and career preparation as fundamental aspects of higher education. The Cal State University system, which we belong to, provides the following definition for

polytechnic: “A focus on applied learning is what sets a polytechnic university apart from a traditional university. Also known as experiential learning, it combines the in-depth study found at universities with practical, technology-based skills training” (2022). This combination of vocational training and experiential-learning is precisely what conjoins the worlds of science and art. As Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Jenn Capps assured:

We have really strong arts [and] humanities programs, social sciences programs and music programs [...] We are incorporating an interdisciplinary sort of approach to STEM education, where faculty are reaching across disciplines and figuring out how to bring elements of all of these things into academic programs. We are being open and recognizing that critical thinking, communication and the arts make a better engineer, scientist—you name it. (cited in Cal State University 2022).

This is also the reason that the arts will flourish in what many mistakenly believe to be a STEM-centered institution. We are—and have been—preparing our artists with the necessary skills that they will need to succeed in their careers. And we put artists and poets in conversation with scientists and engineers to solve complex problems facing the world.

#### Let’s Begin with an Introduction to Our Art Faculty Interviewees

**Brandice Guerra** finds beauty and interest within the minutiae of the natural world. Principally a painter, she enjoys creating at the small-scale, and employing traditional, indirect painting methods to achieve her vision. Unable to recall a time when she wasn’t drawing, Guerra decided to pursue a career in art as a young adult. She believes that many people who pursue the arts, like her, are wired for it. In 2013, when she first came to, what was then still Humboldt State University (HSU), she was impressed with the competency, skill, and beauty that she found in the work being produced

by the students. Guerra found the Art + Film Department’s pedagogical methods to be somewhat unique due to its focus on traditional approaches to art and hands-on teaching. Methods that she states are not present at every university. And then, of course, there’s the trees. Cal Poly Humboldt is nestled up against a Northern California redwood forest—the perfect backdrop for any artist wanting to be enveloped by the natural environment. She also notes the seclusion that comes with Northern California living, which is something she believes lends itself to fostering the unique traditions found in the Art + Film Department. As Guerra explains:

Remoteness can be a very good thing a lot of the time, I think, for our programs. They can be their own thing and have their own kind of approach to things without falling in lockstep with what might be going on in larger cities. I think it's important to have a diversity of approaches and spaces for students to choose from when they're kind of picking a school.

**Berit Potter** studied art history and psychology at UC Santa Cruz, where she learned about art worlds elsewhere, particularly in New York. After completing several internships in the Bay Area, she promptly relocated to earn her master’s in museum studies at New York University and found employment with the Whitney Museum of American Art. After deciding to pursue a career in museum work, she earned her PhD in art history. By the time she finished her degree, she was considering becoming a teacher instead, and eventually, she settled on doing both. In an ironic twist, it was her time and studies in New York that finally taught her about the art happening in California, which she returned to in 2013. She spent the next few years teaching at several different colleges until 2018 when began working at HSU. She counts herself lucky to have found her position in the Art + Film Department, which affords her the opportunity to share her passion for museums and guide students towards their chosen careers. Reflecting on her own time as a student, Potter explains:

That's something that I didn't really get in my time as an undergrad. I had ideas about what I was interested in, but I didn't really know how to pursue them. And I hope that through the museum and gallery practices certificate, the students get a better sense of not only what they want to pursue, but how they can go about making that happen.

**James Woglom**, a self-proclaimed artist from birth, first found his love of creating art through crayons. Encouraged by his teachers after drawing Darth Vader, he held his first art show in early elementary school. After that, it was off to the races. Woglom pursued his passion at university, beginning with a bachelor's in studio arts with a focus on drawing and painting, and then earning a master's and a PhD in art education. In 2015, Woglom joined the Art + Film Department at HSU. He was attracted to it because:

I liked the focus on issues of social justice and the mission of the university in its learning objectives, and honestly, I had just never seen that sort of overt commitment to two specific issues from a state university. I don't know, this might just be a presumption, but I had seen more generalist job calls coming from state universities, and this was, I felt like, people doing the work. So exciting.

by the CTC, which is the California Commission for Teacher Credentialing. It prepares students and curriculum in subject matter so that they can then go on to a credential program.

So, whereas studio majors would focus on probably a couple of different media that they were super interested in before diving into specifics, or art history students would focus on how to make art then a bunch of looking at art history, in art education, we cover all of the media that could potentially be taught in K-12 schools and colleges in California. We then look at art history as a kind of breadth thing—making sure that students have a widely informed knowledge of what the arts are so they can take that to as many students as they possibly can over their teaching careers.

**Guerra:** As somebody who teaches in a kind of a humanities-oriented, liberal arts school, I think my primary job is to expose people to images and ideas. I hope through that activity they can find access to beauty, things that bring them happiness, and to ideas that help them navigate their lives as members of communities. And that's kind of like the big overarching thing.

And then, in order to do that, I'm sharing images, I'm sharing ideas. I'm also teaching people how to use tools and refine their own motor skills and skills of observation; to use their own bodies and the tools

## What we're doing in the Art + Film Department is integrally engaged with the community in a way that I think is very much in keeping with the polytechnic model.

**Guevara:** *Tell me a bit about your position and what you do in the Cal Poly Humboldt Art Department.*

**Woglom:** I am the Professor in Arts Education. Our arts certification program is an undergraduate teacher pathway. These are—what would I call it? It's not quite a credential, but it's an authorization put forth

that I'm teaching them how to use to communicate their own ideas. I encourage them to kind of refine their own skills so that they can then produce their own images and share their own ideas. Because in the end, that's kind of what a lot of art making is about. It's sharing ideas, whether it's embedded in the object itself or whether it needs external explanation.



*Cal Poly Humboldt Art Education students, along with students from Redwood Coast Montessori High School and local community members, paint a 20'x250' mural on the northern exterior wall of the high school's building at the corner of 8th and K St. in Arcata. Photo credit: Alisa Ibyadullin*

**Potter:** I teach art history and museum studies classes in the Art + Film Department. I also oversee the certificate in museum and gallery practices, which is interdisciplinary. It has tracks for art, anthropology, history, environmental science, management—which is our newest one—and Native American studies. I'm also the faculty coordinator for our new place-based learning community (PBLC) called the Creative Coast. I get to do the practice-based work of helping students install shows and then also talk about the history and theory of museums. I really love it.

My research focuses on the history of U.S. museums in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the development of modern art in relation to San Francisco and the West Coast more broadly. I also think about cultural exchange between U.S. and Latin American artists and art institutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I try to fold that research into my classes as much as possible. So,

I teach classes around Latin American modernism, museums and the politics of display, museums and gallery practices, and so on.

**Guevara:** *In November 2020 the Chancellor invited Humboldt to prepare a prospectus for becoming a polytechnic. Can you recall your initial reactions to that announcement? Among the art faculty, staff, and students—what were some of those early conversations and questions?*

**Woglom:** Honestly, when I read it, I had a vague understanding of what a polytechnic school was. I knew it was more STEM, or at least had a sense that it was more of a STEM focused endeavor. But when I looked at the definition and looked at a bunch of descriptions of polytechnic universities, I found that one of the more central ideas is that it's an experi-

ential-based learning model. Hands-on learning is at the core of the curriculum. And I think that, honestly, that's what we do in a lot of the Art + Film Department.

Not just in the media areas but in our museum and gallery practices, or going out and working with the community and galleries and museums to create more opportunities for showing and talking about art.

Then, from talking to folks, I think there was an overwhelmingly positive feeling around the polytechnic shift and what it could do with, you know, concerns about how it might play out on, say, a disciplinary level, among all sorts of possible and

potentially scary change. In art education, our entire program is sort of service-learning centered. It's based around this idea of learning to become teachers by going into spaces where there is a dearth of arts-based programing, writing programing for those spaces, and then teaching it or helping to teach it. So yeah, I think that hands on stuff is already so much a part of art education as a field. Specifically, what we're doing in the Art + Film Department is integrally engaged with the community in a way that I think is very much in keeping with the polytechnic model.

So, once we talked about what it meant, it started to feel very comfortable. We were already doing a lot of what it meant. I think that's the feeling from a lot of folks in the university; probably like this is already sort of what our approach is. It's sort of codifying that and

making it clear to potential future students that that's what's going on here.



*Art 356: Museum and Gallery Practices students install the 2023 Art Graduates Exhibition at the Reese Bullen Gallery. Photo credit: Sonia Sanchez*

**Guerra:** I think there was maybe a little bit of anxiety within the arts and humanities faculty. I kind of knew that some of the other Polytechs had Art + Film Departments. I wasn't sure that the day-to-day activities of my own job, my own labor, would change. I teach kind of hands-on and skill-based things, which I think fits into technical education pretty readily. I think the concern was that there would be, you know, an increased focus on STEM, and then a kind of scarcity in terms of financial resources for the arts and humanities. Which I do think is kind of a valid concern. But I think things have changed now.

As far as my students go, I think the name change to Cal Poly was kind of a concern. But I don't know if people understood that there would be a shift in priorities.

**Potter:** I think that a lot of our conversations were centered around the fact that Humboldt becoming a Cal Poly made a lot of sense, given the University's investment in sciences and just how much the school already prioritized hands-on learning. That's something that we obviously do in the Art + Film Department. It's essential for our classes, whether that be jewelry making or photography. Also, almost half of students with a minor in art (25 of 54) come from STEM majors. So, there's already a cross-pollination happening between those areas, which I think is really exciting. It's something that I haven't really seen at the other schools where I've worked. You could think about the scientific drawing classes that are offered in the Department that make use of the Wildlife Museum's collection as examples of that. In so many different ways, there's a lot of collaboration and interdisciplinary practice.

Also, polytechnics tend to have a vocational focus, which is important. I oversee a professional certificate in museum and gallery practices which is geared toward preparing students for work in museums and galleries, and other aspects of the art world. Like I said, it's an interdisciplinary certificate, so, students can work in history museums and archives and other institutions of that nature. I found that really exciting, too. Our certificate involves everything from hands-on work, like installing exhibitions to working with the collection, as well as tasks like writing condition reports for objects. And then the students do internships in the community, which helps them build their careers.

**Guevara:** *Now that the University has been officially designated a Polytechnic, how have those conversations changed, if at all, since that time? What has become of those hopes and possibilities?*

**Guerra:** I think that the increased financial support from the state—and I'm not going to speak for everybody because my opinions are my own—has kind of alleviated some of the initial anxiety. People feel a little bit better and safer in their jobs.

I've found that there's an increasing kind of outreach from the sciences. There's a desire for collaboration, which I like. I mean, I've done scientific illustration. I teach a couple of classes in scientific drawing. I've always had an interest in the biological sciences, so I'm kind of excited to collaborate with science people. Right now, I'm working with a colleague in biology

to bring a scientific illustration intern to the campus. They'll work with Dr. Peloso, who is the person I'm working with to illustrate recently extinct Brazilian frogs. And the hope is that I could mentor them and provide tools for them, and maybe a space within my classroom for them to work alongside my own students.

We're also excited that there's going to maybe be more economic development in the local area. And maybe more opportunities for local people to get degrees that they might have wanted to get without going far away to get them. And just the kind of economic development in terms of, like, people who are getting engineering degrees or getting computer science degrees and then starting businesses locally. I think that would be wonderful.

**Woglom:** I think that we're an advantageous school to be taking on this process of thinking through the ideas of the polytech. What's super exciting about this space



*Wildlife Management and Conservation major Sidney Wells sketches from bird specimens in the Wildlife Building. Photo credit: Sonia Sanchez*

is this incredible engagement with this beautiful environment. There's also this engagement with community through that social justice curricular lens. I think (we) could potentially become a model for other polytech-

nics. We could show them that this is another way to look at hands-on, community-based, experiential-centered education.

I'm in the School of Education, as well, and a major focus of ours is thinking about how we can work to create an ongoing kind of a sustainable ecology of teacher preparation. You know, making sure that kids are constantly getting robust, educated experiences. If there is one concern I have, it's making sure that there's an equitable dispersal of arts programming and educational initiatives. It was pretty all over the place for a long time.

While we're on the subject, Prop. 28 passed the vote in November, which requires K-12 public schools to spend at least a certain percentage of their funds in arts and music programming.<sup>1</sup> It won overwhelmingly. But what it effectively does is place ongoing funds into schools requiring art teachers. There's a long history for why California kind of lags behind other states in providing free arts education at that K-12 level. But, I mean, this is a night-and-day shift. Any district in the area that has over 500 students has to hire an art teacher, which is huge. It's speaking to a new employment push that is like, I don't know, it's one of the things I always dreamt might happen, but never imagined it would. And now that it has, it's like, oh, we have to figure out how to prepare and hire a whole bunch of art teachers in the next little bit of time. It's super exciting. It's almost like a perfect storm of interesting changes that I think are going to lead to a lot more people having a lot more access to artful ideas. And hopefully it leads to them making the arts a part of their daily lives.



*Art+Film student Cita Hunter sketches in the Cal Poly Humboldt Greenhouse. Photo credit: Alisa Ibyadullin*

**Potter:** Last year, our Department Chair Nicole Jean Hill and I worked on a proposal for the new PBLC, the Creative Coast, which just launched this academic year. Some of the first-year art majors were involved in it this year. By next year, all of them will be involved, including film (students), which is really exciting. It's basically

1. According to Austin Beutner, former Los Angeles Unified Superintendent, "Barely 1 in 5 California public schools has a full-time arts or music teacher [...] Prop. 28 will create more than 15,000 additional jobs for teachers and teachers' aides as well as in community arts organizations. This will help prepare California school children for good-paying jobs, not just in the arts but in other sectors where the creative-thinking and problem-solving skills they learn can be applied [...] Longer term, Prop. 28 will lead to greater diversity in the technology, media and entertainment industries as a broader population of students in California public schools find the doors of opportunity open for them with their newfound skills and experiences" (cited in Jones 2022).

geared towards introducing first-year art students to the University and the Greater Humboldt community through experiential learning. We took a trip to Redwood National Park at the start of the fall semester for part of Summer Immersion,<sup>a</sup> which was really fun. We host artist talks with local muralists like Alme Allen, which is fantastic. We actually got to go see him while he was in the process of creating one of his murals.<sup>b</sup>

**Guevara:** *As an art faculty and department, what is the collective vision for growth and development that has roots in the polytechnic conversations?*

**Potter:** I mentioned our new PBLC, the Creative Coast. One of the most exciting things about it is seeing how involved the students are getting in the Department right from the beginning. I am also the faculty advisor for the Student Access Gallery, and typically students don't participate in the exhibitions during their first year. Maybe they're a little bit nervous to participate right from the start. But this year in two of our earliest shows, we had students from the first-year cohort already exhibiting their work in the gallery, and that was really great to see. I think that the Creative Coast is making an impact in terms of helping the students feel more a part of the community from the beginning of their time at Cal Poly Humboldt.

And then we have Assistant Professor Stephen Nachtigall and Nicole Jean Hill working on the creation of the new digital media major, which is really exciting. There's the BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts), which is fairly new to our department. It focuses on preparing students to become professional artists. In addition to that, the art history concentration is now dedicated to both art history and museum studies, which means it's more actively preparing students for jobs in the field.

**Guerra:** I think, as a department, we deal in both ideas and the hands-on technical preparation that is designed to aid in communicating those ideas. That makes us well-positioned to participate in collaborative initiatives. I don't think that art just exists to provide illustrations for textbooks and things like that, because I think that can be a direction that people tend to think that we want to go in. But it can serve that purpose. Images can communicate complex ideas in a way that is democratic and, you know, allows a wider audience to have access to those ideas.

Then, you know, something might just exist in a journal article where only a very rarefied audience is going to have access to read. And I think with things that are going on in the environment now, it's increasingly important to help people be aware of things. That's where the arts can come in and be useful.

I'm thinking of the many kinds of ShakeAlert notices that I've gotten recently and the friendly design of that app, you know. If you're in a panic mode and trying to read information, then having access to that kind of complex scientific information in a way that's easy to navigate and looks nice can be so important.

Somebody had to design that thing, you know. Somebody had to draw the maps and make graphics and sounds and all of that.<sup>c</sup> That's a very clear way that we can be collaborating.

**Images can communicate complex ideas in a way that is democratic and, you know, allows a wider audience to have access to those ideas.**

**Woglom:** Personally, I'd like to look towards including dance and theater in future iterations of arts pathway programming. There are actually new credential authorizations for theater and dance that were just made available in the last couple of years for the

first time since 1972. It was something that

I was interested in doing, but now I feel like it's imperative. I also would love to expand the interrelationship between the arts and the community and different cur-

*Art 356: Museum and Gallery Practices  
students install the 2023 Art Graduates  
Exhibition at the Reese Bullen Gallery.  
Photo credit: Sonia Sanchez*





ricula. I mean, we've been working towards a lot of arts integration ideas across a lot of different things.

I was talking to someone recently about how one, I guess, centerpiece of the Venn diagram for a lot of us in Humboldt is aesthetic appreciation, though I don't necessarily think it's overtly spoken to in a lot of our coursework. How can we make aesthetic appreciation of content one more part of the toolbox for anybody engaging with the professional practices or business that they're already doing in any of the sciences? How can we make drawing, painting, photography and the aesthetic appreciation of the world that scientists are engaging with a part of their understanding of those spaces? So, expanding, I think, is a concern within that.

I'm thinking about a lot of the interactions we have in the classroom, as being a kind of relational aesthetic endeavor. Thinking about classroom practice as conceptual art—that's not necessarily my idea, it's something that's been talked about forever. But it's definitely a concern and interest to me. How can I both think about and frame what we're doing together as a classroom community, or programmatic community, as artful action?

**Guevara:** *Now that we've begun to establish what the Art + Film Department's role within a polytechnic framework is and can be, can you talk a little more about your own ideas about and role(s) within the art world? How do you understand your work in relation to a polytechnic model of education?*

**Potter:** When I graduated from college, I wasn't prepared to decide what kind of work I wanted to do or how I would go about getting a job through experience or education. I didn't have access to a program like the museum certificate that encourages hands-on work and addresses career pathways. It was difficult for me to decide, you know, if I wanted to do curatorial work or registration or conservation or education or one of the many other jobs in museums. Not to mention the many other jobs that are not related to museums in the art world, like art advising and working at auction houses. I had no idea about the wealth of opportunities that were available to me. And all of them require very different lines of experience and education.

My aim for the certificate is to provide students with more vocational guidance. I take them on field trips so they can see what's happening behind the scenes in museums and other community-serving institutions, and hopefully that helps them determine what internship might be best for them. We have class discussions about specific jobs and guest speakers visit. We also do projects in the museum and gallery practices class where each one is geared toward a different aspect of museum work. Students have the opportunity to think about, just at a very basic level: *Is this fun for me? Does filling out a condition report—that sort of detail-oriented work—look exciting and is it something that I can really get into?* Or am I more interested in talking to people about the artwork? In that case, maybe they're more interested in education than registration. So, that's my path and what's guiding what I'm doing right now.

I think it's helpful to be transparent about what you've gone through to get where you are and what might be necessary for them to get to where they want to go. As one of the exercises for the internship classes, I have students look for a job that they may want five years from now. I have them look really closely at the job description and everything else they would need to do and learn to actually get that job. It helps them think about what the job requires so that they are able to set themselves up. I also make sure to talk about the fact that it might be something that they want now, but as they go down the path, that may change. And that's okay, right? But it's important to be informed about where they might want to go.

**Guerra:** I think I would be classified primarily as a commercial gallery artist. I make art objects, which are paintings and drawings, and I exhibit them and sell them. Which is something that I know some of my students are interested in doing, too. I can provide them that hands-on guidance, if that's something that they choose to pursue. I'm an object maker. I use objects, drawings, and paintings to tell stories and communicate ideas. I've done illustration work professionally over the past decade. Though, I've kind of migrated more into gallery work because it's just easier to fit around my teaching responsibilities.

We talked a little bit about this, but the ideas and innovations that are coming out of other departments—because it goes back to this collaborative model—can be communicated very effectively and democratically through the stuff that we produce in the arts. As somebody who has an illustration background, I think being able to communicate ideas very clearly to

**Woglom:** Arts education has a kind of an interesting culture in that art educators often don't make their making practice central to their teaching practice. I have tried to kind of blend the two in a number of different ways. So, we do things like go to the art quad and build cardboard forts. But the idea is to make a weird thing and then see what happens because of that. Or we'll set up a

## How can we make drawing, painting, photography and the aesthetic appreciation of the world that scientists are engaging with a part of their understanding of those spaces?

a target audience that might not otherwise have access to information is a noble thing.

I'm super into comics, personally. Graphic novels. And I think there's a lot of opportunity there for sharing information with people about difficult subjects because comic books can be kind of disarming. I think the arts can be, as well. I mean, we can see how propaganda functions in our culture right now—and always—and you can see how effective images are in manipulating people's thoughts. I think it's really important that we have people who are very well-educated in how images work, so that they can hopefully be used for good. You know, whatever that means.

I think it's also hugely important for people in the sciences and people training in the sciences to have a strong humanities background. People who are going to become nurses or doctors or engineers or biologists or whatever; they need to be able to consider the human impact of their work. It's important that they're taught the skills necessary to frame their work within a wider context and understanding of power structures and their own humanity. I think there's a lot of things that are produced in the sciences that are harmful and deadly. And maybe an appreciation for the humanities and the kind of beauty of human beings might alter some of that decision making. Who knows? Maybe not. But that's what I would hope I can help do.

bunch of tables during the *Campus Dialogue on Race* to have a space for folks to make art in relationship to what they're learning. I guess, to answer the question, making opportunities for folks to make art pieces ended up being my art practice, in a way. Making those moments where it feels like you can literally *make something* or that you have the agency to change things, I think, is a cool learning objective when going into classrooms and working with kids and making art. It's that, you know, we as a group can walk into this room at the beginning of the day. We don't have paper mâché puppets to do a puppet show with. But, at the end of a number of classes, we will. And you know that kind of affirms that we can make and change aspects of our lives. And then I also do a bunch of watercolor paintings and play music on the side.

**Guevara:** *Thinking about this upcoming semester, what kind of student work is planned that you hope will highlight the Polytechnic art experience?*

**Potter:** The students will get to collaborate on putting together an exhibition, which will be overseen by our gallery director Brittany Britton. Putting the work up on the walls is a really exciting process. Many students learn to hold a drill for the first time in that class. Putting on gloves and handling someone else's artwork, which is much different than how you would handle your own

artwork. And then, of course, comes the excitement of opening the show they installed. No one else who's at the show realizes all the work that went into putting it on the walls. But the students know. When we walk into nice, clean gallery and museum space, we all think: *oh, it looks pretty easy*, right? But we don't think of the hours and hours of work that goes in, even just in the install part. Students always talk about that: "I had no idea that all of this was involved!" It's so exciting to see how proud they are by the end.

I think some of the students walk away thinking: *oh my gosh, there's so much more math involved than I ever imagined would come with hanging all these works straight*. And some of them get really excited by it. And even for the ones who realize: *wow, this work isn't for me*, or *this aspect of the work isn't for me*, that in and of itself is a really good learning experience, right?

**Woglom:** There's our service-learning course—which is the one that I'll be teaching in the spring—we've planned it to be a two-part course. In the fall, students wrote a piece of curriculum that they will then enact at a space. So, this semester at Pacific Union Elementary, students will be going to create paper mâché masks and then do a theatrical piece with another artist who's going to come and teach them a traditional dance structure. That's going to be super fun.

We also have a group that's working with a local high school to do an enormous mural on the exterior of their building. That'll be going on for the semester. We have a group that's teaching ceramics over at Arcata Arts Institute, which will be exciting. Then, there's a group that is working with our Prison Arts Collective, which is a partnership we have with San Diego State University, where we go into Pelican Bay State Prison and do arts programming there. That group has been working on curriculum for them. We're setting up a show that will be going up in the second week of February.<sup>d</sup> We're going to try to Zoom in some of the dudes from the prison, and someone who is recently released is going to come and talk about his work.

**Guevara:** *Can you reflect on elements of art education and art worlds that stand apart from the polytechnic mod-*

*el. What do you hope the campus and broader community understand about these parts of the art worlds and their significance for students and the community?*

**Potter:** I don't see a stand apart—so much as an alignment. Like with everything we've already said about hands-on work. The hands-on work that the students are getting is really valuable, not only in terms of them learning what types of paths they want to pursue, but also to make them more desirable in the job market. I was just talking to Nicole Jean Hill, our department chair, who was at a photography conference. There was a panel at the photography conference specifically about jobs in photography in museums, such as photographing collections and exhibitions. And some of those museum representatives were there presenting specifically because they were having a hard time finding new employees who have a specific vocational background related to museums and photography. That's something really special that our program can offer that isn't being offered at as many institutions.

Also, museum studies is a growing field. It's exciting to see that more museum studies programs and certificates are being offered. When I was applying for a master's in museum studies, there were very few programs. But now the field is becoming so much larger because these graduates of the programs go on to serve so many more institutions than just museums. Think about all the historic houses. The national park system in the U.S. is one of the biggest museum systems in the world. So, there's a lot of work to be done and hopefully students are excited to pursue museum work.

**Guerra:** My experience so far has, I think, been that the definition of "polytechnic model" shifts depending on who you're talking to. And I think maybe there's a concern that there is an extreme focus on career education. Maybe a focus on prepping people for corporate jobs. Of course, people have to eat. I understand that. We are a part of this world, for better or worse, and people have to survive. But I think that maybe things that don't immediately generate profit can still be valuable. Without getting too deep into it, not everything has to immediately be a profit generating endeavor. Human beings

are about more than just laboring and producing money. That's something that we have to kind of keep in mind for the reasons we discussed about needing people to have a humanities and art background. It's an important thing.



*Cal Poly Humboldt Art Education students, along with students from Redwood Coast Montessori High School and local community members, paint a 20'x250' mural on the northern exterior wall of the high school's building at the corner of 8th and K St. in Arcata. Photo credit: Sonia Sanchez*

**Woglom:** To be honest, my brain kind of goes towards connections. And I think I would actually have a hard time thinking about what couldn't be a possibility. The more I hear about things that are happening, my brain immediately goes to like: *How could we do something aesthetic with that space? How could we engage with artistic understanding through that space?*

And, I don't know, I honestly think we can do all of it. That also may be, you know, potentially overzealous. But, I mean, why not? I'm so proud to be involved with these folks in the Department. They're just so committed and engaged and constant in their working to make cool things happen that it's just like, I don't know, it blows my mind every day.

#### **Putting Words Into Action**

*HJSR* is no stranger to the promotion and inclusion of art, both in our pages and in multimedia formats hosted on our website. To quote *HJSR's* editorial board president, Mary Virnoche, "We feel strongly about the imperative to integrate the arts and humanities across conversations, texts, and images that engage the polytechnic institutional identity." In the early stages of bringing this issue together, my team of editors and I contemplated our options for the inclusion of artwork that remained relevant to our theme. Alderson, a faculty member in the Art + Film Department, was immediately enthusiastic about collaborating with me to create a unique space for Art + Film faculty voices in this issue.

As mentioned previously, the interviews with Guerra, Potter, and Woglom were held in early 2023. At that point, none of the student photography displayed here had yet been produced. As discussions between Alderson and myself progressed, we concluded that to best represent the hands-on, experiential-learning occurring in the Art + Film Department, we wanted work from students that was both timely and multidisciplinary. At the time of publication, the art photos are a scant few weeks old, produced by students still basking in the glow of another finished semester.

Alderson then reached out to Art + Film Department Chair Nicole Jean Hill, the faculty member behind the production of student photography featured in this issue. The following excerpts of the conversation between Alderson and Hill further detail the Department's continued commitment to the polytechnic model of education expressed by Guerra, Potter, and Woglom.

**Alderson:** *Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and how you found your way into the art world?*

**Hill:** I'm the chair of the Department of Art + Film at Cal Poly Humboldt, and my main discipline is photography. I found my way into the art world through being

**Hill:** In my teaching capacity, I have been leading the photography area for many years. I was instrumental in expanding the photography curriculum to having digital and color photography instead of only analog black and white. I've spent a lot of time refining that curriculum, working with a lot of amazing lecturers to implement it, and trying to keep photography relevant to both the fine art world and to the world of commercial photography that a lot of our students find themselves in after graduation.

**Alderson:** *As an art faculty member in the Department, what's the collective vision for growth and development that have roots in the polytechnic conversations?*

**Hill:** We really look at the polytech expansion as a way to continually improve and refine our existing majors in art education, in art history and museum studies, and in studio art. I think that one of the key parts to our art program—and one of the strengths that I feel like the emergence of the polytech concept fits together well with—is the idea that we are constantly thinking about our program as: *Where do we want the students to be at when they graduate and what avenues will they take beyond graduation?* So, we've back-engineered our programs to

**We've back-engineered our programs to get students thinking about careers and to get them involved in experiences on campus that help to build up their resumes.**

interested in journalism. I wanted to be a photojournalist. But then I discovered the complexity and excitement that was the fine art world, and specifically, photography within the fine art world. So, I ended up pursuing both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in studio art. I've been a practicing artist and educator ever since.

**Alderson:** *Can you describe your work as a member of the Art + Film faculty at Cal Poly Humboldt?*

get students thinking about careers and to get them involved in experiences on campus that help to build up their resumes. And, basically, I want them to have a much different experience than I had in art school. I was never asked to think about those things until I was already out of there. It's really important to me, then, to build all of this directly into the curriculum. So, the polytech seems like an opportunity to continue to refine those things that we are doing really well, and to have the resources and fa-



*Art+Film student Cita Hunter sketches in the Cal Poly Humboldt Greenhouse. Photo credit: Alisa Ibyadullin*

cilities to communicate that to students as they're working their way through the program.

In terms of expanding things in new areas, I think that the timing of us merging with the film program has been an amazing opportunity for us to think about the ways that we intersect with this other discipline. And from there we can build a new major that solidifies the intersection between art and filmmaking in the realm of media art. We're accomplishing this by creating a new BFA in media arts—although that's a working title—that merges the strengths of our art program with the strengths of our film program. Ultimately, it's a BFA in media arts with emphasis areas in film production, interactive media, and digital art. Becoming a polytechnic allows us to both expand our existing degree programs and to offer additional professionalized degree programs for our students.

**Alderson:** *When we were in conversation about this project for the journal, we thought that in terms of highlighting what our department does, the idea of having students provide the visuals for the essay was an exciting idea. How do the images that are accompanying this article relate to*

*the kinds of activities that students already do in our photo classes on campus?*

**Hill:** What we're trying to do in the photo curriculum is give the students the technical skills to use camera gear from cameras to lighting to printers, etcetera. And to be able to creatively problem solve within certain parameters, but still have the freedom to express themselves, learn to deal with issues of composition and design, and to be able to effectively communicate a story within a single frame. So, we built the curriculum starting with fundamentals—like learning the tools—first. Then, in the intermediate and upper division courses, we get them to build a portfolio that has their own unique style of photography where they're using the tools in a very professional way. The idea is that we're giving them assignments that replicate the work they might actually have in the world once they're working as freelance photographers or as photo editors or what have you.

This particular article and the accompanying photographs are a really good example of a kind of editorial assignment that you might get for a major publication where they are looking for an environmental portrait of

an individual that communicates a certain time, place, and activity that doesn't feel overly staged. It feels, you know, kind of natural, and has a certain level of technical quality that would match what the publication is presenting in their other work. So, we gave these students multiple assignments that deal with environmental portraiture.

I feel that this was a real opportunity for the students. I mean, normally they get to pick their own subjects. Usually, they'll photograph their coworkers, their friends, or their family. And when they do those kinds of projects, the real challenge—what I always tell my students—is that you don't take a photograph, you solve the photograph. So, if they're going to photograph their friend in their apartment because they got an assignment from me, then it might seem really comfortable. But it's up to them to figure it out in that space. Does the student have a big window where a bunch of natural light is coming in? Do they have a visually distracting poster on the wall? Do they have worn shag carpeting? What are the people wearing? These are all things that they have, potentially, no control over but still have to solve into a photograph. This opportunity to photograph for the journal is another extension of that.

So, we've given the students this assignment that's similar to what they might get from a magazine. Something like: *We need you to go and photograph this artist. We want a picture of them in this type of location. Go and figure it out.* They're faced with solving that photographic problem, while also being able to be responsive to the needs of the publication. When photographers work for publications, they are often given certain parameters, like: *We need X number of photographs. We need a combination of close-up shots and distance shots. We need verticals. We need horizontals.* And so, the students were asked to replicate that previous experience they had with the assignment that was in their comfort zone—you know, with their friends and family—but now it's an assignment where they're in control of even fewer variables. And then, hopefully, they've been prepared to solve that visual problem. In this particular situation, we asked the students to work with lights, and to work with their digital cameras in a

way that is similar to their assignments, but again, fits the specific needs of *HJSR*.

**Alderson:** *You gave them some specific targets, in terms of the number of photographs or the kinds of photographs, that are similar to what would happen if they were being hired by a publication. I know there are lots of photo faculty that also do work like that for major publications. Was the goal to make it replicate that kind of an assignment?*

**Hill:** Yeah, you would normally get a shot list from a client, whether that be a publication or something else. And they usually don't know exactly how things are going to fit in. They don't yet understand if they're going to need verticals or horizontals, or if they're going to need something that can really read at a small scale, or if it's going to be a cover photograph. So, you're usually given these parameters to allow the publication a lot of options to choose from. They need a lot of options so that the photo editors and designers can decide what to use. It was kind of the same thing with the students, you know. We'd say, "Don't, just give us one." And that's the difference, right? In an art class, it might be: Go and take a portrait of someone, and then hang on the wall the one that you think is best. But out in the world, you're oftentimes asked to give a buffet of options. You have no control over the final one that's picked. So, you want to try to do your best work in the selection that you're giving them.

**Alderson:** *One of the things that I was impressed about, in terms of the conversations that we had with the students, was that one of the first questions they asked was, "Is it going to be color or black and white?" That's a consideration that a lot of people don't think about. It's not quite as simple as either in color or in black and white. It changes everything about the visual of it.*

**Hill:** Yeah, totally. And afterwards, when we were looking at the photographs, the students would realize that maybe one photo would read a lot better in black and white, while another would read better in color. And then, for some publications the cover might be in color, but the inside photographs are black and white. You

have to attempt to balance those things out and try to pre-visualize as you go. Again, it's good for the photographers to provide a lot of different options because what might actually work well isn't always super obvious as you're shooting. We try to think about what will work in black and white or what color might be too distracting. As image makers, we must train ourselves to have a little sense of that. But you really have to just pre-visualize as best you can, and then be prepared with a lot of potential options to hand over to the client.

**Alderson:** *Can you share any thoughts about the images that the students produced?*

**Hill:** Well, one of the amazing things about the magic of photography is that it's form and content at the same time. I was just really excited to see the way that they problem solved in, you know, really overwhelming environments like the greenhouse, the gallery, and the wildlife building. From a formal side of things, I think they did a really great job in the selections that they chose and in understanding what makes a clear image without a lot of distraction, and that can work on different scales of print size, whether it be a small image or a cover image. I think they did a really good job of that. But it's hard for me to separate my excitement, just in terms of the content. To see all these awesome students doing all this cool stuff and all this hands-on learning, it's just exciting! I would have been excited about the photographs, even if they

hadn't visually problem-solved the shoots as well as they did. But I think that they did a really nice job of merging the form and content together with the photos they submitted to us.

**Alderson:** *When we were talking through this idea of the Art + Film Department being involved in this issue of the journal, there were a lot of different conversations*



*Art 356: Museum and Gallery Practices students install the 2023 Art Graduates Exhibition at the Reese Bullen Gallery. Photo credit: Sonia Sanchez*

*about what it might look like. And what we have—these conversations with our faculty related to these particular areas—that actually comes out of a conversation that I had with you. We were talking about what we already do that's related to hands-on learning. And you brought up these three areas, right? Scientific illustration, museum and gallery practices, and art education. We then came up with the idea of the photo piece as replicating real world job experience. But the whole idea of the faculty*

gram like how the students in the studio classes are working. They're engaged in exhibitions. They're engaged in handling objects.

I just think that it's a really good fit for us, and I think it's really exciting. It's aligning with our strengths, and that allows us to expand those strengths even more.

## Becoming a polytechnic is just recognizing what we were already doing because we're an Art + Film Department. It's not a stretch to think about how we fit within the polytech at all.

*being interviewed, along with this whole structure comes from a point that you made about the fact that our department already does all this hands-on learning, and these are the particular areas where that's most visible and obvious. Is there anything else about that that you'd like to say?*

**Hill:** I guess it just kind of goes back to all the folks who have been asking us, the art faculty, about how we feel regarding the polytech. Asking, “Aren’t you nervous? Aren’t you scared?” But to me, I mean, I’ve already been familiar with some other polytech institutions. And I know that polytech is about hands-on learning. When that announcement came out, I was like, “Yeah, no, of course, that’s what we are.” Becoming a polytechnic is just recognizing what we were already doing because we’re an Art + Film Department. It’s not a stretch to think about how we fit within the polytech at all. I do understand the concerns that other disciplines might have in the humanities, even though I know there’s so many different ways that they are also hands-on. But for us, in all of our majors—even in art history, which seems like it would be the least polytech of all of our disciplines—it’s so incredibly hands-on. The students are working in their classes in the art history museum studies pro-

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- a. As part of Cal Poly Humboldt's PBLC programs, which are offered to first-year students in a variety of majors, students begin their college journey with Summer Immersion. Creative Coast's Immersion "explores connections to the local region, as well as the local art community" (Creative Coast). Learn more about the Cal Poly Humboldt's PBLC programs here: <https://pblc.humboldt.edu/learning-communities-list>
  
- b. The mural, entitled "We Been Healing That Way" can be viewed in person on the westward facing wall of the Pacific Outfitters/Hatchet House building in downtown Arcata, or online at the REBOUND website: <https://www.r-e-b-o-u-n-d.net/tripp01>
  
- c. Find out more about ShakeAlert and experience their visual style here: <https://www.shakealert.org/>
  
- d. Select photography and more information on the exhibition, More Than A Number, and its forthcoming virtual tour can be found online at the El Leñador website: <https://www.el-lenadornews.com/2023/02/15/artists-from-pelican-bay-state-prison-open-exhibit-at-cal-poly-humboldt-reese-bullen-gallery-on-feb-16/>