# Introducing six of the year's top student artists

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ADAM MATAK

**By Cate McQuaid** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 23, 2015

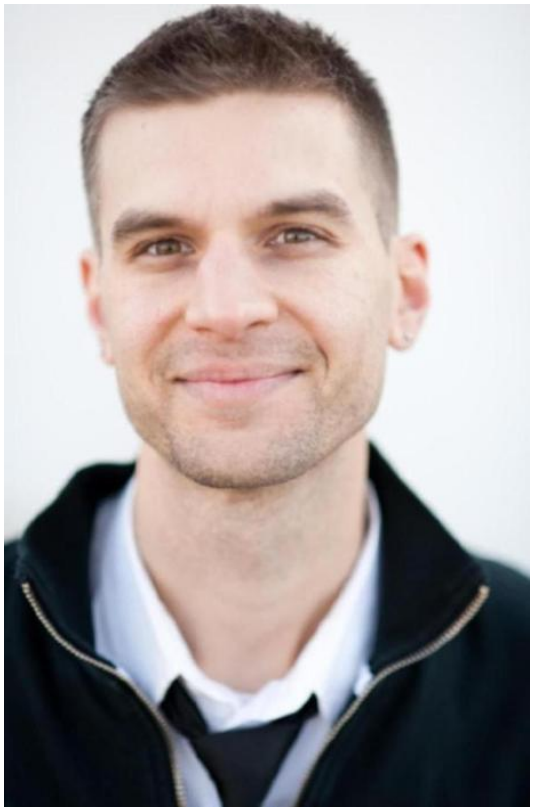
The spring master's of fine arts thesis exhibitions at local art schools show us where art is going: Artists cross disciplines, often shuffling many mediums. Technique is important, but secondary to concept. Social consciousness is on the rise. Boston art schools have been the breeding ground of top tier artists, including Joan Jonas and

Christian Marclay. We visited some of this year's budding stars at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and Tufts University, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston University, and Lesley University.

## ADAM MATAK, 37

## PAINTER
## SMFA AND TUFTS

You can see Matak's work in two exhibitions this spring — his thesis show, and "Some Assembly Required," a group show in the Museum of Fine Arts' Courtyard Gallery through Aug. 16. Both utilize his graphic, comic-book style, and convey the tension between history and the present.



TARA MCMULLEN

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At the MFA, he sets contemporary characters against legendary paintings, recycling, and equalizing. In "Allegory of Painting" one man (Matak himself) drags another in front of John Singleton Copley's "Watson and the Shark." The figures in the foreground are based on a 1981 Robert Longo drawing. Both images wrestle with peril and rescue. The allegory: Painting is ever being pulled from the teeth of death.

Matak's thesis show considers how symbols such as pedestals and architectural ornaments frame power. He invites viewers to pull down a freestanding painting of a statue, and he anticipates they will take selfies framed by his painted embellishments. "I'm hoping visitors will become the things marked important," he says. "They will take the figure away. They will fill that void."

**www.adammatak.com**

## HELINA METAFERIA, 31

## INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST
## SMFA AND TUFTS

Metaferia's performance art, installation, and video pieces make shamanic inquiries into her Ethiopian lineage. They honor family history and ritually release it. She crafts paper costumes, which she calls wearable sculptures, from old family photos and maps.

For her thesis project, Metaferia traveled to Addis Ababa and Washington, D.C., to interview Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Americans. Using organic materials such as clay and salt, she will ritually express the stories of six characters, taking on the guise of a story keeper. She'll perform "Everything But the Spice" at the May 14 opening of her thesis show, and also as part of "Transient Vessels: Bodies Through Boston," a performance art showcase at Mass
Art on April 25, and "Mapping the Dorchesterway Part Two" at Medicine Wheel Productions on May 16.

RYAN LEITNER

"My work is about investigating a sense of home," Metaferia says. "Everyone can feel displacement. We migrate at a pace never seen before. Globalization — I wanted that to be the universal space in which this project lives."

**www.helinametaferia.com**

## DANIELLE EZZO, 30

## Photographer

## Lesley University

DANIELLE EZZO

“I’m a painter stuck in a photographer’s body,” says Ezzo. She uses Photoshop to alter the faces in her portraits into masks, scarred and iridescent visages looming out of the darkness. She cites Francis Bacon and Jenny Saville, painters of psychologically pulpy portraits, as inspirations.

Her day job as a photo retoucher, erasing blemishes and wrinkles, prompted her to push the possibilities in her digital tool kit. Instead of brushing out tattoos and frown lines, Ezzo played them up. She inverted skin tones. “I use different painterly tools, adding layers as I feel it builds up a representation of the person,” says the artist. Pixels as pigment.

DANIELLE EZZO

While circling back to early pictorialist photography, which often mimicked painting, Ezzo’s technique leans ahead, away from photography’s documentary roots. The results are alluring, and alarming.

“Macabre but seductive,” Ezzo says. “Somatic and psychological.”

She used to coax friends to sit for portraits, but with these, she says, “they’re coming out of the woodwork.”

“It’s like Halloween,” she adds. “We put on a persona and it liberates us from our own reality.”

www.danielleezzo.com

## YOUJIN MOON, 29

## Video artist

YOUJIN MOON

Moon came to Boston from Korea to pursue an MFA in painting. Now she's getting her second degree, as a video artist. She applies a painter's eye to her video work.

"I look at surface and texture, and how it collides on screen," says Moon.

The series of videos for her thesis project takes inspiration from the surfaces of the moons of Jupiter. The lushly layered videos feature natural scenes and urban ones, all shot by Moon. Watching them, you'll recognize something — ice, rushing water — until it warps, and the screen looks more like a living, pulsing, painterly abstraction, in which space twists and unfolds.

"I'm interested in how collage can create mental imagery of dreamlike spaces," Moon says. "I revisit the same place and find simple things, unconventional moments, different times of day. Then I create an improvisational depiction of uncanny space."

"If zero is reality and 10 is a fictional, invented world," she adds, "I want to deal with four, five, and six. I want to keep the viewer at the threshold between."

**www.youjinmoon.com**

YOUJIN MOON

## CORY JOHN PLOESSL, 28

### Installation and performance artist

### MassArt

CORY JOHN PLOESSL

Walk into the darkened room. A flight attendant escorts you to an airplane seat, beside a window buzzing with video. Audio kicks in. At first, it's standard airplane spiel, punctuated by the beep of a call button. Then things get dire: "Due to the recent global spread of (beep) . . . avoid contact with (beep)." Precautions escalate, as references are made to terrorism, weaponry, and "mucus at the biotech membrane system."

Ploessl's darkly comic thesis project, "Unfasten," examines how fear regulates society. In a second performance piece, he plays an unhinged, neurotic yoga instructor.

"Insecurity is vulnerability mixed with misunderstanding," Ploessl says. "It culminates in 'I'm not safe and I need to protect myself.' Oftentimes at the peril of others."

His earlier work — social action pieces made in Brazil and Boston — explored empathy. The thesis project questions empathy's flip side. All the work investigates how deeply woven into our society we are, like it or not.

"The idea I really want to get into is, are we truly autonomous beings?" says Ploessl.

**www.coryploessl.com**

## JOSUÉ ROJAS, 35

### Painter

### Boston University

JOSUE ROJAS

“The Joy of Exile,” Rojas’s painting installation festooned with wall drawings, has the quality of a fever dream: roiling color and gesture. Violent imagery leavened with pop culture references. Incantatory text.

The piece tells the tale of migration. Rojas calls it “a celebration of human mobility.” The painter was born in El Salvador, and his mother moved the family to San Francisco when he was small.

The installation doesn’t take for granted the devastation of being uprooted. The first image is of a corn kernel before its propulsive pop.

Rojas’s paintings sprang from his sketchbooks, where he poured his art before he had a studio. “This gave birth to that,” he says, showing off a sketchbook version of the painting “Son,” which features a broken tree, a clown swinging on gymnastic rings, Mayan numerology, and Central American birds.

JOSUE ROJAS

“Some of it is ambiguous for me,” Rojas admits. “There are moments in the creation where I’ve completely submitted to the process. The challenge has always been to put the books on the canvas. I think I’ve arrived at that.”

**www.josuerojasart.com**

## Now showing

**Boston University**

2015 MFA Thesis Exhibition. Through April 26.

808 Gallery,

808 Commonwealth Ave. 617-353-3371, www.bu.edu/cfa/2015-mfa-thesis-exhibitions

**Massachusetts College of Art and Design**

MFA Thesis Exhibitions 2015. April 22-May 4 (Youjin Moon); May 11-23 (Cory John Ploessl).

Bakalar and Paine Galleries, 621 Huntington Ave.

MassArt Special Film/Video Screening (Youjin Moon)

May 12, 7-9:30 p.m.,

Brattle Theatre, 40 Brattle St., Cambridge.

617-879-7166, www.massart.edu/mfa thesis15

**College of Art and Design, Lesley University**

MFA in Photography Thesis Exhibition. Through April 30. Lunder Arts Center,

1801 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge. 617-349-8800, www.lesley.edu/college-art-and-design/events

**School of the Museum of Fine Arts/Tufts University**

The Cyclorama Show: Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition. May 11-14, Boston Center for the Arts, 539 Tremont St. 617-369-3605, www.smfa.edu/cyclo-show

**2015 SMFA Graduate Thesis Screening**

END RECORDINGS.

(Helina Metaferia) April 30,

5:30 p.m. Remis Auditorium, Museum of Fine Arts,

465 Huntington Ave.

617-369-3605, www.smfa.edu/exhibitions-and-events

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