

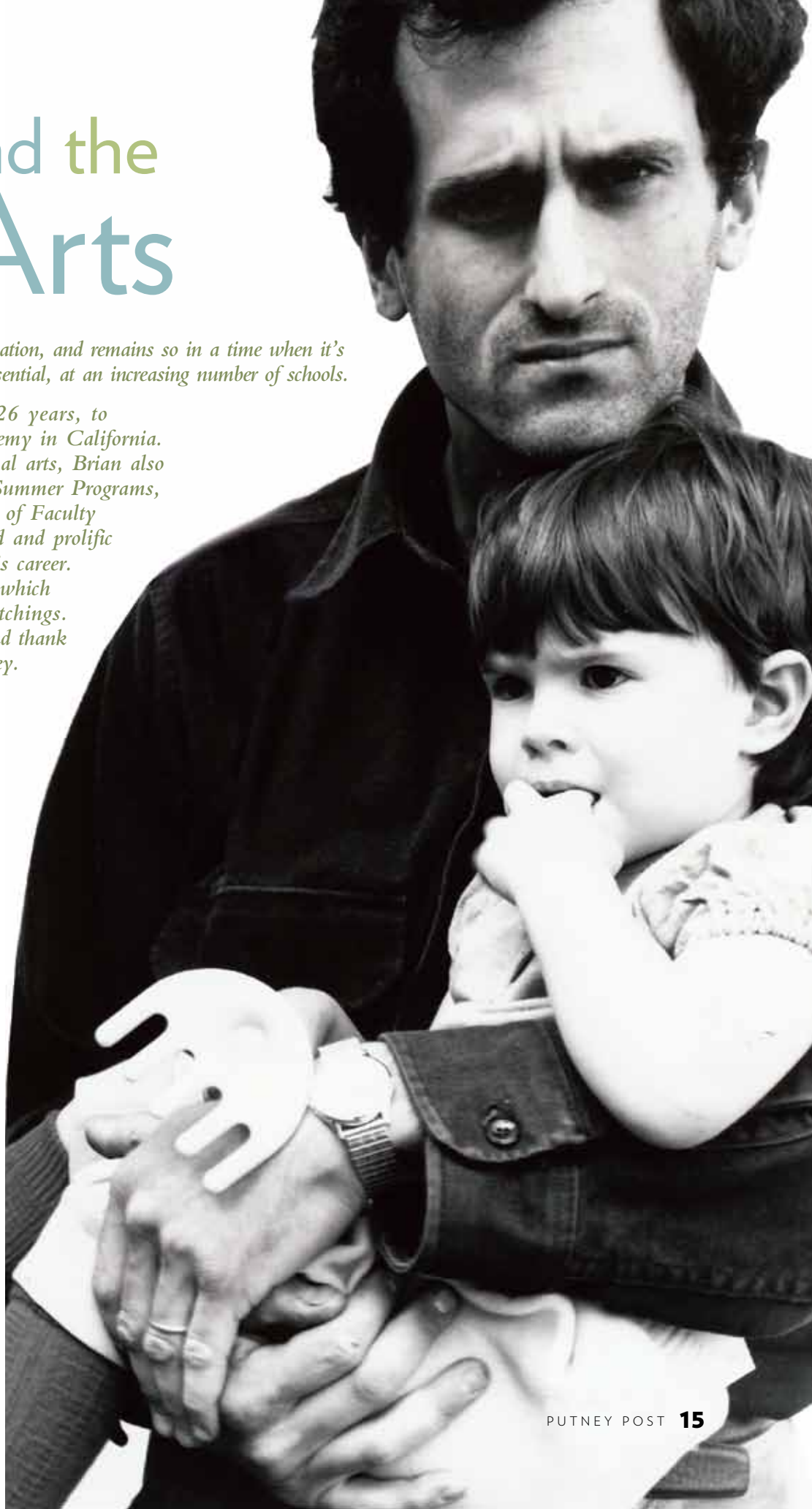
# Education and the Visual Arts

*Introduction: Art is central to the Putney education, and remains so in a time when it's being pushed to the periphery, or deemed inessential, at an increasing number of schools.*

*Brian Cohen left Putney in June, after 26 years, to become the director of Idyllwild Arts Academy in California. A passionate and gifted teacher of the visual arts, Brian also founded and directed The Putney School Summer Programs, now in its 25th year, and served as Dean of Faculty his last three years here. He is a renowned and prolific printmaker who has exhibited widely in his career. Brian is also the founder of Bridge Press, which publishes and prints artists' books and etchings. We wish him well in his new endeavors, and thank him for his many years of service to Putney.*

I just moved 376 boxes, mostly books and prints, to a new home in California. I get a little fussy about my books, and like to categorize them rather specifically by subject. I'm serious about this, but the more serious I get, the more trying the task becomes.

Let's take a book in my collection, *Typologies*, a book of photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher, a kind of documentary visual encyclopedia of industrial buildings. Where do I put it? It could likely go in the Photography section, simply because the Bechers took photographs. Or the art history section, because the Bechers were pioneering conceptual artists in Germany in the 1960s. Or the book arts section, as *Typologies* is a multi-page collection of serial images. Or in my separate section on industrial history, which includes books on mills in 19th century New England. Or in my architecture section. Or in a section on the hybrid field of study called industrial archaeology. Or in my landscape section specializing in photographs of structures erected in the landscape. It's a silly problem to have; but I want the book to be among like-spirited book-friends, and I want to be able to find it, and there are too many possible places for it to be.





**BRIAN HELPS AUDREY '12  
AND CORDELIA '11 HONE  
THEIR SKILLS.**

I thought I coined the term *extradisciplinary*, until I found it on the Internet already in use. By that term I meant looking deductively, in totality, and then determining means for further analysis and exploration. Let me offer an example. When Leonardo da Vinci became curious about the form of the human body, a subject to that point in Christian Europe more or less off-limits, he used what means he had—primarily observation through drawing and writing (and some cutting)—to inquire about the workings of the body and its parts and why things looked the way they did. The science of anatomy didn't really exist; medicine was more anecdotal than analytical; and science and art weren't yet regarded separately.

A little later in the Renaissance, as the notion of a modern liberal education evolved, the disciplines considered worthy of study weren't *subjects* as we think of them but rather the *means* of inquiry and communication—language, spoken and written, argument, analysis, and visual art.

Academics and arts are often separated in an implied hierarchy of importance and priority. They don't belong apart, and weren't born apart. What is art, or science, or math, or any endeavor of the intellect and spirit but exploration, observation, recognition, and translation? Art is informed by more than art; it can encompass and embrace every aspect of life and is an impetus and means for inquiry into other areas of human expression and endeavor. Chinua Achebe eloquently expresses an educational philosophy I embrace: "What you want to do as a teacher is to make people aware of the complexity of experience . . . this is what education should aim to do: to draw out from us what is there so that it can interact with what's outside."

Visual literacy is an essential skill. We encounter an endless array of images pretty much constantly, few of which we'd call art, yet all of which have been created to evoke or induce some effect in us

or communicate something to us. Our aptitude for visual and aural interpretation is vastly older, deeper, and quicker than our ability to interpret words. And as the visual precedes the verbal, so it defies and confounds it.

I rarely use the words "talent" or "creativity," as those words do a better job of keeping people away from art than helping them discover it. Creativity is discovering patterns, relationships, connections, and beauty—seeing itself is a creative act. The potential for creativity resides everywhere, in every subject, every decision, and every relationship. I remind students that what they are after is always within their own experience, capability, and feeling.

Educators are talking a lot about assessment these days, but education is too complex an enterprise to measure in one dimension. You learn more than one thing when you learn. What do we assess when we look for quality? Not just a momentary measure of what we already know we're looking for. When we assess students in art, we hope to learn something we didn't already know—what the student has discovered and shown us, if we are open to seeing and hearing it. Not just "is this good?"—but "what has this student discovered, what have they told me, what have they made me feel?" The full depth of assessment comes in time, in a student's growth and his or her own discovery. It is the evolution and development of thought and expression, and this education never stops. We are fortunate to see and guide it over the most formative years in a young artist's growth, adolescence, and the fact that at Putney the arts are so completely a part of our lives and learning is a blessing.

But I remember that it's never really easy. Samuel Beckett's admonition to "fail; fail again; fail better" has served as my personal credo as an artist. Beckett's quote recalls both the inevitability and necessity of failure as well as the ceaseless imperative to strive to get somewhere, and it reminds us of the vulnerability, uncertainty, and frustration of creative exploration.

Art offers something to draw from and to return to. (What have we created that we can be more proud of, in our anthropogenically damaged world?) By studying precedents for the work they undertake and experiencing the rich historical and multicultural array of the arts, students find recognition and embodiment of their own condition. And in creating art, the world is revealed to them, and they are shown to themselves. "We see the brightness of a new page where everything yet can happen." (Rilke)

# Joey Ellis '03

## is Saving the Environment Through Art

By Don Cuerdon



Beijing is to young, artistic expatriates such as Joey Ellis '03 these days what the Left Bank was for similarly minded people of the 1920s—a place outside the dominant paradigm to explore one's art. China might seem an ironic place to find one's artistic freedom, but this is exactly what has happened to this young alumnus.

Joey is the only Westerner to graduate from China's prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts sculpture program, where he earned a B.F.A. and won the award for best thesis after studying ceramics at Alfred University. To be the first-ever, he obviously did so against all odds. To succeed, Joey immersed himself in becoming Chinese. A story in the January 10, 2010 *New York Times* says he "... poured tea for his professors, carried their luggage, and gave the right gifts." He also used visual mnemonic tricks to master Mandarin.

Perhaps most importantly, he also mastered the concept of *guanxi*, the art of making connections. In return for his cultural immersion efforts, including his deferential treatment of his professors, his mentors found him work and treated him with respect. Since then he's let his work do the talking. In 2008 Joey earned \$70,000 creating sculptures for Chinese collectors and large corporations such as Chevron and Bank of America. To give you an idea of the economy of scale, Joey does much of his work in a 10,760-square-foot studio in Jingdezhen, a city teeming with porcelain artists, that he rents for \$245 per month.

Joey has a knack for creating beauty out of the mundane, such as his "China Tree" made in 2009 from 2,000 common vinegar and soy sauce pots purchased at local markets. The pots are strung together with string and lit from inside to create a thing of beauty that's 30 feet tall. He also has a gift for using art to convey ideas. At first it was simple notions of putting pictures and ideas on everyday ceramics, such as in-flight oxygen mask instructions on coffee mugs. And then Greenpeace called with a commission.

The result of collaborating with Greenpeace was "Tomorrow's Choice," a unique ice sculpture installation in Beijing in 2009. "The piece consisted of 100 life-size sculptures of children, individually hand carved from blocks of ice," says Joey. "They were then placed in the sun to represent the fragility of our children's futures due to climate change and its affect on the glacial melting of the Himalayas. The ice consisted of water collected from the Ganges, Yellow and Yangtze rivers, all of which are highly threatened due to the global climate crisis."



It was right about here that Joey truly began to learn what it is he wants to say with his artistic voice. He was chosen as a TED (Technology Entertainment and Design) Fellow in 2010. According to TED, “The TED Fellows program is designed to bring together young world-changers and trailblazers who have shown unusual accomplishment and exceptional courage.” Joey has shown both and his TED Talk is on YouTube. While attending what has come to be called TEDU, Joey met TED Fellow Colleen Flanigan, who helped him stumble upon the science of Biorock. This led him to Indonesia and Dr. Thomas J. Goreau, president of the Global Coral Reef Alliance, and a collaborator with marine scientist Professor Wolf H. Hilbertz in the creation of Biorock.

This does come back to art in a moment, but first a little science and ecology. Of Dr. Goreau, Joey says, “One of my main anthems in life is: For true information, you’ve got to go to the source. This guy was the source. He taught me not just about coral, but about how coral affects us all and how the sea itself is in fact even cooler than outer space. I immediately became a Goreau junkie and sucked in as much information as I could.” Part of that information was how to create an environment that not only encourages coral growth, but does so in an accelerated fashion—and, in Joey’s case, in the form of undersea sculpture.

“Biorock sculptures are metal rods that have an electrical pulse flowing through them at all times (mostly powered by solar or wind energy),” says Joey. “Then, sea minerals begin to react with the electrified metal itself to create a reaction that builds a coat of limestone around the metal. The limestone grows, slow but strong, and after a year it is harder than concrete. Coral loves limestone, so corals then begin to make their home in these new ‘reefs.’ What’s interesting is that when you give coral ‘shock therapy,’ it stimulates coral growth at rates of up to five times normal.”

The result of this study was a series of undersea sculptures named BIOROCK, now part of the Gili Islands Eco Trust, in Lombok, Indonesia. But, again, that was just the stepping stone to the next phase: helping the Chinese people move away from dynamite fishing and toward eco-tourism by “building” Biorock reefs that also protect shorelines from erosion, create sea grass and mangrove lagoons, and encourage biodiversity of the oceans.

To do this, Joey went back to China and started the Laowai Collaborative. *Laowai*, the Mandarin word for outsider, is a nod to Joey’s foreign status in China, despite his immersion efforts. One of the projects of the organization is Kung-Fu for Coral, a campaign to raise funds for translating the large database of coral reef publications into Chinese, says Joey, “using graphic design, animation and just plain writing as an instrument for change. Throughout the process we will reconstruct the information into public-friendly design and animation that simplifies what’s at stake and highlights how to rectify the problem.”

We’re sure the adventure into art, environment, and meaning won’t end there. Keep an eye on this guy. He’s walking the talk.

To learn more about Joey Ellis, the Laowai Collaborative, and Kung-Fu for Coral, visit <http://cargocollective.com>.



# Summer Programs at 25

THE PAINTING STUDIO BUSTLING  
WITH HAPPY STUDENTS



**SUMMER PROGRAMS  
STUDENTS DRAWING  
AT THE PUDDLE**

It's the first day of the second session of the 25th year of The Putney School Summer Programs. Five chamber musicians are sight-reading Handel's *Queen of Sheba*; five international students are enacting slow-motion fight scenes as an ice-breaker; in the weaving studio, looms are being threaded; and in the jewelry studio, a young girl from San Francisco holds a soldering torch in her hand, a silver ring clamped in front of her and a nervous expression on her face.

Josh is an 18-year-old, second-year student from Philadelphia. His high school has a strong performing arts program, but his passion is for fiber arts. Josh wanted to weave, to sew, to *make things*. Last summer, he found Putney, where he dove into weaving and wearable arts. This summer, in the weaving studio, his mannequins sport hand-sewn shirts and the beginnings of his woven dresses, muslin patterns are cut and stitched, and hand-beaded fabric samples sit ready to transform into a dress.

Josh credits Putney with providing him formal instruction, and immediately taking his skills to a higher level. It is, he says, "a place where people with passions can come and develop them in a serious work environment. The teachers get to the essence of what we want to do, and help us make it happen." And, he adds, "everyone's a character."

Kyle, a second-year student from North Carolina, is downright exuberant about the power of Summer Programs. "Before I came to Putney, I had a misconception that all teenagers were boring, judgmental, and only eager to grow up and leave behind innocent fun. At Putney I was proved wrong. It was the first time I met the kind of people who will frolic and sing in green fields without being self-conscious." Sing, she says, especially helps to break down the walls teenagers have. Her Putney experience "helped me open up in my

high school [back home]. I connected with people of all ages, just like at Putney, and I had the best year ever."

The experience of Putney Summer Programs might be best summed up in a single word from Anna, a student from France: "*Finally!*," she said. "Finally, here were people who could go beyond boundaries and explore outside the classroom," people who shared her passion for the arts.

In his poem "Lanyard," Billy Collins gently chides himself for giving his mother a lanyard—made at summer camp, of course—as a thank you for the many things she had given him in her life—shelter, love, food. At Putney, Summer Programs students are more likely to read "Lanyard" than they are to make one. There are no canoes, no archery range. It's not a camp. It's a chance for students who are serious about art to meet each other, to explore individually and together their creativity, to hone their skills, and to expand their young artistic voices.

Summer Programs began 25 years ago as a small summer arts experience for local kids. The second year, returning students brought friends, and in the following years, dorms were opened to boarders and the program continued to grow in size, program, and diversity. Music and dance were added when the Michael S. Currier Center was completed, and standard parts of The Putney School academic year experience—including Sing, afternoon and evening activities, and milk lunch—remain central to the experience. Today, Summer Programs hosts more than 200 students in two three-week sessions.

Tom Howe, director of Summer Programs since 2001, sees these students' experiences as common—but certainly not ordinary. "Our students often

**"I was moved to tears at the final Sing, seeing all these teenagers so exuberantly engaged."**

**Summer Programs parent**

say 'I found my tribe here.' It allows young people to get support, to come out of a school setting and into a place where other people share their passions." Tom sees students becoming bolder, opening up, and sharing their talents.

Kyle agrees, and sees the benefit of three-week sessions. "At Putney I created the best art of my life. Because we are all forced to throw our entire selves into the experience so quickly, there was no time to be reserved or self-conscious. For some people, it's the only place they can be themselves; but in my case, Putney helped me learn to have that freedom in other places."

Rex, a student from New York, cites the creativity of the students and faculty as definitive to the Putney experience. He says "everyone who attends Putney—students, counselors, and teachers—is understanding and creative." He also thinks the campus, "isolated and beautiful," makes for a great setting for students to really bond with each other.

The Summer Programs drama teacher, Julia Perlowski, hails from Long Island, and lives in Florida. She's been coming to Putney for the past three summers. "At Putney my work moves forward more in six weeks than it does during the entire winter in Florida." To Julia, it's the collaboration that sets the experience apart. "At Putney I can *really* examine what collaboration is. It's not just sharing a room and a workload. It's getting all of the disparate voices together, so that when they look at the final product, they all see themselves in it."

Simone Paasche, an apprentice teacher in poetry, sees her role as existing between student and teacher. Her job is "setting a good example, and being the best version of myself." This means writing appropriately, and editing student work in a way that teaches students to evaluate themselves after they leave Putney. "At Putney, students have two instructors reviewing poetry with them. They receive great attention and feedback, much more personalized than they'll find at most colleges."

Tom Howe has made very few fundamental changes to the program. It's about community—no cell phones, no laptops—with activities designed to bring people together, from an overnight camping trip, to kickball, contra dances, dorm life, and a work day spent beautifying the campus. The goal is to break down walls, and build a place where kids feel safe extending themselves. Programs are offered

in visual arts, theater, music, dance, farm, creative writing, and ESOL. "It's like a double project week," says Tom. The students each choose two activities, and dive into them fully for three weeks, with afternoon and evening activities providing a fun break from the intense work.

By the end of the second week, every Summer Programs student has had a chance to present work in front of the group, and to see every other student's work. It's the risk-taking in the creative process that Tom sees as Summer Programs' most important experience. "If students are pushed to the edge in their exploration, and they truly stretch, then risk-taking is something they'll strive to achieve wherever they go, something they'll recognize in themselves, and something others will recognize in them."

"Even those who come here and don't pursue arts with a single-minded focus still benefit from opening their minds to the possibilities arts bring to their way of thinking, in all that they do. They become more process-oriented. They appreciate the art of exploration and the unknown, and the process of discovery."



**JOSH AND ONE OF HIS MANY CREATIONS**  
<below> **EACH SESSION, SUMMER PROGRAMS STUDENTS SPEND A MORNING CLEANING PUTNEY'S CAMPUS.**

## "Everyone's beautiful at Putney. It's just in the water."

*Post Secret* evening activity group

