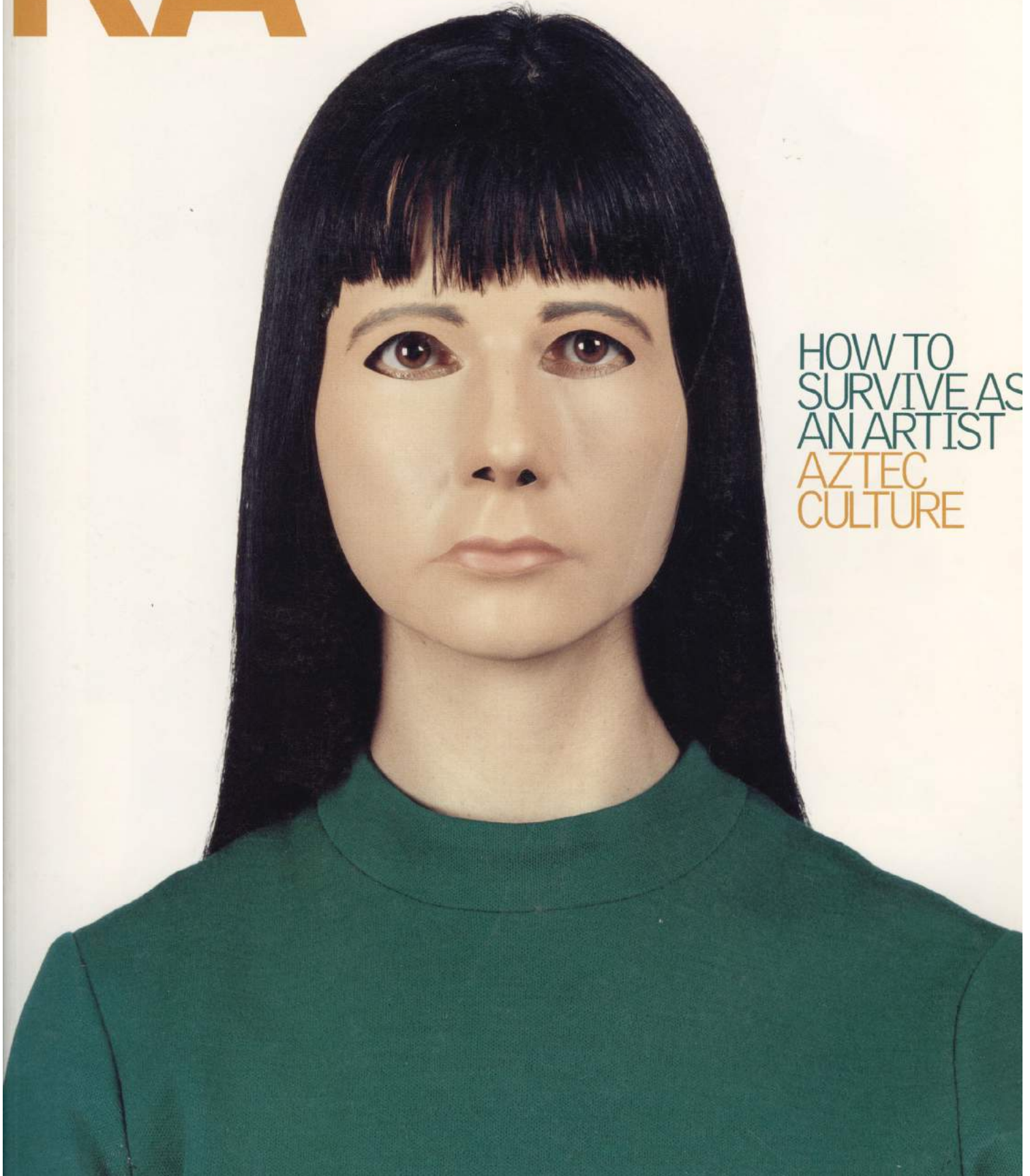


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The future isn't always bright. Morgan Falconer looks at the concerns faced by young artists on the brink of the real world

# GRASPING AT GLORY

I knew I had struck gold the moment I set eyes on Joe Duggan. Seeing his work was only the half of it. I got to the Royal College of Art bright and early with the rest of the prospectors, sped around the Final Year Degree Show, and found Duggan's brash, comic, conceptual self-portraits in the photography galleries. Then I went to search him out, rounded the corner and saw him, taking a business card from the hands of Charles Saatchi. Great minds think alike.

Duggan was a little red in the face by the time I reached him. Understandably, he was a little taken aback. But he was probably also slightly embarrassed, since a crowd of his college friends had been loitering by a nearby desk when the fairy godfather arrived. And one can only guess what was going through their heads. Maybe they thought Duggan's success was justly deserved, maybe they thought it was just deserts – some think such early attention only hastens the end. But they probably thought a bit of both: the degree shows incite a fever of tension, and whether or not students are hoping to be swept up by good fortune, it can feel like a merciless trial.

Simon Keenleyside was another artist being fed through the mill that day. A graduating painter, his work was hanging in a choice location right at the entrance and was already selling. What did he hope to get out of the day, I asked? Sales? Contacts? Gallery representation? 'A long holiday' was probably what he wanted to say: as it turned out, Keenleyside was graduating in more ways than one that day, since his wife was in hospital about to give birth. He admirably contained himself, however, and said no, he wasn't pinning too much on the show's outcome. Indeed, as he explained, many of his peers were ambivalent about gallery represen-

tation. They want time to digest the lessons of college before they commit to something. In the meantime they want to organise shows among themselves and enjoy the freedom while it lasts – hopefully not too long.

Notably, both Duggan and Keenleyside had done their undergraduate degrees outside London, but had come to the capital to be at the centre of things. Understandably, artists committed enough to venture another two or three years of study after their first degree want the best location; many embark on such a course years afterwards, when the undertaking is all the more a risk. It's London that has the bustling scene of trendy galleries, and London that offers the best hope of a show with a major commercial dealer. So for better or worse, it's London's postgraduate schools that are the magnet for aspiring artists.

Over the summer I toured around a selection of these schools' degree shows in the company of Chris Orr, Head of Printmaking at the Royal College of Art, to gauge our different reactions and to pick out some talent. Myself, a critic, with no experience of art school; Orr, an artist, with eyes on its daily realities. It's an interesting time to look, because things have been changing among students and staff alike. The media's excitement over the young British scene has created a range of different, sometimes contrary attitudes, as a new pluralism of styles and media has been refashioning art and artists since the 1960s. In short, today's postgraduate, standing on the cusp of life in the real art world, is not the same creature she was ten years ago.

As ever, it's money that makes the world turn most of all. But it's an imbalance of money: a ballooning surplus in the re-branded 'creative indus-



tries'; a deficit in the student's pocket. As Orr rightly says: 'There's more desperation in the air since the introduction of student loans. The average postgraduate leaves college with a debt of around £15,000, so it's understandable that money is very much on their minds. But it tends to have quite different effects. It either prompts a total rejection of commercial values, usually prior to graduation – perhaps through fear of failing – or their wholehearted embrace, usually after graduation when the cold wind blows.'

The small matter of loans is something that has caused a lot of hand-wringing recently, and as I discovered, it's not just among the students. Some years ago the government wrested control of grants from a number of colleges which had previously dispensed awards at their own discretion. The Slade was one of those affected, and one staff



**JOE DUGGAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY**

Like a lot of students today, Duggan was selling work over the internet even before his graduating show, through sites such as artjunkie.com, so there was much less pressure to succeed then and there. His only goal right now is to clear his Mastercard bill, he told me. His work was attracting a huge amount of attention at the opening, however: it's memorable, readable but puzzling work. In some pictures he appears in theatrical backdrops with a mannequin family (left, 'Portrait of an Artist as a Family Man, 2'); in others he stands alone, taking on stereotypes such as that of a religious devotee. Duggan came to study in London after an undergraduate degree in Birmingham. He said that in the Midlands he thought he was following trends, but it was London that really opened his eyes.

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