

Nuit Blanche Night School

By Jade Colbert

From dusk 'til dawn on September 29 and 30, Hart House was transformed into a place, at first glance, wholly different from its day-to-day self. From the rows of torches and cobwebs of light that greeted your entrance, to the "readings" given deep within the belly of the building, the House became Night School as part of this year's Nuit Blanche, Toronto's annual "all night contemporary art thing".

Part installation, part instructional video, part participatory experience, Night School defined the term 'surreal'. Wholly strange yet wholly familiar, visitors who walked the House's halls were treated to that other side of school life: secret desires, weird science, kaleidoscopic memories, and lessons in all the skills your high school guidance councillor hoped you'd never learn. Students and alumni alike found the exhibit wholly suitable to its surroundings.

Fifth-year student, Jessica Herschman, who travelled the various Nuit Zones fairly extensively, said that the goings-on at Hart House were some of the highlights of the evening. "It foregrounded the act of learning for me," she said. "Through humour, it inventively brought to my attention what we learn and the way we teach. I liked that."

The success of Night School was due to its ability to call up anecdotes from its audience. For anyone who's ever had a late night, deeply philosophical discussion about what it might be like to be an ant, this show had definite appeal.

Case in point: everyone has had a teacher whom they admired, even if but from afar. (Come on, admit it, at least one.) In "Slow Dance with Teacher", Darren O'Donnel dimmed the lights in the Great Hall, cleared the floor, and invited you to rest your head on the shoulder of a surrogate for that person you really wanted to invite to the school dance.

Another popular Hart House attraction, especially amongst photographers, was Will Kwan's giant kaleidoscope, which turned Kwan's collection of images of the West's view of Cathay into lace-like abstractions. This powerful signifier for relations between "west" and "east", also mimicked the ways in which prior knowledge can meld in the mind to create an overall impression, one perhaps difficult to tie to what was originally learned.

Accompanying these installations and performances were several videos instructing viewers on such topics as "Teaching a plant the alphabet" and "Funk Lessons". In the courtyard, the packed House enjoyed a full range of snacks and a "MiNi BAR", where all the drinks were mixed from mini liquor bottles. Hart House Tutors, volunteers wearing white academic robes, interspersed themselves throughout the crowd, expostulating on the essentials of higher education, including creating and delivering convincing excuses and justifications for sleeping in. Ultimately, it was this final touch that personalized Night School and made it one of the experiences for which Nuit Blanche at Hart House is becoming known. Can you get a degree in that?