

MFA 2026 Thesis



NEW YORK ACADEMY OF ART

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Mission

The New York Academy of Art is a graduate school that combines intensive technical training in the fine arts with active critical discourse. We believe that rigorously trained artists are best able to realize their artistic vision. Academy students are taught traditional methods and techniques and encouraged to use these skills to make vital contemporary art. The Academy serves as a creative and intellectual center for all artists dedicated to highly skilled, conceptually aware figurative and representational art.

New York Academy of Art 2026 MFA Thesis Exhibition
Julie Baumgardner

Is it even useful anymore to categorize artwork being made contemporaneously into the historical categorizations of the academic art cannon? That's one unwieldy way of asking if art history's classifications of genre and subject are relevant in the 21st century's quarter life crisis. Without question are the formalist techniques of classical painting, sculpture and draughting are very much in practice on the walls of the world's great institutions and inside the academy, which is where we lay our scene here now, with the output of New York Academy of Art's Master of Fine Arts 2026 graduating class.

The 36 artists who've spent the last two years in the program deepening their skills and broadening their scope now have the opportunity to exhibit a singular work from their ever-expanding oeuvre. In this 2026 MFA Thesis Exhibition, expect to find mostly painting that follows the school's guiding mantra of "Traditional Skills, Contemporary Discourse," with flashes of Remington's equine expanses, Kirchner's slinky ladies, Maria Lassnig's body absurdity, Henry Moore's contours. The beauty of tradition remains alive, but unencumbered by the social molding of their times.

To look and make sense of the Thesis Exhibition means to not slot these works into, say, time-honored movements or styles for the ideas coming out of the academy are playing multiple tunes/games/levels. While it may be a big ask of students to be the arbiters of now *and* the harbingers to come, being inside a pedagogical environment lends to being open and receptive—a mind still open to imagination—not yet hardened and molded by the forces of the external world. Students are in a unique position of being a product of their time and producing an artifact of their time.

These terms matter, of course, in that classification provides context; and thus familiar filters to understand the world, and just as language itself is ever updating, as Victor Hugo so poetically once wrote, “le mot, qu’on le sache, est un Être vivant” (the word is a living being),” an organism that shifts and morphs as it grows (ages?), so to do the way we classify or contextualize as well.

Some environments have flattened art just to its image. In a post-genre world, art did not die, even if Danto proclaimed it to be—it simply has had to expand. In fact, to return to the original question, if these works speak anything to collective artistic production (and their very nature does), it would be remiss to talk about them through these traditional taxonomies, and instead look at how these artists are representing their world. Language of movement and genres that came before provide a faint footprint of stylistic similarities, but torch bearers of convention this crop of artists isn’t. But that’s not to say all has been shed from their forebearers either. The exhibition includes a classical *Maiden* head bust from Chubb Fellow, **Korbyn Carleton** and **Ellie Shafiei’s** *Shadows in the Gallery*, a gender-gaze remix of Picasso’s *Demoiselles* certainly rooted in the cannon, for example.

And so, this display of 40 different artists, all coming from different identity perspectives as well as lived-experiences, with their ears tuned to the frequencies of the now, offer a loosely woven thesis of what representation is/can be through the prism of the self. What a clunky sentence, but at present, the language we have remains in its rigid forms and fails us often by being either too broad, too fixed, too specific in its meaning. In fact, painter **Bruce Jee** submitted his *Untitled*, a series of abstracted shapes that look like an alphabet system of a language that doesn’t exist but still feels familiar, embodying almost exactly the problematics with language.

Hark back to Roland Barthes' 1969 essay, "Is Painting a Language," in which the theorist points out that the language we speak is the same as we use to talk about art is the same and thus can't avoid the "crisis of language," or "language as ideological constraint." But, there's always a catch, and or way out of "the trap" as Barthes puts it. (For him, it's "relief (the restfulness) of being able to create something that isn't directly caught in the trap of language," such as the act of painting.)

It bears mentioning that identity is no longer the self. Identity is both assumed, and subsumed, into larger sociopolitical structures both invisibly and overtly control how we inhabit our bodies and statues in society. Thus, social political messaging is present near all of the works—not explicitly about those social/political messages. Rather, a portrait of anything these days cannot exist without its sociopolitical signifiers, even if there is an impulse of late to move away from the Deconstructivist / Marxist filter that both the academy and institution rely on to situate so much contemporary art work almost as means of reverence and instant canonization. We've also borne witness to the last decades' attempts at placing identity front-and-center almost as an aesthetic qualification, which led to a great flattening of individual voices and identitarian nuance, leaving room for far too much tokenism, or even worse reductive reactions.

So just what's at play in the Thesis Exhibition? A case for a new read of Portraiture. Big bold claim, but not gold-framed hung pictures of kings, queens and court jesters. Instead, a remix of portraiture—one that includes all definitions of the self, all angles and framing, interior or exterior vantage points, representational and metaphorical too. The image of the self that we have or see today has well expanded beyond Panofsky; instead, an acknowledgement that in these current days, what we experience and think about is thoroughly filtered through ourselves.

We are in the age of the self. Everything is of the self and a reflection of oneself. We are the reflective lake as much as Narcissus gazing in self-reflection. In that way, the representation of oneself either literally, metaphorically, anthropomorphically, transformatively or otherwise seeps broadly into even the most formal of definitions of portraiture.

“The etymology of the term ‘portraiture’ indicates the genre’s association with likeness and mimesis,” wrote Shearer West in the Oxford History of Art’s Portraiture compendium, “Likeness is not a stable concept.” And such, the flexibility afforded our innate beings as ever-shifting. As such, if the very thing that portraiture has long been representing, capturing or alluding to continues to wiggle and dance its way through new iterations, then certainly the format must adjust, too.

West also in her tome lays out that “all portraits involve a series of negotiations,” and all negotiations have demands, ones that bend and stretch throughout the process. In fact, painter **Marcus Venegas**, showing his pastel *Crossed by the Sidewalk* (blended out with makeup brushes), engages his queer friends to pose, by giving a set of instructions that then they interpret through their own self-portraits, giving both Venegas and his subjects equal agency in the negotiation.

This exhibition offers a view of representing the self and the world the self lives in during our current “post-this, post-that” era, where tradition and progression are entwined in a whirlpool of influence, that isn’t encumbered by the classical constraints but still embodies what’s meaningful about definition.

The show contains compelling head-on self-portraits, including darling haunting examples from **Bay Weli** and **Michelle Palatnik** or the graphically spliced illusionist example from **Sarah Fingret**; as well as plenty of representational portraiture, including **Andrea Olivia's** Black birthday girl *1 in 4* or **Riham ElSadany's** *I Am No Fool*, both works which have an undercurrent of Pierrot at play (metonymic sad clown). Yet, all these works, especially as they sit alongside their peers' works, highlight an expansion of portraiture, situating the works' underlying mood. After all, that is the way we look now.

One theme observed is the deployment of anthropomorphism, whether a metaphorical strategy to represent the self/personhood or the embodiment (metonymy) of one. **Karim Machado-Aman's** powerful portraits of chiaroscuro candelabra convey his own struggle with mental illness. Of course, the most common association of anthropomorphism is applying human characteristics onto animals, and found in the show are **Yuchen Zhan's** *Two Lunatics* depicting grizzly bears and **Kevin Rodríguez Rodríguez's** the spirit/alma of the tropics, *Caribbean Steel* positions the sea fish as a symbol the strength and resilience of Puerto Rico.

But transposing the human experience onto static objects, too, suggests that in our material world just how materiality can embody our humanness, just as with **David Ort's** woodblock *Path No. 7* of a garden bench, or **Katie Brannen's** *Grandma's Piano*, where gesso and charcoal render a spectral scene with sunlight hitting the musical instrument, suggesting her matriarch's ghostly presence, a remembrance of a life loved and lived. Then there's **Carly Kate Andrew's** *Brush Soap*, depicting a block of cleaning agent riddled with presumably blood, evoking the human stain, the patina of our existence upon the objects we use and batter. And nature, too, gets the humanized treatment from **Corinne Howard's** sumptuous cyanotype *Falling*, a decayed leaf forever memorialized in portraiture, as her way of "manifesting the disembodied," while **Helen Wordsworth** oil-on-pastel floralscape *St. Therese* is "the slow patient unfolding of something alive."

Embodiment, truly of inhabiting our bodies, is also heavily on view on this exhibition, in a theme that in line with today's lingo can best be summed up as Powermaxxing—that is, an unstoppable quest towards empowerment through aesthetic reclamation, whether in the gaze, the rawness of expression or agency. The charged painted portraits from **Sierra Merda** or **Angel Reese**, rendering women's bodies often socially discarded for their weight, wrinkles or other perceived imperfections blanced of their shame, and instead accepting and reveling in their being and beauty. Similarly, the ownership of power in fantasy comes alive in **Amra-Faye Wright's** *The Bathtub*, whose penchant for cinematic staging feels like an undiscovered B-roll by Fassbender.

Meanwhile, **Lillian Cordes' Flex**, a pink-hued dreamscape of a nude woman dripping in her sensuality is framed by draped sheer nylon fabric, almost like a stage curtain, toying with the idea of just who is performing (and for whom). Then through sculpture, a medium still associated with male artists, **Genesis** softens stone with tender and care that belie her feminist and empowered messages that she engraves into her sloganized stele (this example reads "Dejame Ir" or "let me go"), using both concept and material to almost trick the viewer out of their own preconceived notions. Finally, **Alexandra Ying** fashioned a figure emerging from her Italian alabaster almost like a primordial or divine feminine figure breaking from a rigid confines—she's almost free at last.

That idea of transformation, or finding new form also comes alive in the third theme of "altered states," where these artists are imagining a different self, whether in the physical or emotional, an imagining of a different humanity. Whether **Areeba Afreen Qureshi's** elongated Giacometti-esque figures or **Becky Schuman's** otherworldly child or **Catalina Gold's** spiritual body study of the light from within emanating outward, the human form is altered to reach a higher state of consciousness; just as **Xi Wu** in *The Collapse of the Sun* is chasing a "moment of serenity."

Thomas Sternglass investigates soft power through cinematic self-portraiture, and his “Babble On” here shows a king-type character who in reality is a failed authority, a tragic misread of self-interiority. **Daniel Hughes’** *Am I You* in its vivid colorful expression knocks at growth and change, a portrait of a man shadowed by a fiery figure behind him; whereas **Charlotte Essex’s** hidden and haunting *Tairseach* asks if the physical body and emotional self can be in multiple vantages at once—and is absence nothingness, just as asks the figure in **Tako Bartishvili’s** *Other Voices, Other Room* sits without a face (an identity)?

And portraiture today could not exist without the recognition of absurdity of the human condition, and no better to sum up our self-aware satirical stupidity (that’s been informed by our constant self-monitoring) than **Tal Tamam’s** *Many Are the Thyrs Bearers, but Few Are the Mystics*, wherein she uses 3D modeling programs to reimagine social interactions, the kinds that often come from a place of anxiety or failure, but from the view of a God or ghost observing from above—you know, like how your most embarrassing moment loops in your memory forever? That awkwardness, that uncertainty too comes alive in **Allison Gamertsfelder’s** *The Daughters* recalling the humiliation of childhood performance through a theater scene of the adorable gone absurd; or even **Turner Mohan’s** *Renter*, a plaster portrait of man on a scooter-for-hire where fragility of material in contrast with the action, suggests both a silliness and impermanence of his safety and status security. Then, **Isabella Ronchetti**, known for her exquisite corps card deck, offers a portrait of life [*painting in the box*], a tight composition of seemingly unrelated objects revealing a character study, each quadrant a puzzle piece of a curious self.

Then finally, the transcendents. Whether it's the decolonizing of Native American portraiture from **Emily Smith**, or **Arwa Mahmoud's** *Flour II* embodying the the vulnerability of life under the threat of war and ethnic cleansing, or **Yaruk Mehmood's** *Veils of Despair*, or **Giorgi Popiashvili's** *Mother* enshrouded by darkness, pain finds new form. These portraits, informed by generational and systemic trauma, relieve the self through unafraid expression.

It's been posited that in our current age, the self is more important than expression, and art can't survive without expression. If there's a takeaway from this Thesis Exhibition, it's framing around portraiture grants a filter of objectivity. It removes the loaded baggage of language and puts each artists' ideas on even-footing.

These works are all rooted in human experience, and in turn, are proposals for new possibilities, vulnerable and unafraid. Reverent of the old mode but willed to repurpose conventional frameworks to fit today's conditions (a centering of the self in all), this show is a signal that expression is alive and well in art making. The self still stands, but firmly next to expression.

Chubb Fellows 2026

Korbyn Carleton

Sierra Merda

Andr a Olivia



Korbyn Carleton
Maiden 1, 2026
stoneware, flashe, and casein
21 x 13 x 17 inches



Sierra Merda
VVITCH, 2025
acrylic and oil on canvas
68 x 72 inches



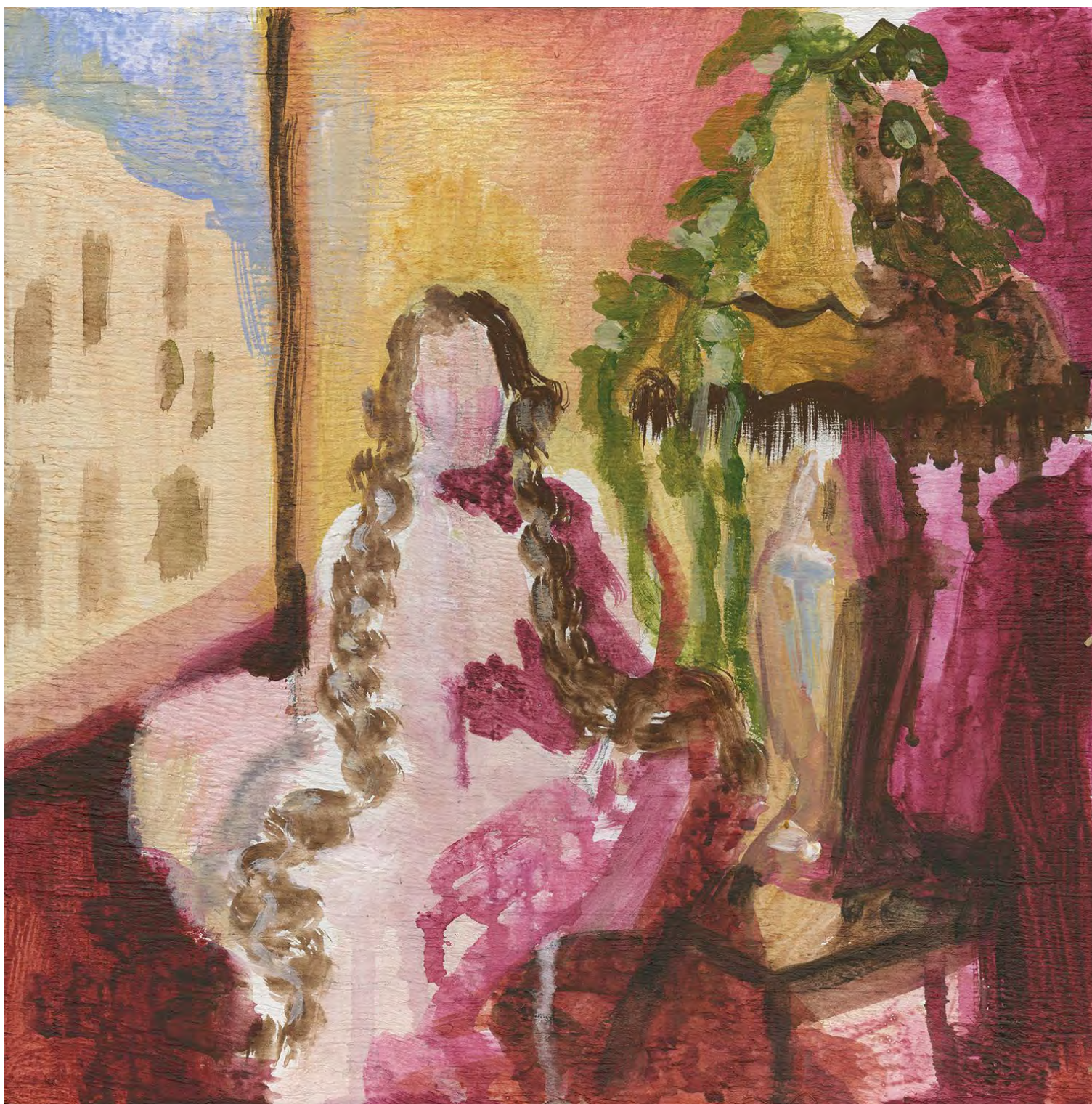
Andrèa Olivia
1 in 4, 2025
oil on wood
32 x 28 inches

Class of 2026

Carly Kate Andrew	Michelle Palatnik
Tako Bartishvili	Giorgi Popiashvili
Katie Brannen	Areeba Afreen Qureshi
Lillian Cordes	Angel Reese
Riham ElSadany	Kevin Rodríguez Rodríguez
Charlotte Essex	Isabella Ronchetti
Sarah Fingret	Becky Schuman
Allison Gamertsfelder	Ellie Shafiei
Genesis	Emily Alexandria Sarah Smith
Catalina Gold	Thomas Sternglass
Corinne Howard	Tal Tamam
Daniel Hughes	Marcus Venegas
Bruce Jee	Bay Weli
Karim Machado-Aman	Helen Wordsworth
Arwa Mahmoud	Amra-Faye Wright
Yaruk Mehmood	Xi Wu
Turner Mohan	Alexandra Ying
David Ort	Yuchen Zhan



Carly Kate Andrew
Brush Soap, 2025
oil on panel
36 x 48 inches



Tako Bartishvili

Other Voices, Other Rooms, 2026

acrylic on wood panel

12 x 12 inches



Katie Brannen
Grandma's Piano, 2025
gesso, charcoal, and shellac on panel
40 x 30 inches



Lillian Cordes
Flex, 2025
acrylic and nylon on canvas
36 x 30 inches



Riham ElSadany
I Am No Fool, 2026
oil on canvas
82 x 48 inches



Charlotte Essex

Tairseach, 2025

charcoal, pastel pencil, and acrylic on paper

40 x 56 inches



Sarah Fingret
Sever, 2025
graphite on paper
10 x 7 inches



Allison Gamertsfelder
The Daughters, 2025
oil on canvas
24 x 36 inches



Genesis
Deja me ir, 2026
quartz
4 x 4 inches



Catalina Gold
Spiritual Body Study, 2026
pastel on paper
30.9375 x 30.25 inches



Corinne Howard

Falling, 2025

graphite and tape on cyanotype

11 x 8 inches

edition unique



Daniel Hughes
Am I You, 2026
oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches



Bruce Jee
Untitled, 2026
oil on linen
30 x 24 inches



Karim Machado-Aman
Bubble Bath, 2025
oil on linen
62 x 48 inches



Arwa Mahmoud
Flour II, 2025
oil on wood
27 x 24 inches



Yaruk Mehmood

Veils of Despair, 2025

charcoal, ink, and malmal on paper

46 x 36 inches



Turner Mohan
Renter, 2025
plaster
19 x 9 x 9.5 inches



David Ort
Path No.7, 2025
woodcut
18 x 24 inches
edition 1 of 8



Michelle Palatnik
Self-Portrait, 2024
oil on board
12 x 12 inches



Giorgi Popiashvili

Mother, 2025

oil on canvas

48 x 30 inches



Areeba Afreen Qureshi
Tum Se Phir Aap Huay, 2025
oil on canvas
107 x 59 inches



Angel Reese
Shifting Vessel, 2025
oil on canvas
8 x 8 inches



Kevin Rodríguez Rodríguez
Caribbean Steel, 2025
oil and acrylic on canvas
24 x 49 inches



Isabella Ronchetti
[painting in the box], 2026
oil on paper
52 x 30 inches



Becky Schuman
Migration at High Noon, 2025
oil on Yupo paper
60 x 86.5 inches



Ellie Shafiei
Shadows in the Gallery, 2025
oil on canvas
48 x 36 inches



Emily Alexandria Sarah Smith
Cherokee Youths Getting Ready for a Powwow, 2026
acrylic on canvas
36 x 48 inches



Thomas Sternglass
Babble On, 2025
oil on canvas
36 x 48 inches



Tal Tamam
Many Are the Thyrsus Bearers, but Few Are the Mystics, 2025
oil on canvas
54 x 64 inches



Marcus Venegas
Crossed by the Sidewalk, 2026
pastel on paper
70 x 50 inches



Bay Weli
Between Two Lights, 2026
oil on canvas
16 x 12 inches



Helen Wordsworth
St. Therese, 2025
oil pastel on paper
100 x 57 inches



Amra-Faye Wright
The Bathtub, 2025
oil on canvas
24 x 36 inches



Xi Wu
The Collapse of the Sun, 2025
oil on linen
9 x 12 inches



Alexandra Ying
Cocoon, 2025
Italian alabaster
7 x 18 x 6 inches



Yuchen Zhan
Two Lunatics, 2025
oil on canvas
30 x 40 inches

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HISTORY

The New York Academy of Art was founded in 1982 by artists, scholars and patrons of the arts, including Andy Warhol, to foster a resurgence in the training of figurative and representational art. The Academy has since developed into a 501 (c)(3) non-profit cultural institution housing the nation's first graduate school of figurative art, a continuing education program, the region's most in-depth figurative art library, an extensive exhibition and lecture series, and iconic New York City events such as Take Home a Nude and Tribeca Ball.

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