

EDUCATORS SYMPOSIUM // ICON 10

## BEYOND STORYTELLING:

Teaching a Writing Practice  
to Illustrators

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*SLIDE: [image] A collage of covers of books of critical writing on design from various publishers and authors.*

Within the applied arts practices, we have noted the vast amount of material written about design, and how the primary authors of these writings are considered authorities on design matters. Due to the design communities well-developed writing practice, this authority, at times, carries over into related fields such as illustration. By contrast, a well-formed writing practice on illustration by illustrator/writers with similar breadth and influence is all but missing.

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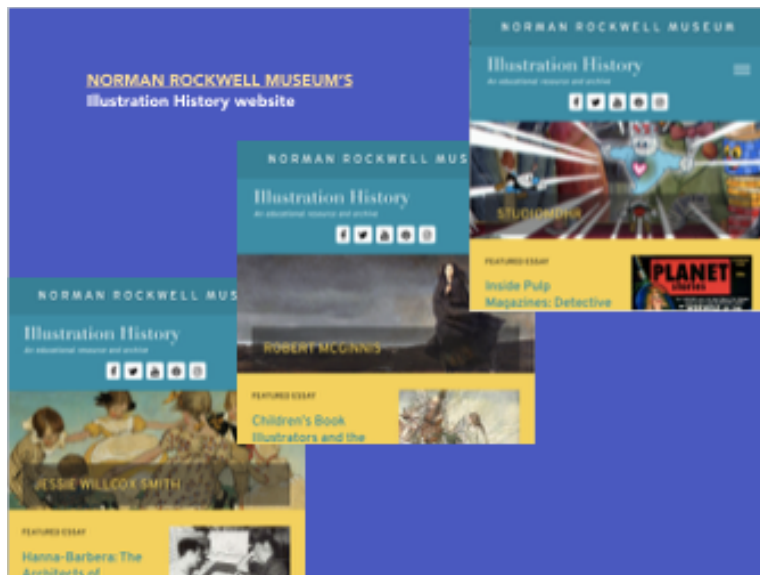
## Why is this our reality, and what can be done to change it?

What can be done to change it? There is less critical examination of illustration within our influential and socially integrated practice despite its visual prominence but there is a growing acknowledgement within critical, collecting and academic circles that illustration history matters.



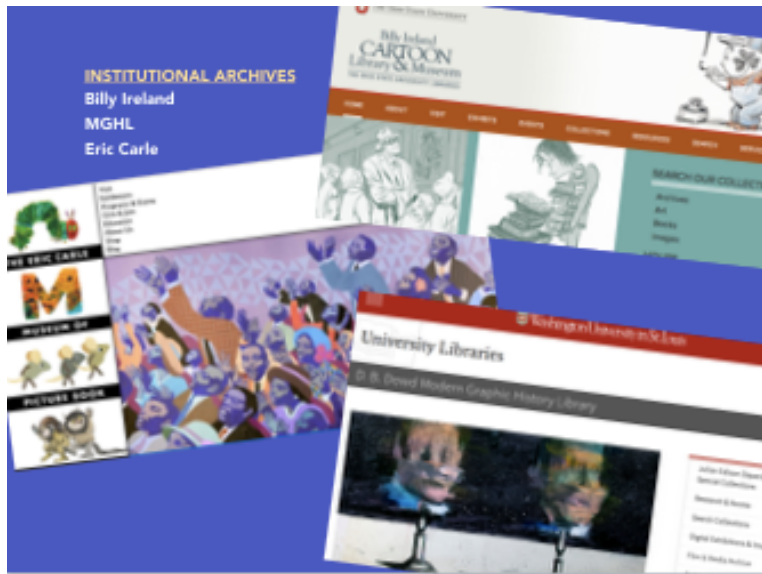
Photos of American Chronicles exhibit © Norman Rockwell Museum, 2018.

Over the past two decades, cultural institutions throughout the United States have attracted millions of visitors to exhibitions, archived ephemera, and created public programming focused on illustration and comic art. The Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, MA, is dedicated to illustration in all its variety, and has traveled exhibitions of Rockwell's art and the work of many other illustrators to museums in forty-one states, seen by more than five million people.



Screen captures of Illustration History website © Norman Rockwell Museum, 2018.

The Museum's widely visited Illustration History website is a continually growing resource relating to the field.



Screen captures of archive landing pages © The Eric Carle Museum, © DB Dowd Modern Graphic History Library and © Billy Ireland Museum, 2018.

Additionally, the Billy Ireland Museum and Cartoon Library at The Ohio State University supports research on the study of comic strips and cartoon art, including global perspectives.

The D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library at Washington University in St. Louis makes available original art, preparatory sketches and didactic materials to students and researchers wishing to study “pictorial graphic culture”.

And the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art has brought attention to the artistry and social significance of imagery for children’s literature. Like the

Rockwell, the Carle Museum draws inspiration from its namesake yet it also examines and celebrates related topics and the art of other creators.



"The Connoisseur" © Norman Rockwell Museum, 2018.

Exhibitions and programming that provided a wealth of knowledge about illustration are always welcome and informative, yet we know that our close looking at illustration must go deeper to constitute a critical examination.

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## Is our current examination of illustration critical enough?

Is our current examination of illustration critical enough? Two new efforts are starting to make inroads into this question.



Photos of Rockwell Scholars © various photographers, 2018.

The Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies at the Norman Rockwell Museum—the nation’s first institute devoted to illustration art—offers fellowships to advance scholarship relating to the field.



Landing page for the Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies © Norman Rockwell Museum, 2018.

In addition, the Center’s presence has published graduate student essays on varying topics that have begun to embolden the academic study of popular materials. Publications for the US market, too, have begun to move beyond biography and fandom to produce materials with great depth.



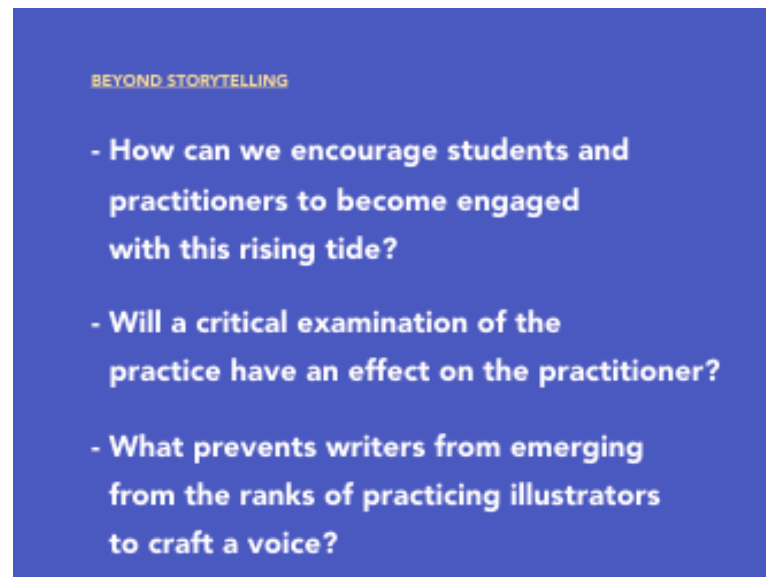
"History of Illustration" text book © Fairchild/Bloomsbury Publishing Co, 2018.  
cover art by Brian Rea.

Just this year, the first reference book devoted to illustration history was released by Bloomsbury/Fairchild, resulting from years of dedicated work by Susan Doyle, Jaleen Grove and Whitney Sherman as editors, and almost fifty authors exploring the breadth of the field.





This is a start, but we need more. If we are to join the global movement toward art- and practice-based research, we need to cultivate advanced scholarship, and embrace the historiography of our profession. And we still have questions:



- How can we encourage students and practitioners to become engaged with this rising tide?
- Will a critical examination of the practice have an effect on the practitioner?
- What prevents writers from emerging from the ranks of practicing illustrators to craft a voice?

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## Examining the problem.

Let's examine the problem. Illustration has, for generations, been described as a medium of visual storytelling. This description is accurate, but also a limiting term—one that is certainly creative, but not analytical. In order to develop critical writing within our practice we need to see our practice critically.

*SLIDE: [image] Ubiquitous Illustration: a collage of illustration used in the public sphere including propaganda and theater posters, murals, advertising broadsides and magazine pages, ephemera, opening credits, book covers, etc.*

Part and parcel of the artistic and cultural experience, illustration reflects and shapes public perception, creates meaning, and establishes a sense of belonging. Illustration functions as a social medium, helping us to understand our times, our histories and our futures, yet if we are to address a missing 'canon' in illustration, how do we conceive of that?



Landing page for DB Dowd's Illustration History: a blog website © DB Dowd, 2018.

Recently, the Rockwell Center's newly established Society of Fellows, in collaboration with Senior Fellow D.B. Dowd, has begun to explore several topics to contribute to the discussion and debate. Having a framework on which to hang ideas may be a good place for students and their teachers to start. Training in critical examination will inspire the next generation of authors and curators, some of whom will also be practitioners.

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## Reading illustration as a social text.

Are we reading illustration as a social text?

*SLIDE: [image] "The Feminine Mystique" book cover and women's magazine page illustration by Edwin Georgi.*

Betty Friedan devoted the first chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* to an analysis of women's magazines from 1939 to 1959. Each of the stories she reviewed in the process was lavishly illustrated, yet Friedan appears not to have noticed the imagery. The texts mattered; the pictures did not. Despite their seeming invisibility to serious commentators, popular images and the social texts in which they were embedded truly contributed to an audiences' sense of the culture in which they lived, describing and interpreting cultural relations in everyday life.

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## Creating hierarchies & exclusions.

How are we creating hierarchies and exclusions?

Beginning in 1939 with Clement Greenberg's influential essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," there was heated debate about the relative merits of abstract art, realist art, and popular illustration. Greenberg, one of the most vocal critics of the period set the conversation's terms.

*SLIDE: [image] "Clement Greenberg Collected Essays and Criticism" book cover and interior spread of essay.*

He argued for the aesthetic complexities of abstraction while protesting the kitsch culture that he felt dominated America. These judgments have had an enormous impact on definitions of culture. They have insulated high culture from certain forms of scrutiny, and have limited serious thinking about popular forms.

How can the democratic values of popular culture be reimagined for another

era? What new terms of judgment might be explored in an age when hierarchical distinctions have shifted, as exemplified by Internet image searches?



*SLIDE: [image] Taxonomy of Beer poster by Pop Chart Labs.*

Due to the disparate character of much writing on popular images, we lack shared taxonomy and vocabulary for description and analysis. Describing, naming and classifying should be considered a pressing issue. Can the redefining of terms be solved in an era that tends to prize the fluid and be suspect of the fixed?

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## Assessing anonymity and authorship.

*SLIDE: Image: JC Leyendecker cover for "Illustrated Monthly Magazine" & unknown illustrator interior magazine page.*

Throughout the history of publishing, creators of popular imagery often went uncredited, while others received recognition in highly stratified markets. Artists were infrequently credited unless the identity of the illustrator added celebrity value. How can the next generation of illustration scholars find ways to overcome anonymity in the absence of clear credits?

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## Settling questions of an illustration canon.

*SLIDE: [image] "Critical America" by Loren Mink.*

We need to reflect on whether and how to settle—even provisionally—these questions. Can such be accomplished without repeating all the problems many research questions are designed to overcome? How do we speak of significance? Is there such a thing as the history of American illustration? Or put another way, can there be a *historiography* of American illustration?



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## Making visual analysis.

Close looking is essential for successful encounters with images and objects, especially popular sources “hidden in plain sight.” Can approaches to training scholars in close looking be imported from art and design training and art historical study?



Photo of Chip Kidd and Critical Seminar students in discussion © Stephanie Haboush Plunkett, 2018.

Some of these questions were examined in a class that Whitney and I developed for MICA's MFA in Illustration Practice program called Critical Seminar. The class was designed to connect students with their artistic antecedents while considering and contextualizing the meaning of their predecessors work.



Cover art of "Becoming Rosie" © Shreyas R Krishnan, 2018..

The course engaged students in critical thinking experiences and assignments that explored the unique power of the artist as commentator. Inquiry and analysis were emphasized through the comparative study of visual signs and symbols as a means of communication. This is crucial for twenty-first century research and scholarship.



Interior spreads of "Becoming Rosie" © Shreyas R Krishnan, 2018.

Student enthusiasm and the quality of their work was high. They found the interconnectedness of published imagery to cultural and social trends, traditions, values, and attitudes, and their explorations provided a context for their own work as artists. Students were asked to write and present several papers of varying lengths.



Screen capture of webpage from the Norman Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies. Illustration © Norman Rockwell, text © Shreyas R Krishnan, 2018.

Upon completion, essays were selected for the Rockwell Center's website's "New Perspectives on Illustration", and made accessible for future research. They serve as a model for programs seeking ways forward in student research. In this essay, Shreyas R Krishnan explored the underpinnings and iterations of Rosie the Riveter by comparing this iconic figure to the art of Ravi Varna, an artist from her native India who used European realism to portray daily life and Hindu mythology. This foundational work led to the development of her thesis project, a historically based gender theory graphic novel entitled "Finding Rosie."

SLIDE: [image] Comparison of comic strips: "Mafalda" by Salvador Lavado and "Peanuts" by Charles Schultz.

Mafalda and Peanuts by Valeria Molinari explored the art of noted Latin

American cartoonist Salvador Lavado, known as Quino, and the relationship

between a loudmouthed, opinionated six year old and Charles Schulz's quiet,

lovable Charlie Brown.



Screen capture of webpage from the Norman Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies. Illustration © estate of Jessie

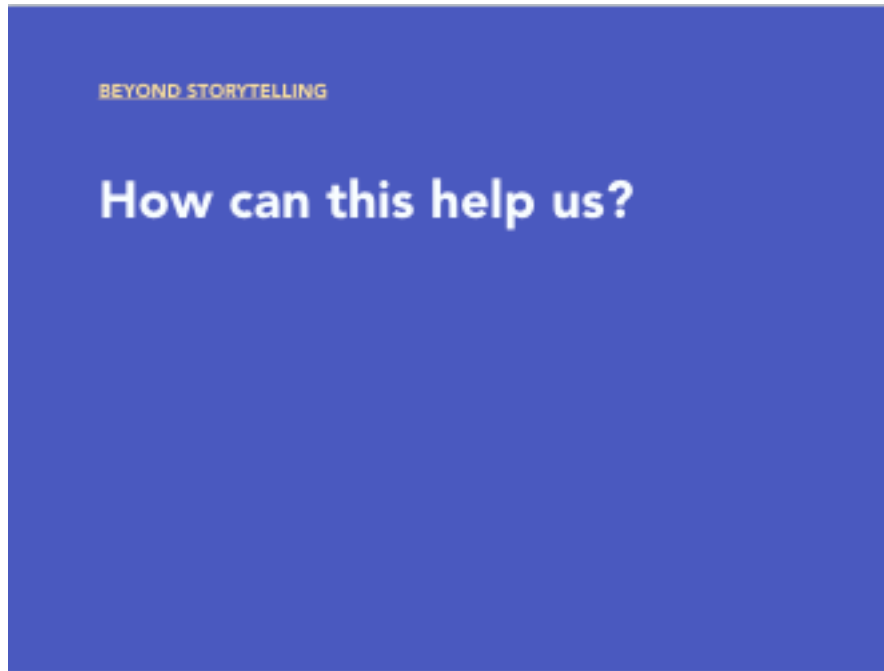
Willcox Smith, text © Ashley Yazdani, 2018.

Ashley Yazdani's essay delved into the origins of the first grassroots Children's

Book Week and the poster illustration by Jessie Willcox Smith that so

successfully launched this ongoing annual event. Yazdani observes that although

reading was certainly encouraged prior to Children’s Book Week in 1919, children had not yet been targeted as an important audience either as consumers of books, or as an untapped market by parental proxy.



How can this help us?

*SLIDE: [image] Looking Closer 3 book cover.*

In the 1999 book *Looking Closer 3: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, Pentagram designer Michael Beirut wrote the preface to a 1983 essay by Massimo Vignelli entitled “Call for Criticism”. In the preface, Beirut notes that Vignelli, who was trained as an architect, was always “impressed by what he perceived as architecture’s superior level of discourse.” In that same year

Vignelli had his chance to write a preface for *Graphis Annual* to “call for a more rigorous approach to graphic design criticism,” Beirut felt that Vignelli’s essay had accelerated the growth of thoughtful writing about graphic design. That was 35 years ago. Not a massive amount of time, but certainly a significant amount of time, especially considering the age of our practice and the vast changes in culture since the dawn of the digital age.



Screen capture of webpage from Print Magazine, website © Print Magazine, text © Rick Poyner, 2018.

In “The Missing Critical History of Illustration” essay for a 2010 issue of *Print Magazine*, Rick Poyner noted that the British illustrators he knew were consciously attempting to challenge received wisdom about the practice and move it forward. He further noted that the lack of illustration criticism, and the

perceived role of illustration as an adjunct of design, was a problem. Illustration was, critically-speaking, left in the dust. Missing was an interest in using the tools for serious analysis to examine illustration imagery. Up until that time, Poyner had been one of the few critics to address this deficit.





Book cover for "Stick Figures Drawing as a Human Practice" by DB Dowd, Illustration © DB Dowd, 2018.

In his writings on illustration history, D. B. Dowd has established his disinterest in discussing 'the greatest' or 'the best', identifying these markers as antithetical to cultural history. His interest is in fostering fresh encounters with artifacts which tell us something about how human beings make meaning.

*SLIDE: Historical and contemporary photos of art school classrooms.*

As we examine our educational institutions, starting in a student's earliest years, and take notice of which practices are celebrated, we can easily see how traditional art history nomenclature minimizes the use of the word 'illustration'. If an educational institution is not aware of this paradigm, the critical study of illustration can never be realized. Scholars of illustration-as-an-examined-practice are beginning to ask questions. We wondered, can students and practitioners benefit from understanding the academic underpinnings and significance of their own work? And is the connectivity of published art to other academic branches of study important?

Generally people become acquainted with or value visual culture through the traditional art history canon of textbooks, museum field trips, or television specials on artists. In virtually all cases the representation of illustration in its own right has been left out:

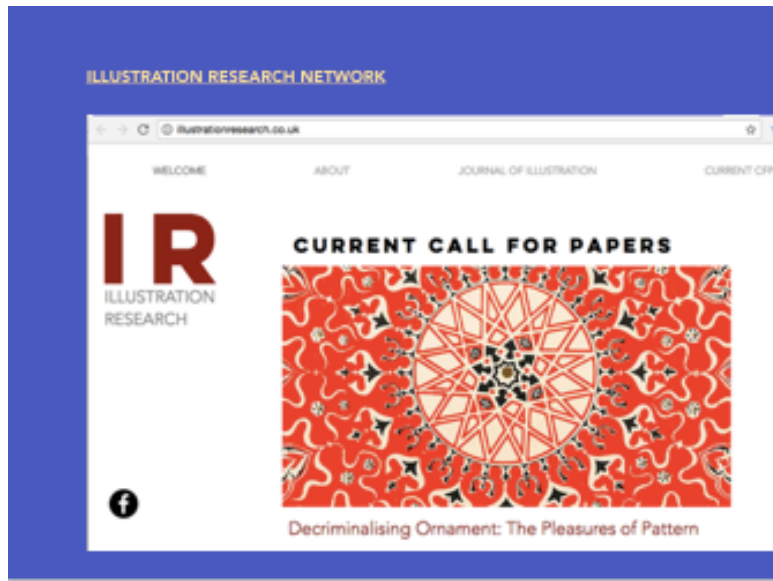
*SLIDE: Collage of images of picture books, book covers, murals, posters, stamps, editorials, etc seen in the public sphere.*

On the other hand, published imagery such as picture books, book covers, manuals, magazine and newspaper illustrations, murals, postage stamps, packaging, and posters are actually better understood, more familiar and more culturally influential to people. Each form also has its own connection to other disciplines such as literature, film, science and cultural studies.

*SLIDE: [images] Recent "Journal of Illustration" & "Varoom" covers & interiors.*

To get a larger picture, we asked colleagues in the United Kingdom about the role of critical writing on illustration, and how it is promoted there. The Association of Illustrators has published "Varoom" since 2006, and the group Illustration Research has published the "Journal of Illustration" since 2014. These groups and their peer-reviewed publications were established

to share research, and encourage topics such as new critical writing on illustration, associated visual communication, and the role of the illustrator as visualizer, thinker, and facilitator.



Screen capture of landing page from Illustration Research. © Illustration Research, 2018.

Desdemona McCannon, Senior lecturer at Manchester School of Art, is a founding member of the group Illustration Research, and editor of the peer-reviewed publication *Journal of Illustration*. She has noted that in the UK “there is an emerging generation of illustrator/practitioner-academics who are undertaking or have completed practice based and historical PhD’s.” She adds that their approach of combined activities in critical writing and studio practice has found traction.

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## Writing within the early years of training as illustrators.

To promote writing among students, McCannon offers these three ideas:

DESDEMONA MCCANNON / MANCHESTER SCHOOL OF ART

- Encourage critical thinking with visual tasks that are familiar from the studio.
- Create communities of interest through theme-based reading groups.
- Produce a student run departmental magazine that offers commentary by students.

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She notes that contextualizing a subject is still taught separately on the studio side. To remediate this, her program developed two initiatives to bridge the studio and lecture theater:

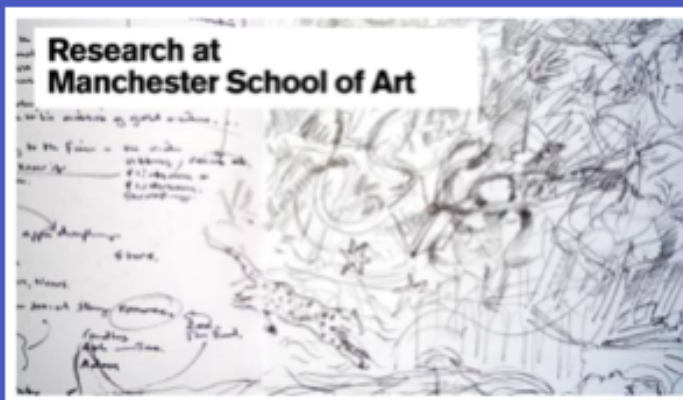


'Practitioner perspectives' invites the studio faculty to contribute to the lecture program, to amplifying ideas in discussion and demystify the theoretical lectures. 'Contextual and theoretical study' is a combination of studio based modules that include theoretical lectures, visits to studios and resources, a practical task and a reflective blog.

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## What is research?

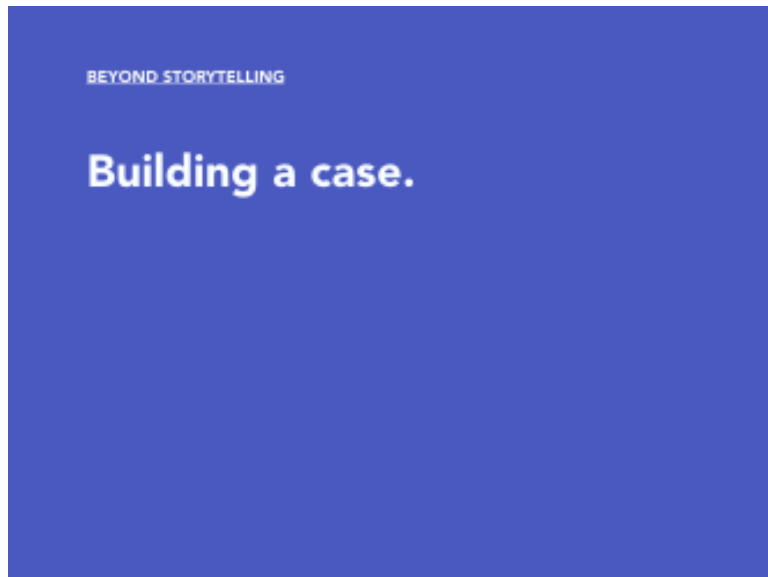
MANCHESTER SCHOOL OF ART



Webpage from Research at Manchester School of Art. Illustration © Manchester School of Art, 2018.

In Manchester's first year program, a week is spent focusing on the question, "What is research?". This involves outside speakers and practitioners who talk about their approach to, and definition of, research ... Questions like 'Is research only for data gathering' or 'Can research be visual and exploratory

as well as text based' are asked. For us here in the US, we may ask: How can illustration practice go beyond its practical role and accepted status, to do a new kind of storytelling with a critical focus on itself?



*SLIDE: [image] MICA's MFA in Illustration Practice studio space.*

How do we build a case where institutional administrators can be supportive in the studying of illustration history, critical writing and thinking? Recently, MICA opened a position for an Illustration History Fellow to teach the required Critical Seminar course mentioned earlier. In addition, a survey style History of Illustration course is to be developed for our new 1-year MA in Illustration. Both of these courses are seen as essential to graduate study.



Academic classroom at the Maryland Institute College of Art © Maryland Institute College of Art, 2018.

The position is limited to a 1-2 year full-time appointment of a PhD, or an interested practitioner with a terminal degree. At present, few candidates with qualifications exist. Additionally, the limited contract presents a problem of impermanence. Although the position is not ideal in terms of keeping prized faculty, it is a step in the right direction. Where on one hand, the Critical Seminar course stimulates interest in critical writing in graduate illustration students, the MICA Illustration History Fellow position is **also** an opportunity to engage scholars interested in our field.



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## Creating a community.



ICON9, Austin, Texas © the Illustration Conference, 2018.

In conclusion, we need to continue exploring ways to establish a community of student illustrators to grow as scholars. We need to consider whether in the study of illustration, a canon is helpful or a hindrance to theoretical thinking.

And we feel that advancements in this realm will help our current students become future illustrators who are able to write their own story.



Students in the MFA in Illustration Practice program ©Whitney Sherman, 2018.

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