

Unitec Scoops Top Prize in Eden Arts Art Schools Award 2019

Auckland, 27 August 2019 – Unitec Design and Contemporary Arts student Oliver Cain has won the Eden Arts Art Schools Award 2019 with his work Communal Conversation & Chewed Nipples; the first time that a Unitec student has won the highly-coveted inter-art school award.

Oliver, who received \$5,000 in prize money for his win, was praised by the judges for pulling off the challenge of presenting “a sort of mini show” with his winning work which consisted of two very different elements. The first part of his work, Communal Conversation, includes two white ceramic toilet bowls lit with LEDs displayed on plinths which in the judges’ citation, “strikes an excellent balance between seriousness and levity, centering on gay sexual encounters in bathrooms, and touching on questions of community and gender.” As well as featuring pink and blue lighting, the piece also emits a muffled club soundtrack, which the judges praised for its “noticeable, but not overweening, use of light and sound.” The second part of Oliver’s work, Chewed Nipples, features four metres of chewed bubble gum hung on metal rails. It aims to give a slightly uncomfortable yet amusing twist on physical touch and sensual desire. The judges praised the “melty, chewing-gum forms, also noting that they echo paint skins.” Oliver was also a finalist in this year’s Wallace Art Awards with his piece Fruit Bowl. More of Oliver’s work can be seen @olivercainstudios

“It’s a major coup to take out this coveted award over an incredibly strong line-up of 21 works, and is an incredible achievement by Oliver and the staff who have worked extremely hard to make this outcome possible,” said Dr. Vanessa Byrnes, Head of the School of Creative Industries at Unitec. “It’s testament to the dedication and teaching methods of our Creative Industries staff who encourage students to experiment with different styles and express themselves in creative practice with confidence.”

“I’m honoured to have won the award this year,” said Oliver. “I would like to thank Unitec Creative Industries staff and lecturers for their support, the award organisers for the opportunities this has opened up for me, and the other students who participated.”

A second Unitec Design and Contemporary Arts student, Samuel Montgomery, won a Highly Commended award with his work Refuge Trap which features a boy’s bedroom. Praised by the judges for being “deeply moving...showing moments of innovation or invention.” He received \$1,000 in prize money.

Other Highly Commended Awards went to Jazmin Snoswell and Hannah Ireland, both from Elam. The Eden Arts’ Board’s Choice of \$500 was awarded to Arlen James from AUT.

The judges of this year’s awards were artist Sara Hughes, curator | Kaitiaki Whakaaturanga at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery Ioana Gordon-Smith, and freelance writer and curator Francis McWhannell.

Launched by the Eden Arts Trust in 2011, the award brings together Auckland’s major art institutions: AUT, Elam, MIT, Unitec and Whitecliffe. Each school was invited to nominate up to five undergraduate students for the award. Eden Arts is a charitable arts trust formed over 30 years ago with the purpose of supporting the arts in the greater Mt Eden area. The Trust’s flagship event is the annual Artists in Eden Day in March, proceeds from which fund an annual calendar of events including prize money for tertiary students as well as for the long-established Young Artists Awards every September. Eden Arts’ most recent new initiatives include the annual Mt Eden Chamber Music Festival launched in 2016 and a new artist residency at Karekare Beach which opened in 2018. For more information please visit www.edenarts.co.nz

Unitec springboards young artist’s career

Take every opportunity. Connect with people in your industry. Push yourself. If there was a formula for success for those breaking into the art world, this could be it – and it’s worked for Bachelor of Creative Enterprise (BCE) student Oliver Cain, who enjoyed impressive success even before graduating.

In August, Oliver became the first Unitec student to win the coveted Eden Arts Art Schools Award, a competition that attracts students from across all of Auckland’s art schools. He was also a finalist in the Wallace Art Awards and exhibited at the biennial New Zealand Sculpture OnShore exhibition on Auckland’s North Shore.

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— OLIVER CAIN



Much of Cain’s work focuses on his experiences and those of the queer community, light-heartedly questioning social constructs of shame, anonymity and sexuality. He pairs items such as urinals and toilet cisterns with bananas, and uses pared-back materials to add a more textured look to his work.

“I like producing work that often has an undertone of meaning, but isn’t necessarily obvious to the viewer straight away.”

Studying at Unitec motivated Cain to dig deeper into his ideas. “Previously I was making work that was a bit superficial, and now I’m making work that’s highly meaningful and personal. My tutors challenged me. Lots of artists have used their sexuality, their race, their gender, to make work; I didn’t necessarily want to be put in that box, but I found it rather freeing in myself to make work that was focused on that.”

Dr Vanessa Byrnes, Head of Unitec’s School of Creative Industries, believes Oliver has all the skills that can grow a career. “He has the ability to manage his time, to seek out new opportunities, to be adaptive, to imagine and create connections where previously they might not have occurred, to communicate and collaborate.”

Dr Byrnes also recognised the teachers who had supported Oliver to achieve this incredible outcome.

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