

Getting Hip with Art History: An Interview with Helen Ives

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The rhythmic hum of a treadmill or the vibrant pulse of a salsa social night might seem worlds away from the quiet contemplation of an art gallery, but for Helen Ives, these physical outlets are essential to her scholarly process. A senior from Boston double-majoring in studio art and art history with a minor in French, Ives embodies the interdisciplinary spirit of WashU.

As Co-President of the Art History Club, she works as a part of the department's "social arm," helping students engage with art on campus and across St. Louis. "I love the club because we can do the fun stuff that makes the major feel like a community," Ives said. "It's about making art history accessible."

Although Ives has previously published research in the *Journal of Illustration* and presented at the College Art Association (CAA) conference, her featured research began in Dr. Ila Sheren's class, "Picturing the Anthropocene: Landscape, Land Art, and Eco-Art." The course explored the Anthropocene—the era in which human activity has fundamentally altered the Earth's ecosystems—and prompted students to connect these global anxieties to the local landscape. Ives chose to analyze the work of her friend and fellow senior, Emma Wang, an artist who creates "ethereal, beautiful, and often functional," objects from reclaimed materials.

In her paper, Ives contextualizes Wang's practice through the lens of "hippie modernism," a 1960s movement where counterculture intersected with rising computer culture. She uses the two as "foils for each other" to explore shared themes like the use of found materials to bypass mass production, and what Wang's work signals about cultural anxieties today compared to in the past. "There are a lot of interesting religious undertones that the hippie mod-

ernists had," Ives says, noting the overlap in how both the movement and Wang use spiritual motifs to reflect the world around them.

While Ives initially viewed research through a strictly "STEM-based" lens, her research in art history allowed her to lean into the "poetics" of the humanities, enjoying the opportunity to develop her own authorial voice, even within the formality of academic writing. "There's a kind of whimsy... I can write sentences that make me feel good, not only because I state something clearly, but it's like there's a part of me in it."

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Helen Ives '26

However, Ives maintains that both fields share a bedrock of simple but analytical observation. "In science, you might look at chemicals in a beaker... while in art history, you're looking at a canvas. Both require you to sit still and actually see what is in front of you before you start theorizing," she notes.

Writing about a living artist and close friend presented unique challenges, requiring Ives to balance her personal relationship with historical critique. "I wanted to

write about her lifestyle and who she is as a person, since that definitely informs the way she thinks... but with a 13 to 15 page paper, I did not have that space." Instead, she adopted a "journalistic" approach, running drafts by Wang to ensure her visual analysis was accurate. "I had a second pair of eyes that was like, 'I'm definitely not trying to do that with my artwork,'" Ives recalls jokingly.

Beyond this project, Ives is completing a senior thesis investigating "post-craft": how contemporary artists use traditional craft to respond to technology and ecology. Her passion lies in practice-based research, a niche she defines as a "combination of art research and practice."

"Practice-based research can operate on a sliding scale," Ives explains. "Sometimes it's more medium-specific and it's helping me talk about printmaking or painting or the way a certain thing feels or is done by artists and their processes. And sometimes it's personal... like a mode for reflection, keeping my thesis in the back of my mind to help inspire my artistic practice."

As she prepares to join the masters program in History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art at MIT after graduation, Ives advises new researchers to build a "constellation" of mentors. As someone focused on the arts and humanities, "You really don't think of yourself in that context until you're shown that you can exist there," she says. "But you can't be afraid to talk to your professors, advisors, or subject librarians. There's a wealth of information out there; you just have to be brave enough to ask the first question." ■