



**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's enjoyed impressive success even before graduating.**

Cain accumulated a number of awards this year, his final year at Unitec. In November, he won the ECC Supreme Award and the Tuatara Ceramics Award at the 2019 ECC NZ Student Craft/Design Awards for his work *Banana Bowls*. In August, he became the first Unitec student to win the Eden Arts Art Schools Award, a competition that attracts students from Elam, MIT, Unitec, AUT and Whitecliffe, with his work *Communal Conversation & Chewed Nipples*.

Other achievements include exhibiting at the biennial *Sculpture on Shore* exhibition (2018), and being a finalist in the Wallace Art Awards (2018 and 2019). "I've always entered and exhibited work through competitions," he said. "I'd definitely recommend to people to enter anything they can and pursue contacts with people, because in the art world, it's all about who you know. If you don't talk to people, you won't get anywhere very quickly."

Much of Cain's work focuses on his experiences and those of the queer community, lightheartedly 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.

"Lots of my work is white, very simple and clean. I don't like much to distract from the work. The white also references public spaces such as toilets, and the related presence of porcelain, and some of it links to public sexual experiences and cruising culture," said Cain.

"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."

Cain enjoyed experimenting with different mediums and testing out ideas, but fell in love with ceramics during his second year.

“I love the process of making things and getting them fired and glazed. There are lots of processes and lots of different outcomes that can happen with your work, so it’s a very raw and organic way of working,” he said.

His body of work also spans painting and sculptures. “Lots of artists like to work in one medium, but I get bored pretty easily, so I like to spread across a few.”

The up-and-coming artist has a strong enterprising streak, quite apart from already selling work through his website. He and his father usually make their own Christmas trees from found materials; in 2018, Cain made bamboo Christmas trees, one a whopping 5.5m high, and sold them to clients such as The Block NZ judge Jason Bonham, furniture store Statement iD, and art collector Sir James Wallace. It attracted media interest from Radio NZ and Stuff.co.nz.

Dr Vanessa Byrnes, Head of Unitec’s School of Creative Industries, described Cain as “a fierce talent to watch”. She said his work leaves a long-lasting impact on audiences, because of its strong, innovative concepts, and high-quality execution in a number of mediums.

“It’s artistic and is underpinned by a craft, but it also has a design aesthetic. He’s engaging with some pretty heavy concepts in a very witty, playful way. It’s very bold, contemporary work,” Byrnes said.

“Oliver also 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 communicate and collaborate.”

Helping students develop both an artistic practice and entrepreneurial skills is a key goal of the Bachelor of Creative Enterprise course.

“It’s a multidisciplinary degree where students can have a go at many different forms of creation. We also teach students about turning ideas into potential business concepts, because we want them to have sustainable, lifelong careers. They need to be highly motivated, really understand their craft, and back themselves in an industry that’s very competitive,” said Byrnes.

Which Cain, surely the epitome of a self-motivated young artist, is already doing. “It’s so satisfying seeing someone who hasn’t even graduated yet having such success in his craft. If you work to gain the complete skillset, it’s clearly possible to have a lot of success,” she said.

Summer holidays are beckoning, but Cain plans to keep on working. Next year his work will appear in the Wallace Art Awards travelling exhibition, and a few Auckland-based group shows. He’s also working with Auckland-based Foenander Galleries on the possibility of a solo show in mid-2020. So watch this space... and this artist.