The 2013 academic year rolls to an end, and the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) candidates at San Jose State University are busily preparing for a showcase of their work at the Art Ark Gallery. Representing the disciplines of pictorial, spatial, photography and digital media, the “Lift-Off” exhibition will give audiences a rare insight into the technical and visual research each artist diligently pursued over the previous three years.

This year's graduates are the newest in the art department's illustrious century-old program; a series of centennial exhibits this fall will celebrate the work of alumni.

Throughout its one hundred year history, the Art Department at SJSU has kept an important presence in the cultural and economic life of the South Bay, as it transitioned from the “Valley of Heart's Delight” to Silicon Valley, and as the campus itself evolved from normal school to state college, and eventually state university.

The Department originated as a two-year program to train prospective teachers in studio art and art history. Students were prepared to fill positions in area schools as the Valley grew and the need for universal public education was recognized. At the beginning of the 20th century, education reformers considered art to be a crucial part of anyone's education, and nearly half of the school's student population at the time took part in studio art and art history courses.

From its earliest days, the Art Department embraced a spirit of collaboration, as well as a consistent engagement with the wider community. Students and faculty labored on displays that were sent to the great International Exhibitions, a popular part of the commercial, social, and cultural life of the rapidly developing West Coast. In 1909, Calthea Vivian, a painter who would later become the head of the department,
worked with students to research, design, and paint a painstakingly accurate wooden reconstruction of the famous temple of the Parthenon in Athens. The scale model was built by students in the Manual Training Department, mounted on a pedestal, and sent to the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle, where it was honored with a gold medal. In 1915, a similar project resulted in a model nursery room sent to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, highlighting a commitment to “the modern application of art principles to everyday living.”

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Art Department grew in size and sophistication. After WWII, new facilities and programs were added, including graphic design, industrial design, animation and illustration. The Department houses one of the oldest glass programs in the country, and remains a major influence on material-focused art practice with its top-notch foundry, woodshop, ceramics and glass studios. More recently, contemporary digital technologies were added. SJSU and the CADRE Laboratory were Visionary Partners along with the City of San Jose and Adobe in the launch of the first ZERO1 Biennial in 2006.

Over the years, faculty has included well-known artists such as sculptor Fletcher Benton and John Battenberg, the textile artist Consuelo Jimenez-Underwood, the painter-sculptor Sam Richardson and the painters Harry Powers and Rupert Garcia. Among the many artists with influential careers who studied at San Jose State are Wayne Thiebaud, Jay DeFeo, Robert Graham, Mel Ramos, Mark Taney, and more recently, Tim Hawkinson and Binh Danh.

Students in the San Jose State MFA program deepen their practice through a rigorous curriculum of studio work, intellectual research, art history and contemporary critical theory, as well as writing and public speaking. They also have opportunities to gain practical teaching experience. Beyond all this, however, the challenge of making and exhibiting art requires consistent creative problem-solving and resourcefulness.

As one of this year’s MFA candidates observes, “The skills we develop become so second nature that they expand outward from our artistic practice to help us address non-art challenges with equal confidence.”