

BONDING BEAUTY TO BUSINESS

The words “inspiration,” “reflection” and “beauty” are not ones you’d ordinarily expect to hear from a management professor. But then, **NANCY ADLER** is no ordinary professor.

The S. Bronfman Chair in Management at the Desautels Faculty of Management, Adler is not only a respected scholar and award-winning teacher, she’s also an accomplished painter who has incorporated her art into her academic life — and vice versa.

“For years, I kept the two worlds very, very separate,” Adler says. She “woke up” about 10 years ago when she was studying watercolour painting with a tai chi master who would weave wisdom stories into his classes. “All his stories rang true as perfect leadership stories,” she explains. Getting to know her teacher a little more, she discovered he had had a background in business. “That was the beginning for me, being able to see the links. Little by little, I let my art be part of my teaching.”

Adler, who was recently awarded the Quebec government’s prestigious Prix Léon-Guérin, is on the leading edge of a global trend in management education that incorporates art, theatre and design into leadership training. She mentions it’s more and more common for management schools to include artistic practice as part of their curricula, and experts have even discussed renaming the MBA, the MBD (Master of Business Design).

Every September, Adler teaches the Global Leadership seminar, the first required course for new MBA students at McGill. She leads her students through something rather unexpected: improvisa-



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tion led by a professional theatre artist. The students are initially “surprised and cautious”

and then “very open and extremely positive,” says Adler, who explains that 21st-century leaders must learn how to thrive in “highly complex, ambiguous environments”—and acquire skills that have traditionally belonged to artists.

“Most of the organizational models of the 20th century were based on decision-making among a set of fixed options,” she says. More important for the 21st century, though, is the question: “How do you design an option worthy of choosing?” She emphasizes today’s leaders must combine both the artistic and the analytic.

Working primarily in watercolour and ink, Adler has been an artist in residence at the Banff Centre and a guest at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver. This August, she opened a world premiere exhibition of her paintings (“Reality in Transition: Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management”) at Montreal’s Galerie MX. At the same time, she was a distinguished speaker at the Academy of Management’s annual conference, held in Montreal for the first time in its 75-year history.

During the conference (this year’s theme was “Dare to Care: Passion and Compassion in Management Practice and Research”), Adler offered three sold-out sessions on leadership at the gallery, and her paintings were projected onto 18-foot screens as part of the closing plenary. As well, she recently published *Leadership Insight Journal*, a collection of her paintings with reflections and quotes on leadership, wisdom and beauty.

Clearly, her work has struck a chord. There’s strong interest in her exhibit touring in North America and Europe, a British film crew followed her around during the Academy of Management conference, and she has a full schedule ahead of her, speaking on art and leadership.

Throughout all her work (whether academic or artistic), Adler stresses the importance of finding and creating beauty in the world. As a tangible example, she mentions the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. “The standard response to this crisis has been quantitative, of course. For example: ‘How many days until we cap the well?’” She suggests another approach to the problem: “Let’s ask ourselves: What would a beautiful Gulf look like?”

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