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On painting beyond the bottom line

By Chris Chipello

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Nancy Adler, S. Bronfman Chair in Management at Desautels / Photo: Owen Egan

"We can't get from where we are to where we want to be unless business is a dramatic and dynamic part of the creation of where we're going," says Nancy Adler.

Prof. Nancy J. Adler, a pioneer in integrating artistic approaches into management education, has won prestigious teaching awards for her innovative classes at the Desautels Faculty of Management. She is also an accomplished painter, who has been an artist-in-residence a number of times at The Banff Centre.

Now, she has combined her academic and artistic talents to produce a unique art-and-leadership multimedia exhibition that is on public display this September at Montreal's Galerie MX.

The exhibition – *Reality in Translation: Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management* – underscores a pattern that has been quietly taking shape in universities around the world: top business schools increasingly are weaving lessons from the arts and design into their curricula.

Adler has long been a proponent of this emerging trend.

"Given the dramatic changes taking place in society, the economy and technology, 21st-century organizations need to engage in new, more spontaneous and innovative ways of managing," she wrote in an influential essay in the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* journal on why a growing number of companies are incorporating artistic processes into their approaches to management and leadership.

Guiding journalists through her display of ink and watercolour paintings last month at Galerie MX (corner Viger and Bleury) Adler pointed to a quote from the legendary investor Warren Buffett: "I am not a businessman, I am an artist."

Buffett, of course, is a famously astute businessman. But his vision sets him apart from the crowd. “His canvas is the economy,” Adler told reporters. “He has a fabulous eye for what should and will work. “

A goal of the exhibition – and a central aim of Adler’s teaching – is to help leaders gain valuable perspective by taking a step back from the day-to-day rush of events and reflecting on what’s important to them. Her *Leadership Insight* journal (with 27 paintings from the exhibition) was just published by Routledge, and similarly supports individuals in their leadership reflection.

“We all know that there is horrendous ugliness in the world,” Adler said, citing the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico as a glaring example. News coverage of the story has focused on whether the well could be capped – “as opposed to asking, ‘What would it take to create a truly flourishing economy and environment in the Gulf? What might a “beautiful” Gulf look like?’ Beyond the Gulf, we need to start asking how our organizations ... can work together to re-create a flourishing world.”

Business must be at the centre of that public conversation, because it is so influential in the world today, she added. “We can’t get from where we are to where we want to be unless business is a dramatic and dynamic part of the creation of where we’re going. Traditionally, we have labeled such innovation as entrepreneurship; today we recognize it as artistry.”

Adler’s three-day Global Leadership seminar is the first course that McGill MBA students take. Over the years, she has brought in improvisational-theatre artist Rob Nickerson, Academy-award winning filmmaker Beverly Shaffer and others to stir participants’ imaginations. The sessions help students appreciate the importance of teamwork and encourage them to discover how business can produce a healthy bottom line by contributing to the world’s social and environmental well-being.

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Since the seminar was launched five years ago, many students have come away saying they never realized other MBAs would share their concerns for issues such as the environment, poverty and work-family balance.

“I now tease that one of my main roles is outing MBAs’ humanity,” said Adler, a Californian who came to McGill 30 years ago.

The 20,000 member Academy of Management, the world’s biggest association of management scholars, held its annual meeting in Montreal last month and served up a reminder that Adler’s development as an artist over the past two decades has done nothing to loosen her scholarly rigour: her article, “When Knowledge Wins: Transcending the Sense and Nonsense of Academic Rankings,” won the *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 2009 Best Paper Award.

Source: <http://publications.mcgill.ca/reporter/2010/09/nancy-adler-s-bronfman-chair-in-management-at-desautels/>