

# NATIONAL POST

## Painting outside the bottom line

By Graeme Hamilton, National Post · Saturday, August 14, 2010 - Canada

Nancy Adler, a management professor at McGill University, poses with one of her works on display at Galerie MX in Montreal. - Graham Hughes for National Post

Members of the world's largest association of business scholars had kicked off their annual meeting last Friday discussing such topics as the "promises and perils of emerging markets research" and "developing responsible global leaders."

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Across the street from the convention centre that housed many of the talks, inside a modern-art gallery, about 50 delegates to the Academy of Management meeting were immersed in an utterly different environment.

Participants in conference session 115 were invited to, "Let a painting choose you," as thought-provoking texts were read aloud and an instrumental composition titled Zenscapes played softly.

"Simply let the words and music flow around you until they flow completely within you," advised the session's leader and the creator of the paintings, McGill University management professor Nancy Adler.

"Can we come back to seeing the beauty in the world?" she asked. "How do we reclaim our profoundly human role as creators and as leaders?"

Not the sort of questions one would imagine preoccupying those in the cut-throat business world. But Ms. Adler is at the forefront of an effort to get executives to drop their obsession with the bottom line and "take a step back and reflect." In short, she wants them to think more like artists, and her approach is winning converts in academia and in some boardrooms.

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"frightening challenge." They both start with something blank and have to make sure they "end up with something wonderful," he said, before praising Ms. Adler as "one of the crown jewels in our tiara."

Ms. Adler, who holds a PhD in management from UCLA, has been thinking like an artist since at least the early 1990s, when she took up painting. In addition to winning distinguished teaching awards from McGill, she has been artist in residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Last Friday, Montreal's Galerie MX opened a limited-run exhibition of her work, titled *Reality in Translation: Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management*, which coincided with the Academy of Management proceedings. The exhibition will reopen to the public from Sept. 1-19. It combines her art with sayings intended to inspire leadership. Those whose quotes hang alongside her watercolours range from Aristotle ( "The soul ... never thinks without a picture) to investment guru Warren Buffett ( "I am not a businessman. I am an artist.")

Every September, Ms. Adler teaches a three-day seminar on global leadership to incoming McGill MBA students, encouraging them to appreciate beauty and ponder what they can create beyond a healthy bank balance. She holds similar sessions with executives at large corporations. Many students, she said, are surprised to learn that they are not alone in their concern for such issues as poverty and the environment.

"When people come into an MBA program, everybody thinks that what they're into is individualism and greed, and that you have to play that out," she said in an interview. "What I'm supposed to do is learn a bunch of stuff, so that I can be richer than you. That's the ethos, that's the mythology, that everybody -- business, new MBAs, management schools -- is colluding around." She tries to bust this myth by encouraging students to "talk about what's really important, what they would really like to do."

Montreal businesswoman Nanb de Gaspé Beaubien credited Ms. Adler with highlighting the connection between art and management. She said the business world is coming around to her way of thinking. "What I am seeing more and more is people not looking to take on just MBAs but Masters of Fine Arts and archeologists," she said. "They realize that in a team you need different approaches, different opinions, and we can learn to build on each other's opinion... In business today we need creativity, we need innovation and I think that's where you need different perspectives for looking at a problem."

Ideas that might have been dismissed as flaky 20 or 30 years ago are gaining greater acceptance among management academics. Jerry Biberman, a professor of management at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, took part in Ms. Adler's workshop. His scholarly focus is management and spirituality, and during the conference he led daily meditation sessions. He acknowledged that some of his colleagues might still dismiss Ms. Adler's exercise as silly, but that is normal in an organization that boasts 20,000 members. The session, he noted, had a waiting list to get in. "I know a bunch of people

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*Nan-b de Gaspé Beaubien*

who were hoping to come but couldn't because it was full," he said.

The 90-minute session's parting message was delivered through the words of 13th-century Persian poet Rumi. "People are going back and forth/ Across the doorsill where the two worlds touch./ The door is round and open/ Don't go back to sleep!" Ms. de Gaspé Beaubien said Ms. Adler's art and the accompanying texts provide a needed respite from the wired business world. "The most important thing in business and in management is to take the time to reflect," she said. "That's what this was today: time to reflect."

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