

## Prof wants to bridge business and art worlds

By JANICE ARNOLD, Staff Reporter

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**MONTREAL** — For much of her 30 years teaching at McGill University, management professor Nancy Adler kept her artistic side to herself and, when she donned her painter's cap, she was discreet about letting her creative colleagues know about her day job.

McGill management professor and artist Nancy Adler poses with one of the paintings in her art exhibition designed to encourage a new type of business leader. [Owen Egan photo]



Today, Adler, who holds the S. Bronfman Chair in Management at McGill's Desautels business school, is openly working to combat the unflattering stereotypes that businesspeople and artists still hold about each other.

She is a pioneer in the growing trend to integrate the arts into business education and management training.

An exhibition of about 50 of her works, mostly figurative watercolours on nature themes, is currently at Galerie MX, 333 Viger St. W., sponsored by the management faculty.

As its title, *Reality in Translation: Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management*, suggests, the goal is to throw cold water on the notion you can't run a business if the sight of a delicately brushed flower touches your soul.

Adler is trying to instill in her students, ambitious MBA candidates from around the world, an appreciation of beauty in general, which she believes will inspire them to become better, more socially aware, business leaders.

Like an artist, the successful entrepreneur must work from ideas that can be realized.

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More than that, Adler believes that business should not be only about making money, but must be concerned with making the world a better place.

In various countries over the past decade, she has taken executives on tours of art museums and led seminars for managers, helping them get in touch with

their inner artist and showing how such a touchy-feely exercise can be good for business.

She wants business leaders to “or the OK.” The words “leadership” and “beauty” are not often linked, she noted, and an Internet search indicates that very little attention has been given to their connection by either academia or the media.

Her paintings and a few prints are interspersed with words of wisdom from people as diverse as Warren Buffet (“I am not a businessman, I am an artist”) to the late Jewish philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and soft music with international influences and nature sounds plays in the background.

People throughout time and across cultures have counselled the value of slowing down and at least seeing the roses. She wanted to create a serene space in which viewers can take a moment out of their hurried lives to contemplate and be refreshed.

**Envision the beautiful, not just the less bad**

The show is interactive in that visitors are invited to take up the oil-pastel crayons and paper provided and draw a self-portrait. She usually gives her students a time limit, maybe as little as five minutes, because the pressure of a deadline is often the best way to get bottom-line-oriented people to complete a task, especially one they feel uncomfortable with.

“The single most common comment I hear from MBAs is that I never realized other MBAs are concerned about the environment, poverty, the balance between home and professional life... There’s an illusion that you can’t be a top-notch MBA and a human being. My main role now is outing MBAs’ humanity,” Adler said.

But, she hastily added, she’s still a management professor. “I want them to take what they have learned out into the world and to take action, not become contemplative in a cave.”

The exhibition’s premiere coincided with the 75th annual meeting of the international 20,000-member Academy of Management, the leading professional association for

business professors and scholars, held in Montreal earlier this month. The exhibition will be open to the public from Sept. 1 to 19.

Adler also believes there's a place for the sacred in management. As she was working on putting the exhibition together, she realized that what she was doing was creating a kind of Shabbat, she said, a time and place where one can step back from routine, reflect and prepare to return to making the world a little better.

At the beginning of the exhibition is the Arthur Frank verse: "We declare a Sabbath, a space of quiet for recovery of the great, forgotten truths." By the time a visitor reaches the end of the tour, "at the edge of Havdalah," as she puts it, they should be starting to think about tikkun olam, the Jewish expression for repairing the world.

"That's the way I was brought up – to make this world a heaven on earth, without being heaven," she said.

Adler is a native of Southern California, who describes herself as having been a "valley girl" and later a hippie. That didn't stop her from going into management, earning an MBA and PhD at the University of California at Los Angeles.

At McGill, her specialty is organizational behaviour, in particular how people from different cultures work together. Adler was the first woman to receive tenure and be promoted to full professor in management at McGill.

The "other" Adler has been painting for two decades, and has been an artist-in-residence several times at the Banff Centre in Alberta.

Her mother, now 87 and still living in California, had a profound effect on Adler and her desire to promote peace and harmony, even among people competing for the same dollar or next rung on the corporate ladder.

Liselotte Adler is a native of Vienna who was hidden by Christians during the Holocaust and endured terrible trauma before immigrating to the United States via England and marrying a native New Yorker.

"Rather than overwhelming me with horror, fear, anguish and condemnation, she told the story of her childhood in a way that encircled me with courage, compassion, responsibility and love," Adler said.

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