CAL Alumni Are

KEEPING IT REAL!
Over the past three years, several College of Arts and Letters alumni have been featured on reality TV shows. Josh Kilmer-Purcell and his life partner, Brent Ridge, have had their own show, “The Fabulous Beekman Boys,” on Planet Green, a Discovery Networks channel (2010-12) and the Cooking Channel, (2012-13), and Josh was a team contestant with Ridge on “The Amazing Race” (2012); Dusty Mitchell has been a contestant on Bravo Network’s “Work of Art: The Next Great Artist” (2011); and Tori Nichel has competed on NBC’s “Fashion Star” (2013). These are their stories.

Josh Kilmer-Purcell, BA, English Literature, 1991

“The Fabulous Beekman Boys” and “The Amazing Race”


Josh is a 1991 College of Arts and Letters graduate with a BA in English Literature who, after beginning his studies at MSU in the Hotel, Restaurant & Institutional Management program, found the College’s creative writing program and University Distinguished Professor and noted poet Diane Wakoski.

“She had a huge impact on me,” Josh says.

Kilmer-Purcell has worked at several Manhattan advertising agencies in New York City, including TBWA/Chiat Day, SS+K, and J. Walter Thompson, among others. Since 2006, Josh has written a monthly column about urban gay life for “Out Magazine,” and he has contributed to various national media including National Public Radio and “The Advocate.” His partner since 2000, Brent Ridge, is a physician at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, and was vice president of healthy living for Martha Stewart Omnimedia.

In 2007, Josh and Ridge purchased the Beekman Farm in Sharon Springs, New York, a town of approximately 550 people, located about 200 miles north of New York City. Their plan: Ridge would stay at the farm and learn farming and lay the groundwork for launching the partners’ Beekman 1802 lifestyle brand, and Josh would continue working in New York City and commute to the farm on weekends.

“The Fabulous Beekman Boys” reality TV show first aired in 2010 and follows Kilmer-Purcell and Ridge as they learn to be farmers and work to launch the Beekman 1802 brand. The show first aired on Discovery Network’s Planet Green channel and ran for two seasons before being acquired by Cooking Channel in 2012.

The series follows the novice farmers, aided by farm caretaker and resident “Farmer John” Hall. Shortly after the partners bought the farm, Hall brought his goats to provide the milk for the Beekman 1802 soaps and cheeses. Polka Spot, the farm’s llama, is also a regular on the show, along with various Sharon Springs residents such as Doug Plummer and Garth Roberts, who own the American Hotel in town.

“The Fabulous Beekman Boys” was renewed for a second season of 10 episodes by Planet Green, which stated that the show “has quickly established itself as a cornerstone franchise for Planet Green.” A year later, in 2012, Planet Green declined to renew “The Fabulous Beekman Boys” for a third season, but Cooking Channel picked it up for a third season with plans to also show the first two seasons with additional footage.
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But the best was yet to come. Throughout the episodes of “The Fabulous Beekman Boys,” the tension and stress of the long-distance relationship was evident. But, until sales of Beekman 1802 products were strong enough to pay the mortgage and support the farm, the couple concluded that they needed Josh’s income. Then came the remarkable opportunity to compete as a team on “Amazing Race 21.” And, even more remarkably, a spot in the winner’s circle!

Ironically, while it was a bad experience with a math class that convinced Josh to switch majors at MSU, he turned to math to solve the final task of the “Amazing Race” — putting the words “Hello” and “Goodbye” written in 9 languages into correct order in front of the United Nations building — and allowing the Beekman Boys to sprint to the finish line and win “The Amazing Race.”

The interesting part of the win for Josh and Brent is that they were, hands down, the underdogs of the final three teams — they had never before won a challenge on the show. “We never, ever thought we would hear you say those words to us,” Brent said to the cameras just after host Phil Keoghan told them they were the winners. Most of “The Amazing Race” audience would probably agree with that.

Both Josh and Brent said in their interviews afterwards that winning the $1 million will allow them to spend more time together on their farm in upstate New York. “This race really brought us back together again,” Josh said. “I had to work in the city, and he’s on the farm. So winning this race actually will bring us physically together again...for the next 50 years.”

Dusty Mitchell, MFA, Sculpture, 2004

Bravo TV - “Work of Art,” Season 2

As a sculptor, Dusty Mitchell says he became interested in the Bravo TV series “Work of Art” while watching Season 1. Mitchell, who earned a BFA in sculpture and a degree in art education from Arkansas State University in 2001, and an MFA in sculpture from Michigan State University in 2004, says it seemed like something he’d enjoy doing. After Arkansas State, Dusty checked into various MFA in sculpture programs and found most were only two years. Having grown up in Adrian, Michigan, he decided to take a look at MSU’s program. It was three years, offered a teaching assistantship, and the opportunity to also study in London. Dusty says he grabbed the opportunity, and it worked out well. And “Work of Art” seemed like another great opportunity.

Bravo TV’s “Work of Art: The Next Great Artist” is a creative competition series that bills itself as “…seeking to discover new talent and shed light on the artistic process that typically occurs behind closed doors. Assembled in New York City under the watchful eye of art world elites, 14 up-and-coming artists...battle it out for a solo show at the Brooklyn Museum and a cash prize of $100,000.”

“At the end of the Season 1 finale, they put out a call for Season 2 contestants,” says Dusty. “So, I responded, and ended up being invited to an open-casting call in Chicago in October 2010 with 500 or so other artists. Bravo also had open calls in New York City and Los Angeles. “Then, after all that, they opened the casting for online entries,” Mitchell says, “and the network had me jumping through even more hoops, creating art, and videos of me making art. Then, in April 2011, I got the call saying I was on the show. We started filming almost immediately, and the program began airing in fall 2011.”

Mitchell says it was a good, sort of diverse, group from the start.
“The schedule is really crazy! You wake up at 5 a.m. with a camera in your face and go nonstop until midnight. Then, you do it all over again the next day. Over time, that ‘quicker, faster’ schedule pushes up the drama and pushes people near their breaking points. The next thing I know, someone starts asking probing questions about missing my daughter.”

“I think they try to mix up the personalities to create drama,” he says. “But as artists, we were all such open-minded people, the more diverse, the better. We actually helped each other during competitions because that’s what artists do.

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Mitchell says that the format isn’t the most conducive to what it’s like to be a working artist. For Dusty, the limitation on materials was the toughest part, because his style is heavily dependent on the materials, and they had no access to random objects that he typically uses in his work.

“I’m not complaining, though,” Dusty says. “It was the same for everyone.”

Dusty says his favorite challenge was the joint wall art project with Young Sun in Episode 6. The finished art shows Young on the left with a speech bubble saying, “I recently lost my father.” On the right is Dusty saying, “I recently became a father.” Young’s next bubble says, “How does it feel to become a parent?” and Dusty’s says, “How does it feel to lose a parent?” The combined answer of both men sits in the middle and simply says, “It challenges you.”

“We were under the Manhattan Bridge in great weather until 2 a.m. videotaping and working on a highly personal piece of art for both us,” Mitchell says. “That was pretty amazing. I won’t ever forget that experience.”

As for Episode 9—when Dusty was voted off the show, one short of the finale—he feels somewhat conflicted.

“Originally, I had two ideas,” Dusty says, “and was turning away from the Skittles collage because I thought the judges might view it as too similar to my past art. But my other idea just didn’t work, so I went back to the collage, finished it off and added a frame. Out of my two ideas, I felt it was my strongest.”

Mitchell adds that for each episode, once the exhibit is up, there is typically a whole new group of people invited to each show, and for Episode 9, he was feeling the love.

“I got such a positive reaction to the piece, I thought I might even win,” Dusty says. “And the guest judge seemed to really like my work. I don’t think any of us except Kymia, who won the challenge, created anywhere near their best work (and I love all of the artists, so that’s not to take anything away from them). I kind of thought Kymia would win, and I’d be second.

“But then, I could almost smell it in the air; that it was my time to go. You know how you feel something in your bones? Well, as it turned out, I was right.”

Since the show, Dusty says he’s received a lot of commissioned portrait work. And, because the show is still airing in other countries, interest hasn’t died down. He adds that it was great to get back home. Being away from family – and the only artist contestant with kids – was tough.

Of his wife, Terina, Dusty says it was tough on her, too. “She’s a troupers. She’s a good one,” he says. “Interesting story: we now have two kids. I missed my daughter Cara’s first birthday because we were taping the show, and I missed her second because our son, Liam, was born on the same date as Cara and we were in the hospital for the delivery. This year, I’ll get to
ToriNichel, BFA, Fashion Design, 1998
NBC’s “Fashion Star,” Season 2

“Never in a million, kazillion years did I ever think I would be on a reality TV show,” says MSU College of Arts and Letters alumna ToriNichel, BFA, Fashion Design, 1998. “But being a contestant on the second season of NBC’s “Fashion Star” was great! You know, when I graduated from MSU, I’m not even sure MTV’s “The Real World” was on the air, yet, (it was, but only began airing in 1992) so reality TV wasn’t really on my radar.”

But, ToriNichel says, when she was at MSU, all of her friends and acquaintances were taking traditional majors, and hers—fashion design—was kind of “off,” yet intriguing to them.

As for the reality show, ToriNichel says: “I think I can sum up the Fashion Star experience in two words: Fashion Camp! The other contestants were great. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to work with Jessica Simpson, and see everyone’s designs in their own personal aesthetic. It was this very cool incubator setting.”

And, how it all came about, ToriNichel says, was pure happenstance.

“It’s kind of crazy, really. Ironically, a friend of mine, Hilton Kaye, who has various connections with casting directors and other people working on various reality shows, shot me an e-mail saying, ‘This is right up your alley,’ and then, promptly forgot about it. He’s the same person who had forwarded my résumé when I landed my position with Sears Holdings.

“I was kind of hesitant because I’d submitted for a few other shows that sounded similar, and might have even been fake as I never heard about them again. ‘Fashion Star’ asked for a video that showed my clothing in a runway setting or myself interacting with my collection. In 2009, I competed (and won grand prize in the first-time sellers category) on the “eBay Challenge Competition,” and had prepared a one-minute elevator-pitch video. I sent it in, and they got right back to me saying, ‘This is fantastic, you must come to our NYC open call.’

“So, I did, and was ultimately chosen for NBC’s ‘Fashion Star,’ season 2. It was a long process; so long, in fact, that I did not believe it was going to be my reality until I got the call.”

On “Fashion Star,” a group of designers create fashions each episode, and three buyers from retail chains—this season from Macy’s, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Express—decide if they want to put money behind the designer’s fashions and sell them online and in their stores. The financial backing can run up to and even exceed $200,000. In a new wrinkle, this year, the designers are assigned to a celebrity team headed by one of three mentors including Nicole Richie, John Varvatos and Jessica Simpson.

Asked when the reality set in that people were going to be sent home over the course of the show, ToriNichel says, “Reality set in the day of the first show—the realization that one of us is being sent home tonight. That, tomorrow, it won’t be the same cast of characters.”

As for the buyers judging her work, ToriNichel says, “I’ve been in settings with buyers before, but never in the national spotlight, on national TV, being judged; for family, friends, neighbors, the dry cleaner, hairdressers, etc., all to see and hear their comments, good or bad. You’re really taking a chance putting yourself out there.”

“The show brings out competitiveness in everyone. You want to get bought by as many buyers as possible. You want your brand to tie in with their brand, yet you want to stay true to yourself, yet be acceptable to the buyers.”

In ToriNichel’s case, while she received compliments from the celebrities and the buyers on her designs, no one bought her designs during the first and second shows, and she was sent home at the end of the second show. Still, she says being on “Fashion Star” was a great way to reach a new customer base, and increase awareness of herself as a designer, of her aesthetic and of her brand.

“With my ‘Fashion Star’ exposure, I have a new platform to re-launch my brand, focus on dresses, and build a social media presence.

“This time, I want to build the business infrastructure, especially the financial area, which is always the most difficult. I’ve mastered the concept of multitasking and wearing a multitude of hats as a business owner who also has the creative expertise and vision that drives the brand and company.
Let’s Get Real

Reality-based television has been around since as early as Allen Funt’s 1948 TV series, “Candid Camera.” But today’s extremely diverse range of offerings, from NBC’s “The Celebrity Apprentice,” Bravo’s the “Real Housewives” franchise, and TLC Network’s “Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,” to ABC’s “Dancing with the Stars,” NBC’s “The Voice,” Fox’s “X-Factor,” and the Discovery Channel’s “Deadliest Catch,” reality TV appears to be expanding to fill the television universe.

Today’s reality TV household names include chefs Gordon Ramsey and Tom Colicchio; fashionistas Tim Gunn and Heidi Klum; music industry veterans Simon Cowell and Randy Jackson; British transplants Piers Morgan and Len Goodman, and a whole slew of bachelors, bachelorettes and their mate choices.

Then there is the “humans against the elements and each other” category with “Survivor,” “Big Brother,” “Ice Road Truckers,” and “The Great Race;” the makeover grouping including “Tabitha Takes Over,” “Extreme Makeover,” and “Kitchen Nightmares;” and the entertainer competition category including the long-running ratings leader (until recently) “American Idol,” as well as “America’s Got Talent,” and “So You Think You Can Dance.”

Why the explosion of reality TV shows in the 2000s? First off, the economics are far too attractive to ignore. A reality TV show costs much less to make than a traditional series-based comedy or drama. What began as a movement outside the U.S. to cut programming costs has taken the U.S. television industry by storm. And we are working overtime to catch up.

Second, the shows can garner huge audiences if they click with the public, and even those that don’t usually deliver a respectable rating. Worst case scenario, the producers pull the plug, go into reruns if they have enough episodes, and move on to the next idea or even a spinoff of the failed show. That may sound a bit mercenary, but that’s the reality of reality TV.