Collage artist and professor Michael Oatman collaborates with architecture students on genre-defying projects that move from the Greene Building to the art gallery—and beyond.
When Michael Oatman was in fourth grade he swiped a power cord from his school’s wood shop. During recess he plugged it into an outlet, dug a trench, and buried it. In the fall he dug a 30-foot-long culvert wired with electricity so that when winter came he could have a working laboratory. He filled the tiny space with thermometers and test tubes, and used a Super8 film projector to show movies of ants carrying food and birds building nests using the snow as his screen. “At the time I thought I was playing scientist,” Oatman says. “Now I realize that was my first installation as a multimedia artist.” Today as a clinical assistant professor of architecture at Rensselaer, Oatman is still immersed in the worlds of science, art, and design. As an artist, he infuses his work with elements of science and architecture. As an educator, he tries to empower Rensselaer’s young architects to incorporate artistic introspection and reflection into their designs. By Amber Cleveland
My things are not painterly—they are as precise as scientific illustrations. In my mind I focus on where there's a shocking sameness. I want you to look at this and be confronted by the image. If it’s important to you that it’s a collage, that’s going to come later.” — Michael Oatman

A visitor need only look around his studio in downtown Troy to see that Oatman—a renowned collage and installation artist whose work has been exhibited at museums and galleries around the globe—draws inspiration from nearly everything he encounters. The space is filled with a wide range of obscure objects that seemingly have no business residing side by side. Upon further inspection it becomes apparent that the artist has meticulously organized the chaos of the space.

Rows of bookshelves line the walls, home to hundreds of dated manuals, reference materials, encyclopedias, and children’s books from which Oatman culled thousands of images for his collages. Clipped images yet to be used sit in labeled folders and filing cabinets strewn about the studio. Some files are plainly named for the contents inside—Diving Equipment, Tools, Food (Packaged), Beverages, Birds, Medium-sized Mammals. Others have more enigmatic names, like the file titled Keeping an Eye (Ear) on The Sky, which holds astronomy-related images.

Oatman compares his work collecting images to “a dowser looking for water—only I dowse images and objects. Very often I’ll be looking for something in particular and then instead of finding what I had in mind, I’ll find something completely different, and it becomes apparent that it’s what I really wanted—and didn’t even know existed. When I work it seems I find what I need, not always what I want.”

Using only pictures from books published between the 1940s and the 1970s because of their similar image qualities, Oatman’s collages often leave viewers confused as to the genre of his work. “I can hear them asking ‘what is it exactly... is it a print... is it a computer-generated image?’”

In fact, Oatman understands the initial confusion. “I differ from a lot of collage artists who take things and tear them and rough them up and use collage in a painterly way, focusing on where there is a jarring difference,” he says. “My things are not painterly—they are as precise as scientific illustrations. In my mind I focus on where there’s a shocking sameness. I want you to look at this and be confronted by the image. If it’s important to you that it’s a collage, that’s going to come later.”

Oatman’s Falling Anvil Studios, named for the collection of 40 anvils he’s amassed over the years, swells with objects and curios that many times make their way into his collages. Inspiration usually comes from his personal experiences and observations. “I read a lot, and I listen a lot, too. I write stuff down and sometimes it sits for years before I do anything with it,” Oatman says.

A artwork centered on the giant image of a hand is beginning to take shape in the far corner of the loft. A collection of images—prehistoric tools, rocks, fossils, and gemstones—scatter from the hand onto the blank black background of a collage not yet fully contrived.

“A plesseed,” Oatman says, pointing to the work in progress. “It’s a four-panel collage, almost like a series of film stills. I’m recreating Johnnny A plesseed’s hand spreading seed, but in this case he’s casting artifacts as we move backward toward geologic time.”

Oatman describes the piece as “an image that is looking at the confusion of science and religious belief, and the ways many of us go back and forth between those things but embrace them all at once. I like the idea of being a political cartoonist of the time using a different, more ambiguous media,” he says. “If I can create an image that is powerfully contradictory, then hopefully people will look at the time that they are in, in another way.”

“When you look at any piece of Michael Oatman’s work, you quickly recognize that he is an artist of extraordinary talent, but that’s just for starters,” says Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Kennedy. “The range of his imagination dazzles. He is a relentless seeker after what is new, and ‘new’ to Michael means a wrenching transformation of any expectations you might have based on whatever you know of his previous work. He is a dogged realist in his detail, but a surrealist in his conceptions, and the fusion has given us a body of work that is bountifully diverse and original.”

Discovering the artist in the architect

Named the “best local artist of 2005” by Metroland, a Capital Region newsmagazine, and praised by the Albany Times Union for producing “some of the most ambitious, challenging work on the art scene,” Oatman has also gained acclaim for his dedication to his students in the classroom, where he challenges young architects to reflect on who they are as students, architects, and individuals, and to incorporate aspects of themselves into design.

“It’s interesting being the artist in the architecture department. It took me a long time to realize I didn’t have to tiptoe around with my interests,” says Oatman. “Yes, I have a different skill set than my colleagues, but it’s a necessary skill set.”

Oatman sees his role as encouraging students to figure out what interests and motivates them. “That’s going to make them more successful in their thesis, and it’s going to make them more interesting as people. Increasingly my role has become about guiding young people toward being able to say ‘I have an interest, and my interest is this,’” he says.

“What I love about teaching undergrads is that I can re-educate them, in a way, to stop worrying about a right or a wrong answer, the popular culture, the common voice. My job is to get them to look at things from as many different ways as possible, on the way to looking at them personally—and I don’t think you figure out what personal is for a while, you have to be guided through different modes of seeing.”

A architecture Dean Alan Balfour praises Oatman’s unique contribution to the Greene Building. “Michael is a wonderful civilizing presence in the school. He nurtures and encourages each student’s creativity, often in surprising ways, and draws them into the world of art beyond architecture,” Balfour says. “His role reminds me of artists such as Edward Millman, Don Mochon, and the internationally admired George Rickey, who were members of the architecture faculty in the ‘50s and ‘60s. They are the names still mentioned when alumni reminisce.”

Oatman teaches the fundamentals of drawing and space, providing students with crucial skills for their architecture careers. But he takes his teaching role a step further to offer students opportunities to work on his projects. Recently he involved students from his Extreme Drawing class—a class he developed that challenges students to use unconventional methods to create collaborative works at extreme scales, inspired by the phenomenon of extreme sports—in a proposal he’s working on for
“A naximander,” 2002, collage on paper with 40 framed micro-collages, 55 x 75 inches overall
“You move past Michael’s collages of gun-toting songbirds, or snowflakes made out of jet fighters, or an 18-foot-long greenhouse made of 2,500 glass plate negatives of criminal mug shots, or a mock biographical video installation in which he recounts how he turned into a criminal, and you realize that Michael Oatman is easily bored, not easily satisfied by life or work.” — William Kennedy
Together the professor and students are developing a series of ideas and designs for a permanent installation on the roof of the museum using only photovoltaic cells. Ideas proposed include laying the cells out in the shape of land masses on a globe, and the students are excited about the opportunity to work on an installation of this size and visibility.

"Could I have done this project without my class? Yes. But this is an opportunity my students wouldn’t ordinarily get—this is something for their portfolio, and something that will elicit their individual creativity," Oatman says.

This spring in a studio course called RxBox: Open Source Architecture for a World in Transition, co-taught with Associate Professor Ted Krueger, 15 students converted a retired 8'x8'x20' cargo shipping container into a mobile medical facility that could be used to bring accessible healthcare to developing nations. Based on an idea called "Doc-in-a-Box," created by global health advocate Laurie Garrett, the transformed container was wired for electricity and fully lit. The repurposed container featured a water filtration system, a corrugated tin roofing system equipped with louvers for protection during inclement weather, a newly tiled floor, and conventional doors and windows.

From Rome to Rensselaer

For the past three years, Oatman has been collaborating with a small group of architecture students to create some of his most acclaimed work. During a 2003 trip to Italy to accompany architecture students who were studying in the school's Semester in Rome program, Oatman began to share his work with several students, allowing them to help with small tasks on upcoming art projects.

By the time the group returned to Troy, Erin Cusker '06, Matthew Fickett '06, and Stephanie Cramer '06 were playing more integral roles in the creation of Oatman's projects. Before long the group members became regulars in his studio, spending the summer working intensely on a large-scale installation project called "Conservatory."

A 18-foot-long greenhouse created from approximately 2,500 glass plate negatives of criminal mug shots from the turn of the 20th century, the construction of "Conservatory" required many months' worth of labor.

"My installations are sort of novels by a non-writer," says Oatman. "They are stories that I want to write, but I realize that I'm not a good writer. So I use art to create a scene where you can go to the place physically where I report that things happen, but it's up to you to put the story in its order, and there is no specific order."

While Oatman sketched out ideas for the installation, the students began the daunting task of scanning and digitally cataloging nearly 18,000 glass negatives. Soon Oatman started to share his designs for "Conservatory" with them, enlisting their architectural skills to help assemble the edifice. The students designed and fabricated the greenhouse's steel structure and the panels that covered the walls and ceiling of the space. W hile valuing their architectural knowledge, Oatman also welcomed their input into the work.

"We tell Michael when things won't work," says Fickett, who was responsible for drafting the greenhouse's renderings. "He wanted to use mirrored Plexiglas for the whole greenhouse in 'Conservatory,' and we told him [we didn't think that was the best design]. When the final project got done, it was a good thing we didn't use the mirrors."

The group grew in number when the demands of the projects exceeded what Oatman and his three students were able to do. Over the last two years, the expanding team has worked to create a range of pieces—from an installation and documentary centered around a coin-operat-
ed binocular viewer and the question "If you could use this device to see anything, in the past, present or future, a person, living or dead, a historical event, or something that has yet to occur, what would you most desire to see?" to a full-scale attic and basement installation called "Iceberg," to a Metropolitan Transit Authority poster commemorating 100 years of motorized buses in New York City.

The name Falling Anvil Studios has extended beyond the physical space in Troy where Oatman and his students create these works of art, to become the group's name, more evidence of the integral role they've played in shaping his work. "The students have been involved in all aspects of the design process, from the conceptualization, to the making of the stuff," he says. "I started out with the intent of letting these students help me so they could gain some experience, but I ended up really enjoying the kinship I had with them. My projects were different because they'd worked on them."

Although working with an artist might seem like a stretch for young architects, the students easily draw a strong connection between the two disciplines. "The opportunity to design and construct buildings takes years of education and experience, but artwork can be equally satisfying—and in some cases equally challenging," says Cusker. "So much of our class work is theoretical or hypothetical and we design things that never get built. Working with Michael I've had the opportunity to design and build pieces to full scale. It has been a phenomenal learning experience for me."

Cramer appreciates the freedom to design that comes with working with Oatman. "Principals in architecture design studios will primarily use us for our skill. They are mostly interested in what we are good at. Michael is actually interested in the way we think."

With the original team members finishing their college careers, Oatman has begun recruiting a handful of students to work with him as the next generation of Falling Anvil Studios. But that doesn't mean the graduating seniors have seen the last of their professor and collaborator. Oatman has already dubbed them Floating Anvil Studios, and he plans to keep them involved in upcoming projects.

Sitting in the Greene Building's Drawing Lab one warm spring day before Commencement, the students talk about what's next. Some are moving to Philadelphia, some to Boston, one to Germany. All are juggling multiple job prospects.

When asked if they'll continue to work with Oatman as members of Floating Anvil, Fickett answers for the group. "Michael will have branch offices in every major city," he says. "We'll all be on call."