

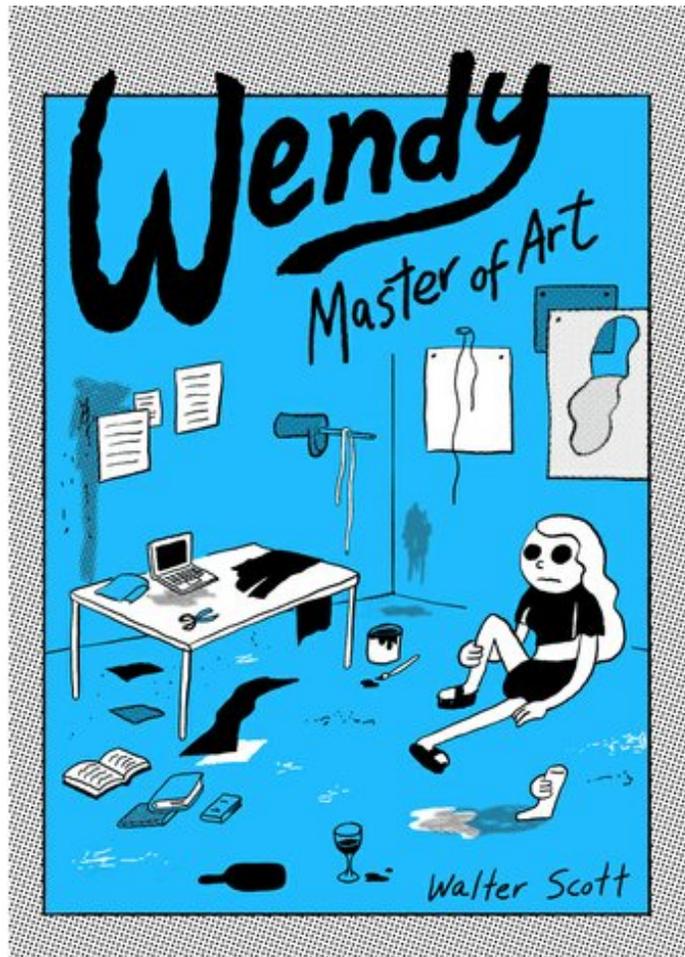
BOOKS

Wendy, Master of Art

Walter Scott's hung-over heroine slinks into an absurd fishbowl world in his latest graphic novel.

by Sarah Swan

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Wendy's eyes are piss-holes in the snow. She's hung over again, drawn with limp and squiggly lines that somehow convey her through the frames of Walter Scott's latest graphic novel, and through the rigours of a master's program in fine arts.

In one scene, Wendy slides drunkenly off a bar stool as the words "irrelevance" and "superficiality" hang in a cloud above her head. "I am a colossal failure," she intones. Her face sags under the weight of despondency, lips drooping comically off her face like two strange skin-cicles. It's a wretched business, art school.

Wendy, Master of Art is Scott's third book in a series that has followed Wendy through her undergrad years and then artist residencies, accompanied by buckets of booze.



This third book is wicked satire that takes aim at the academic excesses of the art world. While Scott's satire relies on hyperbole – Wendy's program is in the fictional Ontario town of Hell – the book is also funny because it's true. One of Wendy's classmates describes their thesis as "a long form fictional poem-slash-correspondence between Octavia Butler and Eileen Myles pondering feminist photo practices through allegories of kombucha fermentation." (I'm pretty sure I've read about similar work recently in *Canadian Art* magazine.)

Wendy and her colleagues banter about modes of inquiry, problematic methodologies and lateral violence even as they glance at celebrities without makeup on their phones. During a critique, a visiting professor grills a student: "I'm wondering about your relationship to an obfuscation of intention and the integration of reaction into your art practice." Wendy, reading an obnoxiously puffed-up and impenetrable essay, crumples the pages in frustration. "What the fuck does that mean?" she asks, but then wonders, "Oh God, what if I'm actually just not smart enough?"



Taking potshots at art jargon is easy, but Scott excels too at subtleties in plot and character development. With Wendy’s cohort he’s created a stable of perfect antiheroes, each with their own elastic facial expressions and demons to wrestle – whether political correctness or the pitfalls of polyamory.

Wendy’s eyes reflect the degree of her drunkenness but also the state of her soul – they frequently turn into saucer-sized sinkholes. Eric, a skinny white kid who is “somewhere on the spectrum,” can’t seem to stop his nervous sweating. He’s afraid to speak plainly about his art because “reductive terms risk an under-interpretation which can breed dogma and henceforth, white supremacy.”



The sum of Scott's artistry is an absurd fishbowl world. Readers can see into the Wendy-verse, but its population can't see beyond their own collective nose, so mired are they in that super-tense, rarefied environment. Reading it, I couldn't help but wonder when art school became so strained and un-fun.

Recently, I watched a 2016 documentary about 1960's sculptor Eva Hesse, and though she battled hard against patriarchal attitudes, she exclaimed, with evident joy, just how much she adored learning at Cooper Union in New York, how satisfying it felt. It's telling that a hopelessly out-of-touch professor at Hell University can't seem to relate to his young students, frequently moaning to himself, "whatever happened to pure exploration of form?" He knows he's a dinosaur though, deadpanning on the first day of class, "you might remember me from my last solo exhibition, in 1998."

Scott also articulates the loneliness of artists. We don't often fit in regular society, do we? When Wendy attempts a date with a non-artist, the results are painfully funny. The enthusiastic naif cheerily exclaims: "I think there's a place around here where you can paint your own mug!" Wendy's eyes become sinkholes. It's just too hard to explain why this is the world's most depressing date idea.



The book rings true partly because **Scott is an artist** himself – interdisciplinary of course, working with illustration, writing, sculpture and performance. He completed his MFA in 2018 at the University of Guelph. If we ever meet, I'll ask if his thesis was a dialectic framework of (non)prescriptive love-slash-hate binaries that interrogate the artifice of art and social non-function.

The distance between academic art and the public at large is so vast it sometimes feels barely crossable. *Wendy, Master of Arts* explores the gap with much pathos and hilarity. How much readers laugh – and how much they wince – will depend on the complicity they're willing to accept, as well as how defensive they feel and how dark their own two sinkholes become when contemplating the merits of their artistic activities. It's a great book. ■

***Wendy, Master of Art* by Walter Scott, Drawn & Quarterly, Montreal, 2020.**

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Walter Scott

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