

# MENTOR the director is in



Far left: "Snake Dreams," 1981. O'Neil's patchwork quilt was made from contact prints of snakeskins and 4x5 negatives on cyanotype-sensitized cotton.  
Top left: "Preteen, April 26, 1994." Printed life-size, O'Neil's self-portrait with her daughter, Julia, is part of an ongoing project in which mother and child pose for a photograph in the same place every day of the year.  
Below: "Let's Do Lunch," 1978. Created with an obsolete prepress process similar to gum printing, O'Neil's early still life owes its strange palette to 21 separate applications of pigment.

Elaine O'Neil has a confession to make. "I was naive," says the director of the Rochester Institute of Technology's prestigious School of Photographic Arts & Sciences, now in her sixth year there.

"Even knowing that I'd have 45 people teaching for me and be responsible for 900 students, I didn't know what I was in for." But having taught photography for 15 years at the Boston Museum School, O'Neil was ready for the challenge. "As a faculty member, you tend to criticize the administration," she says. "So I thought I'd put my money where my mouth was and try to be a good administrator."

O'Neil's reasons weren't quite that simple. "I believe good administration enhances what happens in the classroom," she says. Indeed, O'Neil was tapped to oversee a major academic face-lift. "We needed to make radical changes in terms of tools and discipline," says teacher Malcolm Spaul, director of the school's Center for Digital Media and a member of the committee that lured O'Neil to RIT. "But we also needed someone who was a good listener, and willing to include everybody in the decision-making process."

Before O'Neil's arrival, the school's six departments—from Imaging Systems Management to Fine-Art Photography—had little to do with one another. "Now lots of teachers teach across curriculum and departments," she says. "Almost everyone on the faculty is now qualified to teach electronic imaging, for example."

O'Neil thinks this broadening gives RIT's students a leg up

## for RIT's Elaine O'Neil, administration enhances art

on the competition. "Photographic imaging will continue to grow, but I'm not as confident about the life expectancy of the traditional studio or stock photographer," she says. "The careers we know won't necessarily be there in ten years."

There's also a newfound appreciation at RIT for the aesthetic side of photography, no doubt due to O'Neil's presence. Her own photographs range from highly experimental nonsilver imagery (one of her teaching specialties) to family autobiography (including one-a-day self-portraits with her preteen daughter), and have garnered such prizes as a 1994 New York Foundation for the Arts

Fellowship, a 1990 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a 1985 Massachusetts Artists' Foundation Fellowship. And they've been shown everywhere from San Francisco's Camerawork Gallery to Harvard's Fogg Museum.

What effect has RIT had on O'Neil's own work? "I'd like to see if I can use scientific imaging as a means of expression," she says, citing both Schlieren Photography (used to study air currents) and electron microscopy as possible areas of exploration. "All those facilities are right here at the school!"

—RUSSELL HART

**Opposite page, top:** "Church of St. Anne/Pools of Bethesda, Jerusalem," 1983. Part of a series called "Notes from Birth to Ten," O'Neil's photograph of fractured ancient architecture also fragments her daughter, Julia.  
**Opposite page, bottom:** "Guanxian, China," 1987. O'Neil found this Eastern version of a photo booth on a family trip to China that included her husband, Allen Hess, a well-known photographer himself.

