

2006 CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR: CULTURE

W.J.T. Mitchell: Chicago's renaissance man

Scholar's written about dinosaurs, fetishes, Spike Lee

By Julia Keller
Tribune cultural critic

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He always takes the scenic route. Be the journey an exterior or an interior one, W.J.T. Mitchell is forever looking around, absorbing and assimilating landscapes both literal and metaphorical.

"What makes Chicago so fabulous," he declares, "is the sense of infinite possibility, the vast reach of the plains and the lake, with the city as this massive deposit of human order -- architecture, sculpture, parks, boulevards, alleys -- straddling the border between earth and water."

Mitchell, 64, is the Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1977. But beneath that somewhat crusty and heavy-sounding official title lies a playful and lighthearted intellect, one that moves with fluid ease and effortless grace across a range of disciplines and genres.

In an age of narrow specialization, Mitchell is that rare exception. He's a 21st Century version of an ancient concept: the renaissance man, the restless and vivid thinker who goes where his passionate interests lead him, from literature to architecture to television to photography to politics to anthropology.

This year brought fresh distinction to Mitchell's scholarly expeditions. His latest book, "What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images" (University of Chicago Press), recently received the James Russell Lowell Prize from the Modern Language Association, the group's annual award for best book.

The citation lauded his "provocative and remarkably accessible collection of essays," essays that consider aspects of the visual world such as monuments and paintings, advertising images and Dolly, the cloned sheep. Mitchell also reflects on the iconography of the World Trade Center and the meanings of 9/11.

Mitchell, though, is not some detached scholar examining the world from a lofty perch. He travels to institutions around the world, lecturing on the images that preoccupy us, and when he's back in Chicago, he edits *Critical Inquiry*, arguably the most influential literary journal around. His seminars are designed to be collaborative exercises. "I tackle topics that I want to know more about," Mitchell says. "I want the students to fall in love with each others' minds, not with me. So I make them learn from each other and I try to create situations where I learn from them.

"Teaching," he adds, "is absolutely essential to my work."

He's written about dinosaurs and Spike Lee, about fetishes and William Blake. He's been a guest lecturer

at places such as Dartmouth College and Duke University and the California Institute of Technology. But his home -- intellectually as well as physically -- is Hyde Park, where he lives with his wife, the award-winning composer and musician Janice Misurell-Mitchell.

Asked to describe Chicago, Mitchell gives the kind of panoramic answer you'd expect: "Big plans, wide-open spaces, great heights, but also tiny bungalows, intimate cloisters, little blues clubs, homey corner taverns, miniature rooms and friendly confines," he says. "Chicago is what the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard called an `intimate immensity.'" The description also fits the mind of a certain U. of C. scholar who walks the Earth with his eyes wide open.

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