

GOVERNOR SPOTLIGHT

DAVID REED

David Reed was a Skowhegan participant in 1966, a Resident Artist in 1988, and has been a Governor since 1989. We asked him about his experience with Skowhegan in these various capacities over more than 40 years.



Above / Lillian Ball, David Reed, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Barbara Lapcek (with back to camera) in the Fresco Barn / 1988

SKOW: You are one of several Skowhegan Governors who are also alumni of Skowhegan's program. Why did you decide to go to Skowhegan?

DR: I first heard about Skowhegan from the figurative painter Willard Midgette, who was my professor at Reed College. Bill had graduated from Harvard, which didn't have an art program in those days. Skowhegan was his education in art. He went three times, and his experience formed him as an artist. He spoke of the program often with his students and highly recommended, even insisted, that I go. Later, Bill was a Resident Artist at Skowhegan for two summers before very sadly he died, much too young. The School meant so much to him that he chose to be buried in the cemetery up the road, near the South Solon Meeting House, which is frescoed by artists who were his teachers. Often at meetings of the Governors, I remember him and think that if he were still alive, we would be at the meeting together. I miss his counsel and presence.

David Reed, interviewed by Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, *Skowhegan Newsletter* (Fall 2009): 7-9.

Because of Bill's enthusiasm I was very intent on being accepted. I brought some small canvases and a roll of drawings to the New York office when it was uptown and showed them to Jack Eastman [then Skowhegan's Director] and the others on the staff. I talked my way in. Today, with the current level of competition and higher standards, the work I showed could never have gotten me in.

SKOW: How would you describe your experience as a participant in 1966?

DR: I love your word "participant." In those days we were just students. I had only taken a few art classes in college and was really very young and inexperienced. Twenty years old, I was just discovering my own direction. I arrived early, driving from the West Coast in my Volkswagen Beetle. Walking around, trying to find where to go, I met Bill Cummings, who recruited some of us to help prepare for the other arriving students. He was very kind and welcoming. Because of him I always felt comfortable on campus.

My "studio" was one of the outdoor sheds that were attached under a slanting roof to the side of a larger studio. It was like a horse stall: open to the air on one side, two sides made of just a few wooden planks over a sloping dirt floor. When it rained, which it did often, of course, my studio was a little canyon of running muddy water. The studios certainly have been much improved since then. I painted a few still lifes there and tried to work from the view of the woods in the distance, but never managed to do much that was worthwhile.

The following fall I was to start at the New York Studio School and I was very lucky in that several of the Visiting Artists that summer were connected to the Studio School, including one of the founders and the force behind the Studio School, Mercedes Matter. So I was prepared when I started there. Elmer Bischoff was one of the Resident Artists and I admired his early work. I also learned from talking with Walter Murch. Murch was a wonderfully shy and diffident man. I was amazed that in making his very precise realistic still lifes he liked to walk on paper in his studio and then use the smudged sheets to find forms. James Brooks gave a talk and from his descriptions of working I still have a strong mental image of him on the floor with pours of paint, searching for an image. I had never heard of such a thing.

GOVERNOR SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED

My most important friend that summer was Richard Mock, who came to Skowhegan as a student from the Studio School. Dick and I drove together down to New York after the summer with our paintings and stretchers tied to the roof of my Volkswagen. We got pulled over by a policeman on the Massachusetts Turnpike and I was arrested. When I appeared before the judge, he seemed puzzled. The policeman winked at him and the judge asked me: "How long has it had been since you had a haircut?" The father of a friend from Boston, who was a lawyer, had to come to bail me out. I took the "Not Guilty" verdict to be true in an existential, as well as a legal sense.

SKOW: Although your work has become increasingly abstract, when you went to Skowhegan in the 60s you were painting landscapes. How did the natural environment at Skowhegan affect your work, and do you think Skowhegan played a role in the subsequent move toward greater abstraction?

DR: Yes, I was very concerned about working from nature and what that means while I was at Skowhegan. I didn't want to just paint ideas, but to interact with what I was seeing. Cézanne was my hero. Through painting, I wanted to find a way to bring thought, sensation, and action together. Coming from California, unfortunately, I had no feeling for the landscape in Maine, all that green. Hardly anyone was using the sculpture studio—the open-air central common area was usually empty. A model had been hired and since no one was using her I was able to pose her next to the rough blocks of stone, other materials, and tools. Her body with these crude, blunt forms related to how I was thinking of my interactions as a painter with nature. My drawings were not at all accomplished, but I learned a lot. The following winter, I left New York and painted in the Southwest, drawn to the void, the big space of that landscape. Maine made me miss the West.

SKOW: You were a Resident Artist at Skowhegan in 1988. Having been a participant, what was it like to see Skowhegan from the other side of the faculty/participant equation?

DR: Sometimes I think that having been a student helped me with the teaching. (We still called ourselves teachers in those days.) I knew how intense an experience it could be. But it was also confusing. Sometimes I thought I knew what was going on when I really didn't at all. Every summer, because of the total change of

students and faculty, Skowhegan is completely different. It's a place of very intense relationships, not a country idyll, but aggressively urban.

I should confess that as a student I was something of a troublemaker. A student driving a car up the hill was forbidden, so I made a sign for my parking place: "Cézanne." Jack Eastman caught me crossing a field with stolen lumber from the house that was being built for Ben Shahn. Another student and I had decided that a beam from his roof would be perfect for our tree house. Being a teacher I felt strange being on the other side of this sometimes rebellious dynamic between generations.

Luckily Guy Goodwin, an old friend, and I were on the faculty together for the summer. He's a natural teacher and his insights into the students were very helpful to me. During studio visits I usually work outward from formal concerns, hoping to finally get to something useful. Guy has an intuitive understanding of people and can get right to the point. We talked over the students and their work. Sometimes we even flipped a coin to decide who would be the good cop and who would be the bad cop.

There's a tradition that the artists who will be on the faculty that summer have a lot to say about which students are accepted. Egging each other on, Guy and I argued that a number of applicants who were doing strange, risky, off beat work be let in. Looking back, I now realize that another way of putting it would be that some of this work showed evidence of mental disturbance. In a studio visit with one of these students, I asked about a gun she had depicted in one of her paintings. She said that it was the gun she would use to kill me and Guy. I told her that the red of the gun was good, but I wasn't sure about how she was handling the corners of the canvas and got out as quickly as I could. Luckily Barbara Lapcek, the director at the time, was very good with such situations. Barbara helped the student and she stayed for the full summer.

From other students I learned more than I could give. It took me several visits with Jason Rhoades to figure out that the whole of his studio was his artwork. I encouraged the alien spaceports he was building. I later understood his large installations because I knew how they had started and I loved watching the complications of his thinking and the refinement of his sense of humor. It's hard to comprehend that he is now gone.

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Chen Shen was another such artist. He knew the history of Chinese brush painting inside out and could teach me about brushes and brushmarks. From the beginning I've thought of him as a colleague and now he is much more than that. His work is very important to the history of Chinese abstract painting. I loved talking with Hanneline Røgeberg because of the fearless intensity with which she painted the figures and the narratives in her work. Once driving back to the lake at night, I came across her limping on the side of the road in the pitch dark. She said that, frightened by not being able to see anything, she had decided to overcome her fear by running down the road as fast as she could and had fallen, spraining her ankle.

In those days all the Resident Artists together visited each student in their studio for a summing up—final crits, a culmination of the intensity of the summer. Our last visit was with a student who, pretending to be dead, had hung himself by his feet in an old shack in the woods. It was just a performance, but it was unexpected and we worried that he had been upside down for too long and pleaded with him to let us cut him down. He wouldn't talk. Immediately afterwards, exhausted and trying to get rid of all that tension, Guy and I paddled a canoe into a mounting storm on the lake. Going with the wind we did okay, but then turning and trying to come back we capsized, laughing.

At the end of the summer the students buried a time capsule. I wonder if it is still there. It's hard to comprehend how the time has passed.

SKOW: As you know, we received a record number of applications for our 2009 session—2,005. What do you think this suggests about the relevance of the residency experience in general or the Skowhegan experience in particular?

DR: I think that Skowhegan is a learning experience that works, that helps young artists. This is very rare. I don't think anyone knows why it works, so I'm glad that the structure hasn't been changed or meddled with over the years. The isolation, the number of participants and the length of the experience have remained the same. Maybe Skowhegan works because this structure has stayed the same and it is so flexible, so variable because of the different faculty and participants.

I like the mentoring systems in the West Coast art schools. I feel that this makes for healthier relationships between generations of artists than what we have in New York. I give John Baldessari, who I saw give his talk as a Visiting Artist at Skowhegan, a lot of the credit, because of his belief in teaching, for this attitude on the West Coast. I think that the gradual evolution of Skowhegan from something more like a school to something more like a residency has been natural and good because this evolution encourages even more these intergenerational friendships.

Trying to remember my experiences for this interview, I read through a notebook I kept during my time as a student in 1966. My notes make clear that I went through some kind of a crisis while at Skowhegan. At first it was hard for me to take the feelings and emotions of that rather embarrassing 20 year old I found in the notebook very seriously. But reading the notes more carefully and being reminded of those times, I've realized how much that summer had to do with forming me the way I am now. I was challenged by different points of view, struggling to think for myself, learning not to accept the ideas of others, trying to use art to bring acting and thought together. I think many other students, in their own way, go through similar or related experiences while at Skowhegan. Even though, as for me, these experiences might be painful at times, I do believe that it makes for better art.

SKOW: As we prepare for Skowhegan's 64th year, what do you hope for the School's future?

DR: Years ago there was talk of a Western Skowhegan. I would love to see this happen—a clone of the School, repeated somewhere in the Western landscape. I imagine the same isolation, number of participants and duration. Perhaps my fantasy Skowhegan could take place during the winter in the Southwest. I wonder how the location would change the experience.

IN MEMORIAM

In 2008 and 2009, Skowhegan lost several members of our community: alum ('47/'48) and former Trustee **Ray Alden**; alumni **Marilyn Dea Creighton** ('58), **Pat Fleisher** ('49), **Paul Jansen** ('69), **Donald G. Ross** ('52), and **Toby Urbont** ('58/'59); and faculty artists **George Schneeman** ('78/'79/'80) and **Harold Tovish** ('57/'58/'71). We recently became aware that alumna **Ingrid Muan** ('86) passed away in Phnom Penh in 2005.

Our thoughts are with their families, friends, and colleagues.

