



The Creative Crucible at Penland

By Christina Shmigel

"We require places where the values outside of us encourage and enforce the aspirations within us."

Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*

I first came to Penland School of Crafts in the spring of 1992, on a day when the air, mentholated and piney, pierced into my lungs in a way I have experienced neither before nor since. In the spirit of Tom Sawyer painting the picket fence, Rick Smith, then resident artist in iron, now head of blacksmithing at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, had invited a group of friends for a weekend of iron studio clean-up in anticipation of the school's spring session. On the second day of that visit, I broke away for a solitary walk down toward Beacon Church, a small clapboard building reminiscent of the sculptures I was making at the time. On my way, I passed a dilapidated old farmhouse where a young woman, her back against a pillar, one bare leg dangling off the porch edge, was playing a fiddle. I thought, with uncharacteristic clarity: I want to live that life.

A year later, I was granted the privilege of returning to Penland as a resident artist and did indeed get to live that life—well, minus the fiddle playing, as I got no further in my lessons than "Ball [sic] Them Cabbage Down." Since that time, I have been back to Penland as an instructor, a visiting artist, and a board member. Although I live very far away, in Shanghai, China, I think of Penland as the place at the center of my life, the place where the life that I've made for myself began.

Abie Harris, the architect behind Penland's campus master plan, shakes his head at the fact that most things at Penland don't have dates on them. But it makes sense to me, having lived there. Days run together when each has the same rhythm as the next.

As a resident artist, through my kitchen window, I began my day watching other residents arrive at their studios—usually the first is potter Suze Lindsay, followed by Rick Smith and Shake, his dog. Glass artists Val and Rick Beck, good Midwesterners, work the most disciplined hours while goldsmith Doug Harling, having worked through most of the night, never starts before 2:00. Mid-morning, on my way to my studio, I poke my head into other studios to see the previous day's work; a newly granulated brooch on Doug's bench, chalk drawings for new vessels

on Rick's studio floor, a clothesline laden with the brilliant colors of Carmen Grier's freshly dyed silks. Ever in awe to find myself among people who can bring forth such beauty out of base materials, I set to my own tasks. Conversations about what and why we make are casual—most sustaining is the atmosphere of focused energy, the intensity of commitment that emanates from all of us working here at once.

Residencies come in every stripe and texture for whatever purpose or stage of development an artist may have. The Alliance of Artists Communities, one of the best resources for identifying residencies, defines them by three essential characteristics: that artists stay for a fixed period of time, that artists are selected through a competitive process based on merit, and that residencies offer significant financial support to artists, whether through stipends or subsidized costs. Many craft schools, including Pilchuck, the Appalachian Center for Craft, and Arrowmont, have interdisciplinary residencies, while other organizations, like the Archie Bray Foundation in clay, Women's Studio Workshop in book arts, and the Appalachian Artisan Center in jewelry and furniture, specialize by media.

At Penland, one of the longest of the long-term residencies, artists stay for three years. Living quarters and unequipped studio space are provided at subsidized rates. There is no work requirement although residents interested in teaching may be given that opportunity at some point during their residency. In the words of former resident book artist Julia Leonard, the residency is above all "a gift of time."

The program was founded in 1963 by the school's second director, Bill Brown, as a way of extending the school's use of its studios beyond the summer teaching season. Eventually, Penland bought two old farm buildings just down the road and the resident artists moved into the complex known as The Barns. Speaking in 1979, Brown laid out his intentions for the program:

A doctor or a lawyer, when they get out of school, they can get a job in a law office as a junior partner or they can go to a clinic and be a doctor until they build up their clientele and then they have their own office. Well, a craftsman needs space and he needs a lot of tools or equipment, a woodshop or a weaving studio, you've got to have all this stuff.

Here it was dormant during the winter time. And I thought, well we should use

the equipment and facilities and bring people who are trained—most of them have a masters degree or equivalent—and have them learn to produce and market their work. And hopefully if they did it here they would like the area and like the people and the climate and they might choose to stay around after they had been here as a resident, and that's worked out pretty much so.

By all accounts, Brown had a sixth sense about who had the motivation, talent, and determination to take full advantage of the opportunity; woodworker Skip Johnson, glassblower Billy Bernstein, potter Cynthia Bringle and glassblower Richard Ritter were among the early residents. The acceptance process was entirely informal; textile artist Kathryn Gremley, who today manages the Penland Gallery, recalls putting together what is now a standard application packet—a resume, slides and a letter of proposal—only to have Brown laugh at her formality. As Mark Peiser tells it, he had only been a Penland student in glass for three days when he went into Brown's office to ask for a residency. Brown listened, said that he'd have to think about it, and then, not much of a minute later, agreed. Peiser's status as a master artist and the two studios he built at the Barns—which have been used over the years by other celebrated glass artists—are a testament to the keenness of Brown's instinct.

The residency continued to evolve under succeeding directors. The application process was formalized and the director now selects residents in consultation with a committee. In the mid-1990s, program director Dana Moore refined the residency's mission so the program would be open to full-time artists at any transitional point in their career. She recognized that a range of experience levels at the Barns would provide mentors for younger artists while allowing better established artists an opportunity to pursue new work away from ingrained routines. Sculptor Hoss Haley came to the program in the middle of what many people saw as an already thriving career. However, as an assistant to renowned blacksmith Tom Joyce and then running his own shop, Hoss felt that everything he made was informed by earning a living. What he wanted from the residency was the time to search for his own voice. Through what he describes as "the best struggle I ever had," he found his way to the sculpture he makes now—work that is far from his training in functional ironwork but still rooted in the attentive use of materials, craftsmanship, and labor that are central to craft.

A.
The Barns - two converted farm buildings make up the complex of studios and apartments that is home to the Penland resident artist program
photo: Robin Dreyer

As hidden away as Penland is in the mountains of western North Carolina, one has the sense there of being removed from the “real world.” But the spirit of the residency at Penland is not that of an artists’ retreat but rather one of absolute immersion. There are no weekends in the Penland residency: one lives the life of making every day. Potter Terry Gess thinks of his time there as a “trial by fire,” the testing ground for the life he’d imagined as full-time studio artist, the life he now lives just down the road from the Barns. Gay Smith, also a local potter, pictures the moment of coming into the residency as crossing over a threshold—arriving with a profound acknowledgement of who one is and what one wants to do and then stepping over to find oneself charged with doing and being at a far greater level of seriousness and commitment. Through the course of the residency, says potter Suze Lindsey, comes “a solidifying of *why* you work.” Or as current resident Vivian Beer puts it, “Done studying, done pretending. I’m gonna be a *professional*.”

Among the early challenges for many residents is creating for themselves the structure and discipline that external obligations like school or work have provided until then. As Hoss Haley

puts it, the freedom to make whatever you want is a huge responsibility. Kat Conley, who has long managed the school store, said to Terry Gess at the beginning of his residency: “You can get in there and work. You can get in there and do nothin’. It’s up to you.”

When Sculptor Anne Lemanski came to the residency, it was the first time since she was fourteen that no job barred her from studio time. What a surprise, then, to find the first months a “mental and emotional challenge.” She wavered between production and one-of-a-kind work before finally taking the risk of making just what she wanted. The gamble paid off: in two years of steady work, Anne fabricated the twelve mixed-media wigs that make up her most ambitious piece so far, *A Century of Hair*. It’s the kind of sustained project that can only be made in what Vivian Beer calls “unfractured” time. Laughs Vivian, “it’s still amazing to me how really true it is that the more time you spend at the work, the better it gets.”

For all the making that goes on at the Barns, it’s also a small business incubator. Kathryn Gremley recalls that when she did her first craft show she borrowed every single thing she needed from people in the community. New residents learn from older residents and from the community at

large what it takes to run a successful craft business. Tips on which shows are the best, on how to design a booth that breaks down easily, how to follow up with a gallery, or what it means to have road front property if you’re selling out of your studio are the small talk among residents.

Because the studios at the Barns are open to visitors at all times, the people you most respect in your field show up with observations, advice, and friendship. Gallery owners whose attention you would have to clamor for in a city just drop by. Collectors, curators, and art world professionals come in droves for the annual auction, occasionally, as happened to former resident Cristina Córdova several years ago, driving up your prices. Strangers, years later, tell you how important your work has been to their own development since the day they visited your studio.

For many, myself among them, the greatest gift to come from the residency is community: a network of far flung friendships, of connections shared with people across generations based on the experience of Penland, the circle of friends that have stayed on near the school. The “staying around” that Bill Brown anticipated now includes more than 50 of the 124 former



B.



C.



D.



residents, craftspeople who have a significant impact on the economic and cultural life of the region. Says Nick Joerling, a potter and board member who lives a mile from the school, “the residency allows you time to become a part of a community that always welcomes you no matter how long you have been away.”

To the side of one of those studios that Mark Peiser built, are two flowering trees. I often worked outdoors between them, ever mindful of glass artist Rob Levin, who planted them to commemorate the births of his twin daughters. Now, whenever I am at Penland, I go down to the Barns to visit the residents as though to see my siblings. The phases of their experience are familiar to me: the early struggle to define oneself, the blossoming out after that struggle, the final phase of working with a sense of mastery. In what was my studio space, there was Julia Leonard before me; now jeweler Angela Bubash makes her reliquaries there. The studio that’s home to wood and ironworkers, where Vivian Beer now works, held, among others, Rick Smith, Hoss Haley, and Marc Maiorana. Walking through those rooms and knowing whom they have nurtured gives me a powerful sense of continuity and wonder; I feel deeply grateful to be part of such a legacy.

Around 5:00 each day, I take the dog for her second walk of the day, past the farmhouse where the fiddler used to play, along the road that runs behind the knoll that Penland School’s studios look out on. Past the llama barn, past the turn in the road that leads to other resident housing, back onto Conley Ridge Road. I often wonder if I lived here the rest of my life, would I ever really come to know this place in all of its variety of weather and season.

As I step out of the tunnel the trees form over the road, the great meadow spills out before me, out towards Art’ur’s Knob and the school buildings that look like toy structures in a vast expanse of green. Somehow the landscape has become imbued for me with all the values I associate with the place: generosity, fruitful labor, humor, honor and respect for the individual, experimentation and discovery, wonder, curiosity, and beauty.

After the walk, there’s dinner and a return to the studio for my favorite work hours of the day: World Café on the radio, no more phone calls to return. At midnight, I climb the ladder up into the attic to sleep beneath the eaves, listening to the rain on the tin roof or maybe the pounding of Rick’s power hammer as he gets ready for the Smithsonian show. At last, and throughout the night, from along the curve in the Toe River at the base of our mountain, the sound that even now returns me to that time that was formative in my life and in so many other creative lives: the long haunting wail of the coal trains.

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Published in conjunction with the SOFA CHICAGO 2007 lecture *Residencies: Creative Crucibles* presented by Penland School of Crafts.

For more information about artists’ residencies, visit the website of the Alliance of Artists Communities: www.artistcommunities.org. For information about Penland School of Crafts, visit www.penland.org.



E.

B. Sculptor and furniture maker Vivian Beer in her Penland studio
photo: Robin Dreyer



F.

C. Bill Brown, who started the Penland residency program, with a display of resident artist work in 1969
photo: Doug Stewart

D. Ceramic sculptor Cristina Córdova working in her Penland studio in 2002
photo: Dana Moore



G.

E. Potter Matt Kelleher working at the Barns in 2007
photo: Robin Dreyer

F. Blacksmith Marc Maiorana working at Penland in 2002
photo: Dana Moore

G. Penland resident artist Anne Lemanski with her Century of Hair series
photo: Robin Dreyer

H. Resident artist Shoko Teruyama working at Penland
photo: Robin Dreyer



H.