



Resident Faculty Artist Dike Blair leading one of 5 slide presentations of images he had collected while visiting exhibitions over the past 10 years.

STUDIOS: Remove all trash, nails, screws, tape etc      prime w/ BIN where necessary      paint walls

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# Features

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## Defining Roles: Teacher/Mentor/Crazy Uncle

Dike Blair with Jesus Benavente, Ash Ferlito, Park McArthur,  
Ian Page, and Marisa Williamson

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"Every summer is different" is an oft-repeated phrase at Skowhegan and the summer of 2012 was no exception, although it did seem an especially good one. Sarah Workneh and the returning staff noted early on that the 2012 participants were particularly fast out of the gate and exhibited a stronger than usual desire to make collaborative works with a leaning towards performance, and participant organized discussion groups.

So things were well along and in great shape by the third weekend in July when the faculty report to the Trustees and Governors at their summer meeting. Perhaps the only thing not in great shape was the faculty itself. Kate Gilmore, Rochelle Feinstein, Virgil Marti, Cauleen Smith, and I all felt slightly confused. Simply put (and I am oversimplifying here), we felt like a faculty without students. Now, all of us are experienced teachers and used to the pedagogic flexibility necessary to teach students and groups of students of varied ages, experience, and talent. But here we had a large number of talented participants, some of whom were already engaged with an art world that has become increasingly professionalized, and most of whom (seemed) to consider Skowhegan a residency rather than a school. Each of us responded with a different approach, and Sarah couldn't have been more sage in guiding us, but I think I speak for all of us in saying that we would have welcomed a little more definition of what the roles, relationships, and even the interactions should have been between faculty and participants.

I attended Skowhegan as a participant in 1974. Skowhegan is remarkable in the ways it has remained consistent, as well as in the ways it has changed. From the standpoint of a framework, the structure of the program has essentially stayed the same, with the magic lying in the particular mix of individual participants and faculty members. In looking at the constellation of art organizations, art education options, residency programs, galleries, museums, alternative venues, and the expanded mobility of emerging artists in gaining/creating access to these opportunities, it seems clear that the experiences of recent faculty and participants at Skowhegan would be partially informed by their experiences in the outside world, and therefore largely different than my own experience 38 years ago. So, if the operating model of Skowhegan is taken for granted—five long-term Residential Faculty, 65 "emerging" visual artists, six Visiting Faculty, formal studio visits, informal events and community—what pedagogical shifts are to be expected in a 66-year old institution that while intentionally removed, exists within a larger system? Perhaps, you understand our confusion.

At the aforementioned board meeting, the Trustees and Governors asked us a number of thoughtful questions and had meaningful observations relating to these issues. I particularly remember Governor Francis Cape's (A '89, F '08) very pertinent comment that negotiating the relationship between participants and faculty is actually part of the experience, part of what Skowhegan is about. Perhaps I was naïve, but I hadn't actually considered that shaping Skowhegan's educational model for this

*\* floors as needed Replace walls where necessary close Upper windows -*

particular group of individuals was part of my purpose there—or part of why “every summer is different.”

While slightly anxiety inducing—the notion of adjusting a pedagogy to a particular group, in a particular summer, and sometimes on a particular day does allow for a more personalized, and seemingly meaningful, exchange between participants and faculty. Yet, it raises the question of whether or not “openness” and “flexibility” within a set framework is enough of a pedagogy on its own. If that pedagogy is, in fact, the point, then figuring out the goals, priorities, roles, activities, interactions that set that base framework is likely where the adjustment to the program in a long-term sense should lie. Over the summer, the pedagogy and the framework were constantly butting up against each other—some of it from each player retaining an expectation that this experience would replicate some of the known roles and hierarchies of school-student, faculty-participant and some of it from not knowing how in this particular place those relationships would function differently. Clearly the participants and faculty had many meaningful interactions and next year’s faculty may have few of the questions or issues that we had last summer, but as with any institution that has the benefit of a founding vision and a long history, it seems important to engage in a discussion about the intended relationship between participants and faculty and revisit the definition of Skowhegan’s mission relative to the framework and the pedagogy in a contemporary context. If the day-to-day methodology is responsive, explicating the framework for where that flexibility is rooted seems critical.

So, in the spirit of Skowhegan’s history as a school run for artists by artists it seemed not an uninteresting thing to poll a few of its most recent artists—last summer’s participants—about their experiences relative to these issues. Jesus Benavente, Ash Ferlito, Park McArthur, Ian Page, and Marisa Williamson were extremely generous with their time and thoughts, and what follows is an abbreviated version of what they sent me in response to my questions.

#### **What were your preconceptions about Skowhegan in terms of it being more of a residency, more of a school, or a combination of the two?**

**Jesus Benavente:** I always thought of Skowhegan as a residency. I knew the word School was in the title, but it was usually just referred to as Skowhegan.

**Ash Ferlito:** I thought of it as a hybrid, perhaps retaining its moniker from another time. I didn’t specifically think about the dynamic or format of school versus residency, but got a clear sense from friends, acquaintances, and alumni with whom I’d spoken of the importance—maybe above all other things—of the relationships I would have the opportunity to make.

**Park McArthur:** I imagined Skowhegan to be a residency experience with a lot of alone time for individual work, and with an emphasis on studio visits as a pedagogical and networking tool.

**Ian Page:** I had not even considered that Skowhegan was a school. The people I know who had gone previously never referred to it as school, nor did they mention there was a faculty.

**Marisa Williamson:** I thought of Skowhegan as a residency. Skowhegan is very different from graduate school. Graduate school is rigorous because you get evaluated, there are critique classes, there is a sense of competition and urgency. Skowhegan is rigorous maybe because none of those things exist and people are forced to burrow very deep into their practice and into themselves, without worldly interruptions.

#### **Do you think we might have been—consciously or not—part of a broader definition of what a “school” could or should be? Do you think that kind of negotiation should be considered part of Skowhegan’s charter?**

**JB:** I’ve always thought of school as being a structurally restricted form of learning. While I do think that Skowhegan has a structure... I don’t know if I would call that structure a school. It is not a grad program that pushes a dogma; it’s not an undergrad program that introduces you to the basics. It is more an opportunity to take something we know and do something different with it.

**AF:** I felt a tremendous sense of freedom, a spirit of collaboration and much encouragement to extend my ideas and to make use of the available resources at Skowhegan. I felt really lucky to be there, like I was a part of something special. I wish grad school had had the same tone.

**PMcA:** I do believe Skowhegan’s charter should state more clearly its pedagogical framework. For example, the switch from “student” to “participant” signaled a change in mission from being a school to becoming more of a professional development opportunity. While the residency’s name remains “School of Painting and Sculpture” (signaling the residency’s history), the title does not note all of the ways the residency has changed in keeping with contemporary art in general: majority interdisciplinary practices, majority digital tools and techniques, and an emphasis on socializing rather than classroom time.

**IP:** Skowhegan more closely approaches what I would want out of a school, in that the guidance is optional and the forward momentum is self-disciplined and comes out of a respect, anxiety, enthusiasm, and collaboration for everyone involved, not out of competition. Personally, I gather that each generation manages to define a lot for itself and that any charter is best left vague, as far as benefiting the participants goes. It may be a nice thing to review on behalf of the faculty, who were seemingly confused about their role in relationship to a quasi-autonomously developing momentum with well enough established thinkers. Overall, putting any more strictures or formal aspects onto the experience is something I wouldn’t want.

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**MW:** If Skowhegan wants to actively redefine school to include the sense of immersion—that would be good. But it should also be clear that there are no significant requirements or formal academic structures. Even the studio visits sometimes felt like afterthoughts. While some of those visits were incredibly important to me, they didn't feel like school in the same way that having group critiques would have.

**What were your expectations in terms of “faculty” and instruction? Were you satisfied with the formal studio visits? If not, how do you think things might be arranged differently?**

**JB:** It seems the word faculty is used in much the same way as school. Faculty definitely isn't the right word. What is? Crazy Uncle? Annoying Sister, the one who points out all your mistakes? I never felt I was in a teacher/student relationship, we were faculty/participant. The faculty didn't really behave like teachers in that a teacher is someone who comes and goes. You don't form real attachments to students because the next batch arrives the next semester. At Skowhegan, you have the summer, 9 weeks without any escape. The faculty is there and they cannot escape you and you cannot escape them. We are all forced to see each other beyond the rudimentary concepts of teacher/student.

**AF:** Going in I was excited to receive feedback from the faculty, but I was not anticipating any instruction or pedagogy. The formal studio visits were not disappointing, but from the onset they seemed to carry an anxiety about their intention or purpose. I participated in a one-time experimental all-faculty group crit that took on a surprisingly academic tone and was far less productive than the participant-run weekend critiques, which had a workshop vibe and felt supportive and honest.

**IP:** I had never really used the term “studio visit” before coming to Skowhegan and I had never before formally met with someone I didn't know to talk about my work. Simply put, I had no preconceptions about the visits. Looking back, I really wanted to be challenged and to have to defend myself in the studio visits. That never happened, but in many ways I appreciate the transference of energy that came with someone who is doing well acknowledging that I am doing pretty okay myself. I do wish I'd asked more of the simple questions, like “What tricks do you know?” and “What eternal truths have you discovered?” Perhaps I didn't ask those questions because of the distance created by formal studio visits.

**MW:** I don't know how the studio visit system could be changed. It wasn't a terrible system, but it sometimes felt arbitrary. I'd imagined in advance of going to Skowhegan that there would be formal critique sessions and there weren't. I feel like mandatory, but relaxed, group critiques would be a nice way to get to know other participants work better. About faculty—my expectations were met. It was a good mix. I think every participant would say they had someone they loved and someone that drove them nuts. And, I think that's perfect. The studio visits with the staff were also great.

**Do you think a faculty (or full-summer, artists-in-residence) is a good thing? Would a greater variety of temporary artists-in-residence be preferable? If so, would you formalize interactions between participants and artists-in-residence?**

**JB:** I think that full-time, always there, sharing a meal with you faculty is very important. I think having the visiting artists stay a little longer would be great, and very much in the spirit of Skowhegan.

**AF:** I think having long-term resident faculty is a good thing. Ideally I think the same bonding, collaboration, access and support that happens between participants should especially happen between faculty and participants. I think that reducing the distance between people who have only made art for a few years with those who are heavy hitters in the game is an incredibly powerful thing. I think the benefits of Skowhegan should have far-reaching benefits off-campus and possibly have positive repercussions in the art world at large—a faculty in residence helps enable that.

**IP:** I think having a full-time faculty is an excellent thing. While I'm not a particular fan of the “top-down” kind of critique, I did find a lot of personal resolution resulted from those critiques. I liked the protocol of formalizing the visits in the first half of the summer and then making them voluntary.

**PMcA:** I think a full-time faculty is a great thing. The main reason I came to Skowhegan was for this intergenerational experience. It is rare for emerging artists to work alongside with those who are established. I believe it is very important to formalize interactions, as some participants may be shy or reticent to solicit visits and, secondly, dinner parties and receptions are weighted heavily towards extroverts and may not make space for those who share and make connections differently.

**MW:** I think the full-summer faculty is completely necessary. I would not change that setup at all. I liked the visiting artists, but having a “core family” of participants and faculty seems essential to the experience.

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Dike Blair, 60, is a painter and sculptor who lives in NYC. He attended Skowhegan in 1974. He teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Jesus Benavente, 30, works in many media. He is currently working on an MFA at Rutgers University.

Ash Ferlito, 32, is a painter and multi-media artist who lives in Brooklyn. She received an MFA from Tyler School of Art in 2011.

Park McArthur, 28, makes text-based work and lives in NYC. She received an MFA from University of Miami in 2009 and attended the Whitney Independent Study Program 2010-2012.

Ian Page, 27, is a video, installation, sculpture, and performance artist. He received a BA in Cinema and Latin Literature from Oberlin in 2008. He lives in Los Angeles, CA.

Marisa Williamson, 27, works in video and other media. She is in her second year of the CalArts MFA program and lives in Los Angeles, CA.

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