

Some Thoughts on Craft Education

As part of the interview process the three final candidates for the director position were asked to address gatherings of the Penland community. Each forum began with the candidate sharing some thoughts about craft education. This is an excerpt from Jean's speech.

Craft education has been and will continue to be about the sharing of technical information, the honing of complex skills, the development of conceptual roots, and the clarification of each person's unique vision and identity through their work. At the very core of every craftsperson I know, there is a deep passion about making things—craft education enables people to find answers to questions about making what is important to them. So an essential part of craft education is the understanding and manipulation of materials, but equally important is the development of personal vision.

Meaningful craft education happens in many places and at widely different ages. There are formal apprenticeship relations, there are those who learn from the informal passing-down of skills and beliefs, there are recreation centers and community colleges, BFA and MFA programs, there are conferences sponsored by associations particular to various media, and there are alternative schools such as Penland, Arrowmont, Haystack, etc. All of these forms of craft education offer something valuable and are a part of a network of resources, artists, teachers, and ideas.

Craft education is functioning in a time of extremely high levels of accomplishment; craft artists have pushed the media to intriguingly high levels during recent decades. Awareness of the latest in artistic development is a crucial part of craft education, but the roots of craft/art-making lie—to some degree—in an understanding of the antecedents and influences swirling around the ideas you have.

My husband Tom is making big ceramic jars and he knows they are rooted in the early Chinese and Mediterranean forms he has looked at for years. I think craft history (which is part architectural history, part anthropology, part religion, part sociology, etc.) is grounding and essential to this education. When I took a class at Penland years ago, Diane Itter showed us slides every day that wove historical understanding into our work.

Historic movements may also inform the direction of craft education today. Consider the integration of art and architecture during the 1920s in art deco. There is a revival of this thinking going on today. Architects are looking for artists to create structural embellishments that humanize and enliven the architectural space, and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design has recently developed a new Public Art and Design Institute to train students in this very movement.

Craft education is about interrelatedness and intersections: with the design arts; with product, architectural, and landscape design; with engineering; with humanities and social sciences; and with the fine arts. In many places today craft education also touches on training in practical survival skills: business, marketing, and legal concerns.

In some places it encourages collaboration and connectedness to the community: crossing disciplines within the arts; design teamwork in public art; or working with people out-

side the arts to stretch an idea or reach a new solution. Suzanne Lacy has led the California College of Arts and Crafts into new definitions of art as community intervention and salvation. Some of these directions challenge the need for authorship and raise interesting questions about the power of the individual voice versus the collective voice!

Technology plays a key role in craft education and it will in the future. Each craft, of course, has its own technology to master, but what I am really thinking about here—with its implications for the future—is the influence of high technology on the crafts field. Many artists use computers as a design and presentation tool, others for the creation of art, others for communication and accounting. I think there is potential here for artistic use and perhaps for interface with industry.

Global interconnections will be another part of craft education's future, an exciting part because of deep historical connections and the universality of craft. *Exploris*, Raleigh's new children's museum about the world, has involved artists in many of its design teams.

So, what does all this mean for Penland?



Joseph Miller

Spring Garden Gate by Joseph Miller and David Brewin at the North Carolina Arboretum, installed as part of the Artworks for Public Buildings Program—one of the intersections between craft and architecture.

Penland's challenge over the next ten years will be to remain the place of experimentation and support, of vulnerability, healing, and renewal. Penland will be a training ground for passionate learners of all ages and a networking resource for advanced artists. At the same time, Penland will stretch to extend its leadership of ideas, invention, eagerness, and sensitivity into a world of increasingly difficult social, environmental, and political relations. As an educational institution Penland will be both an anchor and a launching pad.

—Jean McLaughlin

Tom Spleth: A New Resource for Penland

Tom Spleth is a deliberate man who never seems to be in a hurry, but as an artist he has covered a lot of territory. His recent work includes slip-cast functional pottery, ceramic sculpture (both figurative and vessel forms), tile installations, drawings on paper, and computer generated drawings. He recently moved to Penland because he is married to Jean McLaughlin, but it's a move he was happy to make as an artist.

Tom grew up in Oklahoma. He received a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and then got his Master's at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. He stayed in the town of Alfred for fifteen years, first running a pottery and then teaching at the university. He left Alfred for a residency in the Arts Industry Program of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center which places artists at the Kohler factory in Wisconsin. While at Kohler, he met Jean McLaughlin who was there assisting with a show of Hmong textiles. Tom decided to move to North Carolina after the residency and he and Jean were married eight years later.

In Raleigh, he established a studio where he pursued his many artistic interests. "I think my work makes sense from one step to the next," he said. "But overall, it's not one coherent story. For years that was kind of a problem for me—in terms of how I was perceived—but it doesn't bother me anymore."

A good example of the way his work evolves is his current series of large coil-built jugs and bottles. These are based on classical forms, but they grew directly out of a problem Tom was having with his figurative work. "I did a series of drawings of a man's head which then moved into three-dimensional ceramic heads. The heads were quite complex and applying glaze to them was something I didn't quite understand how to do at the time. So I thought I'd go back to a real clear ceramic problem. That's why I made these pots—to allow me to work with these glazes in a certain way. Now I feel confident that I can go back to the big heads and glaze them successfully."

He's also planning a new line of slip-cast functional work based on the large bottles. "That will take that work into casting which will enable me to do different things with the forms. So one thing leads to another." One thing that's remained constant in all of Tom's work, however, is drawing. He has a separate body of two-dimensional work on paper and he always uses his clay objects as a drawing surface.

Tom and Jean are eventually planning to buy land and build a house and studio near the school. In the meantime, they are happily moved into Bonnie's Place and Tom will be working in the out-of-use studio behind the Barns. It's going to take him a while to get set up, but when he's finished he hopes to become integrated into the general network of Penland resources.

Actually, this is happening already. Tom was visiting Chris Berti's first-session stonecarving class when Core student Andi Steele dropped and broke a sculpture she had just completed. It was an unhappy moment, but Tom invited her to make a mold from the pieces so she could cast the form in clay. So while Tom was unpacking boxes and building shelves, Andi produced the first work made in his new studio.

He's also discussed his work with several of the classes and he's been invited to be part of a three-person show at the Penland Gallery this fall. Although Tom still has a lot of moving in left to do, his overall take on this new phase of his life is simple and positive. "I'm very happy to be here," he said. "I think I will have the opportunity to do excellent work in this place."



Tom Spleth

Jar by Tom Spleth.



Robin Dreyer

Tom Spleth, still moving in.