

# Penland Line

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## Conversation, Contemplation, Collaboration

"I believe that mid-career artists need time to experiment, to focus on new work or a specific project, time in retreat to read, think new thoughts, to reconsider where they are going, and they need time in a community like ours," says Penland Director Jean McLaughlin, explaining the school's new visiting artist program. "We provide communion, fellowship, and studio time away from the day-to-day routine of their lives. They give us the freshness of their thinking and observations. Concentrations give us all time to have conversations that can flow from one week to the next. We have chosen very talented, articulate craft artists who we knew would take full advantage of such a privilege and gift."

Penland has long recognized the value of having artists working at the school who are not involved in teaching classes—the three-year resident artist program being the most obvious example—but there have been other models for short-term residencies which involved artists more directly in the session at hand.

During the sixties and seventies, summer catalogs included "visiting scholars" who were not responsible for any particular class. In recent years, several artists have spent time at Penland in a similar role. Sculptor Martin Puryear spent a week in 1997: he did some woodworking, met with craft artists involved in sculpture, and gave a lecture that electrified the entire session. David Schorr spent two weeks that same year producing a set of engravings and he also taught evening drawing classes open to everyone.

The most recent evolution of the idea is a program which brings artists to Penland for two months to work in one of the studios not being used for a class in the spring or fall. The school selected artists who have been instructors, who are well respected within their fields, and who would be adept at discussing work and interacting with students and instructors.

Penland received funding for the program from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation. In addition to studio space, visiting artists receive housing, meals, travel expenses, a materials allowance, and a small stipend. They are required to make presentations at Penland and at the Asheville Art Museum and to have an open-door policy in their studios. The only other requirement is that they be actively engaged in their work.

The initial phase of the program will include twelve artists. The first two were Harry Reese and Ann Hawthorne in the fall. The third was Christina Shmigel this spring. While each of these artists used the time differently, the unifying theme was that Penland gave them an opportunity to reflect and to make connections.



Harry Reese

Harry Reese, whose work encompasses letterpress printing, printmaking, public art projects, and teaching (he was here on sabbatical from the University of California/Santa Barbara), made this comment: "Any productive person knows how to be productive. But what productive people often don't have is meaningful time away from their work. A vacation is very different from going to an environment where creative people are working, where you are not required to instruct them or manage them, but you can interact with them."

"On my resume, I will jot down that I made a few public presentations and produced a portfolio of prints. But what I accomplished here was to meet people I hadn't met before, to develop friendships that will last some time, and to give me a chance to think about some of the things I haven't been doing during the busy time of the past few years. I don't know how others will take this opportunity, but for me it was a time to reassess what I'm doing and how I'm doing it."

Photographer Ann Hawthorne, known for her extensive documentation of Antarctica, her many journalistic assignments, and her invaluable contributions to Penland's publications, echoed this idea: "What happened here that mattered to me was the quiet in my head to think and to reflect and to review—to be in my life and at the same time stand back a little bit from it and evaluate—to look and see what paths there were that maybe I was walking too fast to pay attention to."

In addition to these internal processes, they were each involved in more visible work. Harry developed a suite of prints using a monotype process which he patiently explained and demonstrated to any number of visitors.

Ann Hawthorne made a great gift to the community by collaborating with Program Director Dana Moore on a project which created dozens of portraits of community members with their pets (see page 6). Although this involved a considerable amount of time, the bulk of her stay was spent reviewing and cataloging negatives and slides which span a number of years—a personal editorial process.



Ann Hawthorne

"Working as a professional photographer on assignment, I come back with thousands of images, I edit through them and get the client what they need... But what I'm really working on is what I need, and that's often not what goes to the clients, so then I'm sitting there with thousands of slides that I need to go through as my own, and that's a lot of what I did here."

Harry and Ann also engaged in dozens of conversations with students and instructors about their work, their lives, and issues of artistic and professional practice. "Sometimes it's useful to have an observer or some person around who isn't part of things," said Harry. "Sometimes that person can help even if

their observations are not media specific, in fact that may be more valuable in some ways." Ann and Harry also connected strongly with each other as colleagues and both of them spoke of this as an unexpected and lasting benefit of their time at Penland.

At the end of the fall session, they made a number of suggestions about how the program could be enhanced. Among other things, they saw a potential for interaction between visiting artists and the Penland core student program.

As it happened, Christina Shmigel wanted to use some of her time in exactly this way. Christina was a resident artist in 1993-1994 and had observed the core program closely. "Core



Christina Shmigel

students come under a sequence of strong influences during their two years here," she said. "I thought it would be useful to them to have a conversation over a period of time with someone outside the program—a conversation that would help them develop an overview, an idea about their own work."

During her two months at Penland, she met weekly with a group of core students and engaged them in a series of exercises which she developed for her students at Webster University in St. Louis. "These exercises are designed to bring attention to bear on choices, which are sometimes unconscious, that give one's work its identity."

Christina's own work is primarily steel sculpture drawing on the forms of industrial and agricultural architecture. Summing up her two months at Penland she laughed and said that she hadn't done any of the work she had planned to do. "The work I had planned was work I could have done at home. When I got here, everything else became more interesting."

Everything else, in her case, was many hours spent writing; the luxury of time to pay attention to the landscape, the weather, and the light; interactions with students, instructors, and local artists; and the possibilities for collaborative work.

"Collaborations became an important part of my time here," she said. For example, she and Tom Spleth worked from a mutual interest in industrial structures to create a series of ceramic and steel vessels based on those forms—exciting new work which she could not have done at home.

"This is an interesting residency," she commented, "because it doesn't involve a proposal. You are allowed to let the time suggest what you want to do."

Like Ann and Harry, Christina found that one of the most valuable parts of the program was personal connections. "I actually feel more strongly that I'm part of a network here than I do in St. Louis. It's what pulls me back—all these amazing connections. I find I think of Penland as one endless conversation."

—Robin Dreyer

The other artists who are currently scheduled to participate in the program are photographer Deborah Luster, metal and ceramic artist Sue Roberts, ceramic sculptor Arthur Gonzalez, blacksmith Peter Joseph, and paper sculptor Therese Zemlin. Upcoming Penland Lines will include information about these artists and their residencies.