

Patrick Dougherty, Sculptor

Sculptor Patrick Dougherty, who collaborated with architect Dail Dixon on the new Pines Portico (see page 6), has been connected to Penland throughout his career as an artist. He made one of his very first pieces here in 1985. He returned in 1994 to create a large, temporary work on the corner of the Pines. And, his connection with the school helped him resolve a pivotal quandary in his understanding of the nature of art.

During twenty years as a full-time, itinerant sculptor, he has made more than 150 pieces—many of them monumental in scale—at galleries, museums, schools, art centers, and festivals all over the U.S. and in a dozen foreign countries. These pieces have all been made from woven twigs, branches, and sticks, a method that Patrick refers to simply as “stickwork.” He builds the pieces himself, often with the help of volunteers. Some of his forms mimic the shapes of buildings, the body, or vessels. Other pieces are more abstract, but they generally have openings and, given the nature of the material, they almost always invoke shelter, nests, burrows—people want to go inside them (a desire many of his pieces readily accommodate).

The temporary nature of his work puts him outside of the world of galleries, collectors, auctions, and the escalating value of artwork. “I remain a workman,” he says. “I come and I do a work for you. You pay me a salary.... I think it’s nice that there’s work that remains from pre-history and all that, and you can look at it and get an idea of where art has come from. But maybe there are other people to address that issue. I like it that my work comes and goes and I have to do it.

The thing about the art world and the world of ideas is there’s plenty of room. There’s room for every variation. If the work touches people, then there’s room for it.”

Although his work is not immune to



A view of the finished Pines Portico, Patrick's first permanent installation. This structure was a collaboration between Patrick and architect Dail Dixon who has designed several other buildings for Penland.

criticism or occasional controversy, the response is usually quite positive. “My intuition,” he says, “is that it’s something from your back yard and from prehistory. When kids go through the building phase they understand sticks; it’s not something you have to learn about.... These pieces talk about shelter, about natural phenomenon. I realized that I could conscript that imagery and it could resonate.”

Patrick has a Masters degree in public health and had worked for several years as a hospital administrator when he decided to explore art making through two years of postgraduate, nondegree work at the UNC-Chapel Hill art school. Near the end of that time he started experimenting in his back yard with different materials and made his first piece of stickwork sculpture. “It was about eight feet long,” he says, “and it looked like you could get in it. It was made out of really tiny

sticks.” He remembers a stunned silence when he carried it into the Ackland Art Museum for a student show, because up until that point he had made almost no work. “I was trying to face the idea of what art was really about,” he says. “That

was so profound that I could never get to the object. I was *compelled* to do this, but I couldn’t figure out *why* I would do it.”

Shortly after that, he was in western North Carolina doing some art projects in the schools and was invited to spend a week making a piece at Penland. “It was the second piece I made. It was a very big strip made of sticks I gathered here. It was maybe 100 yards long and it made these big loops as it went across the lawn. It real-



Patrick built this installation, titled Roundabout, at the Tallaght Community Art Center in Dublin, Ireland in 1997. It is 42 feet tall. This is a good example of how making temporary work gives Patrick access to sites that would otherwise be unavailable for public art. There is lots more information about Patrick's work on his website: www.stickwork.net.

ly helped give me a sense of validity.... When you come to this place, there’s a sense of a commitment toward a different kind of life. People are looking into the distance here and thinking about merging materials and ways of thinking to come up with art objects. I really needed that infusion at that exact moment, and I got it.”

It was also at Penland that he began to resolve his dilemma about making art. “One thing I could see when I came here was that people could justify throwing themselves into a craft, because they could say, ‘people can use this, somebody can put it on their table, they can eat out of it.’ But that didn’t quite satisfy me. I really believe in craft in the sense that I believe things should be well crafted. And a lot of life’s best work, your best thinking, is often done with a repetitive act. But I slowly began to realize that people have other needs besides just eating.

“So I could see that making a sculpture that elicited powerful feelings from people had a huge value because it expands their capacities as human beings. We have this incredible ability to feel nuance, but in some ways it needs to get identified. So, when you read a book, you start identifying that other people have had those slight nuances, slight differences in feeling. I think good sculpture, good dance, good writing, they are all so promotive. They help you as the maker, and they help the viewers into some transformative experience, which you can re-experience because you’ve broken the barrier; you’ve crossed the threshold; you can’t go back. So, once I felt that way, I felt really empowered.”

› When Patrick works with students they often express their own doubts about the value of making art. “They will say, ‘well why would I want to make anything anyway? Nobody cares.’ And I say, ‘For this reason: you’ve got a mission; art expands people in serious ways.’”

—Robin Dreyer

Robin Welsh Studio



Patrick Dougherty

Karl Brown