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Park McArthur: 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 a school, nor did they mention there was a faculty. 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 lucky to be there, like I was on something special. I wish my grad school had had the same tone.

PMcA: It seems the word faculty is used in much the same way as school. Faculty definitely isn’t the right word. What is? Crazy seems critical. In the spirit of Skowhegan’s history as a school run for artists by artists it seemed not an unnatural thing to poll a few of the 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 another time. I didn’t specifically think about the dynamic or formal school versus residency, but get 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: If Skowhegan wants to actively redefine school to include the sense of immersion—that would be good. 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: 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 rigid program that pushes a stigma, it’s an underdeveloped program that introduces you to the basics. It is more an opportunity to take what we know and make something different with it.

IP: I had 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 lucky to be there, like I was on something special. I wish my grad school had had the same tone.

PMcA: I believe Skowhegan’s charter should state more clearly its pedagogical framework. For example, the switch from “student” to “participant” and moving from a mission in being to a mission in becoming a more of a professional development opportunity. While the residency’s name remains “School of Painting and Sculpture” (signifying the residency’s history), the title does not note all of the ways the residency has changed in keeping with contemporary art in general. It is not a grad program that pushes a dogma; it’s not an undergrad program of teacher/student. It is responsive, explicating the framework for where that flexibility is rooted seems critical.

MVF: If Skowhegan wanted to redefine school to include the sense of immersion—that would be good. 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.

How do you think we could 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 in the future?

IP: I think having a full-time faculty is an excellent thing. While I’m not a particular big fan of the establishment of personal resolution from those critiques. I liked the protocol of formalizing the visits in the first half of the summer and then making them voluntary.

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Park McArthur

I thought of Skowhegan as a residency. Skowhegan is very rigorous because you get evaluated, there are critique classes, there is a sense of competition and urgency. Skowhegan is rigorous because some of the people are forced to go very deep into their practice and into themselves, without worldly interruptions.

Do you think we might have been—consciously or not—towards 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?

I had never really used the term “studio visit” before coming to Skowhegan. 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 faculty” (signaling the residency’s history), the title does not note all of the general: majority interdisciplinary practices, majority digital tools and techniques, and an emphasis on socializing rather than classroom time.

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