In 1940, Bernard Langlais left his home state of Maine, set on pursuing a career in commercial art. His childhood studio—a loft space over his grandparents’ barn—was filled with his early artistic exploits: comic strips, painted banners for local sports games, and cartoon drawings. Eager for training and artistic exposure, Langlais said he was “just biding my time, waiting to finish high school so that I could go somewhere else.” In 1949, after a stint in the Naval Air Command and several years studying at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., he received a scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture. On the then 160-acre farm, with its converted-barn studios, rolling fields, and open-air “classrooms,” Langlais was enlightened by paradox: he was surrounded by a diverse group of experimental artists, in a rural setting just 60 miles down the Maine back roads from his childhood home in Old Town. “The first summer at Skowhegan changed the direction of my life,” he wrote in 1973. He abandoned commercial design for fine art, and began making vibrant, expressionistic painted landscapes.

Langlais returned to Skowhegan as a participant for three summers in a row (1949-51). He forged close friendships with Alex Katz and Charles Duback, artists who became his studio mates in New York City. Skowhegan School co-founder Willard “Bill” Cummings—once described as a man who was “just farming artists instead of chickens”—became a friend and mentor. Langlais rented a cottage from Cummings on Wesserunsett Lake after the School’s session. It was even in Skowhegan, at Lakewood Theater, across the Lake from campus, that Langlais first spotted Helen Friend, an aspiring singer and the daughter of a Maine state senator who was working at the ticket booth—they married in 1955.

The deeper, more lasting effect of the School, however, was Langlais’s fixation on the environment of his art: how and where he worked; the materials and techniques he used; and the conditions in which he completed and displayed his pieces. Outdoor space, old barns, reclaimed wood, and fresh Maine air became integral to Langlais’s art. By the late 1950s, Langlais abandoned painting for the medium of wood—a material he found more intuitive. Langlais remained close to Bill Cummings even after he purchased his own summer cottage in Cushing. When Langlais debated moving back to Maine full-time in the mid-1960s, he confided in a letter to Cummings: “I think I’ve had it with NY.” It was Cummings who recommended Langlais to the Skowhegan Tourist Hospitality Association in 1967 for their planned monument to Maine’s Native Americans. Cummings applauded their decision “to have a fine work of art rather than a commercial statue with no local or artistic identity.” Nonetheless, and not surprisingly, Langlais challenged the Association’s concept for the commission. The original plans outlined a thirty-foot statue representing an Indian, which one advisor to the project described as, “a compromise between
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expected tourist stereotype and whatever historical accuracy - we can uncover. Langlais used the full 70-foot timbers that were donated for the project and, after taking it upon himself to research the local native peoples, represented an Abenaki man with fishing wear and spear, rather than the figure with headdress, loin cloth and tomahawk that had been proposed. He worked on the project for two years, building scaffolding for the statue in the front yard of his home in Cushing in order to work on the sculpture at its full height. In June of 1969, the monumental piece was transported to Skowhegan on a flatbed truck with a similarly gigantic banner that identified the cargo as "THE SKOWHEGAN INDIAN. The legislative body recessed as the Indian passed the State Capital in Augusta. In the weeks leading up to the dedication ceremony, a rumor began to spread that President Richard Nixon might be in attendance at the dedication event. Much better than an appearance by Nixon, though, were Langlais's succinct, humble remarks at the ceremony: "I've lived with this fellow for two years. There will be an empty space in my yard. He's become a good friend. I hope you accept him as that." By the time of the Indian's dedication, Langlais had populated his backyard with half a dozen large-scale wood sculptures, mostly representing animals, from the jungle to the plains to the realms of make believe, but also athletes and politicians. That number multiplied in the 1970s as his land became his primary canvas. He covered the exteriors of his barns with wood reliefs, and moved and reworked three-dimensional pieces in an ever-changing outdoor installation. Langlais acquired live sheep, geese, a donkey, a ram, and a horse to graze among the sculptures. By his death in 1977, he had created a farm of his own in Cushing, a rolling field with old barns, muddy ponds, and river views, where art was the bumper crop.

Felipe Steinberg is a Brazilian artist whose film and video works relate largely to an examination of global political structures explored through the micro relationships expressed in daily life and culture. While at Skowhegan, Felipe developed work in response to a local public sculpture, Bernard Langlais's Indian, which was undergoing renovation. Interested in both the town's investment in preserving the sculpture and its complicated history with the Native American population, Felipe inverts the colonial eye by using film and photo to convey the Indian's gaze upon the town's inhabitants.
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