GOVERNOR SPOTLIGHT

FRED WILSON
Fred Wilson was a Resident Artist at Skowhegan in 1995 and has been a Governor since that year. We sat down with him to talk about his experience over the past 15 years.

SKOW: You taught at Skowhegan in 1995. Had you known about Skowhegan before you were invited to teach?

FW: Oh yes, I knew all about it because I knew people who had been here, and I had actually come to Skowhegan on visitors weekend in 1985 because my partner Whitfield Lovell was a participant that year. It seemed like such a great place and I was a little jealous that when it would have been a good time for me to go I didn't really know anything about it. In those days people used to come when they were younger, and by the time I learned about Skowhegan I was in my late 20s so it seemed a little late. Of course now artists come to Skowhegan in their late 20s, and also when they're in their 30s or even 40s.

SKOW: You were born in the Bronx and have lived in New York and Westchester your whole life. What was it like for you living and working in a rural environment like Skowhegan for a couple of months?

FW: It was great. Maine is so different from any place in New York or New Jersey or Connecticut. The natural world's completely present, it's the opposite of a city environment. I absorbed that—I loved it. I didn't see a moose or any big animals that summer, but just the insects and the birds really engaged me—watching the patterns of what they do. I can get into that. It has nothing to do with my work, but I really love that. I did make a fresco with images of slugs in it, but that was it. And slugs actually ate some of my drawings, so maybe there was some sort of collaboration there!

SKOW: The fall after you taught at Skowhegan you were invited to be a Governor. Did you have any hesitation about taking on this kind of role?

FW: Oh, no! Right after the experience you're like, “YES! I have drunk the Kool-Aid! I’m ready!”

SKOW: Right! And Skowhegan seems to have kept you engaged because even beyond that initial enthusiasm, you’ve remained very active on the board for these 15 years.

FW: Yes. I’m on several boards, and the good thing about them is that they are very different from one another. Most of them are exhibiting or funding organizations, so being involved with a place like Skowhegan is great, and having been on the faculty made a big difference in seeing that it really does what it says it does. And seeing participants grow the way they do—being a part of that growth is quite special. Also, the camaraderie among artists— it’s very difficult to have that in New York City. Skowhegan is a very safe space for that— a challenging, but also safe space for it. The environment and all the interactions that happen at Skowhegan make it possible to truly make a difference in people’s lives. Being part of the Governors is an extension of how I see going back to make that happen.

SKOW: Is there anything that has become especially important to you in your work as a Governor?

FW: The strong diversity of the program is very important to me. Skowhegan has been way ahead of the curve on diversity since the beginning—way back with Jacob Lawrence in the 1950s. My educational experience was not diverse at all. And actually when I was on the faculty at Skowhegan, for some reason the class was not very diverse that year, which is unusual. I saw what happened because of that—how
They get a lot of this by immersion at Skowhegan. Sometimes it can be sobering, but it's important.

SKOW: What artists were particularly important mentors to you when you were a young artist?

FW: Tony Smith was great. It could have been all facade because I was so young and I didn't know what older artists' lives were really like, but there's a calmness about an artist who has been through a lot and has reached a place where they're just who they are. Those artists can look at you as a young artist and give you the sense that maybe you don't need to worry so much—this is just one little moment in your life, and there will be other moments.

SKOW: What is the role of the faculty in the annual selection of participants? How do they choose what makes someone unique?