At Skowhegan we are lucky to have a great deal of contact with our alumni and enjoy hearing stories from them about their time on campus, whether it was five years ago or 50 years ago. This year we asked alumni from throughout our history to share some of their thoughts about their experience at Skowhegan. We have been fascinated by the fact that while some things have changed about the program (artists as young as 16 were allowed to participate in the early years, and up until the 1980s artists could attend more than one summer), much has remained the same—the challenge and privilege of being surrounded by artists for nine weeks, an appreciation of the landscape, and more.

**JANET SHAFNER (’47/’48)**

In 1947 I read about Skowhegan in the now vanished LOOK magazine and knew immediately that I had to be there. I was still in high school and there was no way my family could afford to send me for the whole summer. At the interview and portfolio review, Sidney Simon discovered that I was only 15. “But I’ll be 16 in August,” I pleaded, and he finally agreed that I could attend for one month.

That long ago summer, and the following one, which Skowhegan so generously underwrote, have been the magnetic north of my life.

**BARRIE COOKE (’50/’52)**

The university I had come from did not then have an art department and so, for the first time at Skowhegan, I was exposed to students, some of the best in the country, who were as serious about painting as I was. This was of great importance to me. The whole atmosphere of Skowhegan was (and I believe still is) very special, as were the staff. It was my education.

**LARRY WARSHAW (’57/’58)**

My years at Skowhegan, the teachers including Henry V. Poor, Anne Poor, Sidney Simon, Harold Tovish, etc., are still a transparent page to me, allowing me to feel and live the vibrancy of a day in the studio; the open fields right behind us; the Fresco Barn; the meals facing the lake; the sounds of the loons at night; learning our craft or sullen art in the studios seven days a week...

We created a camaraderie of sharing growing pains in learning about painting, sculpture, drawing; seeing the striking Borealis in the Maine skies at night; dancing under the stars outside of the barn; the weekly guest lectures on Saturday night in the barn by icons of American painting—all became indelible living images promoting our lives in subtle paths that defined the coming years.

I was in my twenties then and now I am in my seventies, but I cannot account for any loss of time. The Skowhegan School united us all in this special Brigadoon of lasting youth and artistic vitality because of its honesty, integrity of character, and the respect for individuality of discovery established by its founders.

The thoughts of my time at Skowhegan in ’57 and ’58 will remain with me as a unique symbiosis creating for me one immediate family of time alive, dynamic, and refreshing.

There will not be any loss, just a parting of ways that began back in time when we entered the Skowhegan gates on Willard Cummings Road, then departing at the end of the summer reborn to each other in ways we did not see possible when we met on the first day of summer. I had no idea what changes in my painting would happen over this time. I thank you all for the privilege of being allowed to enter Skowhegan, as if just yesterday. The sun is yet to set in shadows and loss.

Keep up the great work you all are doing at Skowhegan, I am so proud of the time I experienced with you to this very day...my celebration continues!

**CLARISSA SLIGH (’72)**

Mine was a crooked path. I arrived at Skowhegan in the 1970s after completing a BFA in painting. I was a terrible painter, yet they admitted me. I was a refugee from a life in the Civil Rights Movement; a degree in mathematics had landed me a job at NASA in the manned space flight program; as a single parent I traveled across Africa with my young daughter for a year. Painting was my passion, but my family saw it as a frivolity.
ALUMNI REMEMBER SKOWHEGAN
CONTINUED

At Skowhegan there was an expectation that of course you are an artist. For the first time in my life there was no need to carry the mantle of a social movement. Mixing oil colors, dabbing paint, and making squiggly marks in Maine was like breathing fresh air for the first time. I literally sat at the feet of the Visiting Artists—Jacob Lawrence, Louise Nevelson, Philip Pearlstein, and Alice Neel—as they talked. When they asked me about my images, I clumsily, in a most inarticulate way, sought words for what I was trying to do. Spending hours in the library with books and old periodicals that I had never seen, I was a sponge absorbing everything in sight.

Leaving Skowhegan was extremely difficult. I returned home to the DC area. I had been changed. Even though I was like a fish out of water, I entered graduate business school in Philadelphia. But from there, I was offered a job in New York City, where I would never have moved to on my own.

After a number of years, I met artists who also did political actions. Being around them ignited old hopes and dreams. Slowly I began to make art again, but it was unrecognizable. But even though my life seemed a contradiction to the place, the seeds planted inside me that summer at Skowhegan had not died. I knew to trust the process even though I did not understand it. Today I accept that when you are open you will be changed. You may have trouble digesting it but your thoughts and actions will reflect that new complexity.

Thinking back, 1989 was such a tumultuous year that our green, calm summer seems weirdly removed from its actual time. The Cold War was ending; a few weeks after we arrived in Maine, Chinese troops opened fire in Tiananmen Square. But in the pre-Internet era, we were insulated from the outside world—except, of course, for anxiety about the fate of the four Chinese students amongst us. (Did Barbara Lapcek arrange all their visas single-handedly, as we suspected she had?)

What was our summer like? “The best summer ever, of all time!” recalls one friend. Another remembers suffering in her studio, “trying to do something different… and failing miserably.” Several sighed, remembering the “endless parties.” I wish I remembered those! Instead, I was preoccupied in my studio, listening to Terry Allen (thank you, Kim Grady) and endlessly repainting a single large canvas. When Leon Golub came for crits and praised it, I bawled him out for being too polite, for not giving the kind of withering, boot-kick critique that I had expected.

In retrospect, the real cause of my irritation was something else: Skowhegan was my introduction to an art world that was not painting-centric. I was an especially narrow-minded twenty-five year old, steeped in obvious choices. From out of the corner of my eyes, though, I was looking at everyone else’s work. By osmosis, I slowly absorbed the news that reinventing Eric Fischl just wasn’t going to cut it.

I remember John Walker strolling carefully through all our studios, giving the same conspiratorial advice: “Thez your painting right down there,” he would whisper, pointing to the bright mess on a palette table. A reality check. In retrospect, the biggest reality check of the summer was
Chris Ware, who became, a few years later, my (and everyone else's) favorite cartoonist. What was he doing that summer? I hardly know. Now though, visiting grad students' studios, I squint at them a little harder, a little more charitably, wondering to myself, who's the Chris Ware here?

RUTH ROOT ('94)

Skowhegan was a great experience. It came at just the right time for me, helping me make the transition from being a student to being an artist on my own. I had finished grad school the year before and had just moved to New York. I was trying to figure out how to survive as an artist, trying to figure out all the parts of my life. Skowhegan was overwhelming when I first arrived.

It seemed to be out in the middle of nowhere, the living quarters were pretty close. I remember the first night's slide show where each of the students presented their slides. I liked so much of the work, that of Sheila Pepe, Carter, Laura Owens, Monique Prieto, Rebecca Morris. People started to work at different paces, some producing a lot of work, some just talking and hanging out. It was intense and carefree at the same time. I was so excited to see what was in everyone's studios every day. Somehow Skowhegan taught me how to create a community as an artist, a community that continues to be my friends. I liked that it was so different than grad school. It was student driven; there was little formal structure; the faculty was there to be supportive, but not to set the agenda. It was the first experience I had had where the faculty didn't function as authorities. There were no deadlines or expectations, only one's own motivation. Even though it becomes obvious later in life, it was at Skowhegan that I realized that as an artist, you are your own audience and your own critic, that you set up your own way of working. I was able to recognize this incredible freedom.

As I look back, I realize that we were a bit wild up there: drinking, staying up late dancing in an abandoned studio that Rebecca Morris named Disco Van Gogh and spray painted with neon letters and stars. We slept in the studios, out in the fields, in a nearby graveyard, in the library. We went swimming late at night. We went wandering through the fields and woods trying to scare each other with flashlights and fake ghost sightings. And yet I emerged from Skowhegan a much more serious artist, very sensitive to the value of a supportive community, and confident that I just had to keep going, keep making paintings, stay true to my own way of working, and not be scared to make something new and undefined.

HERMAN VERHAGEN ('02)

When I saw an ad for Skowhegan School of Art in my art school in the Netherlands I thought “Oh nice, let’s go to New York.” It was much later that I found out that Maine is not New York.

It was raining heavily the first week and I was a bit lost on a new continent. But the people were great. And how exciting it was to see all the participants’ work, to get a studio, and to learn new words every day, like ‘awesome’ or ‘whassup.’ Born and raised in a city, I got very inspired in the middle of a forest with a big lake next to my dorm. I made two of my best videos, both of which have that lake as a background. Another video I did used Skowhegan’s forest sounds. The dripping of the rain as a meter for the poetry of a forest during the day, to end with a nocturnal chorus of frogs in the pond next to the library (these videos are on my website, www.jcherman.org).

When back for my last year in art school in the Netherlands, I tried to encourage others to apply to Skowhegan too. It gave little response. Unfortunately Skowhegan is quite unknown in Europe. After graduation I got some grants and returned to the USA, this time really to New York to make a video there, with help of Skowheganians. I also visited Skowhegan’s office, and remember telling Linda [Earle], who asked if I was planning to move to NYC, that I was planning to move to Paris, France. Which two years later I did. And where I still am. In the meantime, I discovered that Paris, and maybe my life too, is a more open place for crafts than for contemporary art. It made me decide to start a pottery course. In 2010 I will be an ‘official’ potter.