

**SKOWHEGAN
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview
DAVID DRISKELL

By Liza Zapol
Hyattsville, Maryland
February 9, 2012

Oral history interview with David Driskell, February 9, 2012

Size: Sound recording: 3 sound files (2 hr., 24min.) digital, wav 96khz, 24 bit, 4.7 GB, also available in mp3.

Transcript: 35 p.

Photographs: 2 digital photographs

Summary: An interview of David Driskell conducted 2012, Feb 9 by Liza Zapol for Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, at Driskell's home, in Hyattsville, MD.

Biographical/Historical Note: Driskell (1931-) is a scholar in the field of African-American art, an artist, and was honored by President Clinton as one of 12 recipients of the National Humanities Medal. He was a good friend of Skowhegan co-founder Willard Cummings, and has been an active member of Skowhegan in many capacities— he was a participant in 1953, a faculty member in 1976, 1978, and 2004, served on the Board of Governors from 1975–1980, 1982–1989, the Board of Trustees from 1989–2002, as well as various important committees. He was honored with the Skowhegan Governor's Award in 1986, and currently serves on Skowhegan's Advisory Committee.

Liza Zapol (1978-) is an oral historian in New York, NY.

Content: Influences on becoming an artist: upbringing in Georgia, rural North Carolina, discussion of family, culture, school, school teachers; Howard University: mentors, choosing to study art. Participant at Skowhegan: discussion of race; mentors and artists: Leonard Bocour, Jack Levine, Willard Cummings, Sidney Simon, Henry Varnum Poor and Annie Poor, and others; artist Walter Williams; critiques; artistic style: landscape work, figure work, social realism; Bernarda Shahn's "Skowhegan Idea;" introduction to New York through Skowhegan acquaintances; Development of friendship with Willard Cummings; attending lectures. Maine: buying a home; aesthetic of Maine. Board of Governors; Visiting Artist; Faculty member; experiences of teaching, hosting friends on campus, and changing aesthetics at Skowhegan. Willard Cummings' death: funeral; ramifications on the school; conflicts among Governors and Trustees. Cosby Fellowship: establishment, development, discussions with Trustees. Mildred Cummings: friendship, history of African Americans in Maine. Thoughts about future of Skowhegan.

Indexes: Name index available.

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Interviewer Notes: None.

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, an artist's residency program in Skowhegan, Maine (www.skowheganart.org).

Skowhegan began an oral history project in 2011. The Skowhegan Oral History Project includes a collection of thirty to forty interviews with artists, staff, and members of the Boards of Trustees and Governors to document the stories, observations, and insights concerning the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture. These interviews elucidate the organizational and structural development of Skowhegan, as well as the personal resonances of Skowhegan within the biographies of key individuals.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning.

This transcript has been edited upon request of the interviewee, and the text may differ at times from the recording of the interview. There is a verbatim transcript available upon special permission from Skowhegan. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Zapol: This is Liza Zapol. I am here for the Skowhegan Oral History Project, in Hyattsville, Maryland, and it is February 9, 2012. If you can introduce yourself, please?

Driskell: I'm David Driskell. I'm a Skowhegan alum of the class of 1953. I have served in several capacities beyond that of being a participant -- lecturer, Board of Governors, Trustee, visiting faculty, faculty, and finally on the Board of Advisors.

Zapol: An estimable list. (*Driskell laughs*) If you can tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your childhood and how you found yourself as an artist.

Driskell: I was born in Eatonton, Georgia, a small town in Putnam County outside of Macon, Georgia, in 1931. My father, at that time, was a Methodist minister, and we lived in the house that was referred to as the parsonage, near the church. I assumed that that was my first real social contact with people, in the sense of community. And from that, after living there for five years, we moved in 1936 to western North Carolina, in what is referred to as the Appalachian Mountains. We were at the foothills of those mountains in Rutherford County, and that's where I attended grade school and high school.

My interest, perhaps, in art, may have been from two sources. First -- family. My mother was a quilter, and she also made baskets that were part of folk culture. She was of African and Cherokee ancestry. Her maiden name was Cloud. And my father was, I think, of pure African strain. He also participated in making crafts, as his father -- my paternal grandfather -- had done. My paternal grandfather had made what we called 'functional crafts' in the African tradition of weaving bark from the poplar tree into mats, into collars for horses, but mainly floor mats and doormats and table mats. I saw all of that as a kid, but I didn't consider it art. None of us did, in those days. But my father carved in wood, and he did drawings, as well. I still have a few of his old drawings of angels. His art was all centered around his notions of God and religion.

I don't think that fazed me so much, in the sense of the development of my own artistry. As I look back, my attention to what talent I had in art was encouraged by my teachers, first in a little one-room segregated elementary school in Rutherford County, North Carolina. A teacher by the name of Edna Freeman singled me out, amongst the twenty-five or thirty kids in the school, and I

had to draw everything that the school needed. I had to copy a textbook for the rest of the kids, and it wasn't so much a copy as it was my interpretation of it, but I had to copy the wording. At the end of each school year, all of the students who had any kind of artistic talent participated in what we call 'commencement' -- not graduation, commencement meant you brought you art gifts to school and presented them to the teacher. The teacher then presented them at a local communal fair, with the 'Negro' schools, as they were called at that time.

I remember making apples from clay and painting them with enamel paints. I remember helping to make airplanes from shingles of maybe a foot in length, glued together and nailed together. I remember our gathering seeds, acorns, the seed part from the pinecone, hemlock seedpods, and making decorative flowers for the ladies to put on their clothing. Those were really my first remembrances of anything that seemed or sounded like art. But the teachers beyond that one-room school, at the three-room school, and then at the four-room segregated high school, (*laughs*) all depended on me to do the backdrops for the stages, staging plays and things of that nature. I remember in particular one student who had a great interest in art but said he couldn't draw. He would give me five cents to draw landscapes and cars for him. I guess I honed my confidence in myself in that manner, but it came from other sources as well.

Zapol: You then went to Howard University. What further influenced your choice to become an artist?

Driskell: I came to Howard University in the fall of 1949. I won't go into the specifics of that story because it's kind of long and drawn out. I had not made an application to come to college. I got on the train and came to Washington because somebody told me that Howard was the best school for African Americans. I showed up, three weeks after school had been in session, sometime in September, and petitioned the registrar to allow me to enroll. I said I wanted to be a history major. And his response was, 'Well, you don't just come to college, you have to fill out an application.' I had my report card with me, I was ready to go. I said, 'I'm the class salutatorian, and I'm here to go to college.' They were kind enough to advise me properly, and say, 'No, you come back in January, and we will enroll you.'

I went back in January, and I enrolled in several beginning college courses. I also started taking history courses, and they allowed me to do so. Along the way, I decided, 'I ought to minor in

art.’ So the next year, 1951, I went over to the art building and signed up for a drawing course. A gentleman by the name of James L. Wells, who was quite a draftsman, he also taught printmaking, was my first art professor. While taking that course, a gentleman came in the class one day, very well dressed and well spoken, and said to me, ‘I don’t know you, what’s your name?’ and I told him.

He said, ‘I haven’t seen you here before, what is your major?’

I said, ‘History.’

He said, ‘Well you don’t belong in history, you belong here.’ That person was James A. Porter. He later became my mentor. I changed my major immediately, and had no qualms about going to my history advisor and saying, ‘I’m not taking any more history courses. I’m now taking art courses.’

That began my journey in art. Once I was there, not only did I continue courses with James Porter and James Wells, but also with a woman by the name of Lois [Mailou] Jones, who was a friend of Willard Cummings at Skowhegan. She had met him in Boston. She said to me, in the spring of 1953, ‘I’d like for you to go to Skowhegan.’ Howard University, at that time, was one of the schools that had an annual scholarship to Skowhegan. Actually, Howard had one of the scholarships from the very beginning. I didn’t know anything about Skowhegan, I’d never been anyplace north of Baltimore. So I said, ‘Where is Skowhegan?’

And they said, ‘Maine.’

I said, ‘Maine? Way up there? I don’t know if I can go up there. I have to work during the summer.’ I was married and my wife and I had a child. But Professor Porter came to me and said, ‘The faculty has voted for you to go to Skowhegan.’ I started to make an inquiry of a couple of people who had been, who were still at Howard, and they said, ‘Oh, yes, you want to go, it’s a wonderful place, you’ll learn so much.’

So I got the courage to go, to accept the scholarship, and life has never been the same since. *(laughs)* I credit Skowhegan with introducing me to the real art world. There were international students there then. I remember that there was a young man from Italy, and somebody from some other place. That would have been its sixth year, because there had been one year when there

wasn't a session going on. Skowhegan was very, very well known. And I suspect it was not that easy to get into it as a participant at that time. So that started my connection with Skowhegan.

Zapol: Thank you. I'm very interested to hear and to go more into your memories, even just of your first day at Skowhegan -- just arriving, the personalities, what it was like.

Driskell: Well, I recall going up on the train. Getting off, having to change in Boston. I took the train from Washington, DC all the way to Boston, through New York City -- I had never, as I said, been north of Baltimore -- and getting off the train at the South station in Boston. I stayed overnight, at a little hotel that had been recommended by Lois Jones. She was from Boston. The next morning I got up bright and early, and I of course ate Boston baked beans and things that I was supposed to do, headed up to the North station. There I took the train -- I think it was the Boston and Maine -- to Waterville. Seeing the beautiful scenery along the way, I was just taken with the landscape up the coast. By that time, in June, one could see the farmers out in Maine, and see the people picking strawberries, so it was almost like a romantic notion of the landscape, of arriving at this little town. Well, Waterville is not a little town, as towns go in Maine. Being picked up -- I can't remember the gentleman's name -- in a pick-up truck. I had my little trunk, my art supplies, at the train station, and then driving along Route 201 at the river's edge. He pointed out, while we were driving through, that this is where Colby College was located at one time. I think they were in the process of moving up the hill.

We drove up Route 201 to Skowhegan, arrived, and it wasn't what I was expecting. I was expecting something like a college. I had been told by the participants who had been ahead of me that, 'Oh, it's bucolic, it's beautiful.' They said, 'Oh, we live in dorms.' So I was expecting big brick buildings. When I saw these houses that had been converted -- I can't remember the name of the house that I lived in, I know where it is. My roommate was Walter Williams from Brooklyn, there on the lake. I had never been that close to a body of water before, couldn't swim, but I was just taken with the beauty of the place.

The second day I was there, I was taken up the hill and met Mr. Cummings and his wife Millie. Daphne was a very small girl, and Will was like one or two or something like that, the son. Mr. Cummings was very friendly and open to showing us around, those of us who had arrived. I arrived early because I wanted to make sure that I got there in time and got my place. I had been

told that I was going to be a studio assistant to Leonard Bocour, the paint manufacturer. He taught there in the summer. And so we were shown our places where we would be working, those of us who arrived early. Bill Midgette -- much younger than I. Walter had arrived about that time. Then Robert Clark, now Robert Indiana, had arrived. James McGarrell. Irene Preveden, from the Corcoran School in Washington had arrived. Walter and I were the only two African American students that summer. A lady came later and spent two weeks, by the name Catherine Dykes, from Washington, she was a public school teacher. But we were the only two African American students there all summer. And so it became community for us in the sense that we all got to know each other rather early on. There was a young lady from Boston named -- I can't remember her last name -- Eila [Hershon], she painted landscapes. She was a friend of Bob Clark. And Tilda von Henning [phonetic], I believe, and Ann Steinbrocker. We all had this little group that ran around together in.

It was different for me in certain ways. I had never been in an all-white community before. I came from the South, where the assumption was that there was total segregation. It wasn't total segregation. It was segregation in the schools, the churches, and the social circles. But in everyday life we lived contiguously, adjacent to each other. My best friend was a kid that I played with after school. He lived next door to us, he was not African American. So I had been in mixed company like that but not in the sense of a total immersion, a community. Skowhegan then helped to mold my notion of community in the sense of what might be referred to as an integrated one. Expectations of me were centered on my art, not on my race. I came to know that I wasn't being treated any differently from anybody else. Nobody was handling me like they needed to wear kid gloves.

A case in point. I was very particular about what I ate. I remember Mrs. [Minnie] Harville, who was the dietician, the person in charge of food. Whenever she prepared lobster, I went to her and said 'Mrs. Harville, I don't eat lobster. Could you prepare me a hamburger?' And the first time she did. I don't know if we had it every Friday, but maybe every other Friday was lobster, and it seemed that everybody had eaten lobster except me. And I said, 'Oh, Mrs. Harville, you know I don't eat lobster,' and she said, 'David Driskell, have you ever had lobster?'

I said, 'No.'

She said, 'How do you know you don't like it?'

I said, 'Well, I don't like the looks of it'.

She said, 'I'm not going to cook you a hamburger. I'm not going to cook you anything. If you eat anything tonight, you're going to eat lobster.' And I braved myself and braced myself and tore into that lobster, and I loved it! Been eating lobster ever since. That was a good lesson for me. I came back home telling everybody about, 'Oh, you should try lobster, it's so good!' Well, there were little things like that, that I learned along the way that I had not been exposed to. As we go along I'll tell you about some of the associations I made that I retained after leaving Skowhegan. But that was the entry for me.

I was so delighted to be in the company of these teachers, like Sidney Simon, who had not started practicing the art of sculpture at that time. He was a painter. I was under his wing as a painter. But the person that I really wanted to get to know, and he wasn't very talkative, was Jack Levine. When he gave his lecture, I thought, 'Oh, wow, I want to be a social commentary artist. I want to comment on society the way he does.' He showed images of "Gangsters' Funeral," an iconic work he had done. Some of Levine's works were in museums such as the Metropolitan Museum [of Art]. Even though I wanted to learn the kind of colorist format that I saw in Sidney Simon's work, I was really more interested in trying to learn that chiaroscuro painting that Jack Levine brought to Skowhegan from the Boston School tradition. And there was another participant there from the Boston School -- the Museum School of Fine Arts -- named Joseph Ablow. Joe Ablow had pretty much mastered that style of glazing and painting from dark to light. I spent a considerable amount of time experimenting, trying to learn that technique. Jack Levine gave few demonstrations. I was accustomed to teachers at Howard giving demonstrations, but he gave very few. We'd go out to paint landscapes and come back and he would say, 'Giotto never went out to paint a landscape. He took a leaf from a tree, and painted a landscape.' He said, 'That way, it's yours.'

I started trying to absorb the ideas and the philosophies of other teachers. Milton Hebard was teaching sculpture. Henry Varnum Poor was teaching fresco. I think he was aided by his daughter Anne, who was young at that time. We were doing our demonstrations and work in the old barn, which was located near where the current library is. It burned down later. All of the

work we did, experiments, we did over there. Jack Wallace -- was it Jack Wallace or John Wallace -- Al Blaustein, his wife Lotte. She did drawings but I don't think she considered herself enrolled. So many others, their names are slipping away from me. But we loved the notion of the critiques, the criticisms. Up the hill, where the Simon Studio is now, that was a classroom for drawing. Mr. Cummings' studio was out in the woods -- at the edge of the field. I remember going out to his studio to see a portrait that he was working on at the time. We had seen one of his portraits over at the Lakewood Theater that he did of the actress -- I can't think of her name now, but it will come to me -- I also was interested in portrait painting. Stuart Judd -- I think that was his name, he was a Yale student -- I went with him out to Mr. Cummings' studio to see the portraits, and I was just taken with the fact that he was such a fine portrait artist.-- Catherine Cornell! That is the name of the actress whose Mr. Cummings painted.

Zapol: -- the actress?

Driskell: -- the actress. The portrait was in the Lakewood Theater. Painting daily was not what you would call a class, but I guess it was closer to a class structure than how things are done today.

Zapol: So when you went to see his work in his studio, was that a part of a class?

Driskell: No, that was not, that was a special invitation. I think he invited Stuart because Stuart was a Yale student and Mr. Cummings was a Yale man, and it was just a conversation. But Stuart asked me to come along. I'm not sure that we went into Jack Levine's studio. We were always going around the trashcans trying to pick up a drawing that he may have discarded or something (*laughs*). Not too much luck.

I was Leonard Bocour's laboratory assistant. I had to learn the method ahead of time, of hand-grinding the paints. He had a Bellini brand, which was the more popular manufactured brand, but he had the hand-ground Bocour paints. I learned to make the Bocour paints from scratch, so to speak, from pigments, I learned what to add, what vehicles to use and how to put the paint into the tubes. And what I remember particularly was when I went up with my paint box full of paints, Sargent paints, Mr. Bocour looked at them, and he said, 'Those paints are no good.' He said, 'You need some good paints.' So he gave me Bocour and Bellini paints. I told him that I worked at an arts and crafts store, Arts and Crafts Supply Company at 934 New York Avenue in

Washington. He asked me, 'They carry only Sargent paints?'

I said, 'Yes, only Sargent.'

He said, 'When you go back, you tell your boss,' who was Mr. Albert Ellerin, he didn't know him, I told him who my boss was -- 'You tell him that he should switch over to Bocour paints. It's a better grade of paint, not because I make it, but because everybody says it's better.' He then said, 'If you are able to convince your boss to take on Bocour paints and discard the Sargent, you will not have to buy paints as long as I'm in the business.' And he kept his word. I still have Bocour and Bellini paints. I think Mr. Bocour may have died ten or fifteen years ago, but he sent paints to me at Talladega College, my first job in 1955, two years out of Skowhegan. He sent paints to me at Howard University, and he sent paints to me at Fisk University. When I left Fisk University in 1977 to come to the University of Maryland, he sent paints to me here also. He came and gave a demonstration, as he did at Howard, at the University of Maryland in the 1970s. I still have paints that I use that Lenny gave me. I have to kind of heat them up sometimes, cause they're a little stiff.

Now, I don't want to prolong the story, but an interesting part of it is, I was in Sam Gilliam's studio here in Washington, about a year ago, and saw he had these large quantities of Golden paints. I bought little tubes of Golden paints as the large ones are rather expensive. He said, 'Why don't you write Sam Golden and tell him you want to buy in large quantities, and maybe he'll give you a discount.' So I wrote Sam Golden, not knowing that Mr. Golden was deceased. His son, Mark, wrote in return and said, 'It looks like you have a history with our paints, like, three generations. Why don't you submit an order, and we'll see.' And I sent a rather robust order in to him. He wrote -- I have the handwritten note in which he said -- 'You represent three generations of using our paint in our family. I'm going to send your first order free.' And so, the generosity of Lenny is still with me in that sense.

There are so many wonderful stories like that, but one of the earlier stories that I remember, is thinking, 'How is Skowhegan different from other places?' And I remember Bernarda [Bryson] Shahn giving a talk one day. She said, 'Skowhegan isn't just a place. Skowhegan is an idea.' And I told her, I said, 'I'm gonna steal that from you.' And she said, 'Great.' (*Laughs*)

I do think that Skowhegan is something that is indescribable in the sense of the usual notion of

what an art school concept is. It's bigger than that. It's communal, and yet it is personal. It is overwhelmingly friendly, art user-friendly, but there are always the checks and balances to say, if you're not serious, get out. That's one of the things that I brought back from Skowhegan in my own life, in my own teaching. Give the freedom that is needed to pursue one's artistry, but don't waste time on people who really are dilettantes and who want to be there for the show of it. I think Skowhegan has helped embed that in the minds of many people. It's a serious place.

Zapol: Can you give an example of what you mean? Was it in terms of critiques?

Driskell: Yes.

Zapol: Is there a story around that?

Driskell: Yes. On a Saturday afternoon we were all encouraged to bring our works to the barn. I haven't been there for a while. Maybe it's still done that way. You were given pretty much the say-so as to what you wanted to bring but the faculty would sometimes say, 'Make sure you bring this, bring that,' and so forth. Even when I was teaching there as a resident artist, the full summer of 1978, I went to the participants and said, 'Make sure you bring that one in the selection that you're bringing,' because sometimes the faculty notion of progress may not have been the same as that of a student. One of the things that we were concerned about is whether or not there was going to be measurable growth from what we saw a participant doing when he or she came and what differences are seen when he or she leaves.

When I was a participant, landscape painting was very, very popular and it imprinted itself on me. It stayed with me. Returning to Maine to reside there in the summers made it even more imprintable because I'm surrounded by trees -- especially pine trees, which I love -- along with the white birches. Skowhegan, in a certain way, was the model for much of what remains in my work, the beginning of landscape painting as it went through different phases. I never considered myself a realistic painter. But, there were phases of my work in which one could make associations, and say, 'Oh, that's such and such a place,' but I wanted really to move beyond that, to a personal statement about what it was that I was experiencing both visually and intellectually. I wasn't that taken with the broad phases of landscape. I was interested in segments of landscape. I suppose that is one reason why I paint trees -- one tree, two trees, or something like that, or figures with trees. Skowhegan gave me the impetus to do that.

Zapol: To go into the natural.

Driskell: Yes, to have a greater appreciation for nature. When I bought the little place in Falmouth, Maine in 1961, and eight acres of trees and stream, one of the first things, I said, ‘Oh, this brook, I’ve got to make a pond, like Skowhegan.’ So I went up to Skowhegan in the 1970s, and visited Mr. Cummings. He gave me samples of the flowers there as well as the water lilies. When Hugh [J.] Gourley came to visit me -- I think it was in the 1980s, or maybe the 1990s -- he looked around and he said, ‘I see Skowhegan here.’ He said, ‘Your place mirrors Skowhegan in so many ways.’ Even my studio has the sloping roof. It is painted red. Even the house itself, that I designed and had a friend build, has the same kind of studio effect, so the snow will slide off of it in the winter. My gardens are not as well kept as those at Skowhegan, I don’t have much help with them, but many of the plants that I have, the day lilies, the lamb’s tail, the peonies; they all came from Skowhegan. The water lilies came from the pond at Skowhegan. I have a little pond area about as large as this room here, all full of water lilies, all from Skowhegan. And there is a little bridge that goes across the brook. I’ve drawn and painted that bridge on numerous occasions. But Skowhegan was the kind of thing that made such a physical imprint on me that it influenced my artistry for years to come.

Zapol: What was it about the place that made you want to make it a part of your own home, and your own studio, your own aesthetic?

Driskell: Well, I’m a country boy. I was born in the country and Skowhegan to me was almost like an English manor or a gentleman’s estate. It represented the model for what I call the beautiful life. The old house, with beautiful antiques and paintings. The furniture. I tried to replicate -- well I’m not sure that I was cognizant of doing that yet, when I went to Maine, and started buying at yard sales, and auctions. I’m sure I was looking for things that looked like Skowhegan. I picked up Shaker furniture, because one could buy it in the 1970s -- chairs, and tables, and blanket chests -- at roadside stands rather inexpensively. I wasn’t aware that it was Shaker until somebody told me what it was. I knew it was beautiful. It was serviceable and functional and it reminded me of things I had seen at the Cummings home, the Red Farm.

Skowhegan was molding and blending into my aesthetics in a way that I probably wasn’t even conscious of. When I had a chance to go back and interact on a professional level with Mr.

Cummings, with his sister Joan -- we would occasionally stay with her when we visited over on the lake, I appreciated the little things they had around, and that became a pattern of sorts. A model. Mr. Cummings used to take me out with him, antiquing. I remember, in the spring of 1973 I was on sabbatical from teaching at Fisk University in Nashville. I took the spring off and went to Maine and taught a course up Bowdoin College. When the snow melted, I drove up for a visit with Mr. Cummings. He and Mr. Gourley and I drove to several towns searching for antiques, finding many good buys.

I went with them to various places. He drove us around to his favorite antique stores and old shops, to Farmington and the nearby areas. Later, I started going to those places on my own. And I started collecting the big nineteenth century ceramic jugs that are very, very hard to find now -- I have all of them in Maine. I didn't bring them to Maryland. I collected the brass pails like the ones he had by the fireside, and I put wood in them. I even collected a Shaker wooden tub, and I put wood in the tub for the Franklin stove. Mr. Cummings introduced me to the Franklin stove and I bought one for the little cottage before we built the permanent house in Falmouth. Someone came in one day and saw it and identified the wooden tub, and said, 'That's a Shaker tub!' As a matter of fact, a gentleman who lives next door to me, here in Maryland -- a professor at the University of Maryland, Professor Klank -- is a specialist in Shaker furniture. He came and visited in Falmouth, and he noted, 'That's a Shaker wooden tub from Sabbathday Lake!' I knew where Sabbathday Lake was, but I didn't know anything about the furniture made there. He said, 'You have wood in it?' You know, well, I was using it (*laughs*). So I became interested in Shaker furniture, and that's when I found out I had six Shaker chairs, two Shaker blanket chests, wooden buckets and things like that, all of which complemented my notion that I was learning from Mr. Cummings all along.

That was the kind of thing that imprinted my aesthetics of Maine -- Maine country furniture. I bored my family stopping at every roadside stand en route up the coast, going to visit friends, or going to Skowhegan. I always left early enough to stop off in Hallowell, Maine, which was considered at that time to be the antique capital of Maine. There were at least twenty-five antique stores in that little town, just south of Augusta. And so it was about art, but not so much that I didn't see the total picture. All of those things in a certain way began to influence the imagery in my art. I started painting Shaker chairs. I started painting chairs, period, that I called

Americana. They were all based in my discovery of other old chairs with intricate designs that I would pick up for two or three dollars. Thelma, my wife, was kind enough to let me drag them in the house and dress them up. The same thing was happening in my studio. I had so many props, I hardly had any room to paint!

But all of that I think comes out of an observer's aesthetics that goes with being at Skowhegan. I don't know anybody who leaves there with the same mindset that they came with. I've been to other art places. Yaddo. It's a wonderful place but a totally different atmosphere. They residencies with a different kind of atmosphere. Different from what takes place at Skowhegan. The visiting artists who come help to inform the aesthetics of the participants. At some of the other places, there aren't that many visiting artists. I spent two months at Yaddo, the summer of 1980, and by then I considered myself a mature artist. There, one concentrates on his work; you see other people, and you see what they're doing. But you can't help but feel a special kind of interest, dedication, spirit, so to speak, creative spirit, with the Skowhegan experience.

Zapol: You talk about the creative spirit, and there's also South Solon Church, which is very much a part of the Skowhegan story.

Driskell: Yes.

Zapol: Talk to me about what the role of religion was at the time that you were there at Skowhegan.

Driskell: Actually, I don't think religion played an important part in the notion of the Skowhegan idea. I think I brought my religion with me, and we did go to the South Solon Meeting House. There I saw what was to become the space for the murals. And later, I think maybe 1956 or so, there was a competition, and I submitted an entry for the competition. I remember there was a woman who was very much in the role of facilitator for the school. Her name was Jessica Moore. Beautiful head of red, red hair. She used to write to me, and find out how I was doing, and what I was doing after I left Skowhegan. She wrote and said, 'You ought to submit an entry for the competition at the South Solon Meeting House.' And I did. I think mine was a little too fundamentalist and judgmental, as I was attempting to outdo Michelangelo and do something like *The Last Judgment*. People being condemned and the righteous were rising (*laughs*). She wrote back, after the competition was settled. I think Al Blaustein, and Jack

Wallace, those two I remember being recipients. Ashley Bryan also.

Zapol: Bill King.

Driskell: Bill King. Yes. Among those who were the recipients. She said, 'I want to tell you' -- it was very encouraging -- 'that the jury gave your work an honorable mention.' And that was indeed very encouraging to me. I lost the sketch or what I did. I don't have a record of it anymore.

I considered myself a very religious person, when I went there. My father was a Baptist minister, in North Carolina, and I guess I took certain fundamentalist principles with me. But there were hidden social messages in what I considered to be my religious paintings. I don't think I did any religious paintings at Skowhegan. But it was brewing in the back of my mind. It was all brewing there. My roommate was Walter Williams. He did a couple of paintings, one of which won the first prize. He and Ann Steinbrocker won two first prizes that year. I won the Bocour Progress Prize. I was told that I had made more progress than anybody else. I don't know if they still award prizes but it was a big thing to look forward to at the end of the session. Walter did a painting of a woman sitting very lonely, a black woman in a church interior, very isolated, looking up to a stained glass window. One had to look very carefully, and in those stained glass windows there was what one normally would have considered a crucifixion, but it was a lynching. It was informed by what Jack Levine, had done in the social commentary paintings he created. It was also about race in America.

That was probably the awakening call to me, to say that religious painting could be subversive and culturally disguised. Walter had studied at the Brooklyn Museum School, and he knew the Old Masters works. I didn't know that many Old Masters at that time. I knew about Michelangelo and a few others, such as Raphael. But Walter was very conversant about all of them. He had studied with Gregorio Prestopino. Prestopino was an activist painter, in other words, painting as social activism. Walter had taken much of Prestopino's style and combined it with his own painterly approach. He was dealing with the subject of race while at the same time showing what he called the hypocrisy of Christianity. I learned a lot from Walter. He didn't talk much about it. But that was the painting Skowhegan chose as a first prize painting. And they also chose a painting, I want to say of Portuguese fishermen or something like that, by Ann

Steinbrocker. Ann was the person who invited me to stop over in New York City, on my way back from Skowhegan to Washington, and see New York City. She thought I needed that experience. And I did. (*Laughs.*) It was my first visit to New York.

I had met her parents, her father was a medical doctor, they had come to Skowhegan to visit her that summer before heading off to Europe. I had never seen wealth or anything like that. They lived on Park Avenue. An elevator went directly to their apartment. They had a maid. I slept in this bedroom that looked like Italian Renaissance splendor. That night Ann rented a taxi. She said, 'You have to see Harlem, you have to see Broadway at night,' and we drove to Harlem. We didn't really go into an establishment, but we drove past a place called the Red Rooster, in Harlem, and it was a very popular night spot. Then it went disappeared, as clubs go. Now, I understand it's back. She made sure that I saw the Apollo Theater, we drove down 125th Street, and back downtown to 42nd Street, seeing the dazzling lights. I'd never seen anything like that before. I came away with a notion that everybody in New York was rich. And that I had seen the way everybody there lived. Someday I would want to live in New York, because of the glamour. Little did I know, everybody didn't live like that. I found that out later.

Now, my second trip to New York had nothing to do with Skowhegan. It had to do with a College Art Association meeting. And I met Ann again, at that meeting, and she was looking for a teaching job. At that time I was teaching at Talladega College, we met for lunch. I remember taking her resume and sending it out to friends. With all of her wealth, she still wanted to teach. I lost contact with Ann, I don't know if she's still with us or not, but I went to College Art Association meeting in 1959 with one of my former teachers from Howard University, Professor James V. Herring. We stayed at what was then called the Sheraton-McAlpin Hotel, which was 34th and Broadway. I think it's a home for retired senior citizens now. It is across from Macy's. That is where the conference was held. Professor Herring then took me to visit his friends who lived on West 81st Street, near the Museum of Natural History. As I recall, they lived at 14 West 81st Street. They lived on the fifteenth or sixteenth floor. They too had a maid, and maid's quarters, and they were African Americans. Dr. Cecil Marquez was born in Jamaica. His wife was from Venezuela, but she too was a woman of color. He had a very prominent practice on 125th Street.

Here I had seen a Jewish family, which I considered white because I didn't know the difference.

Of course they were white. At that time I was working on New York Avenue, and coming from the country and not knowing much about ethnicity, I said to the other young lady who was working there at the time, 'When a Jew comes in the store, will you show one to me, so I'll know?' And she said, 'David, you're working for a Jew. Mr. Ellerin is Jewish.' Well, I couldn't see any difference. It was cultural, but I didn't know that. It turns out that Ann was Jewish, and she told me about the difficulties of the racial situation -- well not so much racial, I guess it's cultural -- and I just couldn't understand, 'You're white, what is that about?', I asked. It was those kinds of educational experiences that were helping to establish a whole notion of what this country is about, in my mind. I had seen the tyranny of racism in the South because I was living in Alabama in the mid 1950s. But Skowhegan introduced me to the kind of world that I never would have known otherwise. And so the next visit in 1959, here I see this black family, living in splendor. I was convinced, New York is a paradiso! All because of Skowhegan having introduced me to another world.

Zapol: I will want to move into your experience of being a governor, but before we go there, you talk about Skowhegan being an integrated place, and your first experience of that. Were there times when you felt, as an outsider, that there were tensions around race?

Driskell: No. Maybe on one occasion. There was a kid that was from the University of South Carolina, and I don't think I'm being unkind when I say that he was not a good artist. He wanted to be a political artist. He wanted to paint the Battle of Atlanta with Stonewall Jackson. It was so out of place. Everybody knew it was out of place. We called him Stonewall because that was what was in the back of his mind. He wasn't a bad kid. As a matter of fact, we were very friendly because he always said, 'You are from the South, you'll understand me better than anybody else.' It wasn't that so much as he was just in another era. He didn't want to learn techniques or anything like that, he just wanted to do history painting. There really was no place for that at Skowhegan at the time, but they tolerated him. What was the first part of your question?

Zapol: The question was tensions around race.

Driskell: Yes. I wouldn't consider that a racial thing, a racial confrontation, anything like that. The students from the North didn't like him. They thought he was just terribly out of place, with

his view of things. Things really weren't changing that fast at the time in the United States. But as I think about it, you had a select number of students, like Tilda von Henning, who was from Vassar, and Stuart was from Yale. They were an item, as we said -- Stuart and Tilda, (*laughs*) Robert Clark (Indiana) and, oh, the girl from Boston, Iola (?). Irene, later, and Robert, and so forth and so on. It was a place where if people had racial differences in the sense of their notions and ideas, they were very well covered.

Zapol: And what you're describing in terms of this young man from the South, was it like a regionalism?

Driskell: It was, more like a regionalism than anything else. I don't know what happened to him. I did keep up with a number of the other kids, but somehow our paths never crossed again.

Zapol: And in terms of the reigning aesthetic at that time, what would you describe that, if there were one at Skowhegan?

Driskell: I would say that it was one that encompassed the vision of the beauty of the landscape, the land, as being something very specially American. A lot of the students were landscape painters. Still life was popular, the figure was popular, but I think there were number of students coming from places where they had never seen expanses of landscape. They were enamored by this. So those of us who were good, bad, and indifferent went out to paint landscape. The truck took us out daily. You'd choose a spot. I can't remember the gentleman's name, but he drove us to -- we'd choose a spot, 'Want to go to Madison,' 'Want to go to East Madison,' and he would take us there. We stayed there until close to lunch time, and came back. Sometimes we'd take our lunch; Mrs. Harville would give us sandwiches to take with us.

Figure painting and landscape painting, I think were the two major motivational subjects.

Around those two areas there was a kind of aesthetics of what I call Americana, interiors with the figure. Alex Katz was, he had been there early but he came over, he was living in Lakewood, and he had a little gallery. He and a fellow named Tom Boutis had a little gallery over there, and I went over there from time to time. We saw Alex evolving at that time. He was a landscape painter. He was painting the elm trees. There were still the beautiful elm trees, before the Dutch elm disease killed off so many at Skowhegan. A number of his very early paintings were that kind of blended green, from dark to light, of those beautiful elm trees. I remember that about

Alex.

Zapol: He was there then with Bill King and Lois Dodd as well, that summer. They were all at Lakewood.

Driskell: Yes. I learned that later. I didn't know then, but I learned that later from Lois. I didn't know, at that time, that they were connected in any way. It's interesting about that aspect of Skowhegan.

Zapol: Sorry, but I interrupted. You were talking about the aesthetic at Skowhegan, also about landscape --

Driskell: -- and figure painting. Because at that time, Sidney Simon was a figure painter, Milton Hebard was a figure sculptor, and Henry Varnum Poor did figures within the fresco tradition. Poor was also doing ceramics. There was an old wood kiln in the courtyard at that time, that Poor had built and he did some ceramics. I remember a couple of the visiting artists. An Israeli artist by the name of Reuven Rubin. Yasuo Kuniyoshi was supposed to come, but he died, I think, that spring. William Zorach came, as well, as visiting artist, and his wife Marguerite. She was not on the lecture schedule, but she came. I can't remember who else. But when I came back, I thought I knew contemporary American art history, just from these people who were there. They were very prominent.

Zapol: Before you became a Governor, when you describe these times of going out antiquing, was that in the in-between time?

Driskell: That was in-between time. When I bought the place in Maine, the next summer, I went up to Skowhegan. Not for the Trustee weekend but just to visit Bill and Millie. I, along with Thelma and our two girls, would drive up from Falmouth and spend a little time. Occasionally we would drive up for the lectures, not necessarily the annual lecture. The Trustee weekend wasn't as big then, as now. The New York infusion wasn't as much then as it is now. I made it a point to stay in touch with Bill, Mr. Cummings, and others, and Jessica Moore. That was her name. Jessica Moore, the redhead.

Zapol: And what was her role? Just so I can understand?

Driskell: She was in the role that Sarah [Workneh] has now, or Linda [Earle] had, although I'm not sure what the title was. But she seemed to have run things. She was there for many, many years.

Zapol: Sorry, we were saying, when you'd go to see William Cummings --

Driskell: When I'd go up. I would take friends up with me -- 'You've got to see Skowhegan!' Not necessarily artists, but anybody who'd come to visit us in Maine in the summers. I remember, it was 1974. Mr. Cummings said, 'You should be lecturing here. I'll speak to the Governors.' So I get this invitation to come and lecture, and he says, 'You should be on the Board of Governors. You're loyal, an alumn.' Thereafter I think I may have come on the Board right after my lecture around 1975. I stayed on the Board of Governors until some time in the 1980s, maybe even late 1980s.

Zapol: 1989.

Driskell: 1989. I had gone out and spoken with Bill and Camille Cosby, and told them that they needed to get involved with Skowhegan. Luckily they listened. I discussed it with John Payson and a couple other Trustees -- I'm not sure that I was a Trustee at that time .

Zapol: In 1989 you became a Trustee.

Driskell: Yes, I became a Trustee. I was instrumental in getting Bill and Camille to make a sizeable donation because they were interested in knowing how many African American students came to Skowhegan. I told them my story, and I said, 'We really need to encourage more African American participants.' I don't remember the sum that they gave. I think it was around two hundred or two hundred fifty thousand dollars. It was one of the larger sums that had been given to Skowhegan, at that time. And there was a discussion about, what is an African American? Is a person from the Caribbean an African American? Is a white person from South Africa an African American, who has taken up residence in this country? Barbara Lapcek called me the other day and said, 'David's notion of an African American is the same as my notion. They're born in *this* country,' and she looked at John Payson, and she said, 'John, why don't you fund a scholarship for Caribbean Americans?' And he did! (*Laughs*)

They were all friendly discussions but I was not going for that European South African who had

moved to the States and become an American should be called African American. I don't know who brought that discussion up. I had been to South Africa in 1972 as a visiting curator for the Smithsonian Institution. Apartheid, apartheid. I said, 'Oh, no! That's unforgiven, in my book.' I said, 'No, no, they have to be a person of African ancestry born in the United States.' So they said, 'Okay!' The African American participation did increase after that. Barbara used to say to me, 'You have changed the culture around here.' And I said, 'No, I haven't changed the culture.' I think by having somebody that felt as committed as the Cosbys changed the culture. Later on their daughter Erika came to Skowhegan. She was not a Cosby scholar. She came from Berkeley, while doing her MFA studies out there. I'm sure the Cosby gift did increase the ethnic participation part of African Americans.

Zapol: Why did you want to facilitate that donation? Why did you want other African Americans to experience Skowhegan?

Driskell: Well, I had noticed, as a Governor, that there would be two or three African American students occasionally, maybe four. But I thought, as I explained to Bill and Camille, 'Those students are going to keep coming but if you give money specifically for that reason, that's going to increase the numbers.' At one time it was maybe six or seven. So I said, 'That's all very healthy, any way you look at it.' That was one of the premises on which I sold the notion to them.

Zapol: Thank you. Talk to me about your experience then as a faculty member, what it felt like to look at the school from the other angle. Even thoughts about some of the work that you made while at Skowhegan.

Driskell: I considered it an honor to be invited to come and be on the faculty. I had lectured there, as a visiting artist. I was by that time, as you know, on the Board of Governors. There was Lois Dodd, who first made the suggestion, and Bill Williams, and a couple of other people. As it turns out, Bill Williams and I were there at the same time, that summer of 1978. It was a very interesting experience. As a resident artist it is altogether different from just being a visiting lecturer because you're there all the time. You're in and out of the atmosphere, the whole cultural atmosphere. One sees more clearly what is going on, administratively as well as in the various studios. I was speaking with a young man last night at dinner, who teaches at the

University of Maryland, he had been there recently-- Hassan, I can't think of his last name. He was asking me where my studio was, and I was describing, 'It was up the hill from the sculpture studio, the second one out in the woods, and, as you head up towards the [unclear]. And he said, 'Oh, I know where that is.'

I had the chance to make art in a way that I had not disciplined myself to do before, even though I had had the time in the summers earlier because I didn't teach. I had recently come to Maryland in the previous year and I became Chair of the Art Department there. My Provost said, 'This is an important opportunity, so we're not going to ask you to be here during the summer. You should go to Skowhegan.' As a matter of fact, he and his wife came to visit us at Skowhegan that summer. He, for the last twenty or so years, has been President of San Francisco State University, Robert [A.] Corrigan. A number of friends came up and visited as well, including artist Keith Morrison, who became Dean at the Tyler School. Friends came from Portland to visit, and some from as far away as Miami. It was a wonderful summer for their being exposed to many other things. I think our visitors were impressed with the diversity of Skowhegan. I was considered the senior person on the faculty that summer. Bill Williams was there. There were two African Americans teaching painting and drawing, so it looked good to outsiders, you know, this little school way up in Maine. Diversity, diversity! (*Laughs*)

Zapol: You were talking about the work, being able to have the time --

Driskell: The time to pursue the work that I hadn't done before. I did landscape. I did figure painting. I did a few little compositions with the cows in a kind of Picasso style, cubistically rendered. I had an exhibition of that work in Newport, Rhode Island that fall. Interestingly enough, about half of the works were sold in that exhibition. It was mainly works on paper. I did paintings, I did a few canvases, but principally works on paper. I felt very good about the works I did that summer, I'm not sure that I have any of those works left. But it was an experience that reconnected me to nature in certain ways. It also reconnected me to the aesthetics of Skowhegan. I painted the organ again, the old organ that I had painted as a student, up in the Simon studio. I did drawings, life drawings and what have you, and I reconnected to the traditional notion of what Skowhegan was in the old days. My family, Thelma and my grandson Darius, my adopted son, enjoyed Skowhegan as well. It was a very productive summer.

Zapol: Sidney Simon spoke about the ebb and flow of the nine weeks, and how, at a certain point, each student comes to a point of crisis, and re-evaluates themselves. Tell me about what your experience was, of being a faculty member, seeing the journeys of the students over that time -- how you would describe it?

Driskell: It was different from my teaching in the academy. First of all, we had different objectives. There was a looser format. There wasn't a rigidity of adhering to the syllabus in the classroom. But, I think there was some of the same dedication and seriousness of purpose. Maybe even more at Skowhegan because one knew that at the end of the session, this nine-week session, there was going to be some form of accountability, at Skowhegan and at the institution to which the person returned. I think there was some healthy competition going on. There were high points, I would say, and there were low points. Some visiting artists would come in and tear all the work apart.

Zapol: Can you think of an example of what you're talking about?

Driskell: Not that summer, so much as other times. For example, the summer of 1975, when I was a visiting artist. I don't want to name any names, but I do recall -- Bill Midgette was teaching there that summer. I came back as lecturer. I recall the participants bringing works in the barn, lining them up. One visiting person, who was more into conceptual art, lambasted Skowhegan as being old-timey and traditional.

The summer when I was in residency, Louise Nevelson came as a visiting artist. As a matter of fact, I introduced her. She was so funny because we sat down and talked prior to her lecture over at Red Farm. She said, 'I was born in Russia, and I came here and kind of settled between Rockland and New York City, and back and forth, and then I went off to Paris, to make movies, and film.' She gave me a synopsis of her life. So that night, I said, 'And Ms. Nevelson, among other things, of being a sculptor of renown, she's had the experience of being in Paris, having pursued some aspect of the film industry,' and so forth and so on. When she got up, she said, 'I don't know where he got that from.' (*Laughs*) It was so funny! She totally denied that she had told me any of that. I was laughing, and people were looking at me, like, 'Why are you laughing?' Because just previously she had told me about those experiences. She was an interesting character. I remember, she was the emcee at one of the Skowhegan dinners at the

Plaza Hotel. She was reading her notes and she didn't know the microphone was on. She was talking to herself. And she said, 'Now, okay, Louise, get yourself together now! Get yourself together!' And it was funny. And people started laughing and looking up at her, and she suddenly realized, 'Oh! Oh this thing!' (*Laughs*)

Miss Nevelson was dramatic. A colleague of mine, at Maryland, by the name of Claudia DeMonte; as a matter of fact, we have a lecture named for her. She's retired now, a New York artist. We had the Claudia DeMonte Lecture last night, at the Driskell Center at the University of Maryland. And Claudia, who's tall, very beautiful, woman of Italian ancestry, she idolized Ms. Nevelson. She finally got to meet Ms. Nevelson, and she ran up to her, and she said, 'Oh, Ms. Nevelson, I've admired you and your work all of my life!' Ms. Nevelson looked at her and said, 'Well, you've got the jewelry.' (*Laughs*) You didn't know what she was going to come up with! The last time I saw her was at the Pierre Hotel at an event sponsored by the American Federation of Arts -- she was with a very young fellow! They were dancing away and carrying on! The exoticism, and the eyelashes, and the jewelry. She was quite something.

Zapol: And we were talking about the overall arc of the summer as a faculty member and your relationship to the students, that they get built up and then sort of torn down.

Driskell: Yes. I always felt that it was my obligation to be critical but at the same time give enough encouragement so that the participants wouldn't feel as though they hadn't accomplished something. Now all of them weren't on the same level of painting, or whatever they were doing. By the time I was in residence there, other media, like photography, and filmmaking, were beginning to play an important role in the development of one's artistry that summer. There were a few people who didn't think that one should be doing photography and film at Skowhegan.

Zapol: What was your impression of that?

Driskell: Well, I was learning. Being in the academy, these forms of expression had already made their way into the curriculum, and I felt that they had a relevant role to play in the whole of one's development. Now, I was not quite as informed about conceptual art as I probably should have been, and especially site-specific things that were just beginning to be in vogue. I was still a little more into traditional art media. I remember there was a young man from Yale who wanted to do site-specific things, and they weren't common then. One of the things he wanted to

do was to take all the wood that was going be used for fires, and stack it out in the woods as a form of sculpture. He was not amenable to any kind of understanding that this was the wood that had to be used in the evenings when it got chilly. *(Laughs)* I think he was the only student, participant that I recall was asked to leave that summer. It was rather rare that that kind of thing happened. It wasn't over that incident alone. His is whole notion of what Skowhegan was, it was just like, 'Oh, this awful place.' I thought, if it's so awful, why are you here?

Zapol: That was an interesting time in Skowhegan's history. We haven't spoken about Bill Cummings' death and its effect on the school.

Driskell: In 1975.

Zapol: Can you talk to me about your memories of that moment, and what you felt its ramifications were on the school.

Driskell: Yes. I had gone up the summer of 1974 to visit with Bill, and I knew he was ill at the time. He told he was ill. I had taken a minster friend along from Miami, who had visited us that summer. I remember as we left the back area of the kitchen, where the bricks are and a little fountain that it was pretty obvious that he knew he didn't have a long time ahead of him. But he was still optimistic, he was still Bill Cummings, in such a wonderful way. He was a lesson in living, in many ways. Occasionally he said, 'I'm not going to be here that much longer, but David, I'm counting on you,' that kind of thing. I remember as we left, the Reverend turned to him and said, 'Go well.' And that still sticks in my mind.

The next summer we came back and learned of Bill's death. There was a memorial service up at South Solon Meeting House. He had helped design his burial vault made from wood. He didn't want the cement and all that other stuff in there, he wanted to go right into the ground. I think his son Will had supervised the making of it. It was more of the European style coffin than our style, just fitting for his body. I remember we all went up for that event, and then came over to the cemetery, where there was a big stone from down near the lake that had been placed there in its natural and organic form. It was just so much like Bill

All of those things were still moving in my mind about how Skowhegan is moving, how Skowhegan is evolving, how Skowhegan is changing. His sister, Joanie, took over as the acting

director during that period, and I think she remained director for a year or so. We were searching for new directors and we brought some people in for interviews who simply didn't fit the job. There was an interim period where Bill Williams took over the reins of things. He and Joanie worked things out until a new director was selected. It was a difficult period. It was very difficult to overcome the mystique of the Cummings spirit. There was something very special about Skowhegan that you identified with the Cummings. And not having him there, even though Joanie was around, it wasn't quite the same. But, it was at about that time that Judd Reis, John Payson and others joined the Board of Trustees.

Zapol: Mildred Brinn.

Driskell: Yes, Mildred, and others, and there's a couple from New Jersey. I want to say Richardson, maybe. The Board started becoming more urban. I would say more urban in the sense of its New York presence on the Board of Trustees, there had always been New Yorkers, but there was something that was changing in the sense of the dynamics. The school had to see itself more as a national entity instead of just the school in Maine which has had an office in New York. I think people like Mildred Brinn, John Payson, Judd Reis and others, bought into that, and sold Bernarda's idea that Skowhegan is an idea. It's more than a place, and a physical plant, it's an idea. It seems to me that it was about that time that, we call them the dinners, but they were the galas, they became more prominent. The people being honored were of high stature. I think one year even the Pope was honored. *(laughs)* So it was a totally -- well maybe I shouldn't say a totally different -- but it was a slightly different culture.

Nationally and internationally, the word Skowhegan became synonymous with a certain value in the art world that hadn't been there before. When I went to South Africa for the very first time in 1972, I lectured at the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town, which was rare for a person of color. They were so strange, they would let somebody of color come in and do it, but the local people couldn't. And a few of the students came up to me and said, they had read my biography and they said, 'You live in Maine in the summer.' I said, 'Yes.' They knew two places in Maine. They knew of L.L. Bean and Skowhegan. The people who were in art wanted to touch the hem of my garment because I had this connection with Skowhegan. It was that well known! In the late 1970s, and the early 1980s, the culture of the school became something quite different from what it was, when it was still under the shadow of the founders. It became more flexible,

more modern, more outreaching in its goals and objectives, all the way down to the fundraising.

Zapol: In terms of the galas?

Driskell: In terms of the galas and support that came from the people who were making donations, like the Cosbys, and then when John Payson made such a big donation, after he sold the [Vincent Van Gough's] *Iris*es. To me, as a Skowhegan watcher, these things are significant in the history of the institution. And I think that sets it apart. I've had long association with Haystack. Not on the Board – I have refused to be on their Board -- but of teaching there, of lecturing, visiting and so forth. I love Haystack, and I think there is a symbiotic relationship. But Skowhegan and Haystack have different missions. Skowhegan has its own culture. Haystack has its own. And both are, as you know, world renowned institutions. People in Maine don't know that. But everybody outside Maine seems to know.

Zapol: You say that those were difficult years.

Driskell: The transition.

Zapol: The transition. Is there a particular argument, or decision that you were involved in that sticks out in your mind?

Driskell: Yes. The directorship, for example. I might as well mention the name because in this case its history and I think it plays into what I'm trying to explain. I'm probably not explaining it fully. I recognize the gift, the importance of the artistry of this person. Jack Beal, who was selected as a director, after Bill's death. It was bringing a kind of regionalism to the school. Cronyism, I thought, and I spoke up against it. I just felt that it was not in the best interest of Skowhegan. It was my notion that Skowhegan is bigger, better and greater, and can do important things without going backward. We need to go forward. We don't need to say, 'This is the only kind of painting we do at Skowhegan.' We need to say that we are open to ideas, to new forms of expression.

What reinforced my notion of that was, I want to say, it was the summer of 1980. There hadn't been this settled notion of the director at Skowhegan. I was still a Governor, and we were making selections for the faculty. I saw the name of a person that I didn't recognize as having any prominence in the art world, being asked to become a resident artist for the summer of 1981.

I had been invited by the University of Iowa to lecture there that fall: Iowa City. And I came upon a person who had been invited by the director, Jack Beal, to become resident faculty. He was Jack Beal's graduate student. So my response was 'No!' It was revealed, under duress, from the director, that this person was a graduate student, a friend. And I said, 'No, no, we can't have that. We've got other graduate students coming here to learn!' So I may have been a little emphatic with my dislike of that kind of thing, but I think somebody has to watch the hen house, otherwise the foxes will come in and steal all the chickens. (*Laughs*) I wasn't lobbying for myself, or for anybody else, it's just that I didn't feel that we needed that kind of thing. Skowhegan was bigger than that, and better than that also.

Zapol: This was a period there when there were several resignations, big changes. I would assume that meant there were probably some quite big arguments --

Driskell: Oh yes, yes.

Zapol: -- involved in that.

Driskell: I wasn't privy to all of them, but some of them I do recall. Here again, I think people have a right to their opinion, but it got a little feisty at times, when people wanted things to move in a certain direction, others said, 'No, we need to be doing this, we need to be doing that.' I think good won out, in the end. I think it almost always does. I think Skowhegan is a much better place because we had those experiences. I wouldn't necessarily want to go through them again. Skowhegan, again, helped to position me, even in my professional career, in places that I would not have been otherwise.

Zapol: How so?

Driskell: Exhibitions, I was invited to participate in exhibitions that I know came about because of my relationship with Skowhegan. People always cited, you know, 'The Board of Governors of the Skowhegan School,' 'Member of the Board of Trustees of Skowhegan School.'

The memories. I wouldn't own property in Maine had I not gone to Skowhegan. I wouldn't have the association I have with the museums and galleries in Maine were it not for Skowhegan.

Zapol: I'm not sure I know how the participants were selected for the Cosby scholarship.

Driskell: I'm not sure that I know. It's the same process for any student, but the notion that they, not necessarily have to come from a historically black college, or university, but they would have the same qualifications as any other students but racially they would have to be African American.

Zapol: I see. I've asked you many, many questions. Just in terms of your experience now, actually there are two questions. One is just, in our records, it says that you were not a Governor between the years of 1980 and 1982. Is that incorrect? It's quite possible that it's incorrect.

Driskell: Between 1980 and 1982? I would have continued to be a Governor. I may not have participated that much, it may have been right after that little fiery period.

Zapol: It seems like it was right in there. So I just was wondering if there had been a reason for that. Also: the moments of note that I have are the Governors' Award in 1986 --

Driskell: Yes.

Zapol: -- and then when you joined the Board of Trustees and the Advisory Committee. Tell me about this trajectory.

Driskell: I've always considered all of the awards at Skowhegan to be most prestigious in their placement in American art. I considered that a badge of approval in many ways. Not so much that I was in the big league as that I had come of age. And looking at the persons who had been recipients, the decision had been made that I was in that category. At the time, I had left the Chair of the Department of Art at the University of Maryland but I was still teaching there. The award was highly lauded there because members of our faculty were people like Ann Truitt, Nicholas Krushenik, New York painters, Claudia DeMonte, folks like that, who knew the importance of Skowhegan in the art world. They were always a few people who would ask, 'Can't you get me on that faculty? Or can't you -- ' and I said, 'No, we don't do that. We don't do it that way.' So I considered it one of the highlights of my career to have been given the Governors' Award. I think my family felt the same way.

Zapol: Then joining the Board of Trustees.

Driskell: Then joining the Board of Trustees. Yes. I think after being a Governor, and the body

seeing the commitment I had to the school -- going out, trying to bring in support like the Cosbys-- there is the dedication you give to screening who comes and who comes to teach and all that, but then when you start influencing the money flow, people have different notions of who you are. I didn't necessarily want to be a Trustee. I wanted to remain a Governor. But several people said, 'No, no, you should really be on the Board of Trustees.' I think somebody said, at that time, that there'd only been one other person who had gone from participant all the way up to Trustee, and I think they said it was Alex Katz. So I felt, 'Oh, am I going to be in his company? That's good.'

Alex was still on the Board when I came on. I would not consider it an ordinary friendship but by going to Maine, and by going to Skowhegan, then continuing a relationship with artists in Maine in the summer, seeing them at the Colby College luncheon, occasionally visiting their homes, it's like there is a small circle that you never get out of. The Katz Wing at Colby, and the kind of dedication that he and Ada have to furthering the whole concept of American art at this one institution, his own foundation and things like that. All of those things have influenced my own notion of -- I won't say philanthropy, so much, cause I'm not in that category of giving -- but I do try and give generously, to many of the institutions in Maine. I don't give a lot of money. I remember when -- what was Roy's last name?

Zapol: Leaf?

Driskell: Yes! He was there for a long time, and I said to him, 'We ought to speak to the participants and say, 'Everybody ought to give a dollar for the number of years they've been out of Skowhegan.' So I started doing that, but after a while it wasn't going to add up to a lot. So I tried to give more. But he thought that was a marvelous idea because he said, 'Well some people don't give anything!'

Zapol: Yeah.

Driskell: Is Roy still alive?

Zapol: I can't tell you that, I'm sorry.

Driskell: Yes. I once heard that he had left the States and maybe gone to Puerto Rico, someplace like that.

Zapol: I'll look into it.

Driskell: Okay.

Zapol: And what is your role in the Board of Advisors?

Driskell: Well, it's meager in the sense that it's almost like on call, if somebody thinks there's something important enough to pursue and wants my opinion. The time that I left the Board of Trustees, it was exactly fifty years from the time that I was a participant. I just thought, 'Well, after fifty years, that's long enough. Now somebody else needs to fill that void.' Mildred, and a couple of others said, 'No, no, no, no, Board of Advisors, you must!' So I see my name listed and say, 'Oh, they didn't call me this year. Good! No crises.' *(Laughs)*

Zapol: So when you think in your imagination of the place, the landscape of Skowhegan, what do you see?

Driskell: I see those chicken houses that were converted to studios, physically. I see the story in my mind of their telling us, 'Don't smoke around the buildings because those power lines go all the way to Canada, and you will disturb the whole electrical system from here to Canada.' I see the picnic, the Fourth of July picnic, over on the hill, with the fireside chats, and the firesides from Lakewood in the evenings. I see people who love that place. People who look forward, as I do, to coming back to Skowhegan. I did not attend last summer because I had a medical procedure which I had to deal with, but it was the first time I hadn't been there in ages for the Trustee weekend. And when people say, 'I want to come to visit,' I say, 'No! Not that weekend, we are not here, we go to Skowhegan.' There were times when I'd go up at other times, but principally I go now for the Trustee weekend. So I see those things not only in the mind's eye but I see them physically as signposts and landmarks in my own memory of things that helped to characterize a beautiful life. I love the landscape. I love the place. I love the Red Farm. Maybe I should say something negative about Skowhegan, but I can't find anything negative to say. It's given me so much.

Zapol: When you think about the future of that place, what are your hopes?

Driskell: I'm hopeful that, first of all, it won't change in the sense of its creative philosophy. That it won't change in the sense of its enduring aesthetics. That it will remain a landmark in the

sense of what we think an institution like that, for a period of time, principally the summer, should be, and that it remains a model for others that will come after Skowhegan. A viable model of creativity, of artistry, of visual encouragement. It's kind of like a spiritual place to me in so many ways. Not in a religious association, but just the notion that there's something very special physically and spiritually about that place. As an artist, in certain ways, for me it's like hallowed ground. As I said, in the very beginning, whatever few accomplishments I have made in the art world -- and I have tried to define myself in more than one dimension -- studying the history, helping to define the history of American art, to be inclusive instead of so exclusive, in all dimensions, not just from the African American experience, but from the experience of all the ethnic groups, women, and other minorities. I don't think I would have had that broad notion of what American art is if I hadn't had the Skowhegan experience. It's revealing in so many ways, beyond its physical presence. The diversity element alone is something that I think very few places, institutions, centers, can top.

Zapol: Did you ever speak with Bill Cummings, about his choice to have Skowhegan be an integrated place?

Driskell: Only from the point of view of how he knew my teacher, Lois Mailou Jones. And he did say to me once, something to the effect of, 'It's supposed to be like this.' It was like, why would it be anything else? But he never amplified that. But I knew what he meant.

His wife, Millie, was a historian of the state of Maine. She had shared with me many aspects of Maine history. My wife and I, and our two little girls at that time, we went over to visit Millie, in Rockport, Maine -- I want to say in 1968. It may have been 1966, Numbers get a little confused now. She had founded the Maine Coast Artist Gallery. And she asked me to bring some work over to be exhibited. We were having lunch, and she said to me, she said, 'David, I know you are interested in the black presence in Maine. There was an exhibition that had been organized at Bowdoin College in 1964 by Marvin Sadik, called 'The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting.'

I was teaching at Howard University, in Washington, at the time, and Marvin Sadik, the director at Bowdoin, had consulted me on the subject and asked for information. I told him that he should get in touch with Millie, because Millie, even though she wasn't that ingrained in just the

black subject, knew more about African Americans in Maine than any other person that I knew in Maine. She told me at that lunch about a shipwreck off of the coast of Maine over near Thomaston, over there somewhere around 1792. The wreck involved a cargo of African slaves. The African people came inland after the shipwreck and filtered in amongst the native people and the local whites. Millie's maid, a lady who was serving us, was listening. She came in and said, 'I don't mean to interrupt you, but I know a person who's a descendent of that group of people.' I don't think she meant to be demeaning in any manner, and she said, 'We call him Blackie. He's almost as white as I am but he traces his ancestry back to that group.'

Millie was that kind of meticulous historian, and she had told Marvin about a black barber. Somebody painted the portrait of a black barber in Orono, Maine, in the nineteenth century. She and Bill Cummings knew about this particular painting. Bill collected Maine paintings. He may have owned this painting at one time. That painting found its way into Marvin Sadik's exhibit, 'The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting,' and this black barber in Bangor-Orono, Maine, who cut hair and sold food to aid the Greek resistance war. She told me about a black kid, who lived in South Paris, Maine, in the nineteenth century, who was educated there by a white family. She knew stories like that. She told me the only sea captain after the Civil War to be tried and eventually hanged for continuing to bring slaves into the United States, was a man by the name of Captain Gardner from Maine. She knew little tidbits. I was enamored by the knowledge of these people. I never considered myself a historian, but I was interested in history and having started out as a history major at Howard University in 1950, having to write art history, all these things were fascinating to me. In that catalogue, *The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting*, there's a portrait of that barber, which came about because Millie and Bill knew that story. That's how it got into that exhibition.

There were things like that that were so informing to me as a young professor, as a young teacher. When I came to Bowdoin in 1973, I established a course there in African American art history. I don't know that it's still being taught. As a matter of fact the person who wrote the biography on me, Julia McGee, taught that course for a while. There is a major collector, his last name is Hall, who's a Bowdoin graduate, an African American. He owns major works, not just African American works but Expressionist and Abstract Expressionism. I saw him a couple months ago, each time he sees me, he says, 'I would not have been a collector had I not taken

your course at Bowdoin College.’ Kenneth [I.] Chenault, the CEO of American Express, says the same thing. He was in that same class. But that was another level of influence. I wouldn’t have been at Bowdoin had I not gone to Skowhegan.

Zapol: It’s also very interesting to get a sense of who Millie was because I think that’s another part of the story, and perhaps for another conversation to continue.

Driskell: Yes. I think that she is very often left out of the picture, unless Daphne or someone who was very close to her tells that story. She was very important, and influential in the whole Skowhegan idea, a wife who gave up her home for the concept and the utilization of a service which served a broader community. When I say gave up her home, I mean her home was at the center of the Skowhegan idea. She didn’t give up art, even after their separation. She maintained her relationship with art. She founded the gallery over in Rockport, which has now become the Center for Maine Contemporary Art. So there are those living legacies that move in different directions, that we don’t often associate with Skowhegan.

Zapol: Well I think --

Driskell: And one final thing --

Zapol: Please do keep going.

Driskell: During that period, when I became a little disenchanted, I don’t know who and I don’t want to remember the names anyway, there was this notion that we should have a Skowhegan West. A new Skowhegan West, in LA or Oregon or someplace. And my notion was that you don’t duplicate greatness just because you want expansion. Is there a need for it? There was this viable argument that went on ‘Skowhegan West.’ You know the old dictum of, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it; don’t need no fixin?’ I didn’t think Skowhegan needed it. That kind of faded away, thank heavens, but that was a big thing there for a little while. Skowhegan West.

Zapol: Interesting. When was that about? Amid the tumult, or after things stabilized a little bit in the 1980s?

Driskell: I think it was the late 1980s, maybe even flowed into the 1990s a little. I know there were one or two Trustees out there but that was one of the viable topics for a while. I think

people have conveniently forgotten about it.

Zapol: Yes. And as you say from your story, it's so much about the physical space itself that makes it. Of course the families and the people, but also the place.

Driskell: Yes. It's the peculiarity of the place, of the landscape, of being there. Barbara Bush said, when her son became President, 'Who would've thunk it?' In that kind of isolated place, which isn't Skowhegan. It isn't in the town of Skowhegan, but it's Skowhegan. That's the hardest thing to explain to crazy people who just want to -- 'Well it's in Madison, and you say Skowhegan!' Why, no, I can't explain that, don't ask me.

Zapol: Well then we would be saying Madison. It's not as interesting.

Driskell: Yeah, it's not as interesting.

Zapol: Or evocative.

Driskell: I remember Bill Cummings, he didn't say Skowhegan, it was almost like 'Skowegin' [phonetic]. He just flowed through it. Skowegin!

Zapol: In a single drumbeat, almost.

Driskell: Yes.

Another thing. I met some very important people through him at Skowhegan. I met Bette Davis at his apartment at Carnegie Hall in New York.

Zapol: And what are your memories of her, or that visit?

Driskell: Well, very short. I wasn't there for a long period. She was leaving, as I was coming, and he was like, 'No, you must stay and meet Bette Davis. She's from Maine.' I didn't know that. She was from Cape Elizabeth. And very impressionable, in the sense of who she was, very firm. He whispered to me -- I don't know if he did it with the notion that it was so very personal and private that he didn't want to say it in her presence, in my presence -- he said, 'You know, she has an adopted black son.' I had never heard that. I think he said his name was Henry. I said, 'No, I didn't know that.' And he was, like, 'You know, there are a lot of things you don't know about us Maine people.' Edith Halpert, I met at the Red Farm. Those two people stand out

as very prominent in my mind. But he introduced me to a number of people in New York who were influential, in other ways, particularly in the art world.

Zapol: Something that has also come up in my discussions was his own sexuality. I'm wondering what your awareness in your contact with him was of his sexuality.

Driskell: I've heard all the whispers, afterwards. I knew absolutely nothing of that because I knew him during his marriage to Millie. I knew the separation occurred. But I knew absolutely nothing else. And I guess I didn't seek to. Even if I had known it, it wouldn't have mattered to me because he was such a wonderful man, and such a gentle man, in so many ways. So, that was something that I really never entertained in my mind.

Zapol: In terms of his lasting legacy on you, it seems like those, the people who I'm hearing from your first year were Jack Levine --

Driskell: Leonard Bocour --

Zapol: -- Leonard Bocour, Bill Cummings, and --

Driskell: -- Henry Varnum Poor. And I kind of stayed in touch with Sidney Simon, into his second marriage --

[Interruption]

Driskell: A summary. I guess I go back to the notion that Bernarda Shahn's quote that Skowhegan is more than a place, it's an idea. It is an idea that is based in principles that promote a creative spirit amongst people. It is an idea that helps to saturate the mind in ways of making, of creating, of exploring new forms of expression. And it is a place which helps to make people feel as though they are a part of a great legacy, one being Skowhegan, the other being the notion that art is something that we make to enhance our living. I think Skowhegan has fulfilled all of those functions, in that we love the beauty of the place, we love the philosophy behind it, and we literally cherish the notion that there is a place in the American scene where we can feel at home being who we are, being artists, being creators of new ideas, of new forms. Physically it's a beautiful place. I always feel like I'm transformed to the English landscape, over near Bath or some such place, when I'm at Skowhegan. I'm sure its founders didn't have that in mind, but

there's a transformative spirit when you go there. And to me all of that is good.

Zapol: Thank you, Dr. Driskell. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you would like to share at this moment?

Driskell: Well, I can't think of anything offhand. I'll probably wake up in the middle of the night saying, 'Oh, I should have told her about such and such a thing!' No, I think you've been rather comprehensive in your pursuit of what Skowhegan is, or should be, or will become.

Zapol: And if you think of anything that you would like to add, this will be transcribed and shared with you, and you can add as you wish.

Driskell: Very well.

Zapol: Thank you.

Driskell: You're welcome.

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