Alternative Methods of Carving at Penland School of Crafts

Dana Hopkins, 2014

Two weeks, two completed projects, two scars, two worn out pairs of gloves, two times the muscle, and twice the confidence: this, in a nutshell, was my Penland experience.

Penland, located in the breathtaking Appalachian Mountains about an hour north of Asheville, North Carolina, is a residential craft school at which both laymen and professional artists of all ages come together for intensive workshops in a variety of artistic areas such as clay, hot glass, drawing, textiles, iron, metals, paper, and wood. Through the generous support of the Nellie C. Watterson Summer Fellowship for Creative and Performing Arts, I took a wood studio course at Penland entitled Alternative Methods of Carving. This course explored carving different types of wood including curly maple, walnut, black locust, cherry, and pear using power tools.

I felt this was a suitable course to choose as Bowdoin’s intimate size understandably results in a few courses devoted to materials such as wood, a medium in which I am very interested, and one I felt would be a dangerous to engage by myself without previous knowledge and experience. I also wished to gain a greater familiarity with power tools to help in my work as a production assistant with the Bowdoin Theater Department and with Masque and Gown, Bowdoin’s student theater club.

I could not have been happier with the results of the course as well as my overall Penland experience. Students at the school had 24-hour access to their studios. Class sizes were small, leading, at least in my class, to as much hands-on instruction by the teacher as one could desire. The food and natural environment were spectacular, and by the end of two weeks the school really felt like a community. There were slide shows of instructors’ and studio assistants’ artwork every night, as well as yoga classes two times a day for those who desired them. Even the yoga classes contributed to the students’ artistic education. As people who work continually with our hands and rely heavily upon the strength and dexterity of our bodies, it is essential to maintain those bodies, and Penland’s yoga instructor made sure to show us exercises that focused on preserving the limberness of our hands, backs, shoulders, necks and more. I found living and working in such a supportive and creative community to be exhilarating as well as a wonderful opportunity for meeting other artists and networking.

In my course, we roughed out sculptural shapes from logs using chainsaws. We then refined those shapes using angle grinders and dynafiles (think a miniature sanding belt), and then we further refined them by sanding them using sanding pads attached to electric drill guns. Heavy-duty power tools were not the only things I was lucky enough to use, however; I also tested out an electric chisel set and Dremel tools, and got to see a full-size wood lathe in action. It was extremely tiring work, and I ended up with eight callouses and two cuts from the angle grinder, but I also ended up feeling empowered, more knowledgeable about tools and wood than ever before, and knowing how to make surprisingly beautiful pieces using seemingly brutish tools. Below are three of my projects in chronological order from left to right. Every session, Penland holds a scholarship auction to help fund its workstudy program. I submitted the vase on the far right to my session’s auction and was humbled and delighted when it ended up selling for $225. Thank you for this opportunity. It was the highlight of my summer.

Faculty Mentor: Roger Bechtel
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