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TOUCHSTONE CENTER FOR THE ARTS

CELEBRATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY

BY JANET MENDELSON



“Just like everyone else, 2020 was a shock for us,” said Lindsay K. Gates, Executive Director at Touchstone Center for Crafts in Farmington, Pennsylvania. “But in a way, the timing of the pandemic was good, because the very day everything shut down was the same day we kicked off our strategic planning and facility evaluation.” With programs gone virtual and residencies limited due to COVID-19, Touchstone Center for Crafts leadership had time to delve deeper into what artisans and artists love about the nationally recognized school and its 150-acre woodland home.

They heard anew what it means to beginners and accomplished artisans alike to be given time and studio space to explore their media, away from daily routines



OPPOSITE PAGE
BOTTOM:
Participating artists (L-R): Glenn Horr, Jo Campbell-Amsler, Yoko Sekino-Bové, Nick Ireys, Robin Menard, Kevin Crowe (missing from photo)

THIS PAGE
TOP: Jo Campbell-Amsler/Willow Ridge Baskets, **Fishing Creel**; willow rib-style basket

BOTTOM:
Jo Campbell-Amsler teaching in the Robert Little Studio at Touchstone Center for Crafts, 2019



while learning from expert instructors. Artists at all levels described how ideas emerge when creative people from diverse backgrounds unwind together at day's end. Solo walks on the winding trails along the streams that run throughout Touchstone's campus also provide inspiration. They knew the Center was a gem, but these past two years helped them identify new ways to enrich makers' experiences during their workshops, internships, and residencies to help artists realize their potential. While the pandemic altered some plans, Touchstone's 50th Anniversary celebration features an array of events and workshops, expanded scholarship offerings, and a special exhibition at Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural masterpiece. Located near Touchstone, this UNESCO World Heritage site last fall welcomed six Touchstone-affiliated artists for a brief residency. A basket maker, two metalworkers, two ceramic artists, and a botanical illustrator are each creating one piece inspired by Fallingwater for an exhibition in the landmark's gallery October 1 through December 31, 2022. The six pieces will be auctioned online during the exhibition as a fundraiser for Touchstone.

The Center was founded in 1972 as the Pioneer Crafts Council with a mission to teach and preserve interest in traditional crafts of the Appalachia region. Years later, the school moved to a new site, a former camp 60 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, and was renamed to Touchstone Center for Crafts.

TOP: Workshop participants in the Robert Little Studio at Touchstone Center for Crafts, 2019

BOTTOM: Jo Campbell-Amsler/Willow Ridge Baskets, **Willow Tote**; rib-style basket by



Today the focus is on contemporary and experimental techniques in crafts, including blacksmithing, ceramics, metals and jewelry, glass, and drawing and painting. One- to five-day workshops are held May through September. Even abbreviated, this year's schedule includes willow basketry, mosaics, metal mesh sculpture and basketry, Shibori, Yoruba dye, paper and printmaking. Two dorms, 20 rustic cabins, and a common dining room allow participants to stay on site during their workshops.

"Because we offer lodging and meals, it allows for a truly immersive experience where participants can be fully involved in creativity while we take care of the rest," said Gates. It's a short drive in the Laurel Highlands to cascading waterfalls and rafting at Ohiopyle State Park and to two other Frank Lloyd Wright sites, Kentucky Knob and Polymath Park.

Intensive summer internships combine studio management experience with access to studios and learning. There are two- to four-week artist residencies, a teen week, veterans' programs, and retreats for educators, writers, botanical illustrators, *plein air* painters, and others.

"We've experienced so much growth over the last four years," she said. "We've tightened up our operations and started a wonderful exhibition series in our two on-campus galleries. We've been able



TOP: Jo Campbell-Amsler/Willow Ridge Baskets, **Big Egg Basket**; willow rib-style basket

BOTTOM: Workshop participant, 2019



to bring in great basket makers, like Jo Campbell-Amsler and Lanny Berger. Even during COVID, we've been able to grow our artist residency program because lodgings are spread out in the woods and studios are airy, partially open spaces."

Gates, a contemporary basket artist and NBO board member, is among those teaching at Touchstone this summer.

"When pandemic shutdowns began, we knew that to some extent these extensive outdoor facilities could enable us to control conditions," she reported. "We reopened with a limited number of residencies in late spring 2021, expecting applications would come from artists who had lost access to their workspaces or who couldn't return to college due to COVID. Instead, many artists came who have their own studios but had been missing the community of peers. We can offer them that here."

To that end, long-range plans include adding porches to the cabins and expanding common meeting spaces for gatherings. Among these future plans are interviews, called Pathways to Professions, in which accomplished artists discuss steps and missteps they've taken along the way and what they wished they'd known sooner (available on Touchstone's YouTube channel, youtu.be/Oo_1sWzt6yw).

TOP: Workshop participants in the Robert Little Studio at Touchstone Center for Crafts, 2021



BOTTOM: Workshop participant, 2021



New this year is a one-week residency where one artist is invited per studio and they each get to invite three other artists who inspire them to accompany them. It could be their frequent collaborators or someone new whose work they admire.

“More than ever, the pandemic reminded us that building community is vital,” said Gates. “You can take classes anywhere. The beauty of a craft school is what happens during that time in between, those unexpected moments that become the most meaningful for people.”

Touchstone is also committed to the surrounding community. “We’re in a very rural county, and we attract a lot of tourism,” said Gates. “That’s very important here where past industries are now gone. We’re working hard to introduce our resident artists and interns to what’s available locally, because there is amazing support in this region for the arts. This is a great place to set up their creative businesses.”

Last November, Touchstone joined three other organizations to form a partnership to stimulate creative and commercial growth in Johnstown and Cambria County, Pennsylvania. The new Alliance for Creative Rural Economies (ACRE) unites two creative groups and two from the economic development



HERE:
Fallingwater,
classic view
from the SW
elevation
courtesy of
the Western
Pennsylvania
Conservancy

TOUCHSTONE'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY GALA & EXHIBITION

Opening October 9, 2022, at Fallingwater, a home that was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for Liliame and Edgar Kaufman, Sr. and their son Edgar Kaufman, Jr., collectors of fine arts and crafts. The National Historic Site's archives include Indigenous baskets from the American Southwest and ornithology prints by John James Audubon (fallingwater.org).

The exhibition, October 1–December 31, 2022, will present new work, inspired by Fallingwater, by six distinguished artists:

Jo Campbell-Amsler, basketry,
willowridgebaskets.com

Kevin Crowe, pottery, kevincrowepottery.com

Glenn Horr, blacksmith, glennsforge.com

Nick Ires, metal design, nimetaldesign.com

Robin Menard, botanical illustration,
asba-art.org/member-gallery/robin-menard

Yoko Sekino-Bové, yokosekinobove.com

sector to help entrepreneurial makers, designers, artists, and craftspeople.

ACRE pairs Touchstone with the Creative Business Accelerator (CBA) at Bridgeway Capital, a Pittsburgh-based social impact investor; JARI, a nonprofit economic development organization that coaches entrepreneurs in the Allegheny area; and Creator Square, a new artist residency and creative business incubator in Johnstown (acrepartners.org).

"We're pulling together to offer a menu of supports so artists can move here from wherever they are, maybe to pivot due to COVID or to enter a new field and become small-batch manufacturers or start a small business," said Gates. "We'll help them with access to capital and networking, find living and studio space, offer business skills training and connect them to the local arts community. Currently ACRE is a pilot program and 100 percent free to participants. People think inexpensive apartments and studios in old factories are all artists need but that isn't enough. We're really on the road to building a creative economy."

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