The MacDowell Colony 1970 - 1974

I needed a change from my geographical location in Florida, that is, to temporarily change the environment where I worked. Often I complained that I was in a rut with painting. The paintings appeared to be variations on a theme. A change in my working environment seemed to be a logical solution. Change is the key word. I had learned, from past experiences, that if I were to rock the boat, somehow create a radical change in my environment, I would grow. Complacency is a dangerous place to be with my work. Creativity ceases to be a challenge with no resistance. As I said the work becomes a variation of a theme. In the past, one of the greatest stimuli for, pardon the pun, opening new horizons was the trip through the Midwest. That was a radical change from the eastern environment I was so accustom to. That visual experience provided enough stimuli to last a lifetime. At this point in time I had been working in my studio, in Florida, for five years, drawing from the cumulative past. I know that the natural environment in which I am working has always immediately affected me. As a visual person, the light, color environment, the linear and seasonal environment, all affect change in the work. I was told about the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire.

Edward MacDowell was the first American composer of serious music, to be recognized internationally. MacDowell became a popular virtuoso and famous teacher before he was 20. After many years in Europe, MacDowell returned to Boston in 1890 and later purchased a farm near Peterborough, New Hampshire, where he could rest, relax and compose. Finding the music room too accessible to interruption, a cabin was built in the woods a short distance from the main house. Here much of his composing was done and the concept of the MacDowell Colony took form.

MacDowell helped to establish a truly American “school” of classical music. Pioneering the American scene as he did, he concentrated primarily on piano compositions because of the very limited symphony performance opportunities available in this country at that time. He did however; compose a dozen or so symphonic tone poems and other major symphonic works.

Founding the MacDowell Colony as a haven for creative talents was Edward MacDowell’s great dream. In the period from his death in 1908, at the age of 46, to the end of her own life in 1956, Mrs. MacDowell worked tirelessly to fulfill that dream.

She spent her summers in developing the present Colony’s 40 buildings, most of them studio cottages on more than 400 acres of beautiful New Hampshire farmland. In the winter she toured the United States giving concerts of her husband’s music, telling audiences about the MacDowell Colony and urging their active help in its development and support.

Each year the Colony provides some 150 creative artists of proven talent with relief from the mechanics of daily living and an opportunity at no cost to those with limited financial resources, to push forward their projects in isolated studios, where neither friends nor neighbors can intrude.

Frequently, the Colony’s help comes at a time in an artist’s career when the chance to put in long periods of uninterrupted work may have critical import.

To many, the opportunity for Colony residence means at least a doubling of normal creative output.

By the time of my first residency in October of 1970, there had been thirty-seven Pulitzer Prize winning recipients that had been residents at the Colony. A large part, but not all, of the prize-winning works were created at the Colony.

Thorton Wilder lived at the Colony for an extended period. During his residency he wrote the play "Our Town," which in fact, is about the little neighboring village of Peterborough. Stephen Vincent Benet, for "John Browns Body", Edwin Arlington Robinson, John Gould Fletcher, Douglas Moore, Stanley Kunitz and Aaron Copland to name just a few of the Colonist who won a Pulitzer.

Aaron Copland has called it a memorial that keeps on giving. Charles Wakefield Cadman left parts of his ASCAP royalties to it in gratitude. Leonard Bernstein, hard pressed, sought it out when he was long overdue with a commission for a major orchestral work.

In the spring of 1970, I applied for a residency at the Colony. The application process involved 35mm slides of my work, a list of exhibitions, publications, collections etc. Basically, enough material to show that I was an established artist. A panel of recognized artist, critics and art historians reviewed this application.

A short time later I received in the mail the following.

May 1, 1970

I am happy to tell you that the Admissions Committee has granted your request for residence at the MacDowell Colony and is reserving a place for you from October 1 to October 31.

One can imagine my excitement. I felt genuinely honored that a panel of peers would accept my request for residency on the merits of my work. Because of the quagmire I thought my work was in, an opportunity to travel to New England and work at the MacDowell Colony was a timely gift.

The timing for my residency could not have been better. [From April 1965, at that first side walk art show where I was an unknown artist] I had received an invitation to be honored with a one-person exhibition at the Orlando Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition was scheduled to open December 18, 1970, just a month and a half after my return from MacDowell. This exhibition was to be both a retrospective and current works. There was no problem finding works for the retrospective, they were all over central Florida. However, for the current works, I naturally wanted to select works that represented my best efforts.

So in the fall of 1970, I drove north, with a great sense of adventure and change, my car loaded with art supplies. I stopped in New York City for a pilgrimage to Leo Castelli's Gallery to see what my idols, Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg were up to.

Upon arriving at the Colony, knowing what great musical, literary and artistic masters had walked those grounds, I had a sense of reverence. I was warmly greeted and given a tour of Colony Hall, the main community building. Here, breakfast and dinner were shared with the other residents. Lunch, on the other hand had a long tradition behind it. The mid-day meal was brought to your studio in a picnic basket and "quietly" left on your doorstep. The same was done

for MacDowell, years before, when he was composing in his log cabin studio. This tradition emphasizes the importance of uninterrupted work. There were only two rules; “Please don’t smoke in the woods” and “Please do not visit studios without invitation.” This last rule, again, to protect the Colony’s working atmosphere. No distractions to interrupt ones concentration.

I was given a room in the men’s guesthouse. This room was primarily for a private space away from your studio and of course, for sleeping. I was then taken to my studio. In no way was I prepared, nor can I now find words to describe how overwhelmed I was. Upon exiting one of the main roads that runs through the Colony, we entered a long lane, which was the entrance to “Alexander,” each studio having been named.

The inspiration and design for “Alexander” came from Mrs. MacDowell. On a trip to Europe, Mrs. MacDowell had stumbled across a medieval chapel in rural Spain. She was so taken by this chapel, thinking it would be a wonderful creative studio for the Colony. She had an architect copy the original and a replica was constructed at MacDowell. Built with granite walls and floor, high ceilings, a very large fireplace at one end and almost the entire north wall of glass, a true north window, this was my studio.

Besides being in this magnificent studio, it was fall in New England. If I was seeking change, this was a radical change from the sameness of the seasons of Florida.

Once I was settled in, I began to work on large, oversize canvases that had been assembled and crated in Florida then shipped to me at MacDowell. The finished works were returned the same way. At this time the work was involved in the abstract combination of hardedge lines and blocks set against the emotional, spontaneous fields of the canvas. I had been working in this direction for some time in Florida. However, now there was a new freshness. There was an immediate change in my palette, reds, yellows and

orange. This was a direct result of what I was seeing daily, the brilliant fall colors of New Hampshire. As the leaves fell and after the first snow falls, the colors changed to blue gray and white. I felt this new work was all I aspired for in preparation for the exhibition just two months away.

Photo by Maryette Charlton

Louise Varèse working on her manuscript at MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire.

Louise Varèse has received the Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in recognition of her services to French literature in the translation of the works of St.-John Perse, Stendhal, Rimbaud, Bernanos, Simenon, and many others. She has also received the 1948 Denyse Clairouin award for translation.

When reminiscing about the MacDowell experience as a creative high, which it certainly was, there was another part of that experience which is endearing. The close friendships that evolved with certain of my fellow colonists. There was a social life among the residents. This usually happened just before and during the evening meal. I made many new and lasting friends during my stay. But there was one who I was charmed by. A lovely woman in her eighties. Our mutual attraction had to do with her life and my first love, music. Her name was Louise Varèse, the widow of Edgard Varèse. Louise was at the colony working on the first of two books, her memoir. *Varèse - A Looking-Glass Diary.* I believe we were drawn together because we spoke the same language, music that is. She would invite me to her studio in the afternoon, for Dubenet on ice with a twist of lime.

Perhaps on my first visit, we were talking about Varèse when I timidly offered an observation about one particular composition I was familiar with, *Deserts*. Louise encouraged me to tell her my feelings. I said, "The music has a sense of isolation, lost, loneliness." I stopped; Louise's eyes had filled with tears. I was a little embarrassed. I had upset her. She said, "Then you know Varèse. What you said was Varèse the man." From that moment on we became good friends and over many afternoons and glasses of Dubenet we talked about music. To be more honest, I asked a lot of questions and listened intently as Louise shared with me many stories about the people and life in Paris during the 1920's. To hear about a candle-light dinner at Igor and Madam Stravinsky's, about Debussy being a mentor of Varèse, the dark side of Varèse and how, as a young man he lived with Rodin, this was Art and Music, my two passions revealed through the life of this grand woman. Through Louise I could connect with Richard Strauss, Saint-Saens and Satie.