

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERNISM IN MONTANA

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. JESSIE WILBER	15
Changing Perspectives.....	15
The Human Gaze	18
Making it Personal.....	21
3. FRANCES SENSKA.....	29
From Her Roots and Back Again	29
Making Precedes Matching	34
Practice	37
4. ROBERT DEWEESE.....	52
Response Equals Responsibility	52
Sketches/Drawings	54
Paintings and Assemblages	57
5. THE START OF A MOVEMENT.....	73
Teaching	74
Community	79
Conclusion.....	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	87
APPENDIX	92

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Jessie Wilber, <i>The Days of the Cattlemen's Picnic</i> , 1942	15
2. Jessie Wilber, <i>Antelope Tipi</i> , 1976	17
3. Jessie Wilber, <i>Huns</i> , 1954	18
4. Jessie Wilber, <i>Cats in a Garden</i> , ND	21
5. Jessie Wilber, <i>Magpies in a Snowstorm</i> , 1986	22
6. Frances Senska, <i>YaBaBo</i> pot, ND	29
7. Unknown artist, <i>Cameroun Water Pot</i> , ND	29
8. Frances Senska, <i>Ring-Neck Bottle</i> , 1966	30
9. Frances Senska, <i>Chicken Wine Set</i> , ND	30
10. Frances Senska, <i>Partridges</i> , ND	31
11. Frances Senska, <i>Branch Bottle Weed Pot</i> , ND	32
12. Frances Senska, <i>African (Iowa City)</i> , 1946	33
13. Frances Senska, <i>Maholoy-Nagy exercise</i> , 1947	35
14. Frances Senska, <i>Surf Fishers</i> , 1950	36
15. Marguerite Wildenhain, <i>Tall Footed Vase</i> , ND	36
16. Marguerite Wildenhain, <i>Three Necked Vase</i> , ND	36
17. Robert DeWeese, <i>Western Painting</i> , 1976	53
18. Hoyt Sherman, <i>Drawing By Seeing</i> , 1947	55

LIST OF FIGURES – CONTINUED

Figure	Page
19. Robert DeWeese, <i>Portland Sketches</i> , 1980s	56
20. Robert DeWeese, <i>Landscape</i> , ND	56
21. Robert DeWeese, <i>Bill's Lil Trees</i> , 1970	56
22. Robert DeWeese, <i>VFW Studio Wall</i> , 1973	57
23. Robert DeWeese, <i>Flight (Red Boy)</i> , 1988	58
24. Robert DeWeese, <i>Nine Ties, Seven Chains</i> , 1988	59
25. Robert DeWeese, <i>Circus Ties</i> , 1986.....	59
26. Robert DeWeese, <i>Plains Sunset</i> , 1963	60/83
27. Jessie Wilber, <i>Poppies</i> , 1969	79

ABSTRACT

Modernist art burst onto New York City's art scene with the Armory Show in 1913. However, it took nearly forty years for Modernism to take hold in Montana. Using Montana State College (now Montana State University-Bozeman) as my case study, I intend to examine the type of climate that allows a new art movement to develop as well as the impediments that prevented Modernism from taking root.

In examining other factors contributing to Modernism outside of major urban cities I found two of these factors missing from the Intermountain West, and particularly in Montana. The factors missing were wealthy art patrons to encourage experimentation and/or art colonies to create a safe environment for artists. Digging further, I found an economic and cultural resistance to Modernism in Montana, which threatened the economic foundation of a burgeoning tourism industry.

After World War II, with the G.I. Bill opening up higher education to a new kind of student body, pupils began requesting a serious academic art program. At the same time the expansion of Land Grant Universities enlarged their small art departments, creating both the monetary security an art patron might present, as well as the collegial and teaching community of an artist colony.

At Montana State College, beginning in the mid-1940s three artists pioneered the Modernist movement in Montana: Frances Senska, Jessie Wilber and Robert DeWeese. Working together they created a sustained art movement able to overcome the cultural resistance to Modernism in the state. My goal is to give these artists a profile commensurate with other great Modernist artists by formal examination of their work, and applications of various art historical methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

“To see something as art requires something that the eye cannot descry, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.”

Arthur Danto¹

Montana has long been considered a region where Modernism was passed by. However, I intend to show that three artists, Frances Senska, Jessie Wilber and Robert DeWeese, Modernists in their own rights, came to Montana State College in the 1940s, when the Department of Applied Arts was located in the basement of the “women’s building.” I will first look at the literature currently available, meager as it is, and then I will look at Montana State College and the atmosphere created by these artists. I also intend to examine the impediments to Modernism for those artists. Finally, after discussing and analyzing their work, I intend to show how other components, namely their pedagogical methods as well as the creation of an artist community, allowed for a climate to form in the state conducive to the emergence of a modern art movement.

Modernism landed in America in 1913 with the New York City Armory show. Why then did it take over a generation to find its way to the Intermountain West? The answer is threefold: a lack of opportunity, the absence of a supportive environment and the strength to stand up against the Myth of the West.

Through lore and landscape, cattle and cowboys, Myth has always been an integral narrative for the West². The notion of these heroic metaphors, living larger than

¹ Arthur Danto, “The Artworld”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 16, Issue 19 (1964):571-584. In this case, Danto uses the word “descry” to mean notice. This is the crux of Modernism and knowing the “artworld” became a necessary part of the movement.

life, fueled artists as well as art collectors and sellers of art, to perpetuate the Myth for reasons of tourism and commerce, as well as a misinterpreted form of patriotism. It would be over thirty years before Modernism made its way through the barriers of the West, already having inundated many central artistic urban areas of New York City, Chicago, San Francisco and smaller areas of California and New Mexico. It took over thirty years before the threads of Modernism wound their way into the visual vocabulary of Montana and its surrounding regions.

To understand how strongly myth can infiltrate and shape culture, it might be helpful to look at Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, particularly his essay, "Myth Today," which can easily be transposed from French culture into the vernacular of the American West. Cowboys on horseback with lassoes chasing Indians wielding bows and arrows riding across an unpopulated landscape can replace Barthes' French Imperialism. Barthes says that myth has a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something, and it imposes it on us. By relying on myth the story ends up replacing actual events, or as Barthes says, this history which drains out of the form will be wholly absorbed by the concept.³

For example, one of the most notorious Myths of the West tells us the story of the Noble Savage, tamed by "civilization." In this way the fundamental message of the Myth is appropriated in our regional and national culture while the history is lost. The stories become more familiar than the truth. A good instance of this is the artist Charlie Russell (1824-1926) who celebrated the cowboy and the pioneering lifestyle utilizing his

² When Myth is capitalized, it is a reference to the Myth of the West.

³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. (New York, Hill and Wang, 1957) 228

knowledge of the Old West, wildlife and historical Native American themes. Russell's *Bronc to Breakfast* is supposed to depict an actual incident but instead illustrates a commonly known cowboy tale.⁴ By creating the “fact” through Myth, Russell readily promoted the cowboy ways of the West.

There are many more instances of Myth, but suffice it to say that Myth was an important and consuming impediment to Modernism. While Modernism tried to tell the story of the modern world, the Myth blocked that path for as long as it could for the Intermountain West. The only thing that finally allowed light to seep through was World War II, when many Western soldiers sent overseas saw other parts of the world for the first time.

From 1820 through 1920, Montana's culture portrayed itself, through its citizens and its economy, as perpetuating the legends and myths of rugged individualism, wilderness, free-spiritedness, and an anti-industrial, anti-inner city lifestyle. As in America's expansion westward in the early to mid-1800s, art reflected the idealism inherent in everything Western, according to the essay by Alex Nemerov.⁵ In a letter from that essay, Nemerov quotes artist/illustrator Fredrick Remington when he wrote to fellow painter Carl Rungius, “We fellows who are doing the ‘Old America’ which is so fast passing will have an audience in posterity whether we do at present or not.” It was as if he was looking into the future. Remington was also obsessed with the difference between this ideation of the West and his own era, with “sprawling cities, rumbling

⁴ Watercolor, 1908, Montana Historical Society, Mackay Collection, x1952.01.06

⁵ W.H. Truettner, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*. (London, Washington DC, 1991), 5

machinery, and foreign immigrants.”⁶ According to Truettner, it was Remington’s vision of the West that became the picture-perfect postcard of the Western regions, mired in the sentimentality of times gone by, a yearning for the way things used to be. In fact, it was an expanding tourist industry that depended on those ideals and actually paid painters to travel to Yellowstone National Park and bring these images to the East in an effort to lure people there.

Susan Saccocia describes the Modernist movement in terms of style as, “heirs to the Romantic tradition and whose paintings encase viewers as spectators of awe-inspiring scenery,” as the new Modernists.⁷ However, much a stretch that might seem to be, the show is still conspicuous in its lack of Intermountain West⁸ modernists and concentrates instead on Grant Wood, Georgia O’Keefe, Raymond Jonson, Marsden Hartley and Jackson Pollock.⁹ She goes on to note that, “a new generation moved toward Transcendentalism, applying the encounters between self and nature as did Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry Thoreau and using the modernist tools of abstraction and distillation. With the 1930s came social realists as well as surrealist threads that chronicled America’s loss of connection with place and nature.” Since this definition does not really connect with the Modernism that would take hold in Montana, this research was not relevant to my study.

⁶ Ibid, 287

⁷ Susan Saccocia, “A New Visual Language: Modernists of the American West,” *Humanities*, Volume 27, Issue 5, 12-17

⁸ I am referring to the Intermountain West as including Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Utah.

⁹ Although Pollock was born in Wyoming, did not come to his abstract work until he moved to New York City.

As shown, the literature is lacking in regards to the emergence of Modernism in the Intermountain West, instead I have had to turn to magazines for some of my research. In 1999, art scholar Stephen May wrote a series for *Southwest Art* on the subject of “Modernism in the West.” Unfortunately, his work focused solely on New Mexico. However, we may look upon this as a model for the spread of ideas and ideals in regards to art movements into places that are isolated from the influence of emerging art scenes.¹⁰ In 1917, just after the 1913 Armory Show in New York City, several things happened: The Taos Society of Artists formed; Georgia O’Keeffe visited New Mexico; and many impressionists migrated to California.

Taos, New Mexico, became the center for Modernism when Mabel Dodge Luhan, a wealthy bohemian art patron moved from New York City to Taos in 1917. She made her home a gathering place for artists and writers from all over the world.¹¹ Most of them did not stay in New Mexico and eventually returned from where they came. For example May cites the artist Marsden Hartley who created some of his best-known work, “a series of powerful, brooding oils he executed in Germany several years after leaving the Southwest.” A few stayed behind, but those that did, did not venture outside of New Mexico.¹²

Other states may have offered the unending skies, the open ranges and staggering beauty of rugged mountains, but New Mexico had one thing the other regions did not: a

¹⁰ Historically, New Mexico is more akin to California than to Montana.

¹¹ Steve Shipp, *American Art Colonies: 1850-1930*. (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1996)

¹² Stephen May, “Trauma, Tradition, and Transformation: Western American Art in the 1930s” *Southwest Art* Volume 28, Issue 12 (1999):74

patron. Without the support of Mabel Dodge Luhan even Georgia O'Keefe may not have put down her artistic roots outside of New York City.

Pockets of Modernism were taking root in New Mexico, Texas and California. San Francisco showcased the achievements of the California Impressionists with the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Art colonies thrived in Carmel, Santa Barbara, and Laguna Beach, which may have been influenced by the welcoming weather and consistent sun. As May notes, "Increases in museum and gallery spaces and exhibitions of Impressionistic paintings fueled interest in the style, especially amid the perpetual sunshine and natural beauty of Southern California."¹³ While the Intermountain West offered natural beauty, the weather and economic climate was not welcoming enough to pull artists to the area.

Working somewhat chronologically from the 1920s through the 1930s, May found that more painters began to settle in both Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico, often traveling back and forth between the two cities.

The group of New Mexico painters often brought artists back from New York and Chicago while some of these artists even ventured as far north as parts of Colorado. An artists' colony formed in Colorado Springs, called the Broadmoor Art Academy, which after 1926, was known as the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, providing instruction and depicting the Rocky Mountains. Although it was a perfect time for Modernism, the Arts Center did not train painters in Modernism, but rather in realism and landscapes. So

¹³ Stephen May, "Trauma, Tradition, and Transformation: Western American Art in the 1930s" *Southwest Art* Volume 28, Issue 12 (1999):74

while supplying a stronghold for art, it was not a place that fomented a new style, but rather leaned on a more traditional one.

At this time a movement of Impressionist watercolorists began to emerge in California through the increase of patrons buying art and in turn galleries to represent their work. By the 1940s it was pervasive.¹⁴ Again, this trend remained along the coast of California and did not spread inland to the Intermountain West and can be attributed, in part, to the climate and the artist colonies that became prevalent.

With the 1930s came the Great Depression. Times were difficult everywhere, but no more so than in the West. There were plagues of grasshoppers, prolonged droughts that led to dustbowl conditions and farm foreclosures. A majority of the population wanted to think about better times and so began the resurgence of a type of Realism, something I will call Historical Realism, which elevated the Cowboy myth of better days and a deep nostalgia for the way things were thought to have been. As May states, “Many regionalist painters, notably American Scene artists of the Midwest sought to distance themselves from the perceived decadence of Europe and the East Coast by focusing instead on the virtues of the people and the picturesque landscape of the heartland.”¹⁵ This trend spread to Montana as well.¹⁶

Many unemployed artists, including Jessie Wilber, got work painting murals in United States Post Offices around the country. However, according to the website The

¹⁴ Janice Lovoos “The California School of Watercolor,” *The American Artist* Volume 51, Issue 537 (1987).

¹⁵ Stephen May, “Trauma, Tradition, and Transformation: Western American Art in the 1930s” *Southwest Art* Volume 28, Issue 12 (1999):74

¹⁶ American Scene painting depicted American life and landscape naturalistically, typical in the early to mid-20th Century. It reflected American Regionalism without the boundary of a specific region.

Living New Deal, an organization dedicated to keeping a record of the Works Progress Administration, the subjects of such murals in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming were: prospecting, the Pony Express, ranching and farming, the Flathead War Party and General Sully at Yellowstone, all of which harkened back to a romanticized West.¹⁷ Once again the idea of myth and legend pushed any thoughts of Modernism out of the way.

In a catalogue of works done under the Federal Art Project within the WPA, published by the Museum of Modern Art, 1936, the author documents one year's worth of activity. Many of the artists in the catalogue showed influences of Modernism, including cubism, regionalism and expressionism. Covered in the work, geographically, are New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, New Mexico, California and Colorado. Once again the Intermountain West is missing.

Aside from work with the WPA, there is mention of a trend of students of Modernist painters who took jobs at colleges. These students, in turn, traveled around the country taking their Modernist perspective with them. As May states in this example, "Painter Raymond Jonson stepped up his zealous championing of Modernism after 1934, when he began commuting from Santa Fe to Albuquerque to teach at the University of New Mexico – the start of a long and influential career there."¹⁸ Due to his teaching, his students emulated his work and he has been found to be one of the stanchions of Modernism in New Mexico. This shows that when Modernist painters expose students to the Modernistic aesthetic it can open up these new students to more expressive styles, as many students tend to follow their professors.

¹⁷ <https://livingnewdeal.org/tag/new-deal-murals> (The Living New Deal n.d.)

¹⁸ Stephen May, "Trauma, Tradition, and Transformation: Western American Art in the 1930s" *Southwest Art* Volume 28, Issue 12 (1999):74

With O'Keefe still in New Mexico, Modernists there kept to themselves or returned to Europe; they did not migrate to new places to propagate their art. In Texas, a group of artists known as the Fort Worth Circle experimented with cubism, surrealism and other styles. According to May, "A key figure in Texas art for a half-century starting in the 1930s was Jerry Bywaters, who studied art in the East, wrote about art, and served for many years as a teacher at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, and director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Art."¹⁹ Again, we see a trend of artists as teachers at the university level sharing their style with their students, who in turn grow into artists, as we will see in my case study of Montana State College.

In *Modernism in the Pacific Northwest: The mythic and mystical* Junker asserts that, "few regions of the country produced such a distinctive group of artists with such a particular view on the modern world as did the Pacific Northwest in the 1930s and 1940s. Capitalizing on their particular geographical position at what was a modern art outpost."²⁰ Sadly, the outpost did not offer a hand to their neighbors to the east as there no mention of any Intermountain West artist is in this publication.

With the advent of World War II life changed drastically all over the country. While it drained the West of its young men, it also brought a buildup of military bases

¹⁹ Stephen May, "Trauma, Tradition, and Transformation: Western American Art in the 1930s" *Southwest Art* Volume 28, Issue 12 (1999):74

²⁰ Patricia Junker, *Modernism in the Pacific Northwest: The mythic and mystical*. (Seattle, Seattle Art Museum 2014).

and war production plants.²¹ Painters continued to “glorify the unspoiled frontier, virgin land, noble Indians, heroic cowboys and courageous soldiers of the vanished West.”²²

The trend of Modernism steering clear of Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming and barely touching upon Colorado continues with *Twentieth Century American Art*. Doss has a single chapter that deals with Modernism and the Interwar Years. This chapter speaks only to, “The Whitney Museum of American Art and Precisionists, Mabel Dodge and Southwestern Modernism, The New Negro Movement and the Harmon Foundation.”²³

In another article of the series May states, “The realist tradition flourished in the postwar years in many Western states, such as conservative Utah, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, where radical abstract art from the East and California aroused deep suspicion and outright opposition.”²⁴ Here May speaks to the symptoms of the strong undertones of the Myth of the West. Directly after World War II, when many people were still on rations, the economy of the Intermountain West could not sever itself from the Myth. It drew tourists as well as new businesses and people to a place that was one of the least populated in the country.

It was not until 2004 with Rick Newby addressed Montana’s Modernists. In chapter two in the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures* which speaks to Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah and Wyoming. Newby states, “Works

²¹ Stephen May, “War and Peace Western Art in the 1940s” *Southwest Art* Volume 29, Issue 1 (1999): 76-81

²² Ibid

²³ Erika Doss, *Twentieth Century American Art*, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 75

²⁴ Stephen May, “Mixing the New and the Old: Western Art in the 1950s” *Southwest Art* Volume 29, Issue 2 (1999): 112-124

depicting life on the frontier more or less realistically but often with a romanticizing edge, continued to dominate the scene well past mid-century. Nevertheless, Modernism made inroads.”²⁵ The book also mentions the arrival of Wyoming artist Fra Dana, the impressionist painter. But it is his paragraph discussing how modernist artists came west after World War II that is extremely pertinent to my research: “At mid-century, G.I.s returning from WWII (and enrolling in expanded arts programs in the region’s universities) open the way for true gains for modern tendencies in the visual arts, and a few artists from the Rockies – among them Montana’s Peter Voulkos, Jackson Pollock, and Edward Kienholz, raised in Washington state but long associated with Idaho – went on to national prominence, bringing fresh (and brash) energies to American art.”²⁶

In other words, only one chapter of fourteen is dedicated to art, and of that only a few pages address Modernism in the Rocky Mountain Region, including the mention of the Archie Bray Foundation, Robert DeWeese, Jessie Wilber, Frances Senska, and Bill Stockton.²⁷ Unfortunately, only a few paragraphs discuss these seminal artists. Also of note is that nearly all of them were able to pursue a career in art after WWII and after serving in the military as they went to art school on the G.I. Bill and some were able to get teaching positions at Intermountain West universities.²⁸

²⁵ Rick Newby, *The Rocky Mountain Region: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures*. (Westport & London, Greenwood Press, 2004), 42.

²⁶ Newby, 2004, 30

²⁷ Bill Stockton was one of their Modernist peers, but lived in Billings and did not teach at MSC, so I left him out of this thesis. I hope to continue on and include him in a wider investigation of the Montana Modernists.

²⁸ Frances Senska, Robert DeWeese and Bill Stockton all served in the military. Jessie Wilber “served” by way of teaching airmen geography at Montana State College.

Coming to Montana in the 1940s meant artists were inundated with the Western Myth; the paintings of Charlie Russell and Bill Paxton were ubiquitous. A book listing forty-seven Montana artists in total, all painting various genres of Western scenes, boasts in the introduction, “Montana will stand high upon the role of fame, and there will be recorded on the historical pages the names of Edgar S. Paxson, Charles M. Russell and Ralph E. DeCamp as a group of Montana painters who have not only done good work technically, but who have immortalized on the canvas the Indian, the pioneer, the trapper, the ranchman, the cowboy, together with the fauna, the flora and the landscape peculiar alone to this section of the country.”²⁹ As true as that statement may have seemed at the time, it is also true that beginning in the 1920s most of Montana’s young people were moving to cities within the state and out of state.³⁰ Most of the Montana’s traditional jobs in coal, lumber, mining, and agriculture were stagnant or dropping. There was one industry on the rise: tourism. By 1930, over 100 dude ranches developed across the state, mostly around the mountains and valleys near Yellowstone National Park.³¹ According to a study of Montana’s economy at the time, “Rail-based tourism brought valuable dollars into the state, with tourists spending five hundred thousand dollars a year in Montana from 1900 through 1910.”³²

In conclusion, it seems there is a dearth of information speaking to the emergence of Modernism in Montana and the surrounding region. We know there were no artist

²⁹ Dan R. Conway, “Art in Montana,” *Montana’s Art and Her Artists*, (Butte, Butte Public Library 1940), 39

³⁰ Michael P. Malone, “The Modern Montana Economy,” *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (University of Washington Press, 1976), 322

³¹ Dude ranches provided a place for well-off Easterners to experience riding horses and living in bunk houses, basically pretending to be cowboys. Meals, activities and often transportation were provided.

³² Michael P. Malone 1976, 340

colonies. We also know there were not many wealthy patrons willing to support Modernist artists until their careers took off. However, instead of one rich private patron, I posit the land grant universities in Montana acted as “patrons” giving artists the freedom to work and a decent place to live, much like Mabel Dodge Luhan. Although land grant universities were founded in the late 1800s, it wasn’t until after World War II that art departments took on a more serious note, a step away from teaching homemakers how to paint still life paintings. The art-friendly environment created by the need for artists to teach, in turn also created the fruitful ground of an artist colony. The creation of an art community was the second pillar needed to support the Modernist movement in Montana.

In sum, Montana was not as isolated as people thought. DeWeese, Senska and Wilber encouraged the sharing of new ideas, showed these ideas in their own art and teaching practice, which in turn created the basis for Modernism to take hold in Montana. I tracked the circuitous route that Modernism took and observed how Land Grant Universities, after the growth experienced by the G.I. Bill after World War II, provided a kind of patronage. I established how a few like-minded people with a common goal and an inclusive teaching philosophy brought new ideas to a receptive group of students, widening their influence beyond the university. Due to the isolation of Montana at the time, the art community became very close knit, acting as an artist colony by encouraging the Modernist aesthetics and acting as a bulwark against mainstream constraints. In the end, it was the work itself that did the heavy lifting. It wasn’t just the personalities or the teaching philosophies of Wilber, Senska and DeWeese as mentors, but their own work that inspired generations. The Montana Modernists all found ways to use the landscape as

a touchstone, whether it was the hill behind their homes or simply in the color choices, the big sky, scavenging birds or the scraping, ragged peaks of the mountains.

With Senska's spirit of investigation, Wilber's confidence in an untried system, and DeWeese's ability to respond, they began a process to debunk "the Myth of the West" by becoming more than a mere myth, more at one with a modern world. Their work was relevant and found a substantive audience. They emerged from the basement of the women's building into the light of Modernism.

JESSIE WILBER

Changing Perceptions

Jessie Wilber (1912-1989) took a position at Montana State College's very small art department in 1941.³³ The same year Wilber was also awarded a PWA (Public Works of Art) mural in the post office at Kingman, Kansas (figure 1). She finished the piece in 1942, after moving to Montana. The painting, *The Days of the Cattlemen's Picnic*, depicts a Western scene with fenced cattle, ranchers on horseback, and a young boy on a bicycle riding by them. The figures are curved and slightly abstracted, perched on a jack-leg fence and watching bull riders, part of the picnic's entertainment. The colors, primarily dusty beige, burnt sienna and green, convey a sense of late summer or early fall.³⁴ Looking at this piece of Wilber's early work, it is clear she is claiming a flat surface and a slightly skewed perspective with a nod to Cubism. Each of the figures, shadowed in a way that overrides a single light source, enhances their three-dimensionality. This gives the painting a sense of looking at single scene from more than one angle.

This stylistic mode used in her mural painting may have rubbed off on Wilber when she met Estelle Stinchfield, a teacher who Wilber described as, "a fiery little Cubist whose mission in life was to bring Modern Art to Colorado in no uncertain terms."³⁵ Stinchfield was a painter and art teacher in Greeley, Colorado, who studied with Andre

³³ Jessie Wilber was born in Whitewater, Wisconsin, earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Colorado State Teachers College, Greeley, Colorado.

³⁴ U.S. Interior, *National Register of Historic Places*. (1989, February 27). Retrieved from www.kshs.org:https://www.kshs.org/resource/national_register/MPS/Kansas_Post_Offices_Artwork_mps.pdf

³⁵ Gordon McConnell, *The Montana Collection*. (Billings: Yellowstone Art Museum, 1998)

Lhote and O. Friesz in Paris.³⁶ While Wilber was not a cubist for most of her life, she still had those tendencies when she moved to Montana, in a very similar fashion as Stinchfield brought Lhote and Friesz with her to Colorado – both became influential teachers.

During World War II Wilber taught geography to airmen on the campus of Montana State College.³⁷ But she also continued to explore her own art. While working on the Kingman mural in her painting class at MSC during her first year, Wilber noticed the students taking a “polite” interest in the work.³⁸ Seeing that spark in her students spurred her to take on the project of the Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever Mural that still hangs in Lewis Hall at Montana State University. Wilber contacted the Rocky Mountain Fever Lab in Hamilton, Montana, and the scientists there traveled to MSC in order to tell the students about the lab and the research on insect-borne diseases. The mural in Lewis Hall used tempera directly on the wall, after preparing the area using “the traditional pre-Renaissance method” of gesso, whiting, zinc white and water soluble hide glue. She then had her students create drawings, to scale, using their own ideas of composition. Each student’s work was presented and the class as a whole chose the ones “we felt were the most likely to succeed as big mural paintings.” In this way, we see how inclusive and democratic Wilber’s teaching methods were and how she was willing to grasp the smallest spark of interest and turn it into a project in which all her students could have

³⁶ Chris Petteys, *Dictionary of Women Artists: An international dictionary of women artists born before 1900* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co, 1985).

³⁷ Montana State College is now Montana State University. Founded in 1893 as a land-grant college, it was named the Agricultural College of the State of Montana. In the 1920s it was renamed Montana State College and on July 1, 1965, it was again renamed Montana State University in recognition of its science and humanistic research.

³⁸ Wilber, Jessie, interview by Dr. William Walter. *Session 03001, Box 8 -- transcript* (October 24, 1985)

participated and felt ownership. This methodology, started by Wilber, spread throughout the School of Art as a community in the coming years as a few more artist/teachers begin to take advantage of the GI Bill.³⁹

In 1943, Wilber accompanied watercolorist Olga Ross Hannon to the Blackfeet Reservation, east of Glacier National Park, to witness the Sun Dance ceremonies.⁴⁰ She and Hannon sketched and took notes, but of particular interest to Wilber were the simplified depictions of bears, beavers, snakes, buffalo, elk, deer and mountain sheep, as well as the geometric renderings of the landscape. She also noticed how the upper and lower portions of the painted lodges were darkened, due to outside weather and smoke from within the tipis. This left the central area free for the painting of the sacred animals particular to the tipi owner.⁴¹ Although Hannon died in 1947, Wilber did not let Hannon's tipi project die. When Wilber retired in 1974, she decided to honor her friend and colleague by finishing the Blackfeet Tipis with a grant she was awarded by the Montana Arts Council in 1976 for a series of the silkscreened Blackfeet Indian Tipi Designs. The decision to use the style of serigraphs to portray the tipis speaks to the aesthetic of Modernism (figure 2). The lines are simple yet convey the sense of the object and the importance of the imagery by singling out the individual differences of each person's tipi in a respectful way.⁴² The surface is flat and there is no sense of trying to place the tipis in a time and place. Wilber extracted the essence of the object while setting it up as a

³⁹ Not only did the GI Bill allow more students to attend MSC's School of Art, but it also brought artist/teachers from out of state to the school, bringing their Modernist ideas with them.

⁴⁰ Olga Ross Hannon (1890-1947) was the chair of the art department from 1921 to 1947.

⁴¹ Jessie Wilber, recorded interview Session 03001, Box 8 -- transcript (D. W. Walter, Interviewer, October 24, 1985).

⁴² J.C. Ewers, *Blackfeet Indian Tipis: Design and Legend*. (Bozeman, Museum of the Rockies, 1976) Noted on p. 6, each clan's tent depicted different animals and geometric designs,

specimen, removing any kind of naturalism associated with its use. There is no sign of the smoke stains noted from her experience of seeing the tipis in person, or of the weather that should have left its mark on the fabric. Instead, there is an uncontaminated version. However, they were not an idealized depiction of an American Indian tipi. Under the hand of Wilber, the forms took on a flat, clean character. The prints do not have a traditional realist ground line, but instead seem to float in the space of the print. The prints are inclusive of the various animal symbols and geometric shapes used by the Blackfeet. Wilber's use of the silkscreen printing process elevated the bold colors used by the Blackfeet while also bringing attention to the medium, a notable attribute of Modernism.

During the next few years Wilber would be joined by ceramicist Frances Senska and painter Robert DeWeese in the burgeoning art department at MSC. A sense of deep community between like-minded artists began to emerge.⁴³

The Human Gaze

Looking at *Huns* (figure 3) from 1954, her interest in painting birds is clearly seen as is her abstraction of the figural form. Using a reddish orange wash, it looks as though we are seeing the birds under a heat lamp. Her deep saturated color announces itself before composition, line or subject matter. There is a conscious use of a monochromatic theme, an aspect of Modernism as put forth by the color fieldists, specifically, in a 1943 letter written by Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Adolph Gottlieb to *The New York Times* in which they stated, "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought ...

⁴³ This is further discussed in the fifth chapter on Community.

we wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.”⁴⁴ Within the formal aspects of Wilber’s *Huns* illusion is destroyed. There is no illusion. This is a painting. The lines are drawn. First we see red. We feel red, the heat, like a curtain drawn across the canvas. But this curtain is meant to reveal not hide the fact that the painting is two-dimensional. Then there is a minimalist view of the landscape. In fact, there is only a single line delineating the horizon; an oval stands in for a pond. Single brushstrokes create bare foliage. Then there is the brazen foreground of the huns themselves. Of the four huns, two of them stare directly ahead, challenging the viewer’s gaze. It is as if Wilber is using the huns as Manet used the barmaid in *A Bar at the Folies Bergere*, creating an inverse perspective on birdwatching. Thematically, Wilber will use the huns, as well as other birds commonly found in her backyard, again and again. The trope of the window has been used since Matisse, as a painting, as a view from inside the studio to the outer world, or from the outer world to the subconscious world. For Wilber, what is seen from her home, within yards of her surroundings, her view from her window, whether the window of her mind or the window of her studio, is consistently explored in her paintings and in her prints.

During an examination of her works archived in the Montana State University’s Art Department collection, it was clear that Wilber used whatever resources she had at hand. Whether it was crepe paper, linoleum, or pieces of scrap wood, she would manage to create an array of prints.

Ludvig Wittengenstein, writing at the end of the Second World War, speaks of the act of responding to one’s environment without premeditation to get beyond the barriers

⁴⁴ Transcribed from Mark Rothko’s papers at the Smithsonian Museum’s Archives of American Art.

of language.⁴⁵ “Don’t think, but look!” he states.⁴⁶ He is speaking about how we process words and linguistics. For Wittgenstein ordinary, everyday language is too fluid and meanings can change.⁴⁷ He said that there are certain things that cannot be said but can be shown and he gives the example of poetry. I would like to add art to that method of showing instead of stating an idea. Art gives meaning to our daily language by creating “pictures” which Wittgenstein suggests is the only way people can communicate. Here he is referring to our instinctual understanding of how things work. In this case he is talking about playground games. I would like to point out the similarities between language and painting and how Wittgenstein’s advice, in light of the tragedies of World War II, may have led many people to try to simply respond to their environment. Wittgenstein implores readers not to fall back on preconceptions, but instead to have a more open concept of what a thing is – in this case art.

For Wilber, it is a matter of responding to the materials she had at hand and by picking up that piece of scrap wood. She is not thinking too hard about the wood itself, throwing out any preconception of what to do with scrap wood, but rather she is looking at what she would do with the material, in her case the result was her woodblock prints⁴⁸.

In her woodblock print *Cats in a Garden* (figure 4), Wilber creates a unique sense of space, the circles of cats and garden each stand their own ground. Again, she uses a monochromatic theme, so the brown of the paper – earth, soil, ground – becomes a

⁴⁵ Philosophical Investigations was written in 1945 but published in 1953.

⁴⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1953), 36

⁴⁷ A good example of this is the word “thongs” which in the 1980s meant flip-flops, but now means women’s underwear.

⁴⁸ Woodblock printing was used by the Chinese and Japanese then reinvigorated by the Impressionists as well as the German Expressionists.

changing background to the black ink as the viewer's eye moves from one delineated area to the next. The gouged wood creates rich texture in both the background of the cat and the leaves of the foliage. In a partial break from the circle theme, Wilber acknowledges the horizon line but only in passing, not in an illusionistic sense; instead she is emphasizing the flatness of the paper. Wilber also uses shallow depths to explore space and the divisions of spaces. With each circle, it is as if she is drawing our attention to the importance of things: "this, this, this," expounding with intent each aspect of her personal world while interlacing the indoors with the outdoors, leaving only simple lines as thresholds.

Making It Personal

According to Clement Greenberg's 1960 essay *Modernist Painting*, "The immediate aims of the Modernists were, and remain, personal before anything else, and the truth and success of their works remain personal before anything else."⁴⁹

Wilber's work evolved but never became derivative. Her experiences with the land, with the isolation of Montana combined with the community of artists she surrounded herself with resulted in uniquely fresh and innovative Modernist concepts. By keeping to the personal, she could constantly refer to her own environment; by keeping to the aesthetics of the materials at hand she could immediately respond to that environment.

⁴⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *The Collected Essays and Criticism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 85.

In 1973, the Montana Institute of the Arts named Wilber Artist of the Year. In 1988, she was honored with the Montana Governor's Arts Award.⁵⁰ Both awards attest to the importance of her art around the state as well as her influence on younger artists.

Wilber's truth is a reflection of Greenberg's analysis for Modernism: birds, flowers, cats, landscapes were part of her own personal environment. Each print she made spoke to the things she loved, her own experiences and her memories. Wilber was quoted in a 1983 interview as saying, "Everything revolved around what I could see out of my back window."⁵¹ Frances Senska, close friend and ceramic artist wrote about *Magpies in a Snowstorm*, (figure 5) "The subject matter is treated with obvious affection but without sentimentality."⁵²

Magpies in a Snowstorm is one of Wilber's last prints she made before her death. In it we can see how she used the technique of sketching to create a spontaneous feeling in a complicated composition. The multicolored print consists of numerous steps, each one adding to the one before to complete a winter scene. There is a return to the olive greens of earlier prints but the lines are no longer simple. It is as if she is working through the problem of how to tell her story in as few steps as possible. This print is also a return to the silkscreen method, a tactile, unforgiving, work-intensive method. The result is tumultuous, the magpies frantic, the snow relentless. There is a cacophony of caws, muffled and tamped. She is no longer concerned with the "isms" of her youth, but

⁵⁰ According to the website www.mt.gov the Governor's Arts Awards program honors outstanding citizens and organizations in Montana whose achievements in the arts, or on behalf of the arts, benefit all Montanans.

⁵¹ Wilber interview, 1985

⁵² McConnell, *The Montana Collection*, 1998

now completely devoted to the work itself, the showing that comes through an intimate knowledge of her own language.

Wilber's unique voice comes through as recognizable as the caws of the magpies, loud, clear and distinguishable from any other sound. Her work is as indigenous to the Montana landscape as the huns in her yard. The strength of her work relies on her personal world, told through a lifetime of Montana Modernist aesthetics.



Figure 1:

Jessie Wilber, *The Days of the Cattlemen's Picnic*, 1942. Tempera on canvas, 11'2" by 5'8 ³/₄", Post Office, Kingman (Kansas)



Figure 2:

Jessie Wilber, *Blackfeet Tipi*, 1974, Serigraph,
Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Museum.



Figure 3:

Jessie Wilber, *Huns*, 1954, oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Museum.

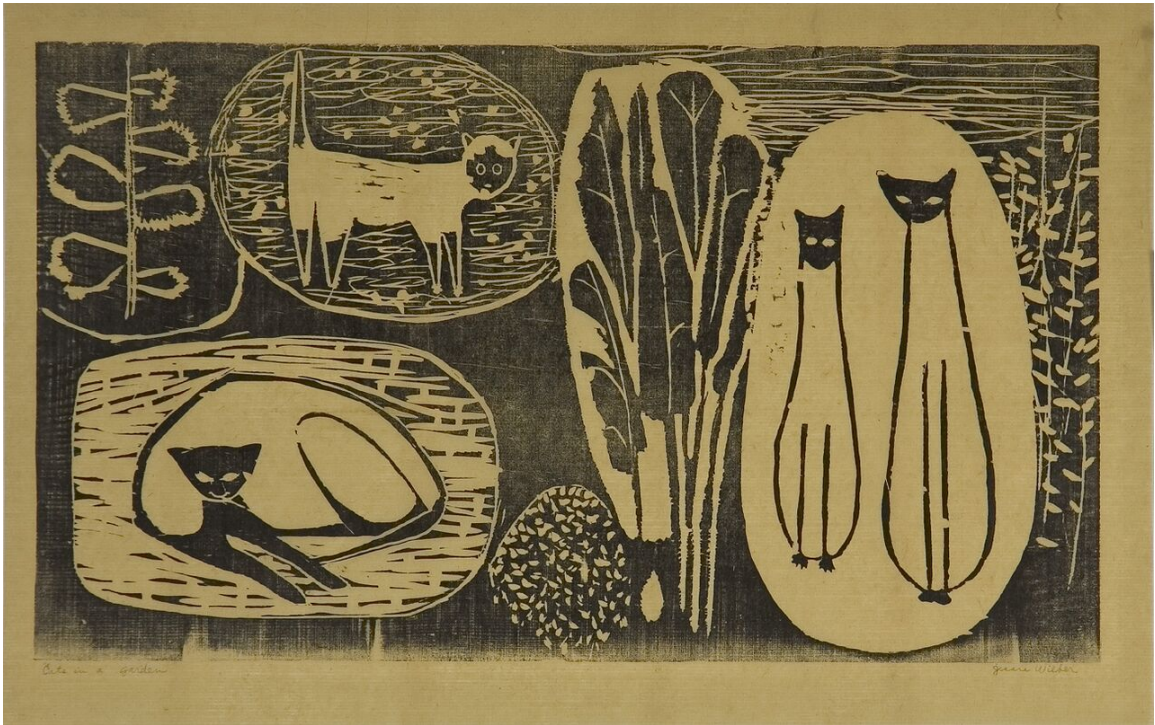


Figure 4:
Jessie Wilber, *Cats in a Garden*, ND, Woodblock print.
Courtesy of the Holter Museum of Art.



Figure 5:
Jessie Wilber, *Magpies in a Snowstorm*, silkscreen print, 1986.
Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Museum.

FRANCES SENSKA

From Her Roots and Back Again

Montana ceramic artist Frances Senska's (1914-2009) deep interest in local materials contributed to her role as a pioneering modernist. By drawing on her early years spent in Cameroon, the daughter of a (white) missionary⁵³, Senska learned to value place and locality, which she applied in the creation of her gouged and painted pots, as well as the figures she sculpted from native Montana clay. Senska's direct connection to Bauhaus artists Marguerite Wildenhain and László Moholy-Nagy brought her studio practice into the modernist realm.

Senska's father was a medical missionary station doctor and her mother was a teacher at the mission station in the grasslands of Cameroon, where she was born in 1914.⁵⁴ When World War II broke out Senska joined the Navy. With her G.I. Bill money for education Senska attended ceramic classes in San Francisco and at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. She began teaching at Montana State College in 1946.⁵⁵

Her *YaBaBo* pots (figure 6), made during her time in Montana were impacted by her early life in Cameroon.⁵⁶ These pots developed after Senska took a trip back to Africa as an adult in 1966. They bring to mind Cameroon water pots (figure 7) not only

⁵³ Although Senska did grow up in Africa, she was brought up with Euro-centric ideals, and in some ways continued the appropriation of African-influenced aesthetics in a similar way that Picasso and Braque did.

⁵⁴ In 1929 she moved to Iowa City, Iowa, when her parents were transferred back to the states. She attended the University of Iowa for both her undergraduate and Master's Degree.

⁵⁵ Brandon Reintjes, *Frances Senska: A life art*. (Helena: Holter Museum of Art, 2004).

⁵⁶ Frances Senska spent 1946 – 2009 in Montana.

in approximate shape but in their use of the sgraffito technique, a form of decoration made by scratching through a surface to reveal a lower layer of a contrasting color. According to an interview conducted for her retrospective at the Holter Museum of Art in 2004, the names of her African-influenced “good luck” pots, named “YaBaBo,” comes from the Cameroonian saying “it will be nine,” which is a good luck chant in the Basa/Bantu culture. Senska stylistically divides the space into nine segments, each depicting part of her natural environment: a turtle, two people in a canoe, birds, etc.⁵⁷

Her use of the sgraffito technique was responsible for the striking resemblance of YaBaBo to Cameroonian ceramics, but it also matched Senska’s existing studio practices. In a video taken in her studio in 1978 Senska herself said, “I am a compulsive decorator. I always draw on the pots – something specific, something mine.”⁵⁸ This way of seeing reflects Greenberg’s assertion that Modernism stems from the personal.⁵⁹ For Senska, the personal encompassed everything she did, from collecting the clay to the designs she gouged onto the sides of her pots.

This decoration was evident, not only in her scored designs that show through the glazes as in the YaBaBo pots and on her *Ring Necked Bottle* (figure 8) but in her *Chicken Wine Set* (figure 9) where she drew with glazes. In this set the pitcher took on the guise of a chicken with a beak/spout, simple feather images drawn on the body as well as on the offset mouth of the pitcher which continued to portray the chicken anatomy. This way of

⁵⁷ Steve Jackson, “Frances Senska: A biography” *Frances Senska: A life in art*, (Helena, Holter Museum of Art, 2004), 5-13

⁵⁸ Tim Schwab, *Evolving Forms* [Motion Picture] (1978)

⁵⁹ Greenberg, “Modernism With a Vengeance” *The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 4 1957-1969* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85

depicting birds shows another aspect of her work, a sense of play. Her referential drawings of birds and abstract foliage are a recurring motif throughout her work.

Senska preferred dark slips which, in the case of the YaBaBo pots, gave this body of work an appearance that was common to clay objects of Cameroon. She likened her style of living to the dark slips she worked with by saying, “I prefer brown rice, brown sugar – all things not overly refined. I like elegance only in the sense the scientists use the term, meaning the most economically precise solution to a given problem.”⁶⁰

While the dark slip directly reflected Senska’s affiliation with Cameroon, the communal activity that surrounds pottery is a more intentional connection. Part of an exchange network, pottery from one area often showed up in other areas of Cameroon and played a large role in defining regional identity. These objects are used in daily life as well as in rituals and often remain prestige items in families’ possessions. A pot that originated in one region of the Grasslands can easily end up in another. One can liken this exchange to the gifting practice of American pottery, where a wine set is given as a wedding present or more specifically, where Senska’s partridges (figure 10) were often given as small presents to celebrate a personal achievement. Speaking with Montana State University Professor Mary Murphy she said she often gave the small ceramic birds as gifts to students upon their attaining a Ph.D. Exchanged or gifted pots may have been a part of Senska’s early life, and it may explain her deep connection to the pottery of Cameroon, as well as her preference for the dark colored pots she may have lived with in her youth.

⁶⁰ W.H. Wilson, “Eleven Montana Potters,” *Studio Potter*, Vol. 8 Issue 1 (1979), 33-46

Being a potter in the Babessi culture (the people of the Grasslands) was held high esteem. Babessi pots are often described as the “womb of women,” establishing an important component of the community’s life. The bottom of the pot, with its symmetry, balance and regularity is like the center of a person and needs to be done well because it contains the potential for life.⁶¹ In Cameroon, clay is generally collected near the potter’s home. Methods of processing the clay so it is ready for molding varies from potter to potter and is integral for the integrity of the clay itself. Senska’s methods came from her own tests and trials but she was happy to show students how it was done, and in fact, made it part of her classroom work.⁶²

Looking at Senska’s *Branch Bottle Weedpot*, (figure 11) the dark outer slip allows her figures of birds and abstracted foliage to stand out, again using the sgraffito technique. In Cameroon pottery, beer and water containers display complex decorations, mixing a range of ornamental techniques and images.⁶³ The 14-inch tall vase with its five spouts on top speaks to a flower or “weed” vessel, substantiated by the birds and leaves on the body of the pot. Although utilitarian in theory it is doubtful anyone actually put flowers in it. This speaks to the Modernist aesthetic of looking at pot itself, not with a utilitarian purpose, but instead with an appreciation of the shape, color and size of an object for its own sake, not what it can do and how it can be used.

Senska’s foray into printmaking may have been an extension of her scratch-making technique she often used in her ceramic work. The subjects of these prints and

⁶¹ Silvia Forni, *Containers of Life: Pottery and Social Relations in the Grassfields (Cameroon)*. Retrieved from www.academia.edu. (Spring, 2007).

⁶² See Appendix for interview with Al Tennant

⁶³ Nyame Akuma, *The Ceramic and Society Project*, No. 46, December (1996), 11-17

lithographs were often reflections of her environment, but it also embodied the African aesthetics that played a part in her own thinking about place. (figure 12)

These elements show both her use of African aesthetics and a consciousness of the Bauhaus movement, an influence on both her work and her own teaching. In fact, Walter Gropius, founder of Bauhaus, states in his thoughts about the movement that nothing can exist in isolation.⁶⁴ Primitive art from Africa was in the minds of Cubists and Expressionists, speaking to a universal language which provided an inroad for Bauhaus. As Gropius stated, “Every piece of work is a manifestation of our innermost selves,” clearly a reference to Freud’s work as well, most specifically the Ego. As Gropius states when speaking of the analysis of the designing process,

“The objective of all creative effort in the visual arts is to give form to space ... But what is space, how can it be understood and given a form? ... Although we may achieve an awareness of the infinite we can give form to space only with finite means. We become aware of space through our undivided Ego, through the simultaneous activity of soul, mind and body.”⁶⁵

A close look at Senska’s ceramic work reveals the fundamental characteristics of her materials, the utilitarian forms (and non-utilitarian forms) as well as her processes, which was a core stance of the early Bauhaus movement and the later art movements that stemmed from the Bauhaus aesthetics.⁶⁶ Inherent in her work, as well as her teaching, is the Bauhaus theory that a basic craft-based training was a prerequisite to being an artist. A producer of artistic work had to know everything about its production. For Senska this can be seen in her collection and processing of her own clay – a common thread between

⁶⁴ C.H. Wood, C. H. *Art in Theory*. (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing 2002), 309

⁶⁵ Ibid p. 311

⁶⁶ Hal Foster, R. K.-A. *Art since 1900, Volume I*. (New York, Thames & Hudson 2004), 194

African potters and Bauhaus beliefs. However, Senska would never call herself a Bauhaus artist, although they clearly impacted her work.⁶⁷

Making Precedes Matching

Senska is a transitional artist whose work forms a bridge between American studio ceramics of 1940 – 1950 and contemporary ceramic sculpture.⁶⁸ Folk notes that Senska studied with Bauhaus innovator László Moholy-Nagy, in 1940 at what has become known as the “Chicago Bauhaus.” In Moholy-Nagy’s own words, “The problem of our generation is to bring the intellectual and emotional, the social and technological components into balanced play; to learn to see and feel them in handling human affairs, a rigidly stifling biological and social impulses; a memorized, not a lived life.”⁶⁹ Moholy-Nagy encouraged his students to try all kinds of materials and techniques, while teaching them that design is basically a problem solving act. “You weren’t here to make art, but you’re here to solve this design problem. If it turns out to be art, that’s a dividend.”⁷⁰

A modernist relationship to nature that is reflective of its subject rather than naturalistic in every way underscores Senska’s work. For example, she uses the form of a chicken to reference the natural structure of a chicken, an idea further expounded on by Ernest Gombrich⁷¹ when he wrote about “making precedes matching.” Senska’s imagery of birds is a summation of her own idea of a bird and not depicted by the actual bird’s

⁶⁷ Dean and Geraldine Schwarz., *Marguerite Wildenhain and the bauhaus: an eye witness anthology*. (Decora, Iowa, South Bear Press, 2007)

⁶⁸ Thomas Folk, “Frances Senska: Studio Potter” *American Ceramics*, Volume 8, Issue 2 (1990). p. 34-39

⁶⁹ Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*. (Wisconsin, Cuneo Press, 1947), 12

⁷⁰ Frances Senska, *The Archie Bray Archived Interviews*, (1998)

⁷¹ Ernest Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 186

anatomy. Gombrich's account of the art of painting as the consideration and conditions of perception takes into account not only the look of things but the hidden essence of things. Senska's process, while incorporating the utilitarian side of ceramics also feels like an intuitive process that has a structure even if it is not clear where that may have been heading at first. It is as if she was learning as she made the objects and in her process the wheels kept turning as she became deeply familiar with the problem and finally solved it. In her teachings she learned and in her learning she taught.

Senska is quoted in *Vision in Motion* repeating a nonsensical tongue twister in the Basa dialect of Cameroon, "Koki umbale gogo/ tenge kule milondo/ kokroko miyombroko/ mbondo tos."⁷² The idea of her knowing this and sharing it reveals Senska's connection to both Cameroon and the teachings of Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy uses this kind of tongue twister word play to put a tic in the ear of the artist, to open the artist up to other kinds of inspiration and encourage a kind of sound abstraction that can lead to outside the box creativity. Senska was quoted as saying that she often listened to African music in her studio while she worked⁷³. This is a combination of Moholy-Nagy's "tic in the ear" as well as a source of influence in her work. Senska's collage work is also included in *Vision in Motion* as the visual demonstration of art in a solution-based form. (figure 13)⁷⁴ This method of finding the art by solving the problem of the piece turned out to be an underlying principal in her own work, as well as her teaching.

Senska was quoted as saying that her early instructors stayed with her, especially in her approach to clay, "It was important then to learn to use the technology and the

⁷² Moholy-Nagy, 1947, 327. Senska notes this was a rhyme and made up of nonsense words.

⁷³ Bill Neff, Art All the Time, Video Interview (KUSM-TV, 1997)

⁷⁴ Moholy-Nagy, 1947, 131, Fig. 173 a,b

materials which were available to solve the problem – and that seems even more valid today.”⁷⁵ While Moholy-Nagy brought the ideas of function and form as well as creative ways to solve problems through intuition instead of planning, another teacher was instrumental in bringing Senska into the life of a potter. Marguerite Wildenhain’s belief that the best teacher was nature itself, but a ceramic artist needed a strong foundation in technique. Looking at Senska’s *Surf Fishers* (figure 14) and Wildenhain’s *Tall Footed Vase* (figure 15) it is quite easy to see the impact on her life and work of Wildenhain., Wildenhain was a Bauhaus-trained potter who taught at Pond Farm, a community-based potter’s school in California, where in 1950, Senska spent a summer under her tutelage.⁷⁶ When comparing Wildenhain’s *Three Necked Vase* (figure 16) there is a resemblance to Senska’s *Branch Bottle Weedpot*. According to ceramic artist and Professor at Montana State University Josh DeWeese, who knew Senska most of his life, Wildenhain was an important figure to Senska.⁷⁷ The atmosphere at Pond Farm, an artist community, was nurturing and provided a safe place for artists to experiment with clay. Pond Farm, founded by Gordon and Jane Herr, an architect and writer from San Francisco, came out of the “back-to-nature” philosophy and was exemplified by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration that was created to alleviate the urban squalor of the Depression by relocating laborers on the land. In the arts community the inclination was particularly strong and spurred the formation of several well-known art schools located in rural settings, including Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and Cranbrook Academy in Michigan where Senska was enrolled in 1946. Wildenhain was quoted in the

⁷⁵ Wilson, 1979

⁷⁶ Schwarz, 2007

⁷⁷ Michele Corriel interview, January 3, 2017

book *The Invisible Core* (1973) as saying, “Pond Farm is not a ‘school’ it is actually a way life.”⁷⁸ This is the kind of atmosphere, as well as the back to land philosophies of Pond Farm, that contributed to Senska’s overall teaching and living style.

It was at Montana State College that Senska fully appreciated the land and the environment where she lived and worked. Montana in the late 1940s was a rugged landscape with a small population. The art department, called the Department of Applied Art, under the direction of watercolorist Olga Ross Hannon and printmaker Jessie Wilbur, was just starting to open up the curriculum to something other than Home Economics subjects.⁷⁹ Senska said, “I started teaching ceramics with the merest little scrap of knowledge. I had had just two quarters of ceramics when I started teaching. I just learned it right along with the class.”⁸⁰ She cleaned out an old storage room in the basement of Herrick Hall where she and her students built a ceramics studio, which included several small electric kilns and a few kick wheels she bought with a grant of \$300 from the department. “I managed to change the curriculum,” Senska said. “They hadn’t tumbled to the fact that ceramics was going to be a big deal.”⁸¹

Practice

The culture of ceramic studio art is by nature more communal than painting, due to its purpose-built spaces, especially those on college campuses that require inspections

⁷⁸ Sonoma County Museum, “Marguerite Wildenhain: Bauhaus to Pond Farm,” *Educator Guide*. Santa Rosa, California: Sonoma Country Museum (exhibition ran January 20 - April 15, 2007)

⁷⁹ See Chapter on Jessie Wilber.

⁸⁰ Jackson, 2004

⁸¹ Ibid

of the premises to occur on a regular basis.⁸² Because of the cost in building such spaces, sharing it becomes a necessity. In addition to the convivial atmosphere of working together, Senska added the journey to collect clay and process it. The clay dug from a railroad line cut near Lewistown, where an outcropping of the Kootenai formation is exposed to the elements, offered up some of the best stoneware available in the state, according to Josh DeWeese, who accompanied Senska one of her trips. She also found, along with student Peter Voulkos a closer source in Bear Canyon, where she would take students.⁸³

For Senska, there was no question of ordering clay, even her glazes came from a nearby drainage. Her deep connection to the land was as important as the forms she used to create the vessels and objects. The digging of the clay and processing of it for use in the studio was all part of the experience of being a potter. It contributed to developing an awareness of surface and materials. It also helped to create a tighter knit ceramic community, as she invited her students to experiment alongside her in the studio.

For Senska, her life as a potter and her life as a teacher often intertwined. In a video of her taken in her studio she said,

"You have to be patient when you're dealing with some inanimate objects. You can't hurry a pot ... you have to coax it and assist it and direct it where you want it to go. And if you make a sudden move, the pot just goes. And I think people are the same way. What you're doing is passing on what you have gotten to someone else so that they can use it. Sometimes they use it in very original

⁸² Jenni Sorkin, "Craft-in-Residence" *The Open Studio Network* (academia.edu, 2013), 25-29

⁸³ One of Senska's favorite stories about Voulkos, is how he stood guard beside a filthy pickup truck parked on Bozeman's Main Street until the owner returned. "Where did you get stuck?" he demanded, intrigued by the clots of good red clay clinging to the vehicle. And so Peter discovered Bear Canyon clay," according to an article in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle written by Marjorie Smith, (March 26, 1983)

ways, not ways you had anticipated--but which appeal to you.”⁸⁴

Two of her most famous students, Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio, speak to her teaching style. Voulkos, whose style was abstract and dynamic and Autio’s work was more lyrical and figurative make it hard to believe their training derived from the same pair of hands. However, in an interview Senska did after receiving a lifetime membership to the National Committee on Education in the Ceramic Arts noted that a someone approached her after seeing a student-made video she’d shown instead of giving a speech told her, “You hold your hands just the way I do, but I learned from Peter Voulkos.” To which Senska replied, “Well, it figures. He learned from me and I learned from Marguerite Wildenhain. That's what education in the ceramic arts is all about. You learn from somebody who does it.”⁸⁵

Her teaching style developed into a combination of discovery, along with her students, and to problem-solve designs, which also encouraged a group support for individualism.

Characteristics such as those mentioned above encouraged in the early years of Modernism as well as the communal Pond Farm aesthetic.⁸⁶ Combining a style stemming from the ideas of Senska’s African childhood, which also inspired the likes of Picasso and Braque, with the Bauhaus ideals of utilitarian craft and her communal potters’ lifestyle inspired by Pond Farm and Cranbrook Academy, Senska’s work and life crossed

⁸⁴ (KUSM-TV 1997)

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Senska contributed to the inception of the Archie Bray Foundation, in Helena, Montana, a public, non-profit educational institution that encourages creativity in the ceramic arts, and continued to support it throughout her life.

the frontiers of ceramics.⁸⁷ From those who taught her how to live the life of an artist and the artists who taught her how to become a teacher, Senska passed both of those qualities down through the generations of ceramic artists that followed her. The life she instilled into her ceramics speaks to the culture of Cameroonian exchange traditions as well as the modernist attention to materials. A potter's life may seem simple, but the strands that create an artist are not. Each piece Senska made holds tight to the experiences of her life: her childhood in Africa, the teachings of the Bauhaus' form and function, Wildenhain's demands for mastering the technique, and her own years of generosity through teaching. For Senska, even if she had never made a dime from her art, she was always happy to live her life with her hands in clay.

Her work embodies the Montana Modernist aesthetic from its reflection of the land in the clay and glazes she made, to her playful partridges and wine sets. Her ability to place making before matching incorporates Gombrich's notion of what makes Modernism more than a mimetic practice to recreate the world as best we can and to stop trying to keep an illusion that is no longer necessary.

⁸⁷ This point will be revisited in the conclusion.



Figure 6:

Frances Senska, *YaBaBo* pot, 9" by 7" diameter, stoneware, N.D.
Courtesy of the Holter Museum of Art, catalog "Frances Senska: A Life in Art."



Figure 7:
Cameroon Water Pot, N.D.



Figure 8:

Frances Senska, *Ring Necked Bottle*, 12" by 6" diameter, stoneware, 1966.
Courtesy of Holter Museum of Art catalog "Francis Senska: A Life in Art".



Chicken Wine Set, VARIABLE DIMENSIONS, STONEWARE, N.D., COLLECTION OF KELLY AND ROY CROSBY

Figure 9:

Frances Senska, *Chicken Wine Set*, stoneware, ND.
Courtesy of the Holter Museum of Art Catalog "Francs Senska: A Life in Art".



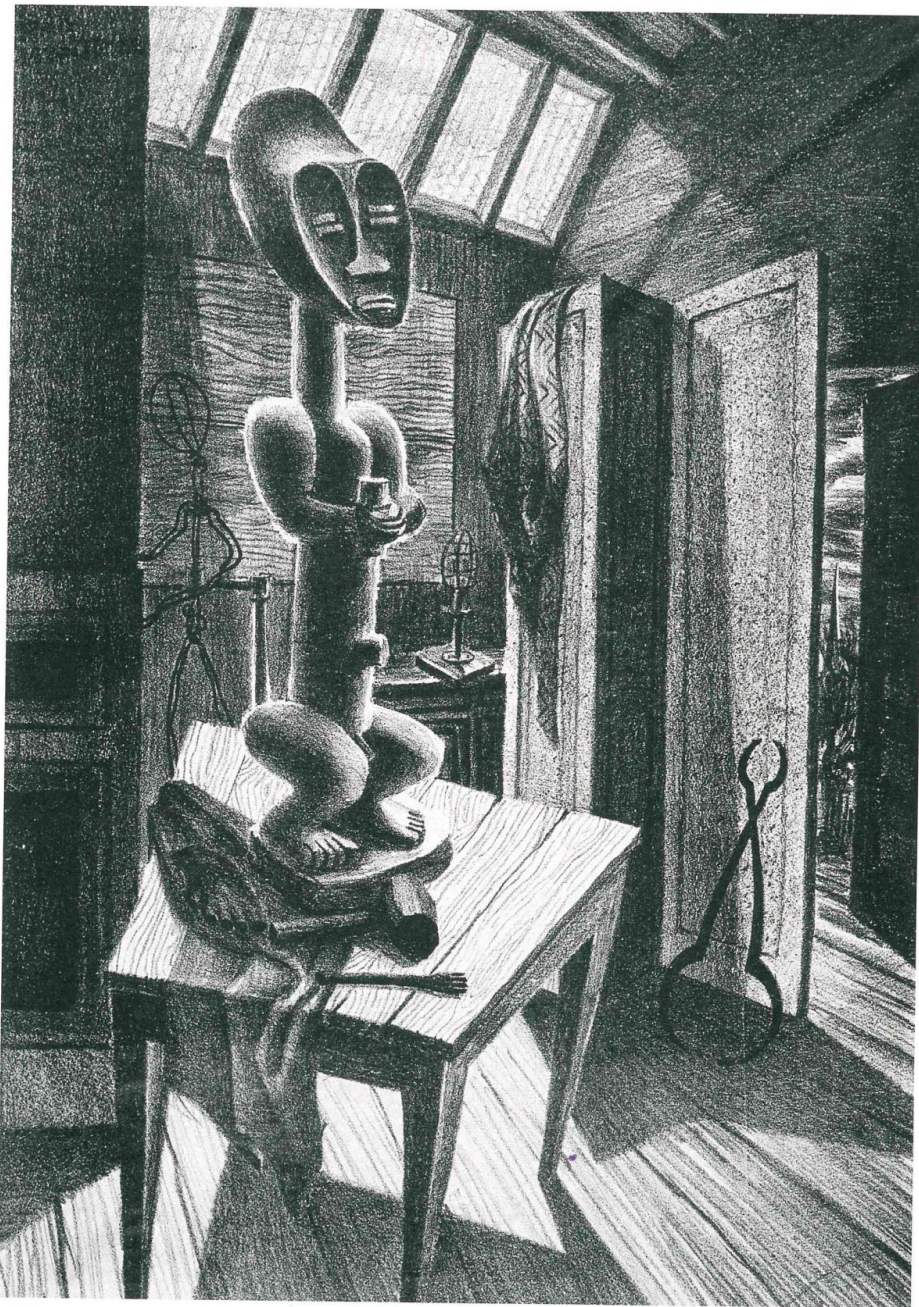
Figure 10:

Frances Senska, *Hungarian Partridges*, variable dimensions, Stoneware.
Courtesy of the Holter Museum of Art Catalog "Francis Senska: A Life in Art".



Figure 11:

Frances Senska, *Branch Bottle Weedpot*, 14" by 6" diameter, stoneware, 1979. Courtesy of the Holter Museum of Art catalog "Francis Senska: A Life in Art".



African (Iowa City), 20" x 14", LITHOGRAPH, 1946,
COLLECTION OF THE HOLTER MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF THE ARTIST

Figure 12:

Frances Senska, *African (Iowa City)*, 20" by 14", lithograph, 1946.
Courtesy of the Holter Museum of Art catalog "Frances Senska: A Life in Art".

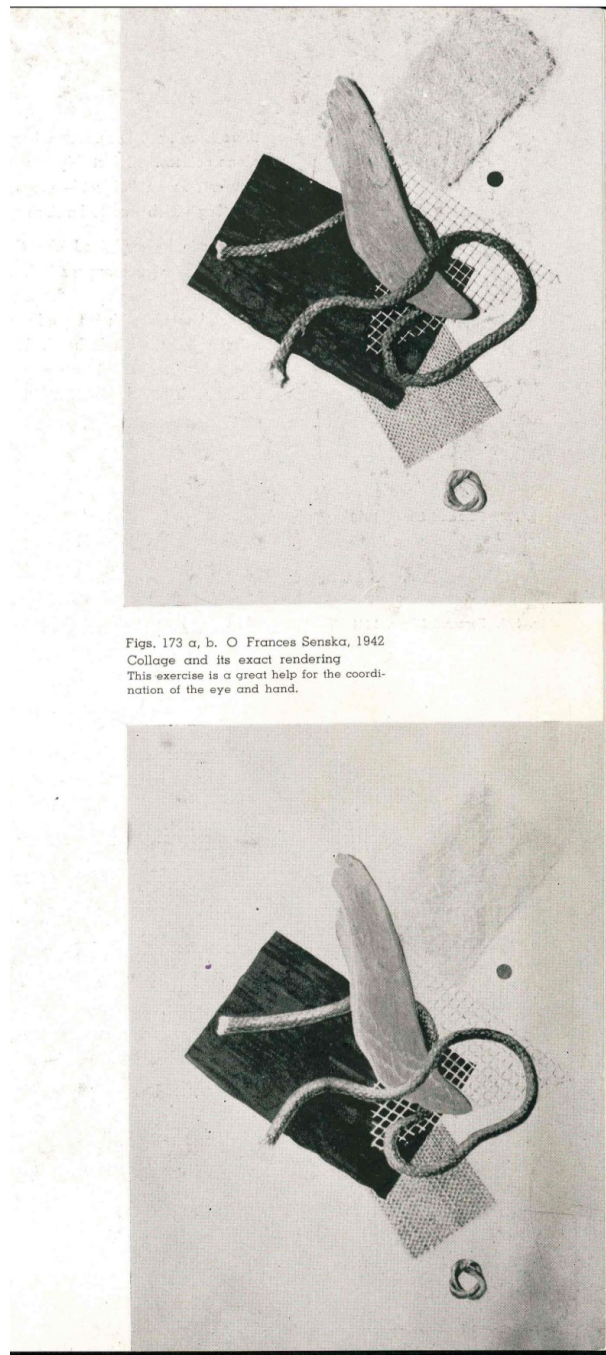


Figure 13:

Frances Senska, collage and its exact rendering as printed in Lazlo Maholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion*, 1942.



Figure 14:

Frances Senska; *Surf Fishers*, 7 7/8" x 4 3/8" light stoneware, 1950.
Courtesy of the Montana State University School of Art archives.



Marguerite Wildenhain, *Tall Footed Vase*. 13 x 7 in. Courtesy of Luther College Fine Arts Collection. Photo by Harry Baumert.

Figure 15:

Marguerite Wildenhain,, *Tall Footed Vase*, 13"x7", N.D.
Courtesy of the Luther Fine Arts Museum.



Figure 16:
Marguerite Wildenhain, *3-necked vase*, 9.5" x 9" x 6.5", stoneware, ND.
Dolores Dietler Collection.

ROBERT DEWEESE

Responsibility is the Ability to Respond

Robert DeWeese (1920-1990) served in World War II and went to college at Ohio State University where he met Hoyt Sherman. Sherman developed the Flash Lab, where he would mediate, what he called the “schism,” between thought and feeling and between science and art, by flashing images on a screen for a split second and then asking his students to draw what they saw.⁸⁸ It was DeWeese’s exchanges with Sherman’s theory of “perceptual unity,” that allowed DeWeese to further explore his idea of “responsibility is the ability to respond.” I intend to show his aesthetics in his sketches, paintings, and collages through this lens.

Looking to the methodology of Clement Greenberg’s critical essays and Michael Baxandall’s criteria for understanding pictorial art I intend to pinpoint how DeWeese negotiated the materials at hand, which then led to the work itself.^{89 90}

Baxandall examines the painter’s goals: what is expected from the artist; what is it the artists wants from the work; what is the market at the time; what is the culture at that time; what is the artist’s relationship to other painters; and how does he make use of his contemporary philosophical and/or scientific ideas of the era. In other words: what was the problem the artist was trying to solve. As stated in the chapter on Frances Senska the notion of art being a set of problems the artist must solve also stems from Moholy-

⁸⁸ Students worked in complete darkness so they could not see what they were doing; there was no verbal instruction as to how to draw and music was played throughout the exercise.

⁸⁹ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intension*, (Princeton, Yale University, 1985)

⁹⁰ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism* 1993

Nagy's Bauhaus philosophy and is utilized by DeWeese as well. His problems are more about line, the honesty of a line, and how a painting can resolve the artist's responsibility to respond to his surroundings and cultural/societal barriers.⁹¹ In DeWeese's *Western Painting* (figure 17) he uses a series of sketches and drawings of buffalo, moose and elk with the barest outlines of a natural environment. The market during this period in Montana consisted mostly of Western paintings, replications of wildlife in paint as well as bronzes, depictions of Native Americans on horseback or historical portraits of Native Americans drawn by artists in the 1800s. *Western Painting* feels most certainly like a comment on the art market at the time. Rarely did DeWeese sell a painting that was not to one of peers.⁹² *Western Painting* also is a comment on the culture at the time, the Myth of the West, how art had to fall into specific categories to be accepted by the market. However, rather than conforming to that genre he combined sketches that were not of a piece. In this case DeWeese uses his intuition to relay a truth about art in Montana at that time. As Henri Bergson put forth, intuition is a kind of instinct which can lead to the absolute knowledge of an object, as compared with analysis which leads only to the relative knowledge about an object.⁹³ Reality changes, but in our lives we keep the events that interest us and discard those that don't. Relying on the subconscious to keep true track of the world, calls upon intuition. Wittgenstein also speaks to the intuitive

⁹¹ DeWeese put a lot of stock in the idea of an honest line. See Appendix for interview with Neil Jussila.

⁹² There was a large tradition in the artist community in the state to purchase, if possible, or trade works of art, since it was difficult to make a living on being an artist. Nearly all the artists at the time were art teachers as well as artists. For most, as it was for DeWeese, he said, "My paintings and teaching were inseparable, and like the growth of everything in those years, kept a focus. Excitement piled up in the corners, and Gen and I ran out of space three times before anyone bought a painting."

⁹³ Charles Harrison, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*. (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 143 Bergson was a French philosopher that played a role in the avant-garde preceding World War I.

method of getting beyond or breaking through a certain point where there seems to be no way forward.⁹⁴

The non-archival materials he used, not just in this painting, but in many other works, could barely stand up against the elements of his home/studio. Fragile crepe paper, markers, sketches with frayed edges and paint peeling reflects a tendency to use whatever was at hand at that moment. These actions indicate an immediate response to the artist's responsibility as he saw it, and an instinctual action of Wittgenstein's Don't Think, But Look philosophy of seeing.⁹⁵ He merely grabbed whatever materials were at hand and sketched, painted or collaged his responses.

Sketches/Drawing

Hoyt Sherman's Flash Lab at Ohio State University was conceived to mediate the "schism" between thought and feeling and between science and art, by flashing images on a screen for a split second and then asking his students to draw what they saw.⁹⁶ It was his theory of "perceptual unity," a way to interpret how the mind sees images through the human eye in an effort to help students see the whole field of vision simultaneously in relation to a single focal point.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Wittgenstein spoke about mathematics but we can infer language and art as an extension of his reasoning.

⁹⁵ Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 36

⁹⁶ Aside from DeWeese, Sherman's teachings influenced many of his students including Roy Lichtenstein.

⁹⁷ Hoyt Sherman, *Drawing by Seeing*. (New York: Hinds, Hayden & Eldredge, 1947).

It wasn't only the flash art, but the notion of introducing exciting new ideas in a classroom environment that DeWeese carried over into his own work, he also adapted some of these techniques for his own teaching purposes.⁹⁸

A look at his multitude of drawings show his intentional language of line and gestural responses to his environment, including his family and colleagues, road trips and, underlying much of his work, the Montana landscape where he lived. It is through these sketches that DeWeese saw the world and recorded it, through these drawings he drew in a close circle of friends, colleagues, students and fellow artists. The underpinning of DeWeese's sketch work reflects Sherman's Flash Art discipline that a student needs to see the whole field in relation to the focal point (perceptual unity) that stayed with him throughout his career.

DeWeese's series of sketches showing his daughter dancing may be related to a specific class exercise executed by Sherman (figure 18). As Elizabeth Clymer Okerbloom in her essay on Sherman wrote, "The end of the course includes drawing a dancer flashed in action."⁹⁹ By the time DeWeese created this series, his sketches continuously portrayed the instantaneous imprints of reactions inferred by a rapid execution of a drawing to convey the moment, an idea or an object, as described in Sherman's Flash Lab.¹⁰⁰ This exercise also illustrates DeWeese's core philosophical belief that "responsibility is the ability to respond." This response to a situation by sketching was almost a calling. In every situation, he would draw. His sketchbook is a window to his

⁹⁸ More on this in the next chapter when I talk about the aspect of teaching as community.

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Clymer Okerbloom, Hoyt Sherman's Experimental Work in the Field of Visual Form. *College Art Journal*, Volume 3, Issue 4 (1944), 143-147.

¹⁰⁰ Sherman 1947, p. 31

world. Bringing it back to Greenberg's definition of Modernism, his sketching like that of Wilber's prints and Senska's pots reflects an interpretation of the things and the people he saw every day. Moving the trope of a window into the metaphor of his life, he only leaves out the frame of the glass. *Portland* (figure 19), *Landscape* (figure 20), and *Bill's Lil Trees* (figure 21) are examples of his immediate responses to his environment.

DeWeese's work continued to proliferate. Every day brought new opportunities to record his children, his wife, music, trees and the road. Sketch after sketch shows a development of a language without words: his quick marks of impressions. DeWeese's drawings depicted honest portrayals, connecting the artist to the world, connecting being in time with being in place.

Artist and gallery manager at Montana State University Dennis O'Leary said,

“Bob's art over these thirty years is about his life. Portraits of family, friends and localities describe his surroundings. With these, in combination with his non-representational works, we clearly see his conceptual attitudes. All reality is as we behold it. We are responsible only to ourselves for our spiritual fulfillments and must find them wherever we can. For Bob, they are within himself, his family, friends and environment. For Bob DeWeese, art and life are most certainly one and the same experience.”¹⁰¹

A few of his sketches later became paintings. These paintings as well as his studio enabled DeWeese to not only create art but to create an art community. Senska had ceramics, a natural communal environment, encompassing group collection of clay and nights spent over a kiln. For DeWeese it was his way of bringing artists and friends, colleagues and family into the fold that he just called “art,” according to the curator's statement in *DeWeese's Legacy*, a 2006 catalog, including his student's work and their

¹⁰¹ McConnell, 1989

student's work, Terry Karson said, "DeWeese was more than a teacher, he was also a progressive thinker, a beguiling provocateur, and a seminal figure in the spread of modern art and philosophy in Montana."¹⁰²

Paintings and Assemblages

DeWeese's paintings are a step away from the immediacy of the sketches. Employing color as well as line, many of his paintings nod to the classics while leaping forward with commentary, while others employ the collage technique made relevant by the Dadaists such as Hannah Hoch and Max Ernst whose work spoke to the changed relationship between objects and humans or man versus machines.¹⁰³ These issues were still relevant to the modernists in Montana. Extraction industries were dying out and the questions that the Dadaist brought up did not go away with either World War I or World War II. By the time of DeWeese's *VFW Studio Wall* (figure 22) in 1973, the total emergence of mass media was rampant. The large mixed media on canvas work included advertisements, newspaper headlines, Matisse-like cut-outs, school photographs of his children as well as pages seemingly torn from notebooks. It is localized with Bozeman-based headlines and it is nationalized with images of well-known figures. DeWeese includes colors and lines for the sake of composition. It is a portrait of his studio and it is an artist statement for his work. With greys and off-set lines he creates a sense of place, but it is a place where "anything goes." There is an openness to the piece although there is the presence of painted walls, suggesting there are limits to the openness.

¹⁰² Terry Karson, *DeWeese's Legacy*. (Helena: Holter Museum of Art, 2006).

¹⁰³ Dadaism was a literary and art movement that preceded Surrealism. The Dadaists felt that chance played a large role in accessing the subconscious and thus a universal truth.

In a much later painting done in 1988, *Flight (Red Boy)* (figure 23) figures rise in joy, sail across the sky, and fall from grace. In the center is the “red boy” a placid faceless embodiment made of lines. With references to Atlas with a female figure holding up her “world” (a child on her shoulders) and a Greek chorus huddled in the background with colors muddled to activate the images. In some ways, DeWeese recalls Titian’s *The Rape of Europa* with his contemporary use of mythological images to modernize the legend. In the foreground, all the figures remain nudes, a call to classical painting, while all the figures in the background are blanketed in clothes, thereby forming a delineation between them. The figure flying overhead like a zephyr adds to the overall feeling of a mythological allegory. In this way DeWeese is able to take the ever-timeless nature of Greek/Roman mythology and translate it to a modern day interpretation. As some of his work is more abstract, this is a painting in which a deeper reading on the representational images is more available. The brushstrokes, clear and active, support the multiple narratives going on in the piece. The eye moves from the Red Boy to the other figures and back around again, constantly supporting the motion of the work. To go back to Baxandall, here DeWeese underlines the contemporary philosophical ideas of the era. Painted in 1988, *Flight (Red Boy)* when George H.W. Bush won the election, after eight years of Ronald Reagan and the Iran-Contra investigations and hearings. Politically, it was a dark time for liberal-minded artists. DeWeese died in 1990, and this painting may be somewhat auto-biographical. Red Boy here may be a version of DeWeese himself, symbols of family, of joys and judgements. DeWeese loved the theater¹⁰⁴ and this painting may be a reflection of his life as a Greek play.

¹⁰⁴ This was made clear through conversations with family and former students. (See Appendix for

Written in his University of Iowa notebook was the statement, “Anyway of seeing is abstraction – to make any sense we select – thus abstract... keep clear Naturalism is abstraction. Modern art paints things we know about, [whether we] do or do not see.” These graduate school notes provide some insight into the later works of DeWeese. The naturalism he refers to shows up again and again in his sketches as well as his paintings. In *Flight (Red Boy)* there is a nod to Renaissance naturalism combined with the abstracted figure.

“Modernism is philosophy,” he wrote and the word “eloquence” appears again and again. It seems that he is trying to understand his place as a modern artist as a graduate student, looking into the difference between Impressionism and Romanticism.

Another aspect of his collage work is the series of paintings DeWeese devoted to the men’s tie. He was quoted as saying,

“The last few years I have been doing that old unoriginal icon of uniformity, the necktie. Why? Well, I felt some kind of need for such an outrageously simple form no matter if it becomes an interpreter’s delight. I like the visual fact of the tie – something to count on, something to play upon, something really there. But then there are things that seem not to be there (in the visible world) at all – dream, fantasy, myth, allegory, symbol. Idea. Made Visible. The thereness and the not thereness all part of the same thing, eh?”¹⁰⁵

In *Nine Ties, Seven Chains* (figure 24) and *Circus Ties* (figure 25) DeWeese uses this everyday symbol of what it means to be a man, the man made visible, for a series he cannot break away from. It occurs in dozens of pieces in which some have actual ties in

interview transcripts.)

¹⁰⁵ T.K. Forbes, *Robert DeWeese: A Retrospective*. (Billings: Yellowstone Art Center, 1991).

them, some use tie chains, other, as in *Circus Ties* the objects are painted bigger than life. Here he mixes his figural abstraction as well as the symbol of creating an image of a tie as a tree that Man must climb. DeWeese often used humor and irony in his work. In this instance the ties stand in for the flags of a circus, but they bring to mind crucifixes, hung with sides outstretched like Christ on the cross. Putting the ties so high the figures use ladders to adhere them to their stands, DeWeese replaces the Romans with the Ringmaster. It is hard not to call to mind the many art historical references to the Passions of Christ. How many men in suits and ties have been sacrificed to the god of status quo? How many men have felt like they worked in a three-ring circus?

As in many of DeWeese's paintings he brings with him the history of art. He is a painter and a teacher. His paintings tell the story of the past as they point on to the future. By bringing other art references into his work his Modernism had a two-fold purpose to create art and to teach. Noted in an essay he wrote titled *On Painting*, DeWeese stated in it the importance of art students to know and understand the masters of the past because, "they are your teachers and mine, too."¹⁰⁶ Further in that essay he spoke about non-objective paintings and how they use the qualities of nature but the source is, "within the artist or in the painting-action itself. ... it is pure painting – and in this sense the most realistic painting. It makes concrete such ambiguous, non-objective terms as delicate, heavy, slow, fast, hot, cool."

This is seen in his painting *Plains Sunset*, (figure 26) one of his earlier and more abstract pieces. His thick brushstrokes evoke the horizon, although the dark blues, gray, black and bit of blood red negate the typical "inspiring" vista which would come to mind

¹⁰⁶ Karson 2006

in a painting of a sunset. Instead it is heavy with dripping paint, the viewer's eye, while being pulled across the plane, drops into pockets of timelessness, areas of gray and like a game of Chutes and Ladders zips the viewer up again. The piece is more of a journey than an exercise of observation, more of a dialogue than a meditation.

Circled twice in one of his notebooks is a quote from Kenneth Burke, "We cannot call a man illogical for acting on the basis of what he feels to be true."¹⁰⁷ Burke was a literary theorist and from these notebooks DeWeese may have regarded art as a kind of language, to be understood through the literary theorists of the time. DeWeese added in his own words underneath the quote from Burke, "both poet's metaphors and the scientist's abstractions discuss something in terms of something else – and the course of analogical extension is determined by the particular kind of interest uppermost at the time."

His reference to art (and science) as a kind of metaphor, and hence an arm of language allows a direct line into Wittgenstein's discussion of "family" relationships.¹⁰⁸ As DeWeese's artwork glides from sketching to painting and assemblages underlying all of them is the unique hand of a Modernist artist. Wittgenstein looks at the definition of games to show that not all things can be strictly defined. As such DeWeese's work falls into the open concept of Modernism in a variety of ways and forms. First and foremost it is through the personal that we see his world, as Greenberg pointed out. Secondly, there is always an acknowledgement of the surface, the character of the paint and the impact of mixed media commentary on society. As a teacher, especially a teacher in Montana,

¹⁰⁷ The DeWeese family gave me access to Robert DeWeese's University of Iowa graduate school notebooks.

¹⁰⁸ Wittgenstein, 1953, 36

dealing with students who may not have been in contact with anything other than the art promoting the Myth of the West, DeWeese brought in notes from other Modernist painters to inform his work and to teach his students aspects of Danto's "artworld." But he did so with a mind to place and a mind to his students. Without the prior knowledge of theory and practice it is nearly impossible to go forward in dialogue with art.¹⁰⁹

Wittgenstein goes on to talk about the relationship between a number and other things we call numbers, "... the strength of thread resides not in the fact that someone fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres." And so DeWeese's paintings, sketches and assemblages are very like the overlapping of many fibers, twisted together to strengthen his body of work.

DeWeese's unique aspect of Montana Modernism, always aware of where he was, his work progressed to include the landscape. Even in his most abstract work, like *Plains Sunset*, the land cannot but help to find a way onto the canvas.

¹⁰⁹ Danto, 1964, 580



Figure 17:

Robert DeWeese, *Western Painting*, collage and mixed media, 15 ½ by 12 ¼ inches, 1976. Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.

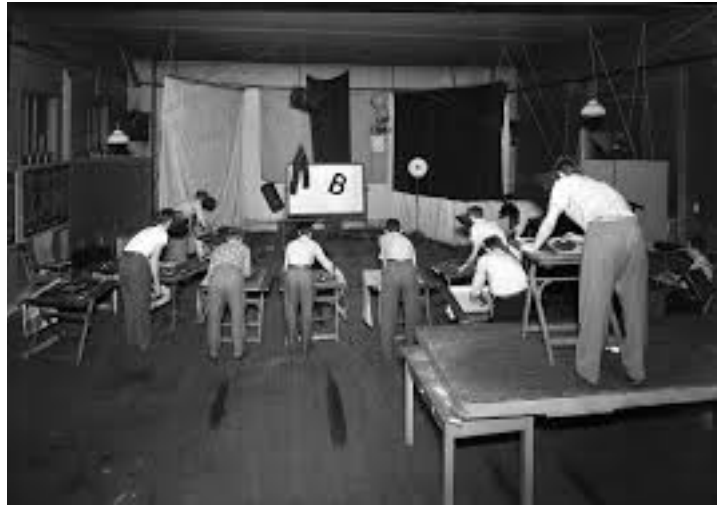


Figure 18:

Hoyt Sherman's Flash Lab, 1947.



Figure 19:

Robert DeWeese, *Portland*, 12" by 17", felt marker on paper, 1980s.
Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.



Figure 20:

Robert DeWeese, *Landscape*, graphite on paper, ND.
Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.



Figure 21:

Robert DeWeese, *Bill's Lil Trees*, 8.5" by 11" each, felt marker on paper, 1970.
Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.



Figure 22:

Robert DeWeese, *VFW Studio Wall*, mixed media painting, 1973.
Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Museum.

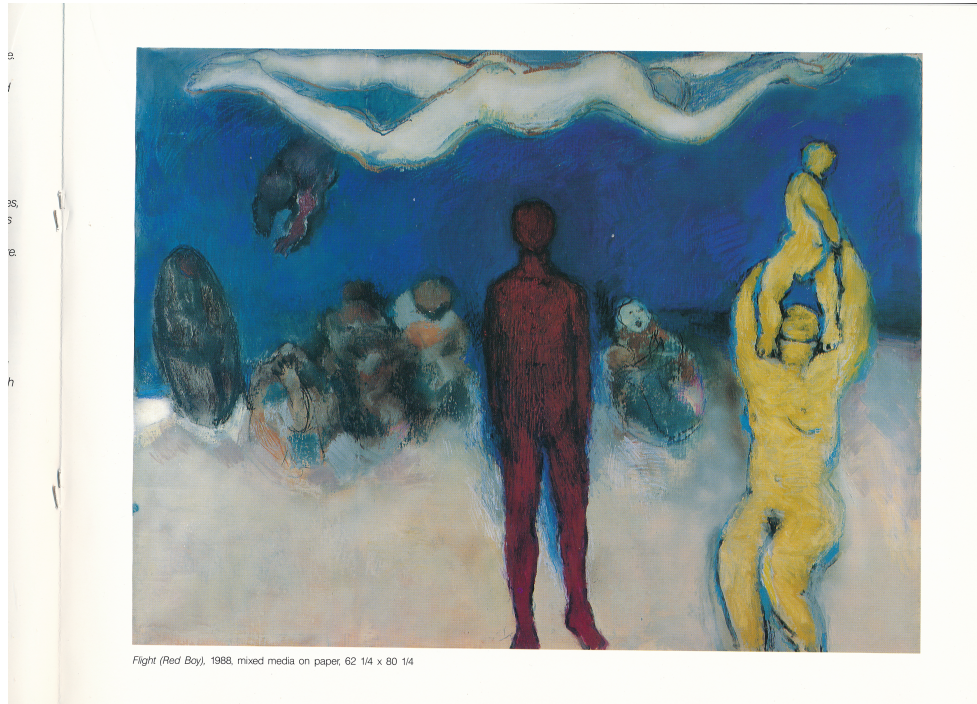


Figure 23:

Robert DeWeese, *Flight (Red Boy)*, 62.5" by 80.5", mixed media on paper, 1988.
 Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Museum.

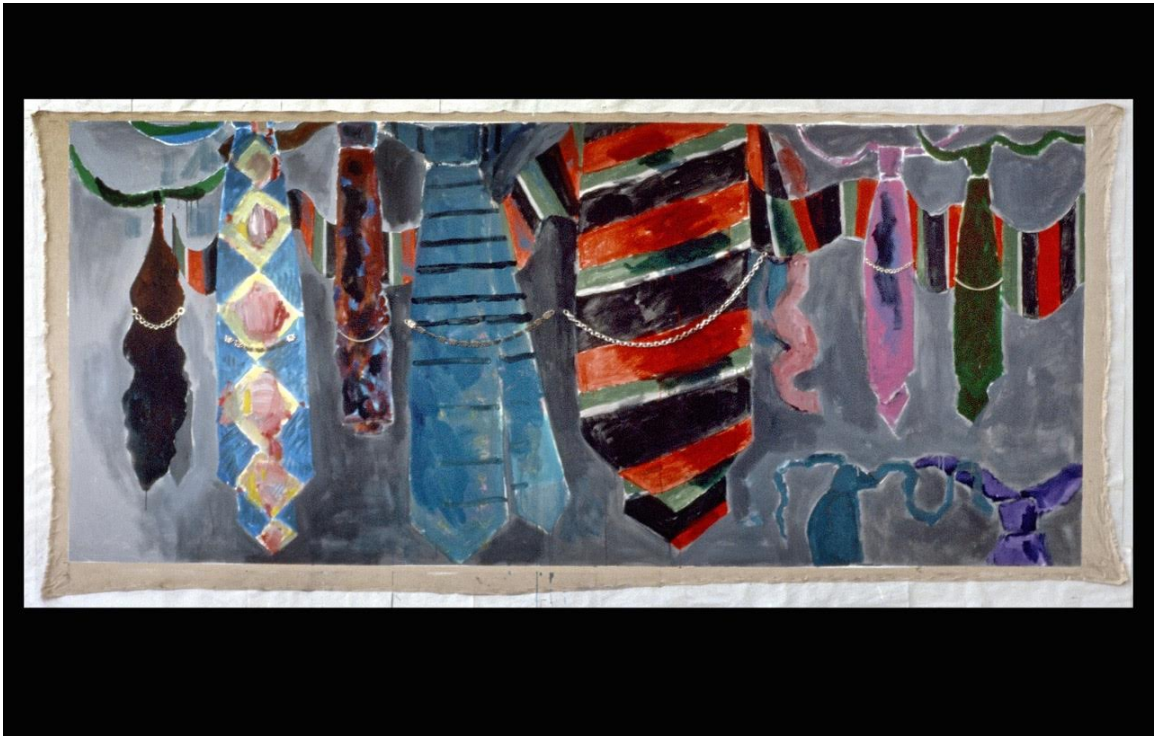


Figure 24:

Robert DeWeese, *Nine Ties, Seven Chains*, 5' by 11', mixed media on paper, 1988.
Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.



Figure 25:

Robert DeWeese, *Circus Ties*,
Caron D'arch crayons on gessoed window shade, 73" by 47", 1986.
Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.



Figure 26:

Robert DeWeese, *Plains Sunset*, 19" by 26.5", oil on Masonite, 1963.
Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.

THE START OF A MOVEMENT

The research undertaken for this thesis uncovered the three components for an art movement in an isolated area like the Intermountain West and in this specific case study, Montana, to take root. It had to have the initial two components going for it: patronage and an “art colony” climate. In this case Montana State College offered both. The expanding needs of the land grant university system to include a larger and more academic art department meant that artists could teach. This in turn meant they would get the benefit of patronage via a paycheck. Tied to that, the climate at MSC played the role of an art colony in that artists, musicians, dancers and writers could interact, supporting each other’s foray into the edges of modern art. There was no real art market and so the only support they received was from each other.¹¹⁰ The fact that this type of community existed allowed for the third element of Modernism to take hold: the strength in numbers to fight back against the Myth of the West. The combination of all three of these factors is the key component that allowed Modernism a foothold in Bozeman, and from there other parts of the state.

As a sub-element of these components I would have to add the roles of DeWeese, Senska and Wilber artists as teachers added another dimension to the aspect of community. Each one encouraged their students to create expressive art and supported their art by inviting them to show their work to the public and to each other.

To further examine these components I have divided the conclusion up into Teaching and Community to more deeply understand the importance of these two

¹¹⁰ There was no art market aside from the Western artwork that enabled the Myth of the West to continue.

elements and how they worked together to form a fertile artistic environment that was unique to the place and time. All the components worked together to create a paradigm in which an art movement could thrive, despite the fact there was no direct patronage or the presence of an existing art colony in the state.

Teaching

As stated in my introduction, Modernism came to Montana via the expanded range of classes offered through the land grant universities made possible by the larger student population due to the G.I. Bill, which allowed more students to enroll. The main source of new ideas introduced to Montana's up and coming artists came about through their teachers, both directly and indirectly.¹¹¹

Frances Senksa, Jessie Wilber and Robert DeWeese, were the first three art teachers at Montana State College to approach their work and their teaching as reflected in the unified theory of education as outlined by John Dewey.¹¹² Dewey postulated that art is best taught through experience. "The answers cannot be found, unless we are willing to find the germs and roots in matters of experience that we do not currently regard as esthetic. Having discovered these active seeds, we may follow the course of their growth into the highest forms of finished and refined art."¹¹³ All three

¹¹¹ As explained in previous individual chapters on DeWeese, Senska and Wilber, each one brought Modernist aesthetics with them to MSC, obtained through their individual experiences in the arts. Indirectly, they allowed their students to have access to people and artists who visited from New York and other urban art hubs, as will be further explored in this chapter.

¹¹² John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York, Penguin Group, 1934).

¹¹³ Ibid, 11.

artists/teachers were Modernists and brought their Modernist perspectives into the classrooms.

In 1960, Montana native and New York commodity broker Everton Gentry “George” Poindexter began donating abstract expressionist art to the Montana Historical Society’s museum collection and the Yellowstone Art Center¹¹⁴, eventually he would donate 382 works of which half are paintings and the rest are works on paper to the Yellowstone Art Center alone. The Poindexter Collection, a collection that included paintings by Willem de Kooning, Robert DeNiro Sr., Jackson Pollock, Richard Diebenkorn, Earl Kerkam, Franz Kline, and Jack Tworkov among others was the largest abstract expressionist art collection west of the Mississippi.¹¹⁵

When DeWeese heard about the showing of the Poindexter Collection and the nature and quality of the abstract expressionism art in the state, he drove to Helena and borrowed a few pieces. The stated reason for the donation of the art by George Poindexter was for educational institutions to have access to them and DeWeese would make that happen.¹¹⁶ DeWeese did not think to bring the students to the art but instead brought the art to the students. For weeks Willem de Kooning’s *Woman*, 1948, as well as some other paintings from the collection hung in the Student Union Building, available for anyone to observe.¹¹⁷

For Neil Jussila, an art student in the 1960s, the Poindexter Collection changed everything for him. It changed the way he thought about art and the way he connected to

¹¹⁴ The Yellowstone Art Center would later become the Yellowstone Art Museum.

¹¹⁵ Ben Mitchell, *The Most Difficult Journey*. (Billings, Yellowstone Art Museum, 2002)

¹¹⁶ Mitchell, 2002, 16

¹¹⁷ See Appendix for Neil Jussila interview.

his own artistic expression. For DeWeese, it was a way, the only way, to communicate what was going on in New York City's art scene to his students.

DeWeese's students and visiting artists were as influential to his own work as his was to theirs. This can be seen in the painting *About Wiley*, 1972, Mixed media on Masonite, included in a catalogue *Robert DeWeese: Work since 1949*, in which DeWeese laid the typed words of Wiley, "What we will attempt to learn though we may not know it is to learn that we are who we are and that it is all right to be who and what we are." The gallery director at the time, Dennis O'Leary included it to illustrate the DeWeese's aptitude as a teacher to appreciate his students' work. In a rare piece of writing DeWeese did about painting he explained this theory.

"A teacher-student relationship in the field of painting is artificial and false. They should be considered as equal participants in the excitement of painting; the one with the greater experience which the other draws upon. There must be a philosophy of painting or there is no painting. There must be equal earnestness and drive; there must be hard work. A teacher must stimulate by fair means or foul. But don't ask him to spoon feed or hold your hand ... The language of painting – size, shape, position, and color – is simple, but it takes many paintings to learn the language – to feel and sense it – to make it part of you. Don't be precious with your painting – you must gradually learn to see and operate in these terms." Speaking to the Myth of the West in that essay DeWeese further wrote, "Charlie Russell was a good storyteller and in his younger days, a pretty fair painter. He was authentic, but he's dead and his era is over. His imitators may be sincere, but they are just as beside the point as the Chamber of Commerce Pioneer Days."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Denis O'Leary, *Robert DeWeese: Work Since 1949*. (Montana: Fine Arts Gallery, Montana State University, 1979).

As his student, Jerry Rankin said of DeWeese, “His simple statements embodied huge ideas. He kept us busy with the job of seeing.”¹¹⁹

Senska’s teaching style was very hands-on although she did not encourage students to make pots that looked like hers, she did physically place her hands on her students’ hands to give them the right direction while sitting at the potter’s wheel.¹²⁰ In fact, she is quoted in a television interview as saying Pete Voulkos held his hands in the same she did, which was the same way Marguerite Wildenhain held her hands.¹²¹ This beckons the inference that Senska, DeWeese and Wilber created a lineage from teacher to student not just in the Montana art world but beyond, a lineage that can be traced into the 21st Century. Senska’s student Al Tennant spoke about her ability to be tough while allowing each student complete freedom to discover their voice.¹²²

Wilber’s generosity of spirit gave her students the leeway to explore various materials regardless of the outcome.¹²³ Ray Campeau, one of her early students, described Wilber’s teaching method as working beside her students, not in front of them. She would have the students set up their painting projects and then she would work on her own painting in the studio with them. Students and teacher painted together, each working on their own pieces. Wilber would explain what she was doing but did not perform a “demonstration,” where the students had to try to emulate her work. Instead she would ask each student to talk about their work to the entire class, making each student feel as important as the rest. Campeau said, “They never made anyone feel like

¹¹⁹ Karson, 2006

¹²⁰ See Appendix interview with Neil Jussila for his account of this incident.

¹²¹ KUSM-TV, 1997

¹²² See Appendix for transcript of Al Tennant’s interview.

¹²³ See Appendix for transcript of Ray Campeau’s interview.

they were less than them. They did things communally.” By not setting herself apart from the painting students, Wilber created a safe environment, students learned by doing and they learned how to respect each other’s work as modeled by Wilber.

DeWeese, Senska and Wilber taught in what John Dewey would call a pragmatic environment where reality is experienced. Every one of their students learned their art by doing the art. And in nearly every case the credo of the teacher/student relationship reflected Dewey’s view that art needs to be experienced in order to understand it.¹²⁴ As cited in DeWeese’s painting *About Wiley* as well as in Senska’s discovery of the ceramic partridges the learning by doing philosophy ran deep within the entire department at the time.¹²⁵ In a television interview with Senska she talks about Voulkos and his constant breaking into the ceramics studio when the school was closed to work on his very big pieces. When she found out, Senska gave him a key, so he wouldn’t have to break in anymore.¹²⁶ Wilber’s teaching, while very much participatory, also included a hands-on personal involvement with her students.¹²⁷ When combined, as most students experienced all three professors during their years in the art department, these teachers not only left behind very large impressions of what Modernism was they also enabled their students to discover what it could become in their hands.

¹²⁴ Dewey, 1934

¹²⁵ She was teaching students how to pull a bottle on the wheel and when she was done she pinched the top.

¹²⁶ KUSM-TV, 1997

¹²⁷ See Appendix of Ray Campeau’s interview.

Community

A tight-knit supportive community was the other pillar holding up the lintel of Modernism, not just between Wilber, Senska and DeWeese but in the state at large. The community encompassed both their students and other artists that began to crop up around Montana. As noted by artist and teacher Ray Campeau, “Those were the people that were the glue that kept the arts alive in the state. There became a beauty [to it] – everybody in the arts was one big family. It was to the point where you went to a show – there were no art galleries in the state – so the MIA would put up these shows.”¹²⁸ The leaders were the teachers, the people in higher education, they would exhibit too, not just the students, [everyone] became part of it. They’d give lectures, give demonstrations, share their beauty.”¹²⁹ Campeau, who was closet to Senska and Wilber, spoke of them as tough and loving. He also described the kind of nurturing community created by all them that allowed their students to feel safe enough to explore new ways of expressing themselves. But he also spoke about the first painting he ever bought – it was Jessie Wilber’s painting, *Poppies*, of the DeWeese family.¹³⁰ (figure 27)

The idea that Campeau, who was still a student with not much money, would spend it on a painting whose subject is Robert and Gennie DeWeese’s two children, speaks to the power of the painting as well as the strength of community. To want to hang a painting of someone else’s children in their home reflects the closeness of the artists.

¹²⁸ The MIA was the Montana Institute of the Arts, an organization founded in 1948. It issued a magazine on a quarterly basis. Both Frances Senska and Jessie Wilber served as board members.

¹²⁹ See Appendix for Campeau’s transcribed interview.

¹³⁰ He and his wife loved the painting but couldn’t afford it. One day Campeau sold some of his own work, finally having enough to purchase the piece. When he called Wilber, she said it had just sold – to Campeau’s wife.

DeWeese and his wife Gennie¹³¹ kept meticulous records of all the art shows around the state, going to openings even when the weather seemed prohibitive.¹³² The DeWeeses created an environment of artists supporting artists. This is proven by the boxes the DeWeeses kept in storage filled with postcards and posters of their students' and friends' artwork showings they collected. It also reflects their dedication to the careers of their students.

Trade between artists was rampant. Since no one had enough money to buy a lot of art, but they wanted to support each other, trading art served an important purpose. It validated their continued work and helped to create a bond between the artists.¹³³

Branson Stevenson was a salesman with Socony Vacuum Oil Company as well as an artist and art lecturer.¹³⁴ By traveling around the state for the oil company he brought news of new artwork with him, and spread the word of Modernism. As he traveled around the state taking with him pieces of art he'd borrowed from people like Senska and Wilber. He would present them to the far-flung art community during a lecture or slide show. Not only did he spread the word of the art being done around the state but in his role as Vice Chairman of the American Artists Professional League he brought artists to Montana to speak and give demonstrations whenever he could. In 1952 he brought the

¹³¹ Gennie DeWeese was an artist in her right, as well as Robert DeWeese's art partner and wife.

¹³² Art openings in the early years were not at galleries but at the Montana Institute of the Arts shows and art fairs held across the state.

¹³³ This fact was shown to me personally when I visited Gennie DeWeese in the years before her death in 2007.

¹³⁴ Branson Stevenson exhibited paintings and prints in Montana as early as 1936 and was legendary for sharing not only his own work but other artists' work as he traveled the state on a lecture circuit. Frances Senska reminisced about him borrowing ceramics and prints from her own collection to present at Chamber of Commerce meetings in remote parts of Montana. He played a leading role in many arts organizations, including the Montana Institute of the Arts, Montana Historical Society, CM Russell Museum, and the Archie Bray Foundation. (Missoula Art Museum)

English Potter Bernard Leach and Hamada Yanagi to Montana. As Senska is quoted as saying, “That was a good boost and we’ve been reaping publicity from it ever since.”¹³⁵

Word of what artists were doing in the world also came to Montana through people like artist Henry Meloy, an art professor at Columbia University in New York City originally from Townsend, Montana. Meloy visited with DeWeese, Senska and Wilber as well as other Montana artists on his trips West, evident in the booklets (*Figures, Notes, and Portraits*) by Meloy, kept by DeWeese. When Meloy came back to Montana in the summers conversations between all of these artists would often spur all-nighters. Ideas of Modernism as well as politics stirred the pot.¹³⁶

Ceramic artist Pete Voulkos attended Montana State College under Senska, DeWeese and Wilber, and afterward spent time teaching at Black Mountain College, occasionally coming back to Montana after interactions with Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Charles Olson. These conversations and shared evenings were another way information about the art world got disseminated. It is also another example of sharing through experience and not textbooks or journal articles.

Up until the 1940s, the isolation of Montana was one of the causes for Modernism not to take root. But now, the awareness of their isolation became a factor of necessity in creating an art community. Whenever there was a Montana Institute of the Arts show, wherever it was held, people drove there regardless of road conditions. Knowing the small size of their number, this did not deter the artists from seeking each other out, but had the opposite effect; it united them.

¹³⁵ Senska, Archie Bray Archives, 1998

¹³⁶ These nights were documented in Robert DeWeese’s sketches.

Conclusion

Art movements are generally created by a small group of people who push forward with a different perspective other than the status quo. Although Modernism took hold in most of the country after the New York City Armory Show in 1913 it took over thirty years for it to surface in Montana.¹³⁷ In this case and in this time there was an overwhelming amount of stereotyping about the West: it included rugged individualism, the “pioneering” spirit, and the tough and tumble cowboy ways as found in movies and literature of the 40s and 50s.¹³⁸

After World War II, due to the increase in college undergraduate and post graduate enrollment with money from the G.I. Bill, Montana State College was able to provide the stability that Mable Dodge Luhan provided to the artists in New Mexico in the 1910s. The college also provided the camaraderie that developed in an artist colony, serving a similar role as the art colonies in California during the 1920s.¹³⁹ This gave artists a supportive environment where they felt secure enough to try things, to push a Modernist perspective and even teach it to their students, thereby giving more strength to alternative voices.

For Senska, Wilber and DeWeese it was their ability to take something their audience (either students, the public or other artists) would know – the landscape – and use it in a Modernist way. By this I mean they created a viewer who was actively “seeing” the work, an experience of the beholder to engage with the work rather than ask

¹³⁷ It was not an immediate reaction but one that did build up steam over the next decade.

¹³⁸ In this case I mean the years leading up to and directly after World War II. Up until the 1940s there wasn’t any interest in art that was not Realism of a “Western historical” or landscape genre.

¹³⁹ (Shipp 1996)

the viewer to stand there passively. The viewing experience, such as that of looking at a tree that is meant to be a tree and nothing more does not ask anything of the beholder. To stand in front of DeWeese's *Plains Sunset* (figure 26), the viewer must interact with the work. The first thing to notice is the horizontal patterning of the brushstrokes, then the red area that could be a setting sun, and as the viewer comes to the realization that this is a landscape, an undulating surface begins to become clear. Levels of ground, of hills against a sky coalesce. This kind of experience is exciting for the beholder. It rewards the viewer for a few minutes of work that is wildly different from the realist aesthetic. It transforms the viewer into an active observer and requires a conscious level of activity. When we consciously work at what we see the experience is elevated. This is what Gombrich means when he talks about applying the "test of consistency."¹⁴⁰ That is how he understood the break-away nature of Cubism and it is in exactly that way which I am describing Modernism in Montana. By the time DeWeese, Senska and Wilber were working in Montana, Cubism had come and gone. Abstraction, and Abstract Expressionism were on the rise, but well-established in many parts of the world. Montana artists had the task of taking those movements and condensing them in order to educate and promulgate the notion of Modernism in an environment hostile to anything that wasn't catering to the Myth of the West. To do so they had to show as well as prove their art was exciting and had its own rewards.¹⁴¹

Further research into this era will include a thorough investigation into the state of politics, culture and events in Montana directly following World War II, of particular

¹⁴⁰ Gombrich, 1960, 282

¹⁴¹ I would like to add that I am aware that what I've researched and written is a construct based on resources available to me, as well as my own interpretive priorities.

interest is the cultural climate in the 1940s and 1950s. I intend to widen my group of artists to include those who did not necessarily teach at MSC, but were vital in the spread of the modernist aesthetic around the state.

Lastly, but most importantly, I would like to point out that this work has allowed me to realize the importance of public funding in education as well as the arts. This is especially important in the more rural areas of our country, where access to museums and other institutions is not readily available. With the current climate of funding for the arts on the chopping block, it is of vital import to see the connection between public funding/educational opportunities and the type of community that can be created, such as that of the Modernists in Montana.



Figure 26:

Robert DeWeese, *Plains Sunset*, 19" by 26.5", oil on Masonite, 1963.
Courtesy of Tina DeWeese.



Figure 27:

Jessie Wilber, *Poppies*, oil on canvas, 1969.
Courtesy of Kay and Ray Campeau.

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APPENDIX

Interview with Al Tennant 6/11/16Student 1966-69

Al Tennant describes what it was like to be Frances Senska, Jessie Wilber and Rober DeWeese's student. He speaks to their teaching methodology and how Senska, Wilber and DeWeese pushed their students' limits and taught through shared experiences.

As a group it would make sense to talk about. These three individuals were pretty goddamned amazing. First of all, in Montana, to have these two ladies in a relationship in cowboy country made us think, whoa, these are pretty ballsy ladies. Then to have Bob DeWeese who was probably one of the finest printmakers/drawers in the Northwest really. First of all, without rambling on forever, they were really kind and understanding people. Even though their critiques were a little harsh they were not demeaning, they were supportive. They had a hands-off connection with students, especially Frances. She talked to you in such a subtle way you thought you were having your way but you were really doing it her way.

It's difficult to explain, she suggested as she talked "look over here" or "think about something other than that's a piece of clay" what is it? She'd go on for five or ten minutes. And then she would walk away. You sat there kind of bewildered. But then you think oh, she's saying that should explore things on my own but takes these basics. If I

don't, my own work will be totally goofy. That's how she talked. Years later, when I would go away and then come back and visit her in her studio, she had that same attitude she had when she was a Navy fighter all those years ago. She still had the same attitude about what I was doing, what everybody else was doing. She said, "I just let everyone go."

We had nowhere to do Raku except in Frances' and Jessie's backyard. We were back there making forms, putting holes in them, and they were blowing up and she'd scream out, "you boys are going to kill yourselves." But she was just open to everything. She and Jessie and Bob were just really special people who really had a fine group of students there that they encouraged and who went on to great things.

Frances, her history, she was a home economics major. She didn't know a lot about clay. But she grew with her students. And she grew as a teacher. She was a gregarious kind person who talked gently about what clay is, romantically perhaps, but she inspired us enough for most of us to stay with the arts for the rest of our lives. Fifty years later I'm still making clay because I had a teacher like Frances Senska who never discouraged me, and made me kind of think about the whole process. In Bozeman, back then, we only had one kiln and we didn't know anything about wood kilns or salt kilns (although we did build a salt kiln one time, but the school shut us down because we made one girl in the dormitory cough). It was very rudimentary. The people who were there during that time we went on and kept studying, working and developing ideas – what we learned there was basic but it wasn't sterile.

We did not make fine work while we were there, we made work of the time, in the world's worst kiln, but we were encouraged to think past that time. They created a nurturing environment. Frances, Jessie and Bob instilled within us the desire to search. Every one of the people who left that school went on to keep searching.

One night in the Molly Brown, a friend and I were drinking too much, and this cowboy was sitting next to us and he drank his drink and then he ate his glass. My friend had long hair and was a hippie, and in fact, the governor of Colorado's son had long hair and it was shaved by these cowboys ... it was not a good time to be a hippie in Montana. He said, Tennant, I am out of here right now.

Bob, Frances and Jessie they instilled – they did not teach you how to do something, but instead they taught you what to think about when you're doing the art.

I used to go out to Bob and Gennie's house and hang out. We would have a great time.

I wonder sometimes about these teachers and I think how lucky I was to have to them as part of my life. Somewhere along the line we've got to say thank you. The years I spent with those three people were so rewarding.

Frances, she was a hands off teacher. She was knowledgeable in form, she really understood what good form was, and balance. She was very much a functional potter and so she taught that. It's amazing that Voulkos came out of that. She probably said, Pete go do something else and he did.

Frances and Jessie both had the kindest souls. When you were with them, having a cup of tea or a glass of wine, there was an aura of softness about them. And that's the

way Jessie taught – about freedom, very find technique and then she said, experiment, experiment, experiment.

Bob always said, Tenant if you don't understand what a line is, then you can't draw. And I thought what the fuck is this guy talking about. Then one day he walked by and said, "That's a line."

In printmaking, I kept doing the same drawing and he said, Tennant, these are really ugly. You can't print anymore in my class until you come up with an image that has some substance about it. I thought I'm never going to pass this class, I'm going to flunk out and everyone will be so disappointed in me, and then one day I was sitting near the college, and next to me was an old Chevy pickup with an advertisement on the side, that was faded. I looked over and thought oh wow, look at this door, it has the most beautiful image. And of course I had my sketchbook with me, because that was what Bob taught us, to always have our sketchbooks with us. So I drew this image and went back to Bob and said this is what I want to print. And he said, "Okay, Tennant, you can print it. Those lines are important."

Teachers don't have to hold your hand. He was making me pay attention. The same with Frances and Jessie. A good teacher can make you pay attention. If you have the capability, and you have the imagination, you have the desire, you will take this and run. If not, go drive a truck. That's kind of what they said. They were just three of the most amazing people.

Frances, she knew where the deposits were around Bozeman, every fall we'd take a university truck and dig clay, take it back to the college and treat it, and that was the clay we used. One of the best glazes we had was from Trail Creek, Peter Voulkos found it on the bottom of one of these settling areas, this clay that made the most beautiful glazes. Trail Creek Green.

These people encouraged us to dig clay and look for glazes. It was just such a major influence in many, many lives besides mine.

Interview with Ray Campeau (Student 1954-1959)
June 16, 2016

In this interview Ray Campeau talks about his relationship with Jessie Wilber and Frances Senska, both as teachers and as friends. He also discusses the close art community that sprang up around Senska, Wilber and DeWeese.

We have a lot of their work hanging in our house. Frances was a sort of a powerhouse, ex-military, and commanded a respect that a lot of people didn't have for women teachers at that time. She made everybody jump. I'd jump for her. She was very, very powerful but very soft spoken. She taught jewelry and ceramics and filled in – they all worked back and forth through the different mediums. She was a fine printmaker. When you worked with her she allowed you to be an individual with direction. She was still a director, but everybody was different. There's a wonderful story about her when Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio were her students. She would come to the school and would have seen that they had broken in so they could work on their ceramics. She said, "you really don't have to break into the school to get in," and she gave them a key. There was that kind of understanding between her and her students. She made it okay for them to work and not get them in trouble, as some others may have done.

I'd been to school here before and just didn't really settle into a school situation so I joined the Navy for a couple of years. When I came back, a little more ready for school, and I had the GI Bill and it saved my darn bacon and kept us alive while I was in

school. I started out in architecture, loved design courses, I loved things like that and hated the engineering. Guidance used to be really strange. If you had an aptitude for art they would direct you to architecture. Not into art. And that was the way my guidance came out of high school. Architecture was part of engineering at that time. That was kind of the reason I left. When I came back, I had no particular direction, but in the courses I had to take, I had to take a painting class and took one from a crazy little man – Robert DeWeese – the only person I knew that would call a bohemian. He was this guy, strange off-the-wall. You didn't know what he was going to talk about. Whether it would be his kids or art. I can remember one time going to a class and Bob was teaching, lecturing, and nobody could pay attention to what he was saying. He had on a woolen tie on, which had a bunch of holes punched in it. Everyone was watching as he walked back and forth until finally he said, "Oh my tie? My kids did this this morning." Most people would kill their kids for punching holes in their tie, but he thought it was great so he wore it. That was one of the things that sprung me to think, if you could live like that ... he had this crazy family that he loves and he played the flute with his kids, the recorder, this is a good life.

Jessie was the mother figure. She was the soft one. An absolutely gorgeous woman, always taking care of students. We didn't know that, we each thought we were the only one she took care of ... so there were these two women, one ex-military and the other a mother figure and a crazy man were the people we were going to take courses from. There were others who filled in but they were the stalwarts who put it all together. Jessie taught printmaking and she taught painting, drawing, fibers. She had a much more

feminine approach to everything. In my lifetime, a feminine approach was different, with her it was different because she all this power and knowledge of what she was doing. And then she had this wonderful persona that went with it. If you had all three of these people it was like going to a circus. You had all these different characters who came in and you had to shift gears, no matter who were in with. Robert would take us out painting and he never, ever, gave a demonstration. Which I, at first, sort of resented. But after a while I realized it was the greatest thing he could do. He talked to us about our painting rather than have us paint like him. He would take us out and tell us a problem: ok, we're going to work with the landscape as we live in the landscape. So we would all go out but each person would be on a different track. One person would be literally trying to do it, another would doing it because of what was happening during the day, another would be looking at the color patterns. Afterwards we'd have crits and it looked like it came from 15 different people, not at all the same. All on the same field trip, all on the same day, but all different because he was respecting where we were coming from. We'd go to his shows and see the paintings he did – in printmaking he did demonstrations because you could hurt yourself. The whole atmosphere of the place in Herrick Hall – the basement and third floor was art. Painting on the third floor, ceramics and printmaking in the basement. He was an explorer with printmaking, etching and engraving. He exhibited and showed his work and was active in the MIA¹⁴². Those were the people that were the glue that kept the arts alive in the state. There became a beauty – everybody in the arts was one big family. It was to the point where you went to a show – there were no art galleries in the state – so the MIA would put up these shows. The leaders were the teachers, the

¹⁴² Montana Institute of Art, an non-profit arts organization with a periodical published quarterly.

people in higher ed., they would exhibit too, not just the students, they became part of it. They'd give lectures, give demonstrations, share their beauty. Kay and I went to a meeting in Lewistown of the MIA, the DeBeers musicians – the light had bounced from the hallway into the room, Jessie was sitting on top of the piano and nobody could even listen to the music anymore because she was so gorgeous, sitting on top of the piano like she was posed, in the sunlight, like a spotlight. Everybody there talked about it, it was a tear jerker.

We had this association with teachers that a lot of people don't have anymore. They helped us. Not just with our art, but with our lives. Frances and Jessie helped to buy our house. They knew we were going to get it before we did. I was going crazy, working on my masters, the Danforth Gallery exists because of them. I bought that place for \$9,000 but I didn't have \$9,000. I asked them if I could get a loan and they said, "certainly." We paid them back, almost immediately, but it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for them. They were the catalyst for so many things happening. It's like the Archie Bray Foundation, Frances was one of the founding members there. They had this connection all through the state with people working all through the state. They were an inspiration, not just teachers, and they did their own work. Some people I had later on would say, "I'm an artist but I'm working teaching," they never said that, "They said I'm a teacher, an instructor at the university and I instruct art and I make art." But they knew how to work with people. If you go through the people they had, they all knew each other, they could have a reunion and it would be a kick. There are a lot of people doing art out there because of them.

They also protected the families. Sometimes when you get really tired and then you get upset – you can get pretty angry. One time I was working in the jewelry department with Frances and I designed what I thought was a beautiful piece. I was just about to take it up to get a evaluation and I saw a little bit of fire scale on it and I broke every rule ... I was going to put a piece of jewelry against a buffing wheel while it still had a cord on it. That's a bad thing to do. So I thought well, I'll coil the cord in my hand not thinking it would ever get tangled. But the second I put it on the wheel it caught and burned the inside of my hand came out, the cord slapped the jewelry until it was destroyed. And I said a few things, ranting and raving. Kay used to drive up to the school and pick me up. I don't which one it was Jessie or Frances, but she went down to the car and told Kay to just drive home, let me walk, you don't want to talk to him right now. After walking ten blocks I was able to walk it off and I didn't feel like such a dork by the time I got home. She didn't have to go out and say anything to Kay. Kay dropped out of school when we got married, so she went back, and her goal was to graduate before our daughter did. When she graduated Jessie made her a wonderful little painting that had to do with reaching for a goal. They connected us in that way.

Jessie was an incredible lithographer. Screen printer. We have a print that she printed very few – she had one that she signed for Ray and Kay and just gave it to us. And so there was some sort of connection they made with students. They inspired a lot of people to be like that, to become teachers. They had this incredible respect from students. You never bad-mouthed them. They were very soft people, never angry, unless they were talking politics, mostly it was we have this information for you. We have a series of

things you have to accomplish. We'll be there and we'll work with you but we won't do it for you.

Bob would go downtown in front of his studio on Main Street, across the street from the Bozeman Hotel, top floor of a two story building and it had a side entryway. It would paint on the street and sell paintings. Kay and I managed the Valley View golf course for four years, Bob would come out and do quick sketches of people and they would buy them. He could be a literal as he wanted to be – it wasn't the way he did his art but when he would do something like that he could knock out caricatures. His studio was a hangout for artists and students, dark and dingy. Very special to be able to go up there.

He would take us out and give us a certain amount of time to do things. Hoyt Sherman-like classes – he taught something similar to that. There were a lot of different things he would do to get us to observe, not analyze, but to observe and let ourselves become involved in the observations. It was our painting it wasn't a painting, and he would criticize it that way. He would first ask, "what are you trying to do?" and we would tell him and then he would say you're very successful getting it across here and not so successful here. He wouldn't set up a problem: we're all going to draw this tree. That wasn't his way. I've still got paintings when I was in class with Bob, Frances and Jessie.

Jessie was a very soft bohemian. She would set up situations. A lot of times we painted indoors, Jessie would paint while we were painting, not giving a demonstration. We would be painting and she would be painting. Then she would explain what she was

doing. And we would explain what we were doing. They made everybody feel like they were important. They never made anyone feel like they less than them. Everything was communal – which was a sign of the signs. They did things communally.

This was the hottest spot. It was the only spot with a high fire downdraft kiln, all the way to the East Coast, and that was because of Frances. They would do things like that. Bob got in trouble with OSHA for doing things like that. He was using galvanized plates for etching. There's zinc in the galvanized plate and it gives off mustard gas. Mustard gas is bad. The only good about it is that it's very heavy. This yellow gas would come out and we'd be in there and [the gas] would go over the edge of the table and hit the floor. OSHA came up and said you can't do it and you can't show other people how to do that. Bob didn't care because he made beautiful prints on galvanized steel plates. While the OSHA man was there Bob asked him if he could just one last print. The OSHA man rolled his eyes and said, "Yes, you can do one more." The title was "*The last galvanized print.*"

Jessie and Frances were always caretakers, Bob was a flyer. To get something done, he'd just do it. It could be scary. Where Jessie and Frances always knew what would happen. They had a number of things that got shut down because they were in a building where other things were taught. The building was where they kept the rats from the experiments. So the jewelry room didn't feel like the rats had actually been taken out. They're exploring all the time. They got things for the school. Like the big litho stones. They would get them from old publishing companies, like from old Campbell's Soup labels that was done on litho, Barvarian lithos stones. They'd chase them down. I doing a

big lithograph and while I was cleaning the bed, I did that, washed it. Inked up the stone, put my paper on, applied the squeegee on top, applied the pressure started cranking it through and I heard “tick” I wonder what that was? I broke a stone in half. It was a really beautiful stone. And I thought, they’re going to kick me out of school. It was horrible. Jessie was teaching that course. I went in and told her I broke the stone. She asked, “do you know how it happened?”

I think I left a granule of abrasive on the stone and that little grain popped it. She said, “Well, now we’ve got two.”

Instead of saying you dummy.

That’s what it was like. It was a safe house and you didn’t mind putting in a little more effort and time in there.

We watched Bob go through a series of stages in a particular print, not fiving us demos but every time it was in a new state he’d pin it up. He never worked with perfect paper ... he’d just rip it. You’d get the same type of image slightly altered on each one so he’d got it up to where he wanted it. We have a sketch of a piece he made, a pretty important etching. He always had a sketchbook – but if he didn’t just drew on whatever was around. He drew on napkins and pieces of paper. We have one he did as a portrait, a drawing he did for an etching, of his family, it looks so childlike it’s just wonderful.

We were encouraged to show our work, by all of them, art wasn’t something you put in a closet. If you were a writer you wouldn’t write and put it in the closet, unless it was a diary. If you’re doing art you’re communicating. They always used the word communicating, or saying something. It could be funny, serious, something about the

aesthetic ... you had to have a purpose rather than just going out there making something. And that caught on, it became part of our package. They were, our kids called them our guardian angels, they treated our kids like real people. Everyone equal to them, no one was above anyone else. That was a whole crew like that. It was a great place to go to school. There were instructors, but none like the dynamic trio.

Poindexter collection: the other thing was Bob ... they were letting people take it out and put it in their in homes. They had a de Kooning and they let some people put it in the trunk of their car, but they never took it out. I went up when they had the Poindexter collection they didn't know what they had. You could do what Bob did, which was legitimate, but you shouldn't have been allowed to do that. Just put it in your car.

Everybody that came into contact with them became part of that magic.

When I was taking jewelry with Francis, they brought in a jeweler and I dropped all my classes to watch that guy work. I became very close to him. Conrad Swerring? By the time that ended he offered me a student position, but I couldn't afford to take it because I had so many kids. When he left I took jewelry [classes] from Francis, but then I got involved with painting and switched gears to get into painting.

They would bring in guests, and you would meet these other artists from around the state and from around the world. And there was a magic in that too, because we were so isolated. And all of a sudden we're with all these people who had connections with galleries away from Montana.

The first painting we ever bought was one of Jessie Wilber's. Kay and I had an agreement that anything we made in art we'd spend in art. And so the first time they had

a student show at Herrick Hall somebody bought a few of my lithographs. But let me tell you the whole story... Jessie painted a painting of the DeWeese kids and Kay and I fell in love with it. But we couldn't afford it. We saw it a couple of shows, one of the MIA shows, and we wished we could have had it. Then we left all of kids here and hitchhiked our way to the Worlds Fair at Seattle and there was Jessie's painting again, in the Northwest Pavilion, and we thought, oh god we really want that painting. Everywhere we went that painting would appear. Then we had one of those sales up here and I sold the lithos ... I came running home and told Kay I'd sold a couple of those. Then I had to find to phone to call Jessie and tell her I could make a down payment on that painting. She said, "I just sold it ... to your wife!"

We both made the same decision only she got to it before I did.

That's the way we felt about them. We worked with them. I would have run through a wall if they told I could run through a wall.

Francis was hard-nosed, not some sweet little thing. She was likable, but when she spoke, she spoke with an authority that the others didn't. She was the boss. And in a day we would traverse these three people and work with them, and be part of their world.

When we had the Ketterer art center. We had a retrospect for Jessie, it was beautiful show, Jessie was the quiet one. She did a lot of woodblock prints. Here was this very delicate woman who could rip up a piece of wood. Woodprints? It was because it was the easiest, and required the least amount of space. Woodblock becomes very personal. You can work on it and put it away for a while.

They took care of me when I'd get crazy and I think they fell in love with Kay. Kay and I met in theater and Bob was in theater, they had a theater in town at the Red Barn called the Loft Theater and the last show we saw was Bob played Mack the Knife in the Three Penny Opera, and he was incredibly good. You could only seat 40 people in the whole place. Kay did Dial M for Murder. Bob was in theater pretty heavily. They lived in town, on church over the RR tracks there's a white brick house, that was B and G's, the place looked like a junk yard to the point where the city asked them to clean it up. None of us wanted them to clean it up, we had a great time over there. Where else could go out have lunch where Peter Voulkos played and Rudy Autio played ... it was crazy with them. Bob loved being with his kids, so many guys so much else to do and let the woman take care of the kids. One time, all these kids were dressed up in fairy things they'd made, dancing around with wands, and we can hear music. This is really cool, we slow down to watch – Bob was underneath the table playing the recorder for his kids to dance to ... how do you not want to be that. What a world we'd have.

Interview with Neil Jussila (Student 1961-1965 plus plus one year for a teaching certificate on the GI Bill after serving in Vietnam).

Interviewed on 6/23/2016

Neil Jussila talks about his experiences with Frances Senska, Jessie Wilber and Robert DeWeese. He was especially affected by DeWeese's introduction into abstract art and talks about seeing the Poindexter Collection for the first time.

I started school during fall quarter of 1961. I had my undergraduate degree in 1965. One extra quarter to get a teaching cert. I had fallen in love and needed some way to make a living. I didn't think I would be possible to do anything outside of teaching. For an abstract artist, from what I'd seen from Bob and Jessie experienced.

If I was to cut to the chase, what I really appreciated about Bob, who was my first teacher, was I never understood him. What he was doing of course was talking about art, he was teaching art, not talking about it, but actually teaching it. Rudy Autio once said something like that. One of my colleagues at this university is the joy of getting tenure is you can talk about the subject without actually doing anything. I remember the first project that Bob assigned. You have your sketch books, I'd like to see what you can do with drawing something on the canvas. What I did was make a pen and ink sketch because I liked Charlie Russell and I put a lot of time in on it, and devoted a lot of energy to it. It had some likeness to a building on the campus. And Bob, knowing that's what the

students would do, came in the next class, looked at each other's drawings, with a lot of detail, time and energy ... we were to work with India Ink and Japanese brushes. Now do the same thing with that on another page, with only a minute and a half to do it. I did it. And I managed to do a fairly good job. He held up my work as an example.

He liked the idea of the quick sketch. Bob excelled in as an impeccably fine draftsman. It seems to me when I think about it, he was involved with this idea that the word draw means to bring forth like drawing water from a well. He was that kind of an artist. His drawings were always quite intimate. He always had a ... his purpose was to teach people the value of spontaneity, that's hard thing to teach and to develop that in a language that 18 or 19 year olds can comprehend I think is really hard because they're very self-conscious at that stage, pretty rigid, the idea of spontaneity can be quite challenging. We were off to a running start with that. So I struggled through it. I liked him because he epitomized the idea of a San Francisco beatnik. I found that in he was very responsible in how he stated things. He was not a bullshitter. He could tolerate some things but he would really draw the line when he needed to with students. He had no tolerance for mediocrity. I think that was true. I think that it was a privilege to be in his class even though at the time I didn't realize it. He liked students from Butte, which was my hometown, I heard a comment from him that his best students came from Butte because they had a much better social awareness. Better cultural awareness.

I remember on one occasion, I was terribly homesick and had to go home every weekend, I had a very hard time adjusting to college, my father and I went duck hunting, somewhere along the line I'd picked up some splashy techniques on how to make water

color paintings. I came back from that duck hunting trip on a Saturday and we had a frame in the house so I globbed onto the frame and figured I'd make a watercolor painting. I carefully rendered a dark evening sky with these ducks coming in over the berm, I wonder what Mr. DeWeese had to say about this! I'd expected him to say I was a great genius. This is how freshman think. And nothing's changed. So we went into the office area and he looked at it. He asked me if I had a wood burning kit and I said I thought I had one at the house, and he said, it looks like you burned those ducks into the sky and then he said that grass on the berm looks like whiskers. I knew at that point my great genius was going unrecognized. After being really honest at that point he carefully explained and told me what a stereotype was and what a cliché was and he did in a way I could understand.

I'd never heard of those two words before. That lesson coming from a professor in the first two months of my education was invaluable. I never forgot it.

I have tried to address my own students in my own career in that way. The lesson was clear I had to start thinking of art in a broader sense. I had to get that stereotype out of my mind.

I was there when he brought the Poindexter Collector. Everyone in the department had one little chore and the chore he was assigned was to be charge of exhibitions in the art department. And that was a lot of work. He had a heavy teaching load. It was in Herrick Hall. He had received an invitation from the Montana Historical Society – they had served notification that they had an exhibit, the Poindexter Exhibit. He got a state truck or something because the paintings were pretty big and took two or three students

with him to Helena and picked up as many of those paintings as they could and they brought them back to Bozeman and installed them in the Student Union Building ... I think in a lounge area ... along with that he brought a copy of George Poindexter's essay and he had the department secretary transcribe it and it was mimeographed and distributed to all the students in his classes. He talked about and we went over and looked at the exhibit and talked about abstract expressionism. The upshot – it was during my sophomore year in 1962, I would go over to the SYB and read the essay and look at the paintings and it really made a lot of sense to me. It had a large impact on my work.

During that same quarter, Jim Reineking, he was really smart and visually one of the best students that ever went through that curriculum, Bob spoke of him for many years. He was about 8 years older than I was, he could do things with line quality that was like magic, it was lyrical. He drew really well and he had learned how to draw from Ben Steele at Eastern Montana College. I came into contact with that and after that my life began to change. And because Bob never pandered to students. Some of teachers do. But Bob never did pandered to the ignorance of students. Nor was Frances, nor was Jessie. They had a nice sense of decorum. They who they were and they knew who their students were ... Bob opened the door for me to explore abstract expressionism. When I saw what Jim could do I realized what I could do. At some point in my junior year I did a watercolor that I thought was pretty snazzy ... Bob would watch me work and I thought I'd improved. He looked at it and looked at the sky, he said I think somebody told you once how to paint a sky and that's all you know. You're not looking and you're not

thinking. And it was just that abrupt and that was a good lesson. That type of candor I really appreciate. I had to hear that and on those terms.

In later years Bob had an exhibit at the YAM, it was a hallway exhibit in the museum, and Frances and Jessie came over with Bob and Gennie. It was Frances who pointed this out to me, explanations do not come easy, that one evening I was looking at the drawings Bob had rendered, they were fast and they were intimate, really wonderful, and I was chatting with Frances and she was looking at them, and she said you know Neil anybody can make a very clever drawing, like a box that looks like a box, but not anybody can do this which is felt. That was the type of environment that F, J and B and G had created. If there was anything that underlined the philosophy of what they believed in that was it. When I think of the remoteness of Montana at that time, and how few people who had an understanding of what was taking place in the art world, that was quite an observation. And I'm sure they struggled with that for a long time before they could articulate what they were ... with that idea that was nothing but a feeling before Frances could articulate it.

Gennie and Bob had a great love of doing things. Bill Stockton he and his wife and their son would drive to Billings or Bozeman on occasion and stay with the DeWeeses and have a good time. Every time they went to Bozeman their son was something they looked forward to, the DeWeese household was alive with things, from telescopes to microscopes to musical instruments. It was a treat. They had such engaging curiosities, and that was carried through in how Bob taught. They were not restricted in any way.

Jessie had retired and gave me a good collection of fine art books that remain as being classics. And I remember Bob noted that this one book on the lives of Van Gogh and Gauguin and how they worked together was a significant read. I know that's an indicator, as Gennie said, Bob was no visual dummy. More so than anything he was an draftsman of the first order. Bill Stockman also commented about his drafting abilities and very fine he was. In terms of bringing forth, I really believe in that. If Bob could've lived to this point with his curiosity he would have embraced digital photography and those big scanners. His late work with the neckties was really experimental. They indicated a very different direction of real play and exploring an idea. He took delight in it.

I went to graduate school on the GI Bill in Bozeman. When I finished my degree in 1965 I was in the army within a month, I got out of that I had the GI Bill and so I returned to school. At that point after the army I couldn't stand any sort of regiment. I just hated the army. Those 21 months were the longest months of my life. When I came back the art department changed and they hired quite a few young faculty and they politicized the department and they were going to make a name for themselves on the backs of the graduate students and I just avoided them. They reminded me of the officers in the army. I always went to Bob for advice. I started to become spontaneous once again. He encouraged me to do what I knew how to do. He never tried to control me. I have a lot of respect for him.

Assignment from Jessie was to get a poster board with one color of paint make a picture of something you use every day, a can of shaving cream, or a razor. Jessie didn't

think it was a good job. She was trying to wake people up. She woke me up. In my sophomore year I took a class from Frances and I knew right away that I didn't like that class. I didn't like getting my hands dirty. Frances was very tolerant, really quite good. I remember trying to set up some clay on a wheel. I couldn't get it centered, I was puzzled and weak and she saw me struggling. She centered the clay and said now you begin. But it just wobbled. She said no, like this. She grabbed my arms and told me to hold my hands this way and she said, do it this way!" and up came the cylinder, boom! She said, "Now do it like that." I said, "Yes, m'am." She was that type of person, if there was a problem she could address. She wasn't tall, but she had a lot of strength. Out of all of them, she had one of the best conceptions of contemporary art. I remember on one occasion, Gennie was having a get together and Frances was there, at the time I was doing a study of eastern Montana and asked if I was doing the prairie landscapes. And I said they weren't really landscapes, but more like paintings. And a smile came over her face she said the object is the object, and then she laughed once a teacher always a teacher. There was an opening for a discussion and I marveled at it, it was a wonderful gift. I'm so grateful. I think I might've been blessed with a fairly good curiosity, even though I was guarded and rigid I wasn't afraid to rise to a challenge even if it meant failure and embarrassment, I could still accept. They really had a hands-off approach. The best way to find yourself in art is just to try and try and try until you discovered something. The best way to understand and learn about art is just to experiment and try and experiment and try and try again until you hit a discovery and an awareness. With that discovery and awareness then you can go back and learn because then you would have an application

for the information. I think that idea probably was a good idea and part of the operation of the art department. I might also add that among the three of them, they would have an art bazaar where they would sell ceramics and jewelry and make silkscreen prints and gift items they were always co-opting the graduate students to take the freshmen in hand and encourage them to show up on Thursday nights to make something for the art bazaar. There was a nice sense of community they created.