

Rebecca Keller, *Affinities*, 2013. Laser-cut vinyl and window, 40 x 48 in.

In Residence at Chesterwood

by Christine Temin

As a youngster growing up in Concord, Massachusetts, Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) carved various materials, including turnips. He later went on to become one of the great sculptors of the American Renaissance. Concord, the hotbed of the Transcendentalist movement, was home to the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott. Louisa's youngest sister, Abigail May Alcott (an artist herself and the model for Amy in her sibling's celebrated novel *Little Women*) took pity on young Daniel and provided him with some proper modeling materials and tools. No more turnips for French.

What would the creator of the *Minute Man* in Concord and the *Seated Lincoln* inside the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, make of contemporary sculptors who eschew marble and bronze in favor of just about anything else? Would he approve of turnips as a choice? Or would he offer these artists more conventional materials?

By 1897, French was sufficiently established to buy a 129-acre property in the Berkshire hills of Western Massachusetts, which he named Chesterwood, after his father's house in Chester, New Hampshire. He, his wife Mary, and their daughter made it their

base from May to October, living in New York the rest of the year. He loved it there. "That is heaven," he once said of Chesterwood. "New York is, well, New York." To design his studio and residence, French hired Henry Bacon, who had worked with the celebrated firm of McKim, Mead & White (the same architects who later designed the Lincoln Memorial).

In 1968, the National Trust for Historic Preservation acquired Chesterwood from French's daughter Margaret French-Cresson. A decade later, "Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood" was launched, with a

different juror selecting the art for each season. The 2013 edition is scheduled to be the last of these yearly group exhibitions. From now on, the shows will be biennials, and the years between will be devoted to curated displays that might even consist of work by a single artist, says Donna Hassler, Chesterwood's director since 2008. (As a guest juror for the 2005 show, she deliberately included both figurative and conceptual work.) There will also be more emphasis on artists-in-residence, which, if you think about it, French was himself. The Guggenheim Museum administered residencies on the property in the 1980s and '90s, and Hassler intends to reinvigorate and revamp the program. "The residency program is going to be our main focus," she says. It will also be interactive, so that visitors can meet and watch artists more than they used to.

"Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood" has sometimes had specific themes, notably a 1989 show devoted to women figurative sculptors. This was in some sense a rebuttal to French, who didn't cotton to the idea of women sculptors. His daughter, however, became a noted sculptor of portrait busts.

The challenge to any sculptor showing at Chesterwood is the environment. It's so lovely that works can be easily overtaken by it. Siting opportunities are as varied as any artist could want. Jurors and staff do the siting. Hassler says, although artists sometimes state in their applications that their work is best in an open field or that they need

Right: Maud Bryt, *Eve*, 2013. Bronze, 2.5 x 5 x 3 ft. Below: Judith Shea, *Lower Manhattan Classic*, 2006–09. Mixed media, 78 in. tall.



a dead tree around which to create. There are formal gardens with a hydrangea-bordered allée and arches to mark the route, an overlook with a dramatic drop and view of distant hills and sweeping lawns, and a woodland path that feels secretive and serene, with pine needles crunching underfoot.

In the 1980s and '90s, a lot of Cor-ten steel pieces in the "Contemporary Sculpture" shows looked like they were auditioning for corporate lobbies. There were also years when the shows were dominated by academic figurative

work, a risky move, since French was a master at it, and with certain exceptions contemporary artists are not. In this genre, you can't get better than French's *Death Staying the Hand of the Sculptor* at the historic Forest Hills Cemetery

in Boston, which commemorates the sculptor Martin Milmore and his stonecutter brother Joseph. The solemn, hooded figure of Death lays one hand on Martin's and carries a bouquet of poppies—the promise of everlasting sleep—in the other.

One of the few exceptions to the general inadequacies of contemporary figurative work is Judith Shea. "The first time someone used the word 'figurative' about my work it was negative," she recalls. "I grew up in the middle of the abstract century, but in my heart I knew that wasn't [for me]." Shea's association with Chesterwood began in 1989, when she was the Guggenheim Museum's Sculptor in Residence at the site. Under Hassler's tenure, Shea returned for another residency in 2010. Shea says that when then-Guggenheim curator Lisa Dennison first invited her to Chesterwood, "I didn't really know anything about the place other than the work of Daniel Chester French. I didn't know the Berkshires. It just looked like a great residency." Part of the appeal was its length, from August until mid-October, so Shea felt she could really accomplish something. She had New York friends who spent

weekends in the Berkshires, and they introduced her to some of the many artists in the area. "It was a moment when I benefitted from being away from New York, and there weren't any cell phones, no Internet access or other distractions. I remember drawing clouds, thinking about the figure in the landscape."

"The place that French holds in American figurative sculpture was an inspiration," says Shea, who was exploring grand questions such as "How do you get to be Bernini? Or French?" She'd been working in bronze but felt that if she continued with it, she'd become "a footnote in history." At Chesterwood in 1989, she remembers "starting to incorporate the full figure into my work." Prior to that she'd been doing striking sculptures of uninhabited clothing with classical references. While in the Berkshires, she started carving. "Working with wood had to have been influenced by being surrounded by the woods," she says. "I made the transition to wood because there were so many bad examples in bronze that I didn't want to be associated with. The first New York gallery show I had after that period was wooden monuments." She was trying



TOP: COURTESY CAROLINE COOK / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST



to rehabilitate the tradition of monuments, even equestrian monuments. At Chesterwood, she also studied how French sculpted hands, “the whole code, the encryption of gestures.” And she researched such seemingly antiquated matters as pedestals. A history buff, she made a pilgrimage to French’s grave in Concord and to the *Minute Man* statue.

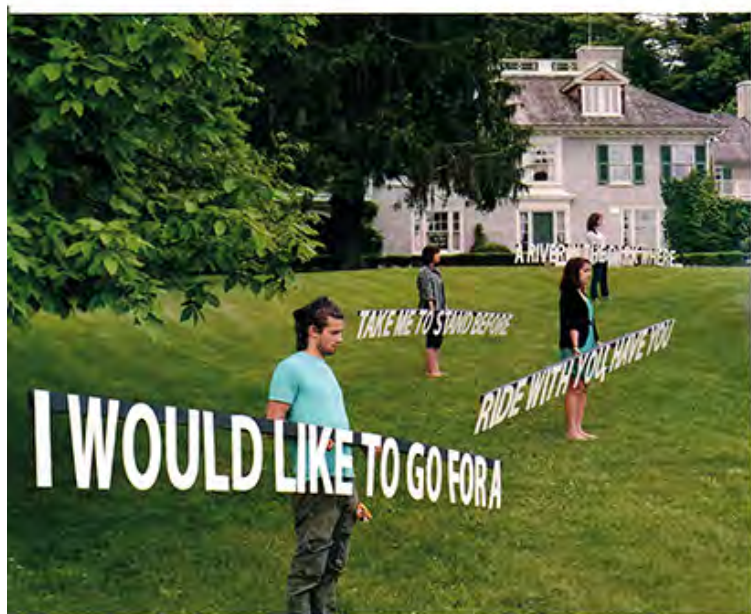
Shea recalls that when Hassler invited her back, “she said to me, ‘I’m going to pick your brain.’ She was trying to reconfigure the program. What worked? What didn’t? How to find interesting artists? How to find support? She needed more board financial support. I became an informal advisor. The board was locally based, so they’d be involved.” Shea’s

second residency was shorter, about a month, and allowed visitors to come and go in the shed where she was working. She says, “I didn’t find it intrusive. I work more slowly now, so I didn’t have any problem with people asking me questions.” As with her ’89 experience, she started working with an unfamiliar material—this time clay, which she bought at the Sheffield Pottery, a famous local supplier of materials and tools.

As Shea’s experience demonstrates, Chesterwood’s residencies can prompt artists to branch out. The 2013 artist-in-residence is Rebecca Keller, an instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who specializes in installations having to do with the history of place. She is also the author of *Excavating History: Artists Take*

on Historic Sites (StepSister Press, 2012). Hassler met Keller at a National Trust conference, where the artist gave the keynote speech, and asked her to come to Chesterwood. “Donna asked me to focus on the house, because that’s where she would like people to be,” Keller says. “My methodology for the project has been to do a lot of reading.” Keller did an initial round of research during the months when Chesterwood is closed, when she had to wear a winter coat and scarf even while working indoors. Undaunted, she trawled through French’s library. “This guy knew everybody,” she says. “He was connected to the important writers, artists, and arts administrators of the time.” She admires French’s use of allegory. “Some [things] he used over and over. Wings, for example. He said he was an ornithologist before he was a sculptor. Wings are almost always a symbol of death,” she explains. But Keller worries that contemporary viewers do not understand allegories, that a bouquet of poppies doesn’t mean to them what it did to people in French’s day.

Tim Prentice, a perennial success in the Chesterwood annals, understands how to collaborate with the landscape rather than try to upstage it or treat it as background. His kinetic metal sculptures along the woodland path were magical, formed, in a couple of cases, of hundreds of tiny metallic squares that shimmered and floated like exquisite insects, making a faint rustling sound in the process. Prentice has had commissions from Cameroon to Taiwan, but he lives fairly close to Chesterwood. “I get annoyed with them sometimes and then



Above: Tim Prentice, *Dot Dance*, 2011. Aluminum, stainless steel, and PVC, dimensions variable. Left: Adam Frelin, *Narration* (Amy Hempel, *Tumble Home*), 2013. Printed performance stills and wooden billboards, 6 x 5 x 0.33 ft.

Right: Sharon Bates, *Practice*, 2013. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Below right: Lucy Hodgson, *All Fall Down*, 2009. Wood and shingles, 6 x 11 x 10 ft. Below: Rick and Laura Brown, *The Housatonic*, 2013. Wood and trees, 15 x 40 x 3 ft.



I don't submit," he says, "and then I think, it's only an hour away." What annoys him is the conservatism: "I always thought that Chesterwood had a permanent identity crisis. It wasn't a great career advance to be there...I was glad when George Rickey was in it, because he's a senior figure in my line." Senior figures were in short supply in the annuals, though, Prentice feels. Both artists and jurors were largely local, and there aren't many locals of his caliber. He also mentions the site's chronic lack of funds.

Hassler obviously had her work cut out for her when she arrived to guide Chesterwood into the future. The estate had been maintained, but as with all properties of its vintage, there was plenty still to be done. The French archives, for instance, were housed in the residence, where they were inaccessible and lacked climate control. Now they reside at another Berkshire institution, Williams College, which has a fine art historical tradition, having trained some of the country's most prominent museum directors. At Williams, the archives have well-staffed, climate-controlled quarters. The college is



also digitizing the material. Hassler says, "We need to be a partner and a player in the sculpture world, more than we have been." Money is ever an issue. Fundraising is ongoing, for causes ranging from sculpture transportation to residencies. The works in the group shows are for sale, aggressively so, with price lists accompanying admission tickets. Hassler says that sculptors have

received commissions based on their work there, and some collectors return year after year and have established personal sculpture gardens based on what they've learned and bought at Chesterwood.

Hassler is a passionate advocate of her institution's mission. Visitors, she says, come for different reasons: the sculpture, the historic house, the formal gardens, and the landscape.

Mentioning that French's pals Henry James and Edith Wharton were habitués of Chesterwood, she adds, "We see this [becoming] a gathering place for creative people, as it was during French's lifetime."

"Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood 2013" is on view through October 31, 2013. More information is available at <www.chesterwood.org>.



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