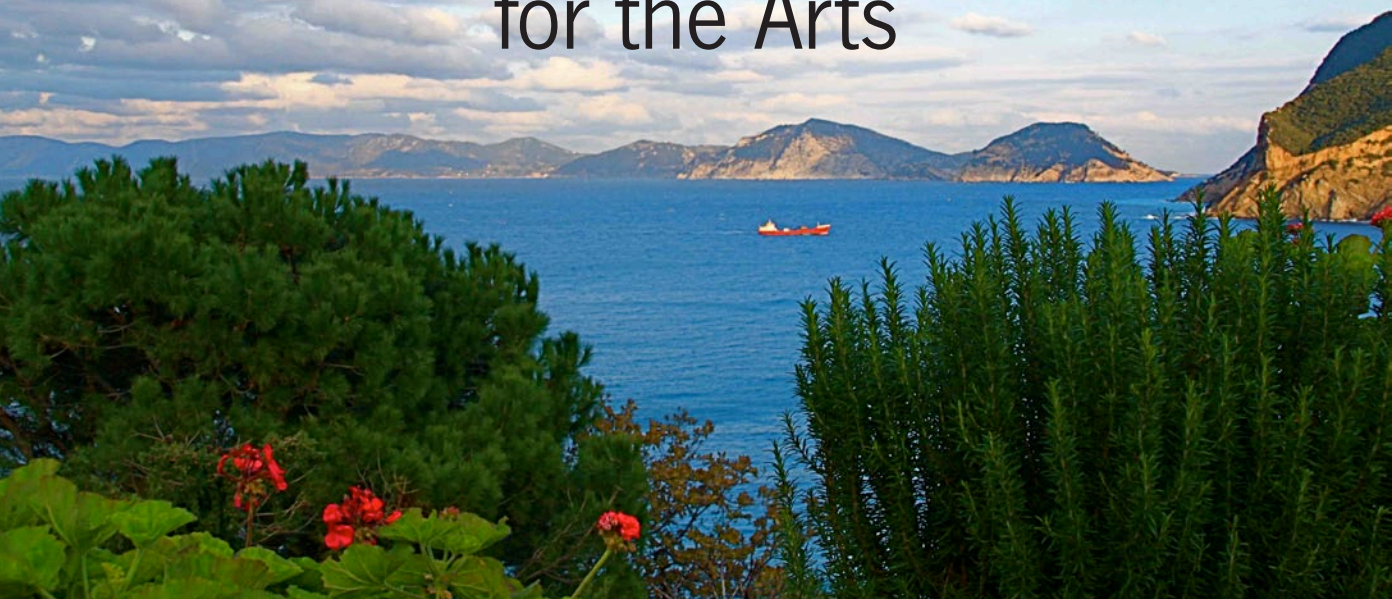


The Skopelos Foundation for the Arts



Mark Messenger explores a residency program in Greece

*Above: Skopelos Harbor.
Photo by Kiki Gro-Nielsen.
Below: Skopelos Foundation
for the Arts Studios.*

I RECENTLY SPENT SIX WEEKS IN GREECE AT A small residency program called the Skopelos Foundation for the Arts, 'SkopArt'. There is an online abundance of comparable art residencies around the world. In most cases these provide sufficient work space, facilities, technical support and opportunities for aesthetic exchange but each is idiosyncratic. What is important is to match one's artistic goals with the right residency. I would like to share some of the specifics of SkopArt because I think it provides an example of the broad opportunities many artists, teachers and study groups are currently seeking; namely, the chance to tailor an experience for creative renaissance.

SkopArt, located on the Greek island of Skopelos, just off the northern mainland in the Greater Sporades, provides studio space and arranges accommodations in a well-equipped, low-key and incredibly beautiful environment. But most significantly, its unique collection of attributes fosters personal inspiration.

Unusually pine studded, Skopelos is one of the greenest islands in the Aegean with a reputation for its grapes and olives reaching back thousands of years. It is a particularly conducive setting for concentrated investigations in ceramics, painting, printmaking, performance or writing either as an individual or as a part of a study group. The SkopArt





*Left: A ceramics studio space with incredible views.
Right: Hector Mavridis performing an historic Greek firing.*

founder, Gloria Carr, first visited the island in 1996 and recognised it as an ideal location to pursue her dream of organising an international studio. Carr earned her MFA in printmaking from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She participated in a number of group studios, exhibited her artwork broadly and spent 17 years as a consultant and editor for the *Smithsonian Magazine* in Washington DC. These experiences provided her with a unique background for setting up an art foundation. She began construction in 1998 with the assistance of an international board of directors, local community leaders and the Dutch Architect Gemma Koppen. Three years later the foundation opened as a non-profit. Since then, guided by Hellenic history, contemporary trends and island life, it has promoted significant dialogue between artists from almost every continent.

Albert Einstein pointed out that, though we can plan to implement creative insights, we cannot specifically plan when we will have them or if we will have them at all. The process of their arrival, even to those of noted genius, is a mystery. The best we can do is set the stage by nurturing habits of readiness. As artists we ‘prime the pump’ with the disciplines of studio practice. These are pretty simple; when in doubt explore images, scrutinise texts and exhaust sketchbooks; stretch the canvas, mix the palette, prepare the press, load the camera, wedge the clay, fill the page or sound the phrase. To absorb and wait are important phases of creative incubation but equally significant is the habit of employed hands, however clumsy. This activity is what the psychologist and philosopher William James referred to as motive powers’ “slow dull heave of the will” and what Buddhism notes as “right effort”. But what about when even our best intentions stall? Where do we go for inspiration?

In my experience, a dramatic change of environment (such as a residency provides) makes it difficult to rely on old patterns of behaviour. And poignant first-hand encounters, even if brief, can constitute profound influences. Some might argue that there is a marked difference between sensual novelty and dedicated creative research but I contend that it is possible to seek the best of both worlds; a substantial period of fresh investigation and reflection as well as exotic interaction.

Art residencies are as unique as the individuals who take them, with the added variations of time, location and production. I suggest that within a relatively short time frame (several weeks for example) it is surprisingly manageable financially and, though it may seem

I asked Carr and Somer what successful visitors to Skopart have in common. They concurred that those who combine adaptation and a sense of adventure are the most satisfied. These individuals do not sweat the inevitable challenges of travel and are willing to try new things. As a result they leave the island with invigorated perspective and a collection of new strategies for their artwork.



*Above left: Demonstration, by
The School of the
Art Institute of Chicago.*

*Above right: Studios accommodate
drawing, painting, printmaking
and ceramics.*

Below: Skopelos Town waterfront.

unreasonable at first to consider a more ambitious agenda, there are many inspiring precedents. It has been demonstrated that a change of lifestyle and pace transforms an individual's production over the course of his or her working life and also positively affects a person's health and relationships.

There are two categories of residents at SkopArt; I attended as an individual but many do so as part of organised groups. Individuals who come alone or as collections of friends working independently can be flexible regarding unanticipated opportunities. Groups, which are often affiliated with institutions and are earning credits, are by nature less flexible but this is easily remedied if leaders schedule for independent activities. A typical schedule for a successful group has been the following:

Participants rendezvous in Athens to spend time at city sites and attend activities relevant to their disciplines. Ideally, groups have two leaders and about 15 participants. Next, everyone makes the scenic half-day, bus-ferry trip to Skopelos. On the island, students alternate between lectures, demonstrations, studio time, field trips and personal exploration. At the conclusion of scheduled activities, students either return home or continue their travel independently. Given a heads up, most participants arrange an enriching, often extensive homeward journey.

SkopArt's programs are designed to support each resident's holistic experience. In the late spring, summer and early fall when the allure of ancient history and artistic precedent are framed by expansive vistas of warm, vibrant light, this experience extends far beyond the studios' 24 hour access. Well-prepared meals and table pounding political conversations in the village add a human dimension and even simple routines, like an evening walk or run, are potentially amplified. One might become aware, for example, that the island's trail network was the training ground of Olympians (most notably a classical running champion named Agnondas) and along the paths one might also discover artefacts reaching back to Minoan civilisation and earlier. Needless to say, Skopelos is a veritable treasure trove of human epochs and aspirations.

Successfully managing a complex residency involves a combination of passion and pragmatism. Since 2000, Carr's daughter, Jill Somer, has provided the invaluable organisational expertise to complement Carr's far reaching idealism. Somer first visited Skopelos in 2000 on a brief vacation from her mortgage banking career in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Program analysis was the last thing on her mind but the foundations



growing needs were compelling. Somer returned two months later as Associate Director intending to stay a year. What she did not expect was the dramatic change of lifestyle and values her decision would bring.

Somer greeted me when I stepped from the ferry, an intelligent and hospitable woman with a disarming sense of humour. Soon, I also met her six-year-old daughter Zoë, her husband Yiorgos and her mother. Zoë's first priority was to show me the foundation's garden which she tends with her father, Yiorgos. Yiorgos' was to show me the facilities he maintains. Carr's was to ask about my artwork. I have rarely met a more large-hearted group of individuals. Somer, now fluent in Greek and nearly encyclopaedic in her knowledge of the culture, understands as does Carr, that their experience as expatriates intimately corresponds with that of the artists they host. They have been extended the title of "Skopelitis" by locals (a rare honour for non-Greeks) but remain cognizant of their status and make extraordinary efforts to support their adopted culture. Yiorgos, the gregarious former soccer pro and Greek national, as well as Zoë, the precocious bilingual kindergartner, add perspective and levity to this dynamic.

I asked Carr and Somer what successful visitors to Skopart have in common. They concurred that those who combine adaptation and a sense of adventure are the most satisfied. These individuals do not sweat the inevitable challenges of travel and are willing to try new things. As a result they leave the island with invigorated perspective and a collection of new strategies for their artwork.

The range of content in art is not new; any more than the range of potential in the human heart but the development of new perspectives is easy to see. What we find arresting in art is the unique translation of timeless themes; the communication of real possibilities in new contexts. The varying aesthetic quality of these representations is what has caused many critics to distinguish some art with a capitol A. They insist that the rare jewels of enduring relevance are notable exceptions. Producing work that inspires this kind of collective epiphany is a significant function of the artist. Residency programs such as the Skopelos Foundation for the Arts provide the kind of experience that fosters this process.

Raised in Southern California, Messenger earned a BA in History from Westmont College in Santa Barbara, a Teaching Credential in Art from California State University, Fullerton and an MFA from San Diego State University. He moved to the San Francisco East Bay in 1996 to begin a teaching position at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill. He exhibits his artwork extensively and recently returned from a one-year sabbatical.



Left: Nikos Rodios, internationally known local potter.

Right: A typical living space a short walk from the studios.

SkopArt, located on the Greek island of Skopelos, just off the northern mainland in the Greater Sporades, provides studio space and arranges accommodations in a well-equipped, low-key and incredibly beautiful environment. But most significantly, its unique collection of attributes fosters personal inspiration.