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Otis, OR – Sunshine poured over the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology’s campus as Bren Simmers, Josie Sigler, Phyllis Trowbridge and Shannon Berg arrived to begin their stays at Sitka as Artists-in-Residence. The Oregon coast, it seemed, was doing its best to provide inspiration to the four women, whose work is very much influenced by the natural world and our connections to it.

Simmers, Trowbridge and Berg, hiked to the top of Cascade Head their first evening at the Sitka Center. On the way back down, an owl hooted softly from the darkening trees above. Everyone stopped. “Oh,” Simmers breathed. The magic of the Sitka Center’s location was taking hold already.

The Sitka Center’s Artist-in-Residency Program started in 1981 to give artists, writers, musicians, and scientists the chance to immerse themselves in their work, free of charge and without distraction or obligation, for up to three and half months at a time. For most artists, that sort of uninterrupted and supportive space and time is all but impossible to come by any other way.

That’s a large part of why a residency program was always part of Sitka Center co-founder Frank Boyden’s vision. “When I got out of grad school, I had to go to work,” Boyden explained. “I taught painting and drawing and it took a tremendous amount of time. I didn’t have time to continue *my* work as I would have liked to and I was jealous of my friends who traipsed off to places like New York... someplace they could continue *their* work.”

Simmers agrees with Boyden. The Vancouver, B.C. poet spent four months alone in a ranger station in the Canadian wilderness as a fire-spotter, and says that while the experience gave her “the ability to *see*,” it was also extremely isolating. Simmers likes that her living space at the Sitka Center is “self-contained but has community.” She hopes to use her time at the Sitka Center to “transfer that [ability to see] to the city,” so that she can help others – especially kids – “start having their own language and relationships with nature.”

Co-founder Frank Boyden also hoped that by hosting individual artists and scientists, the Sitka Center would encourage professional expansion and collaboration. “Writers can be really solitary,” Maine author Josie Sigler explains. Sigler was drawn to the Sitka Center in large part because of its belief in the importance of place; she explores place and the relationships we have with those places in both her poetry and her fiction. The Sitka community, therefore, is “a really nice resource to have. There are so many connections here.”

Connections – between people, people and place, and/or art and science – are a huge part of visual artist Shannon Berg’s work. The biologist-turned-installation-artist uses scientific methods and topographical mapping principles to transform otherwise “irrelevant space” – like a small crack in her driveway – “into something more beautiful.” While at Sitka, a place to which she already feels a happy sense of belonging, Berg wants to continue exploring “the interaction of cultural and natural landscapes.”

Phyllis Trowbridge, a painter now living in Ashland, OR, sums up the Sitka experience: “I feel *so* lucky to have been given this truly wonderful gift.” Trowbridge works mostly with oil paints in plein air. “It’s really important to get a feeling from what I’m seeing,” she says, “and I love the expansiveness of the coast.” Trowbridge has come to the Sitka Center for years, though always as an instructor, not a resident. Either way, Trowbridge says, “I think Sitka is perfect.” She smiles. “I just really think it’s perfect.”