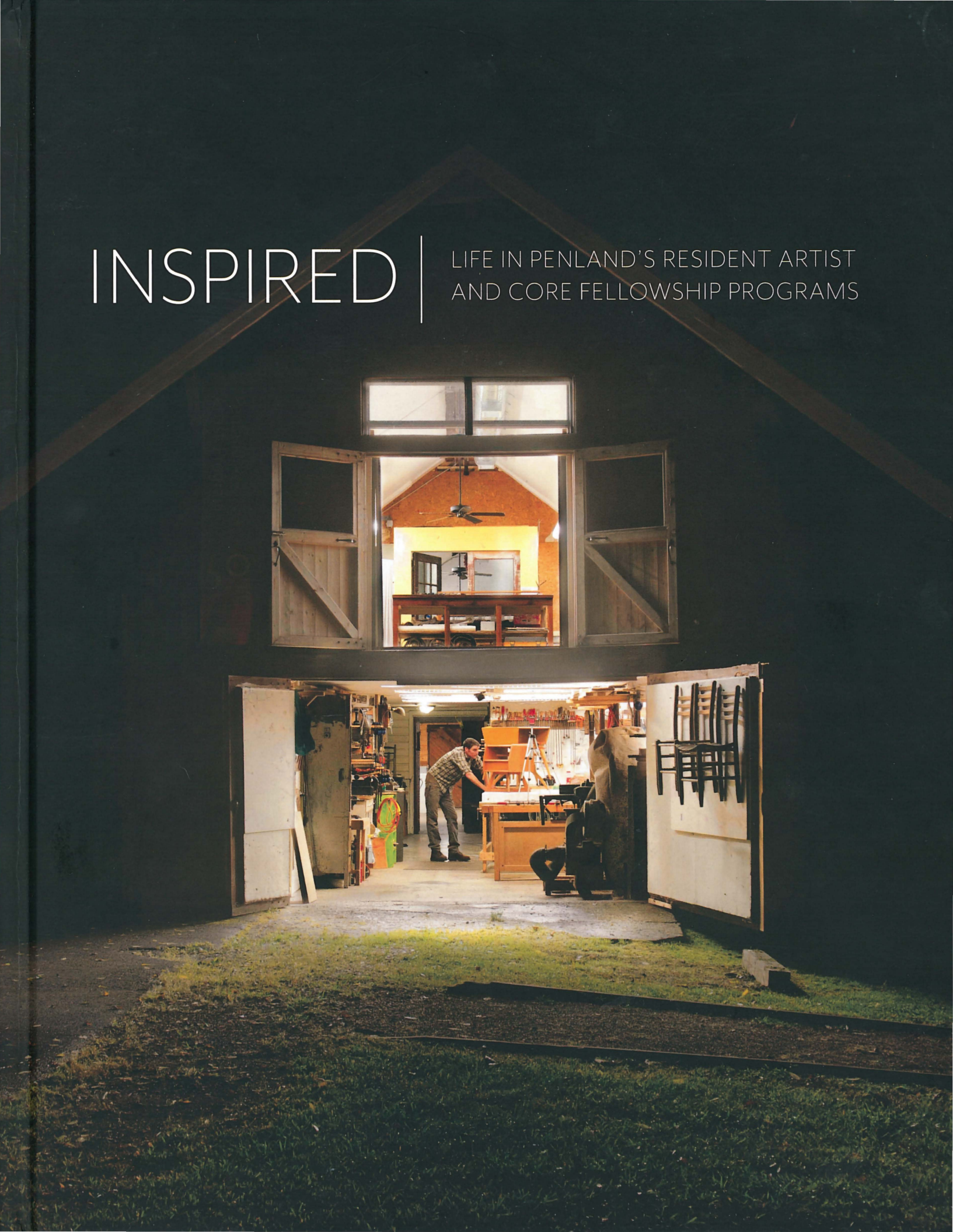


INSPIRED

LIFE IN PENLAND'S RESIDENT ARTIST
AND CORE FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMS



SUSAN CHIN

CORE FELLOW, 1983–1984

"A brooch or ring emerges from my stash of materials and is coaxed and teased until it is a thing which can be cherished." Susan Chin's jewelry pieces balance on an edge between less and more, assemblages and abstractions, primitive minimalism and opulent bits of material she refers to as unobtainium. In an inherited box of tools, she first discovered her signature materials of hand-carved ebony and bone—materials she has never strayed far from. Her nebulous pods are tattooed with 18-karat gold studs or implanted with a soft growth of golden wires and gathered together with stones and fragments in a collective conversation, emerging as adornment.

After receiving her BS degree in nursing from Columbia University (NY) in 1977, Susan Chin's career path as a jeweler began with a class at the YMCA in Philadelphia, which eventually led her to Penland. In the years following the core fellowship, Chin established herself as a studio artist and began exhibiting work through galleries and at the Philadelphia Museum and Smithsonian craft shows. Since the late 1980s, her jewelry has been included in a lengthy list of national exhibitions, including Freehand Gallery (CA), Facère Jewelry Art Gallery (WA), Aaron Faber Gallery (NYC), Mobilia Gallery (MA), and the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (WI).

BALANCED PERSPECTIVE

I was always a maker of things, even when I was a child gluing rocks onto a toothpick box. My approach is still much the same—I consider how much time I have before I'll get interrupted, survey my materials, check in with what I feel like doing, and then dive in. My older sister had gone to art school, so as the youngest daughter, I chose the path that would irritate my parents the least. My mother had aimed to be a nurse, so I went to nursing school. This choice has served me well—as I transitioned to becoming a jeweler, nursing allowed me the flexibility and the financing to go back and forth to Penland. The hospice nursing I do now more than twenty years later nurtures the other parts of who I am and has given me the financial stability to take more risks with my jewelry.

I started making jewelry my second year out of college. While working as a nurse, I took a jewelry course at the YMCA in Philadelphia. I had inherited my sister's tools because she had redirected her artistic ambition toward writing fiction. Then I took night classes at what was then Philadelphia College of Art. I learned a lot, made some work, and was encouraged to visit the Philadelphia Craft Show. Many of the artists showing that year had Penland addresses and that's how I first heard about the place. In 1981, I drove there for fall concentration; Kathleen Doyle was teaching general jewelry making. Those eight weeks were a wonderful immersion into the culture of the place: Kathleen's approach to teaching; the full day and night experience of being a crafts person; eating, breathing, and embodying the handmade, personally styled, off-the-treadmill life.

When I arrived for that first concentration, I felt intimidated. I was living in a dorm again, and it was scary not to know anyone. I'm a shy person, but I adapted within a few weeks. I was there to work and learn things and I fell in love with the whole experience. I am naturally a hardworking person, and I saw being there as an immense opportunity. Compared to working all day as a nurse and then taking night courses in jewelry, there I was at Penland, involved with jewelry all day, and often there were people in the studios with me in the middle of the night! Also, the setting is so beautiful. I was seduced by rural life and the community aspect of Penland.

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I was assigned to work in the kitchen. Back then, in the days of Jane Brown, everyone in concentration had to work for the school two out of their eight weeks—no exceptions. I integrated fairly quickly. I wasn't ready to say it out loud, but secretly I hoped to be a studio artist one day, and that's why I approached



Susan Chin
Crusted Circle Brooch, 2006
1¾ x 2 x ½ inches
Bone, 18-karat yellow gold, green, pink, orange, and blue sapphires, peach moonstone; carved, drilled, fabricated
Photo by artist

Opposite page:
Photo by Ron Schwager

the concentration with such vigor. I thought, this is my chance—I have an eight-week launch! Not having gone to college for art, I didn't understand how you might get from here to there, and I saw Penland as an alternative route to learning how to become a working studio artist.

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I returned for a second Penland concentration and felt like a pro at the life there. I had some money saved up, so when Jane Brown invited me to stay on as a core student, I accepted. I enjoyed one year of the Browns' leadership before they left. Bill had so much charisma, was an artist himself, and drew a lot of talented people to the school. Jane treated us like an extension of their family, and their life seemed to be inextricable from Penland itself. They wanted us to behave in a manner that reflected the school in a positive way, to work hard, and make the school coherent with their vision.

Being at Penland as a core student was more than a fair exchange. Rarely did money change hands. We stayed in one of the houses and had full use of the studios. Having access to the studios twenty-four hours a day was a heavenly gift.

I started out the first year as the driver running errands in Asheville. You're kind of on the outskirts of the school as the driver. When that job ended, I was the dining hall manager, overseeing the work-study students. The school maintained a beautiful garden down by The Barns, and I had the privilege of making the twenty flower arrangements for the tables every Sunday. People often perceive me as this extremely calm person, reliable and serene. This is not really true, but I did okay as dining hall manager. I had to come out of my comfort zone in order to haul a few students out of bed for work in the morning to do their designated job. I was absolutely driven to get in the studio and make jewelry when I wasn't in classes, so it was really useful to work for the school because it offered me a sense of balance. Sometimes it's necessary to get away from your bench and do some simpler work.

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The number and type of classes you could take was limited in my time—for example, core students didn't generally take glass classes because paying students always filled those. I know twenty-four isn't old to be choosing a second career these days, but at the time I was so directed to maximize my time at Penland that I only took classes in metals, enameling, and blacksmithing. I have some regret about not exploring other media. I could choose my bench in a jewelry class before the other students arrived, so I had a five-by-three-foot sense of place in the metals studio, even though the faces of the instructors and students kept changing.



Susan Chin
Miko Bracelet, 2013
8 x 1½ x ½ inches
Bone, sterling silver, fine silver, 18-karat yellow gold, 22-karat yellow gold, ebony, turquoise, pink cobalto calcite, orthocere fossil
Photo by artist



Susan Chin
Bone Stick Brooches, 2007
4 x ½ x ½ inches
Cow bone, 18-karat gold, 22-karat yellow gold, opals, peridot, apricot moonstone, iolite, sterling silver; cured, carved, fabricated
Photo by George Post



Susan Chin
Hoary Heart Brooch, 2005
2½ x 2 x ¾ inches

Ebony, 18-karat yellow gold, sterling silver, 22-karat yellow gold, sunstone; carved, drilled, fabricated, forged, oxidized
Photo by artist



Susan Chin
Lapis Chunks Bracelet, 2014
8 x 1½ x ½ inches

Sterling silver, 18-karat yellow gold, bone, copper/silver mokume gane, lapis lazuli, glass taxidermy eyes, freshwater pearls, jasper, agate, white onyx
Photo by artist

The galleries in Philadelphia were carrying my work back then, but with the Penland connection, I picked up more galleries. My fellow core students and I did a craft show in Charlotte, my first experience with that. We were working artists while we were core students.

When the Browns left, it felt like we had been orphaned. We didn't understand the decisions that had been made. After core, when Verne Stanford came in as director, I worked as his office assistant for a few months, but I felt that my tenure at Penland had ended. I went to work for metalsmith and former core student Paige Davis in Bakersville for a year. I lived in a rustic cabin on a sixty-acre hilltop property that I shared with a small cemetery. Twice a week I'd drive to her studio. Paige continued my education in how to make it work as a studio artist/craftsperson—what shows to do—all that. Working with her I could see firsthand how people manage this life, even if they live in a rural place. The area was rich with other craftspeople doing that very thing.

When I came back to teach at Penland twenty years later, the school felt very different. Jenny Mendes, a dear friend who was a core fellow with me, had returned for a residency and was thriving at Penland. I think both the core fellow and the resident artist programs now are much more helpful to the participants. It was onerous back then to launch your career from that distant rural environment, but now the school helps you with your CV, coaches you on how to approach galleries—it's more geared to support you professionally as well as artistically.

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Now I work two days a week as a hospice nurse, an organization I have always wanted to be involved with. I was too isolated working in my studio for so many decades, and I wanted a more stable income. With my hospice work, I can still do the American Craft Council Baltimore show and include my work in a number of galleries, but I am able to focus more on one-of-a-kind jewelry, and I don't do production work anymore. I just want to make work that I would like to own.

Some people are surprised that I have combined being a professional jeweler with being a working nurse for the last few years. The work with hospice is grounding: I make a real difference in people's lives, and I like that practical and meaningful activity as a counterpoint to being alone making jewelry. My work as a nurse also gives me perspective. When I'm making jewelry, I sometimes get sucked into this worry about finishing the piece on time—but thanks to my work in hospice, I know that it's not life and death.

INSPIRED

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Penland School of Crafts is world-renowned for total-immersion, hands-on workshops that have provided dynamic, often life-changing, educational experiences to thousands of people. Less well known, perhaps, are Penland's multiyear artist residencies. This beautiful volume now tells the story of the school's extraordinary Resident Artist and Core Fellowship programs, which have for decades launched and nurtured scores of brilliant artistic careers.

The book includes detailed essays, historical information, rich photographs, and conversations with thirty-two alumni of the programs. These conversations bring to life the history, community, and creativity that are at the heart of the school and illuminate the risks and rewards shared by those who pursue lives of artistic expression. The illustrations present a diversity of materials, processes, and ideas that showcase the expansive world of craft.

In her introduction, Caitlin Strokosh, executive director of the Alliance of Artists Communities, says this of artist residencies: "What this field does is invest in artists. This is risky business: it requires trust in individuals, patience, and faith, with few tangible tools for assessment." After more than half a century of commitment to artist residencies, Penland School of Crafts offers *Inspired: Life in Penland's Resident Artist and Core Fellowship Programs* as a narrative and visual testament to the continued impact of that commitment.

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