



Side of Palmist Building, Havana Junction, Alabama (1961) © William Christenberry; Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery

THE MUSE OF PLACE AND TIME:

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY

ROBERT HIRSCH

William Christenberry, born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1936, is a photographer, painter, sculptor, teacher, and arts advocate who is considered one of the most influential southern artists working today. Christenberry's honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Major exhibitions of his work have been held at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Die Photographische Sammlung, SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, Germany; and Institute of the Arts,

Rice University, Houston, Texas. Publications by and about Christenberry include *Of Time and Place: Walker Evans and William Christenberry* (1990) by Thomas W. Southall; *Christenberry Reconstruction: The Art of William Christenberry* (1996) by Trudy Wilner Stack, Christenberry, and Allen Tullos; and *William Christenberry: Disappearing Places* (2002) by Christenberry, Susanne Lange, and Claudia Schubert.

This interview is the culmination of numerous conversations between Christenberry and the author from October 2004 through August 2005.

Robert Hirsch: Describe your family background in Tuscaloosa, and its impact on your work.

William Christenberry: It has been said that I was born in Hale County, but I was actually born in the city of Tuscaloosa, which is just a few miles north. My grandparents on both sides, the Smith Family and the Christenberry Family, were farming families in Hale County. It was made, however you want to look at it, famous or infamous, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [1939], which is a coincidence since James Agee and Walker Evans were there in the summer of 1936 putting that work together. I was born in November 1936, so I tell people that I didn't meet them [laughter]. I was born and raised in Tuscaloosa, went to high school there, and to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. My summer forays past and present into Hale County are constant. Since the early 1960s that's the only time of year and about the only place I make photographs. My earliest color snapshot is from 1960.

RH: Why do you think that you haven't photographed anywhere else?

WC: This is and always will be where my heart is. It is what I care about. Everything I want to say through my work comes out of my feelings about that place—its positive aspects and its negative aspects. It's one of the poorest counties in the state, but it is also a county with great lore and legend. In the nineteenth century it must have been like *Gone With the Wind*, a place with great southern plantations. It became clear to me during my graduate studies [1958-59, at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa] that I wanted to express my feelings about this place. To paraphrase William Faulkner, "There is enough to write about on this little stamp-sized state called Mississippi to occupy me all of my life."

I don't know of any other way of putting it. You might say I have never made pictures elsewhere. My pictures of our family are pedestrian snapshots. I've been to Big Sur, California and other exotic places and technically the pictures were fine, but I have never taken the big camera to places like that.

RH: What else influenced you at this time?

WC: I was reading Russian and southern U.S. literature. I read a short story by James Agee, whom I had never heard of, and later I came across a copy of the second printing of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I showed it to my grandmother, and she said, "This is Mrs. Tingle, that's Mr. Tingle, that's Sadie, that's William...." I may have been the first person to put that puzzle together, who these people were as all their names had been changed to protect their privacy. More importantly, Agee was doing what I wanted to try to do visually—experimenting with ways to address issues of social responsibility and human dignity. It was something to sink my teeth into.

RH: Did any teacher influence you in graduate school?

WC: I had a wonderful graduate advisor, Melville Price. He was Jewish, and I say that because it enters into the story. Mel was a second generation abstract expressionist painter who had been teaching at the Philadelphia Museum School in Pennsylvania and chose to come to Alabama in 1958. He was haunted by the Holocaust. He was extremely well read and was very affected by what was happening in the South. He was a wonderful dark-skinned white man with jet-black hair who was often mistaken for a light-skinned black man. He introduced me to Dada and

surrealism. A few years later I began teaching drawing at Tuscaloosa. I might still be there had it not been for Mel. One day he and I were having coffee. He just said to me out of the blue, "Bill, if you don't get out of here, you're going to be forever trapped here." I knew he was right. So a year later, in 1960, I went to the big city—New York.

RH: That must have been a quite a change.

WC: Talk about a growing up time! It was a transition from something in which I had been totally immersed—abstract expressionism—to the coming of pop art. I had eight different jobs in twelve months. I had a Master's degree, but I did not want to teach. I sold men's clothes in Greenwich Village. I was a custodian in Norman Vincent Peale's church on Fifth Avenue. My job was to take care of the sanctuary and keep an eye on the crucifix above the altar as it had been stolen previously. I spent most of my time there reading Albert Camus. Next I worked for a gallery on Madison Avenue, and finally I ended up as a file clerk on the twenty-eighth floor in the picture collection at Time-Life. It did not pay a lot of money, but each week I got a free copy of *Time*, *LIFE*, and *Sports Illustrated* [laughter]. And that was where Walker Evans worked as a senior editor for *Fortune*, on the eighteenth floor.

RH: How did you first encounter Walker Evans?

WC: Months went by before I got up enough nerve to see him. He was extremely cordial and offered me an autographed copy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I was so nervous I said, "Thank you sir, but I already have several copies." He clicked the pen and closed the book. He didn't say a word. It took me several years to get a signed copy [laughter]. As our friendship grew, he would say, "Tell me that story, Bill," and he would laugh. That struck up this long friendship until his death in 1975.

RH: What were the circumstances that led to you traveling with Evans back to Alabama?

WC: In 1973 the University of Alabama's Art Department decided to put on an Evans exhibition. Previously Walker shied away from those things, but he was genuinely interested in the fact that another generation was looking at those pictures. He agreed to go to Alabama if I went with him. During the flight Walker said, "This is the only time that I have returned since 1936." Walker was very sensitive to the privacy of those people. He said, "I want to see any and all of the structures



Palmist Building (1980) © William Christenberry; Courtesy of Pace/McGill

that I photographed that are still standing, but I do not want to see any of the people that may be still living. What I really want to do is photograph and see the things that have caught your eye over the years.”

RH: Why do you think that he did not want to meet any of the people?

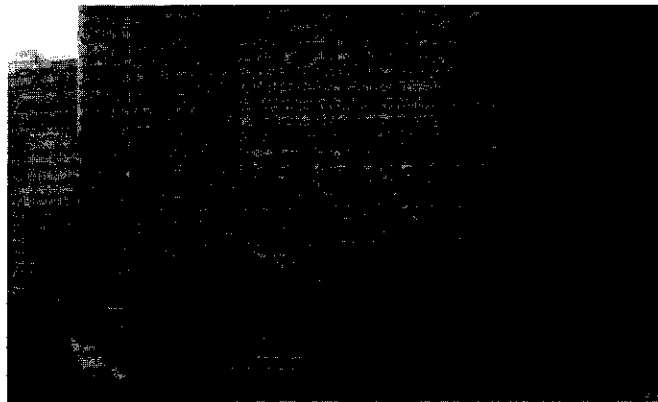
WC: Agee inserted himself in their lives while Walker kept a certain distance. They were two different personalities. One night I asked Walker about their collaboration and these were his exact words, “I’ll tell you something Bill. If you knew a great man, you don’t go around mouthing it openly.” I didn’t ask him anymore. It wasn’t spoken in an arrogant or ugly way, it was just factual.

RH: How do you see Agee today?

WC: Periodically I take *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* off of the shelf and read passages. It was never a book I felt comfortable reading from beginning to end. When I discovered it in 1960, it took me six weeks to read. It is basically a long prose poem meant to be read aloud, and I could only take so much of that at one time.

RH: When did you leave New York?

WC: I went to New York in 1960 and left in the summer of 1962 to accept a teaching position at Memphis State University [Memphis, Tennessee], which is now the University of Memphis.



Wall, Marion, Alabama, “5 e refreshing” (1964) © William Christenberry; Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery

RH: What year did you start making photographs with your Kodak Brownie?

WC: The earliest one that I have is 1958.

RH: What was your initial impulse to use a Brownie?

WC: It was a little 127 Brownie Holiday that Santa Claus had brought one year. It was in a chest of drawers in my parents’ house. As a painting student, I wanted to reference the landscape and things in the landscape, mostly the vernacular architecture, in my painting. This prevails in my work to this day. Although everybody else was painting non-objectively, I made *Tenant House #1* [1960]. Not only was it pivotal in my painting, but my photographic work too.

RH: Why did you work in color during a time when black and white defined art photography?

WC: Back in the studio it was the color reference, the memory jog that was important to my paintings.

RH: How was your 127 film processed and cared for?

WC: The pictures were processed at the local drugstore in Tuscaloosa and printed on fiber-based paper, which has held up remarkably well. It is my nature to take reasonably good care of whatever I do, and I stored the negatives in a cool dark closet. I can still print from the Brownie negatives from the 1960s, and many will be reproduced in the new Aperture book. I also dry-mounted those little 3 x 5-inch drugstore processed snapshots onto pieces of mat board with a three-inch border, which was fortunate because it gave them support. I would tack the mat board up on the wall next to this huge piece of canvas, so that I could use it as a reference for the colors and forms. They were not photo-realism paintings, but expressionistic paintings that look somewhat like a combination of Chaim Soutine and Willem de Kooning in the same painting.

RH: How did Evans come to see your Brownie photographs?

WC: I mentioned them in passing while I was showing him my large canvases, and he said he would like to see them. I gave him a box with sixty-six Brownies to look at. When he finished he said, “Young man, this little camera has become a perfect extension of your eye, and I suggest that you take these seriously.” At the time I was about as interested in photography as I was in physics—zero. But that’s how it began.

RH: How did the Brownie photographs come to the public’s attention?

WC: When color began to be embraced in the early 1970s, I was in several exhibitions that included some of the Brownies. One was at the Corcoran [Washington, D.C.] and the other at the Jefferson Place Gallery [Washington, D.C.]. In 1976, Virginia Zabriskie came to see my work. I joined her New York gallery, and had a one-man show. It was difficult for a lot of people to believe that these photographs were made with a Brownie camera. As Walker once said, “There is something about that cheap lens that makes the color just right.” I have never seen the Brownie photographs as a separate activity. For me all these things relate. I am very pleased to have been recognized as a color photographer, yet the photographs only existed as part and parcel of the whole.

RH: What made you decide to switch to an 8 x 10 view camera?

WC: One day, out of the blue, Lee Friedlander said to me that it would be interesting to see what I could do with a camera that produced a large negative, preferably 8 x 10. I said I never used anything like that. “You can learn, can’t you?” he said. Shortly after that, I began working with a Deardorff view camera lent to me by a friend.

RH: Is the stillness of your photographs a conscious or unconscious decision?

WC: It was totally unconscious, and if I were a poet, I could talk to you about that. I don’t want my work thought about in terms of nostalgia. It is about place and sense of place. I only make pictures when I go home. I am not looking back longing for the past, but at the beauty of time and the passage of time.

RH: What is it about the passage of time that compels you to go back?

WC: It is like an unbelievable magnet. I can’t wait to get

out into that landscape and to go back and see those same places. Sometimes they are still there and sometimes they are completely gone.

RH: How does your re-photographing of sites affect your notion of time?

WC: Returning to the sites allows me to record both the traces of passing time and represent how a subject is transformed by time.

RH: What is the connection between the Palmist Building and your sense of time and mortality?

WC: I had known the Palmist Building all of my life. Originally it was a country store run by my great uncle Sydney Duncan, my grandmother's brother. It was on my father's bread truck route, in the 1940s. When Uncle Sydney retired and gave up the store, it was rented to gypsies who read palms and told fortunes. They hand-painted the sign, a palmist sign. [For a detailed account of the Palmist Building and other stories see *Of Time & Place: Walker Evans and William Christenberry*.] One day the landowner discovered the gypsies had skipped town and left the interior in shambles. He put the palmist sign in the window frame to keep the rain out. Inadvertently he stuck it in upside down, which made it more iconic for me than if it had been right side up.

RH: When did you start photographing the Palmist Building?

WC: The first Brownie picture was made in 1961 with black-and-white film. The first color picture, and probably the definitive view, was made in 1971.

RH: After years of effort you finally have the Palmist sign in your studio. Why was this important for you?

WC: It goes back to the act of possessing in the positive sense. It's all-encompassing. It's emotional, spiritual, and in an actual, physical sense sums up what I am about. I have lots of other beautiful hand-lettered signs that speak to me of Americana. For instance, I have forty-eight Top's Snuff signs alone. I have Coca-Cola signs, too. Whoever designed that script was a genius. It's a beautiful aesthetic form, which reminds me of exquisite single-stroke brush lettering.

RH: How did Walker Evans's sign collecting influence you?

WC: The signage in his photographs was an influence. We did occasionally engage in sign "liberation" episodes together, too. Once we were driving on a backcountry road in Alabama in 1973, and I saw this Top's Snuff sign on a fence post. Walker said, "I am going to have a hard time keeping up with old eagle-eyed Christenberry. Let's photograph it before you take it." I photographed him photographing the sign, but what he really wanted to see was the Palmist sign that was still in the window. I have pictures of him making a photograph of the Palmist sign. Walker was a great influence. We exchanged ideas until his death, and I like to think there was a lot of cross influencing. One of my choice found objects is a sign off the side of a building that Walker photographed in 1936 and is in *Famous Men*. I took the sign off the side of the building in 1966. He couldn't get over that. He had it included in his big show at Yale Art Gallery called "Walker Evans: 40 Years." I had a magnificent friendship with Walker. He was a wonderful man, a great artist, and I miss him.

RH: How is your work different from what Evans made in 1936?

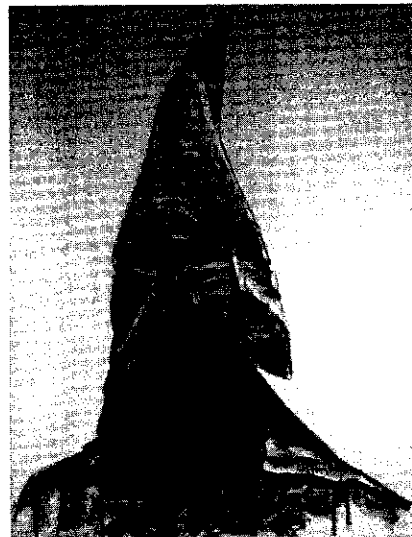
WC: Unlike Agee, Walker kept his distance emotionally. His view was objective. My stance is very subjective. The place is so much a part of me. I can't escape it and have no desire to escape it. I continue to come to grips with it. I don't want my work to be thought of as maudlin or overly sentimental. It's not. It's a love affair—a lifetime of involvement with a place. The place is my muse.

RH: How does your southern sensibility regarding beauty affect your work?

WC: Think of what Miss Emily Dickinson said, "Memory is a strange bell, jubilee and knell." I have a deep attachment to this haunted landscape, haunted in the sense that there is a dark side to it and there is a positive side. And a distance of about 800 miles from Washington, D.C., gives me a perspective of that place that I wouldn't have if I lived there day in and day out. By the time that I get to Tuscaloosa, I can't wait to get out into the countryside. It literally charges my batteries. I used to go out for a week or ten days and make three-hundred Brownie exposures. Now the film is almost impossible to get. When I work with the 8 x 10, I am not going to get 300 exposures. Last summer I made twenty 8 x 10 exposures. I still have access to some 127 and 620 Brownie film and as long as I can get the film I am going to continue to make some Brownies. That 3 x 5-inch image is just a little jewel.

RH: How do you deal with the dark side of southern culture?

WC: Although my work is largely celebratory there is this dark side that permeates the South. How could I avoid the issues of the civil rights period and the terrible evil that manifests itself in the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)? I have often doubted whether or not I would live long enough to see the progress that the Deep South has made in civil rights, but there is still much to be done.

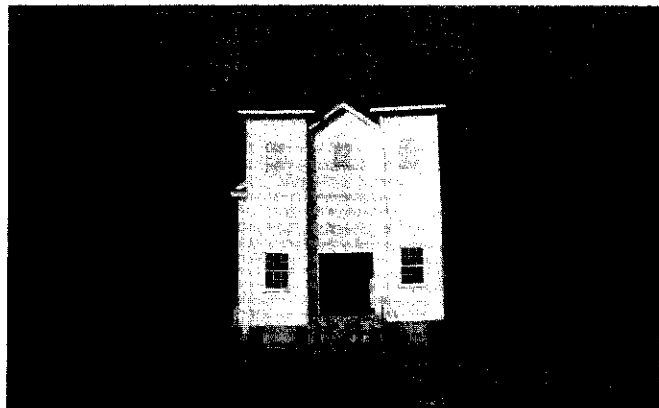


Klan Drawing © William Christenberry; Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery

Just a few weeks after my arrival in Memphis in 1962, James Meredith attempted to integrate the University of Mississippi, which is only sixty miles south of Memphis. In a way, Memphis is the big city of Mississippi. I was listening on the radio to the broadcast of that event. Two people were killed that night down in Oxford, Mississippi. How could I as a human being, forget being a Southerner, let that go by me? I've never been a marcher or a joiner, it's just not my nature, and sometimes I've regretted that. The only thing that I participated in along that line was the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' March just before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed.

RH: Describe your first encounter with the KKK.

WC: In 1960, I read on the front page of the *Tuscaloosa News* about a Klan rally at the Tuscaloosa courthouse. I said to my friend Ed, "I'm curious. Let's check this out." He agreed to go. We got down there and there was no evidence of Klan activity outside. It was after dark, and the streetlights were on. There were not many people around. I suggested we go inside the courthouse. Ed said, "I'm Jewish, I'm not going inside." I gathered my courage and went in. The lights were blazing and yet nobody was around. I walked up these old marble steps to the second floor. Still nobody. I got to the top of the third level and just to my left was a Klansman in full robe and hood. I had never seen an image like that before. This guard was standing at attention and there was a door to his left behind him. When I got to the top of the steps, he did not turn his head or his body. He turned his eyes to look at me. I have never seen anything more frightening than those eyes glaring through those eyehole slits. I stopped dead in my tracks and didn't go any further. I went right back down those steps and out of the building.



Church, Sprott, Alabama (1971) © William Christenberry; Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery

RH: When did you begin making Klan imagery?

WC: The first drawing in my sketchbook is dated 1961. Moving to New York gave me some degree of objectivity. It was that distance from New York to Alabama that gave me perspective on what I wanted to do and what I am still attempting to do. Not just with oppression and violence, not just with the Klan, but also with all of my work.

RH: How did this evolve into your Klan Room?

WC: It began in Memphis in 1963. I bought a couple of Barbie dolls, made some sketches, and had a friend make a Klan costume for Barbie. When the "moveable parts" GI Joe doll came out in 1964, I bought twenty of them at once. The young lady at the cash register could not contain her curiosity. She said, "Mister, it is nowhere near Christmas time. May I ask you what you are going to do with twenty GI Joe dolls?" I said, "Young lady, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me." A friend, her mother, and Bill Eggleston's wife, Rosa, sewed the first doll costumes. By the time we moved to Washington, D.C., in 1968 I had the beginnings of a Klan tableau of some 200 dolls.

RH: Why haven't those 200 Klan dolls been exhibited?

WC: There was a theft from the studio in 1979, and that wiped out the dolls. All but one was stolen.

RH: Have any of the works ever surfaced?

WC: No. They disappeared from the face of the earth. I was able to re-create and enlarge the tableau, though, after the theft. This is what people see now when it's exhibited.

RH: How did this theft affect you?

WC: The worst thing was the effect it had on my wife Sandy and our two young children. To this day we do not know if the thief was pro-Klan, anti-William Christenberry, or just someone wanting to possess this work. I think somebody has it squirreled away, and it has become something like his or her shrine.

**RH: How do you respond to critics who say you are be-
atifying, fetishizing, and/or glorifying the KKK?**

WC: All of those things have been said, but I argue it is best to have it exist to provoke discussion. I think it is important to have an artist of my background attempt to come to grips with these issues. I am not just speaking out about the Klan but about injustice and racism. This was my way of doing it, and I stand by it. It is not pro-terror or pro-Klan, but the work walks a thin line between being understood and misunderstood and for a long time no one would touch it. Institutions, including the Whitney [New York], weren't willing to exhibit it.

**RH: What is it like to be immersed in this imagery
everyday?**

WC: I don't have to tolerate it everyday because even when it was upstairs I would deliberately not go in there too often. Since it was last shown in Brussels and in Cologne it has been in storage because I've run out of space in the studio.

RH: Have you made new Klan dolls?

WC: Yes, I made some of my strongest pieces in the 1990s at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. These dolls were tortured and/or bound, and some had hot wax poured over them.

**RH: Do you see your Klan work differently in the post-
9/11 world?**

WC: The Klan is only one aspect of terrorism and racism, but it embodies the whole shebang. That is one of the reasons that I can live with it. And why I stand by it. The Ku Klux Klan is very real to me as a Southerner and represents a powerful aspect of terrorism. It originated in Tennessee after the Civil War, but it immediately spread to Indiana and then across the country. The bottom line is that this terrible terrorist group is part of a broader mixture of fear, control, and power that manifests itself in many ways and in many different places. Unfortunately, sadly, I'm afraid that hatred and terrorism will always be with us.

RH: Have you ever collected authentic Klan items?

WC: I am not a collector of Klan memorabilia, but I have been given authentic items like Klan posters, a manual, and a calling card that says "The only reason you are white today is because your ancestors believed and practiced segregation, KKK College Park GA." I was given two Klan uniforms that I keep in a cabinet up in the attic. One is white muslin from the 1920s and the other red satin from the 1970s, and they terrify me. I plan to turn these artifacts over to a major American Studies program such as the one at Emory University

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[Atlanta, Georgia]. They are currently in an exhibition at the Spy Museum here in Washington, D.C., called "The Enemy Within, Terror in America—1976 to Today."

RH: What is the relationship of your Klan Room to your work with vernacular architecture?

WC: Right after the Klan theft in 1979 I dreamed of a building on a backcountry road in Alabama with no windows and no doors and an unbelievably pitched roof just like the pyramidal hooded head. When I got up the next morning, the dream was still clear as a bell, and it continues to stay with me until this day. I decided that if Jasper Johns could fulfill his dream about painting an American flag, I could make my dream work. My first Dream Building was made in 1980, and I continue to mine that source because that form is still powerful to me.

On the other hand, the architectural pieces, or "building constructions" as I call them, are structures based upon things that I have known for most of my life and/or photographed, such as Sprott Church. I first photographed Sprott Church with the Brownie in 1971. The sunlight on the façade and the bright blue sky make it one of my favorites and one of my best pictures. I lived with that picture haunting me in the best sense of that word. The image and the feeling of that little church, the nature of the Brownie Camera lens and where I was standing, which was a slight rise in the landscape, made it seem almost like a miniature object. It was a small church in the first place. I lived with that until 1974 when I said to myself, "Why not build it?" I made a small version and that was the beginning of the building construction series.

RH: Why do you call them "building constructions" and not models?

WC: In a model, you adhere to a strict floor plan and scale. The constructions are all built by eye and include idiosyncratic things that make each one unique. They have a similar feeling to a real building, such as the Palmist Building, which I photographed for decades and is now gone. These sculptures are my interpretations of the wonderful vernacular architecture that has vanished from this earth. I use balsa wood, paint, glue, Alabama soil, and metal among the materials. It usually takes several months to build a piece, but I think about it for a long time beforehand.

RH: What triggered your desire to physically make Sprott Church?

WC: My friend, curator Walter Hopps, was at the studio one night. I said, "Walter, I can't possess Sprott Church. I've photographed it, and I've drawn it and those things don't really suffice. I have a desire to make a small version. I've never done anything like that, and it might be a waste of time." He looked at me and said, "You'll never know until you do it." Since then I've made a dozen or so buildings that were based on actual pieces of vernacular architecture that I have seen or photographed. In recent years these have become less literal, and covered in white wax. I call them "Memory Forms." Referring to Miss Dickinson again, my memory of things is more important than the literalness of things. So the pieces are more simplified, more purely defined than the earlier ones.

RH: What are you working on today?

WC: I am honored to be having a large exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum [Washington, D.C.]

when it re-opens on July 4, 2006. Plus, I am really excited to be guest curating a large exhibition from the museum's wonderful American Folk Art Collection. Aperture is publishing a new book about my work that is due in April of 2006. Also, there will be exhibitions at Aperture's Chelsea space and at Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York in the summer of 2006.

RH: What is informing your current work?

WC: One of my cathartic activities, and my first love, is drawing. Drawing is so immediate; you either win the battle or lose the battle. And even if you lose the battle, it is just a piece of paper. Drawing is a release because I do my best not to consider them precious. The latest are very linear drawings of trees. Some are on large paper, so you almost feel physically involved with the subject. I am always simultaneously working on something sculptural also, so that I can move back and forth between the media.

RH: Has the role of artists changed in your lifetime?

WC: We live in a day where anybody and everybody can be an artist. We don't have the tradition of a nineteenth-century academy. Anybody can make work and look for acceptance. And this is wonderful. I grew up around Black Folk Art in Alabama. I would so admire the directness, the power, and the innocence of this work. I don't have that innocence. I have too much training.

RH: How has living in Washington, D.C., affected your relationship to the landscape of Alabama?

WC: My heart is still in Alabama, but the distance gives me a needed perspective. If I had stayed at the University of Alabama, I doubt I would be doing the kind of work that I do because I would be too close to it. When I go there, I see it with a fresh eye. I have an openness that allows me to immerse myself in the entire landscape. I don't want to be too comfortable. I want that edge to be there from the source. I am sixty-eight years old and feel I have a lot that I still want to try to make visible.

RH: What is the best thing about being sixty-eight?

WC: Having the flexibility to move past traditional boundaries and go from drawing to sculpture and of course to photography. I like it when people ask, "What is Christenberry? Is he a photographer, a painter, or a sculptor?" I see it all as one piece. There is no separateness. It is about the interaction, the intermingling or the coming together of these various means of expression. I am not just one thing.

RH: Do you think art is built off of other art, and if it wasn't for our predecessors, we wouldn't be doing whatever it is that we are doing today?

WC: I couldn't agree with you more. Influences... I've never avoided my influences. [Paul] Cézanne made a wonderful statement, and I wish I could quote it in French so it would sound better. He said, "Have your influences, but there will come a time when you will shed your influences like a snake sheds its skin." I am still shedding mine. ☺

ROBERT HIRSCH is the author of Exploring Color Photography: From the Darkroom to the Digital Studio; Seizing the Light: A History of Photography; and Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Ideas, Materials & Processes, Second Edition.