

Conversations with Alumni

The Best Way to Get Things Done

An Interview with Suzanne Deal Booth, MA in Art History and Conservation, 1984

Alumna Suzanne Deal Booth, a former IFA Trustee, is a philanthropist, art advisor, collector, and vintner, and generously supports the Suzanne Deal Booth Fellowship in conservation at the IFA. She co-founded the Friends of Heritage Preservation in 1998 and serves as the director of the organization—a small private group dedicated to protecting and preserving cultural and artistic heritage. She currently serves on the boards of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Menil Collection, the American Friends of the Centre Pompidou, Ballroom Marfa, The Contemporary Austin, and the Calder Foundation. In 2003, after she spent a year living in Rome with her young family, the *Suzanne Deal Booth Rome Prize Fellowship for Historic Preservation and Conservation* was created at the American Academy in Rome and has awarded annual fellowships ever since. Deal Booth's current endeavors include establishing and cultivating Bella Oaks, an organic vineyard and olive orchard in Napa Valley, CA. Former Deal Booth Fellow Celeste Mahoney conducted and edited this interview.

You graduated cum laude with a degree in art history from Rice University. What was it that drew you to the Institute?

I had gone to the University of Texas at Austin for two years, and I had studied sociology. I decided to go to Europe, and it turned out to be a much longer trip than intended. I bought a two-month Eurail pass and it turned into a year abroad. I ended up buying a Volkswagen van, outfitting it, and traveling all through Europe and Asia Minor, and when I came back, I had decided I wanted to study art history.

Everything I did in Europe had to do with culture, and it fed my imagination. So when I came back, I transferred to Rice University.

I told my dad I was going to get a part-time job. Somehow, through my interests and networking, I met Dominique de Menil and she offered me a job. I was twenty. It quickly led from working in the campus museum to a private study in her home, in the River Oaks area of Houston. My job was to enter information on these typewriters that had memory—we didn't have computers—from her late husband John de Menil's meticulous notes into a database.

I worked for Dominique for two years after I graduated. When I started thinking about

going to graduate school, I was intrigued by conservation, by the idea of preserving history and works of art. I had gone on two archaeological expeditions while at Rice, in Italy and Israel. I really enjoyed putting things back together again, and the feeling of accomplishment when you take care of something valuable. When I was considering my options, I just thought NYU was the best. You have it all—some of the greatest museums in the world at your fingertips.

Where did you live while you attended the Institute?

When I was accepted at the Institute, I was still in touch with Dominique, and she told me I must absolutely stay with her.



Suzanne Deal Booth with Dominique de Menil and Walter Hopps, Houston, c. 1977



Dominique de Menil's townhouse in NYC

She wasn't in New York very much. My room at Dominique's house, at 111 E 73rd Street, was in the basement, but it had windows that looked out onto a Max Ernst garden. I had a tiny little kitchenette, a bathroom, a big desk, and a bed. That was it, but I loved it. I lived there for two years. Because of the proximity to the Institute, I could have a cup of coffee and walk to school in twenty minutes.

It sounds idyllic!

It didn't come without its restrictions. I couldn't have guests. She had a pet parrot who used to throw things at me. But I was living with a great art collection, and I liked being this sort of shadowy student figure. She would always include me in dinners she held, and I met art historians, museum directors, writers, and artists.



Suzanne Deal Booth with Mark Rothko's *No. 10*, 1957, oil on canvas, The Menil Collection, Houston, © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

What was the conservation program like at that time? What was it like being in the basement of the Duke House?

I thought it was funky! We didn't have great classrooms to work out of, and the space had no windows, but the lab had everything that we needed. My year was a class of eight women, so we could all fit into a small space. Central Park is right outside the door, and some of my classes were at the Met. I worked as an office helper for the two then-directors, Norbert Baer and Larry Majewski. The two years just flew by. I also worked at the paintings conservation lab at the Met, with [head of the department] John Brealey, and loved that experience too.

You also met James Turrell. How were you introduced to him?

Through Dominique, I met another former protégé of hers, architect Glenn Heim. He invited me to a cocktail party at his loft on Church Street, where I met Helen Winkler, one of the cofounders of Dia [Art Foundation] along with Philippa de Menil and Heiner Friedrich. I also met Fred Hughes, who was the business partner of Andy Warhol, and I met James Turrell. I was talking to James, about his work, a Skyspace [*Meeting*] at MoMA PS1. While we were talking about this project, Helen comes up and says to James, "You should hire her!" And she's the kind of woman where you do what she says.

So he said, "Okay!"?

Well, he said, "what can you do? Can you handle heavy equipment?" And I said, "what, like, a tractor?" And he said, "no, can you handle a drill?" I said I could as long as I had protective equipment—my dad is a safety engineer. So he hired me almost immediately, and I would work on weekends, going out to Queens in my worst clothes. We'd be hauling 2x4s up the side of the building, and using drills, and tearing up concrete. It was crazy, and I loved it. Every day he would take his team to lunch, and that's how I got to know him. He asked me to work on his big Whitney show too [*James Turrell: Light and Space*, 1980]. James has been someone that made sure I got a paycheck once, and so I've been very instrumental in helping him out with his projects at different museums. I've been to Roden Crater probably 10 or 12

times, and I'm still in touch with him. The good news is he's realizing his dream in his lifetime. In recent years he's had some huge donations. Like Kanye West—who knew? You couldn't have predicted that, thirty years ago. It feels like I've known him a lifetime.

What was the New York art scene like then? What was your role in it?

It was *happening* in New York in the early 80s. All these clubs were beginning. I visited The Factory a few times. I'd bomb these parties with my friend and classmate Judy Fox, who's now an artist in New York...at one party I met Andy Warhol, and I had him sign my arm. Why didn't I have him sign a shirt, or something I could have saved? He took a Polaroid of me looking a little tired, with his signature on my arm, and gave it to me.



Andy Warhol, Polaroid photograph of Suzanne Deal Booth, SDB collection, © 2020 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

I met Rauschenberg and visited his studio. There were so many artists working with young people around my age, so I connected a lot to the scene, and absolutely loved it. It seemed like a lot of the people who were interested in conservation were also interested in contemporary art, and that brought in a lot of interesting visitors, even though we were in the basement.

It sounds like you were very busy!

When you're busy, you're very efficient at figuring out how to manage your time. I've always thought that having lots of interests was the best way to get things done.



Alumni

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