

Stephen Whisler

Artist Statement

I was attending Claremont Graduate School in 1980, thinking that it would be a great start to my art career. Full of enthusiasm and optimism I took on the challenge of being the director of the student run Libra Gallery. As I recall I got the position because none of the other students wanted to bother with it.

Most of the exhibitions were the MFA shows that every graduate student did in their second year, so I really only had a few exhibitions that I would be able to curate. I put together several shows, almost all of which were controversial for one reason or another, but none more so than David Ireland's.

I had first met David through my wife Sabine Reckewell at the MFA program she attended at Fiberworks in Berkeley. David was an odd fit for the fiber artists there, what with his penchant for making conceptual art out of old cast off objects and his long ongoing work using his house in San Francisco. But when I thought of David I knew he would be an interesting choice for Claremont.

David warmed to the idea of the show, even though the \$300 honorarium would barely cover his travel expenses. He said, "I'll make a poster you can put up around the school and we'll make some stuff right there in the gallery for the show". OK, I thought, this will be great, I'll be able to introduce Bay Area Conceptualism to Southern California!

The poster arrived and it looked beautiful! It said in large Helvetica type at the top: "YOU CAN'T MAKE ART BY MAKING ART". As soon as I put them up around the school I started getting what I would characterize as rather negative comments from my fellow MFA candidates: "What the fuck is this crap Whisler?" "That's the stupidest thing I ever read, why are you inflicting this nihilistic attitude on us?" "Hey, I'm paying a lot of money to learn how to make art here, this is ridiculous!" were a few of the comments I recall. One student actually ripped the posters off the wall. Luckily we had a whole stack.

Then David arrived. We made frames in the wood shop out of scrap wood, got some concrete and cast a small shelf, two door stops and some bookends, all very rough looking. The show in the 1500 square foot space looked spare, to say the least. David rolled up that day's copy of the L A Times and put it on the shelf; we got a couple of phone books from the office to put between the bookends and I inlaid a small brass plaque that David had made to commemorate the exhibition in one of the sheetrock walls. We stuck open the doors with the door stops and opened the show. Almost all of the other students hated it. I thought it was a great success. David really made the art in the show with the most economical means, almost like he didn't make it.