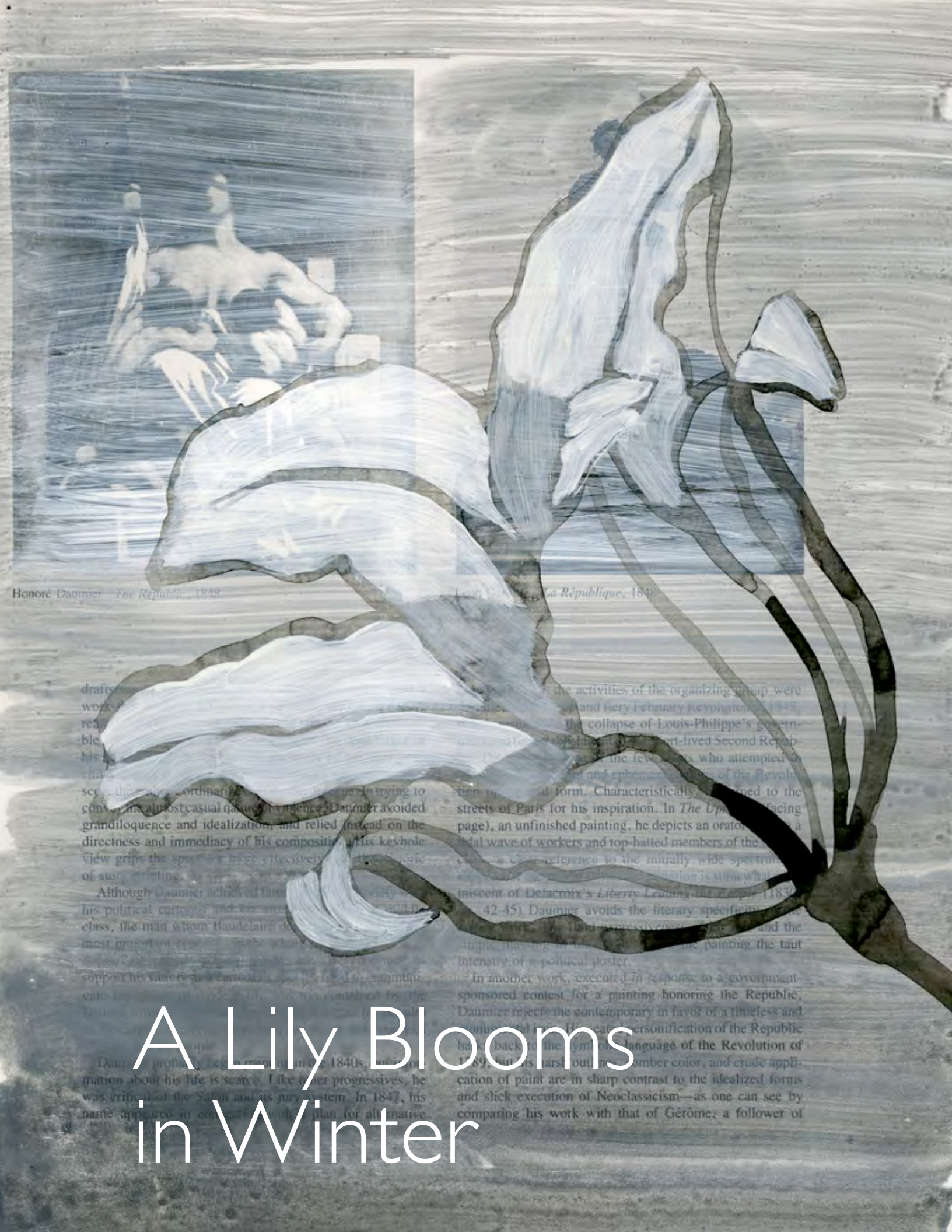


A Lily Blooms in Winter

Detail: 1.2018.1-4

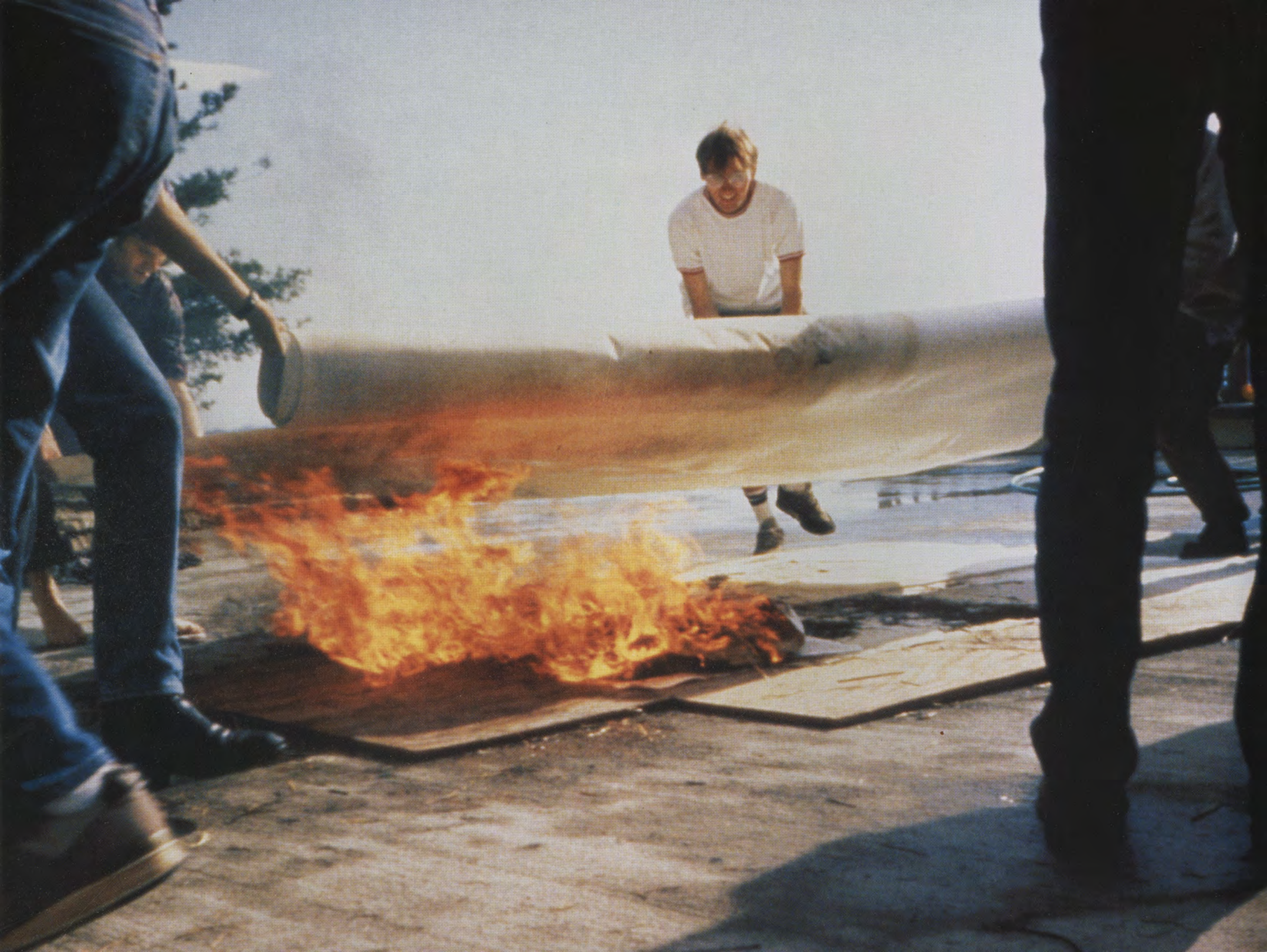
Detail: 1.2018.5-8

Detail: 1.2018.9-12

THE MOUNTAIN LAKE SYMPOSIUM AND WORKSHOP

ART IN LOCALE

RAY KASS & HOWARD RISATTI



FRESCO WORKSHOP, 1989

ALSTON (STONEY) CONLEY

Alston (Stoney) Conley, *Shrine*, 33, June 1980, fresco on panel, x 21 x 1 in. (83.2 x 53.4 x 2.54 cm).

Alston Conley came to Mountain Lake in 1989 to give a workshop on fresco painting so we could learn skills that we anticipated using for another John Cage workshop, which, unfortunately, he did not live to do. In the text below, Conley describes the process by which he became an "itinerant fresco teacher," able to pick up the tools of his trade and travel to the Virginia mountains.

I discovered fresco as a student at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1977. I had been making fragments of contemporary walls in building plasters and paint. At Skowhegan I noticed how brilliant the colors were and how the pigments bonded to the plaster surface. Wanting to learn more about the technique, I read the chapter on fresco in Ralph Mayer's *The Artist's Handbook* and started gathering materials.[1] The plaster, slaked fresco lime, was the hardest thing to find; no art store sold the material. I found a source in western Massachusetts for quick lime, the calcium oxide powder used to make fresco lime by the process known as "slaking"— i.e., mixing water with quick lime plaster to create calcium hydroxide (the desired slaked fresco lime) and then aging the resulting plaster. Mixing quick lime with water during slaking produces lots of heat, steaming off some of the water and creating the possibility of an explosion because of the chemical reaction $CaO + H_2O = Ca(OH)_2 + Heat$.

Armed with appropriate fresco-making materials, I used two fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown in the winters of 1978 and 1979 to make a series of true fresco panels with actual slaked lime, shaped as fragments of walls from imaginary civilizations. Then in the summer of 1980 I worked at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture as the co-dean of students with my wife Mary Armstrong. George Schneeman taught fresco that summer and it was our first meeting.[2] Best known for his collaborations with poets, Schneeman made small frescoes on cast cement forms, often circular shapes (cast in garbage can lids) one inch or more thick, upon which he would apply his top intonaco painting surface. I was still making my wall fragments with wood lathing and the traditional three layers of plaster. I added white cement and horsehair to the first coat that was then pressed through the openings between the wood laths so that the plaster, squeezing around the inner sides of the laths, would hang securely in place. I needed a strong structural first layer, and the additives provided that.

I spent the 1981–82 academic year on a Fulbright grant in Florence, where I finally got to see the Italian masters' frescoes and visit behind-the-scenes at the Sistine Chapel during its historic restoration.[3] Frescoes aren't known for being portable, so I borrowed Schneeman's technique of casting small, round cement "tondos" as well as trying fresco on Masonite panels. When I returned to the U.S., I started making icon-shaped panels of polystyrene, which was readily available as insulation panels. I discovered a new cement product called Conproco Structural Skin; it contained small plastic fibers, an alternative to horsehair, which added strength. I also used the material Acrylic 60, which when mixed with the Conproco increased its ability to stick to a nonporous material like the polystyrene panels. These materials allowed me to become an itinerant fresco teacher as they were much more portable.

[1] Ralph Mayer, *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques*, first edition (New York: The Viking Press; 1940) 5th edition revised and updated with Steven Sheehan (New York: Viking Penguin; 1991).

[2] Schneeman (March 11, 1934 — January 27, 2009), who was born in Minnesota, was largely a self-taught artist influenced by Italian Renaissance painting. He worked in various media including collage, egg tempra, and fresco and was especially well known for his collaborations with New York poets including Peter Schjeldahl, Anne Waldman, Larry Fagin, and Ted Berrigan. He exhibited at Holly Solomon Gallery in Soho during the 1970s and early 80s.

[3] My experience with the Sistine Chapel started at Skowhegan when I gave a fresco demonstration to visiting lecturer Leo Steinberg, a well-known Modern Art critic and art historian with particular expertise in the Italian Renaissance. Steinberg suggested I visit the Sistine Chapel and get up on the scaffolding while the current, somewhat controversial restoration was in progress. He wrote me a letter of introduction. On weekends the Vatican was letting those in the field onto the scaffolding to see the restoration work. When Mary and I went to Rome we were given a tour of the conservation process, which had reached the middle of the ceiling. They were cleaning Adam and Eve and the Serpent, and on one side was the fresh, bright color of the clean surface and on the other the dirty painting. In the middle of the Michelangelo-designed scaffolding was a dentist-office-like chair that leaned back and was equipped with a light with a magnifying glass. Here the conservators