William Christenberry, an internationally renowned artist and 1959 alumnus of The University of Alabama Department of Art and Art History, will lecture on his art on the UA campus on November 5. An exhibition of his works at the Sarah Moody Gallery of Art will be on view from November 5 through December 22, 2009. This year is the fiftieth anniversary of his receiving his Master of Arts degree in art from the university.

In anticipation of his visit to campus, Mr. Christenberry and I recently talked on the phone about a wide variety of subjects. He has a very relaxed style of speaking, as if he never left the dusty porches and kudzu jungles of west Alabama. His dry sense of humor and gentle spirit are sometimes difficult to convey in writing, but were ever-present in our conversation.

William Christenberry entered the University of Alabama as a freshman in 1954, intending to major in commercial art. “I didn’t know any better,” he laughs. But his teachers’ observations of him, and his own instincts, steered him in another direction.

Christenberry said that Jack Granata, Howard Goodson, Melville Price, Lawrence Calcagno, a visiting artist from the west coast, and Frank Engle, from whom he only took one class, influenced him toward the fine arts. In Engle’s class, he didn’t make pots, but fashioned ceramic figures that he sees as connected to his later Klan pieces. Christenberry credits Joe Bolt, who taught him drawing his freshman year, with “predicting” he would be a painter, not a commercial artist.1 Granata, Price, and Goodson he counted as friends, as well as influential teachers. “Mr. Granata was a wonderful teacher and a wonderful friend,” he recalled. “I identified very closely with Howard Goodson because he was from Alabama, from a small town — Vernon, I think — and he was real special to me.” He remembers Ted Klitzke, who came in as chair in 1958, as “solid as a rock and a true gentleman.”

Christenberry recalls the atmosphere around the department when he was in school from 1954 through 1959. “All the faculty were very active, doing their own studies. A lot of that excitement was coming out of New York, with Abstract Expressionism, which was a vital movement at that time.”

During his school years, however, Christenberry began to find his own voice, and “to deal with subject matter, but in an expressionistic way,” as he puts it. About his paintings, he said, “They’ve got all that gesture. I’ve always loved surface, texture, painting, thick paint. But, I wanted to use again the subject matter that I was familiar with, that I grew up with, that I cared so deeply about.”

When he was a boy, one Christmas Santa Claus gave him a Brownie camera, but it wasn’t until he was in school at the university that he began using it. “I went into that landscape, in Tuscaloosa and Hale counties primarily, and began to photograph the things that caught my eye, the vernacular architecture in particular, the country graveyards, which were beautiful things. I used to haunt country graveyards…just to feed my spirit.”

In Working from Memory, his most recent publication, he talks about how the Brownie camera — and the landscape of west Alabama — helped him move from pure Abstract Expressionism to his own painting dialect:

“Abstract Expressionism was all the rage in the art world then, and just like everybody else I was painting in that style. I was coming to grips with my feelings about the landscape and what was in it, though, so I incorporated objects or places into my paintings, such as graveyards and tenant houses. I would take color photos with the Brownie of anything that caught my eye, send them to the local drugstore to be developed and use the photos as color references for my paintings in the studio.”2

He had already been photographing around west Alabama when another event steered Christenberry toward his unique painting vernacular. He discovered the book, Let Us Now Praise Famous
to his friend Franz Kline. They tried tracking Kline to his favorite bar in Greenwich Village, Cedar Tavern, where Kline and his artist friends hung out. Christenberry didn’t shrink from telling a story on himself about stalking the artist in the city. “I didn’t have any money. I nursed one beer. I was shaking in my boots. The bartender just let me sip it; I’m not a big drinker, anyway. Finally he said, ‘you’re just ‘bout out of luck, son. Franz comes in here every night and he hasn’t been here one night since you came here.’”

Later they went to Kline’s studio, and opened the mail slot to slip in the letter of introduction. “I lifted that little flap and you could see these wonderful big black and white paintings all over the place.”

Christenberry accepted an instructorship in the department when he graduated and stayed about a year — and might have stayed longer. “Mel was very supportive of my painting, and as time went on, he said to me, ‘you know you should move on and see something of the rest of the world — don’t get stuck here.’ That was not a criticism of the university, but pushing a young person out into the world.”

Christenberry took Price’s advice and moved to New York. Artistically it was not the most productive year for him, but in the big city he found influences, made decisions, and met people that would figure significantly in his artistic life to come. The other artist he tracked down in New York was Walker Evans. “I finally got up enough nerve to call up Fortune magazine where Evans worked. I probably made a fool of myself. But he was very, very kind...”

“[It] made a tremendous impression on me.” It was actually Agee’s writing that had more of an impact on Christenberry than Evans’ photographs. “See, Agee was a fellow southerner, he was from Knoxville Tennessee, or born there. That was, and is still considered — this is not just my opinion — one of the best collaborations between a visual artist — Walker Evans, and a writer — Agee. What Agee was doing with the written word is what I wanted to do with paint. Not literally, but in terms of feeling.”

Christenberry recalled that one of the “wonderful” things about the department is that they brought in visiting artists from all over. “It didn’t get stale.” Lawrence Calcagno, an Abstract Expressionist painter from San Francisco (1913-1993) was one of those visiting artists. Christenberry describes Calcagno’s painting style as lyrical abstraction, which provided a counterbalance to Mel Price’s style of Abstract Expressionism. Price and Calcagno were also very different personalities, which Christenberry recalls helped him develop different sides of his own artistic self. “[Calcagno] was a very gentle-type man, very soft spoken, very bright. Mel was very brash, opinionated, and outspoken. But I loved them both.”

Melville Price, who came to Alabama from New York in 1958 and taught art until his death in 1970, had a lasting influence on Christenberry. “He could be gruff; he could express his opinion. He latched on to me and I latched on to him and we had some interesting tussles. He was very significant to me.”

Price helped put Christenberry in touch with the outside art world before and after he graduated. When he took a trip to New York as a student, Christenberry and his friend Peter Thomas (who later became Dean of the Corcoran School of Art, and then head of the Graphics Department of the Federal Reserve) took with them a letter of introduction from Mel Price
The Alabama Civil Justice Foundation, the Alabama Humanities Foundation, and the Southern Poverty Law Center are just some of APAEP’s supporters. Funds from the purchase of an Alabama Arts Car Tag also contribute money to this program.

When Grimes talks about his students at Donaldson Maximum Security Prison, it is clear he feels he is filling a real need. “These students have powerful things to say. A lot of them won’t get out anytime soon. This is it for a lot of them. The world has forgotten them. This drawing class is a chance for them to have a voice. It’s tricky to get them to open up. A lot of them are self-taught; several have good facility in drawing.” He sees his role as helping them refine their drawing skills and helping them “open up the possibilities” for creating something more. “It’s a mix between how much I teach [draftsmanship], and how much I get them to express and get something more [from their art] they didn’t expect.”

Grimes is learning at least as much from his students as they are from him. “They come up with amazingly deep material. There is rawness on occasion. It’s inspiring for me - and helpful. In a college environment, it’s easy to get fed up with a few students who are less invested than their parents with their education, to get on the cynical side.” Grimes says it’s refreshing to be around students “who do their homework, who have high expectations for themselves. If I come to class [at Donaldson] and I’m not prepared, I feel like a jerk.”

Some of his UA art students assume the prisoners he teaches are not good students. “[I tell my UA students,] ‘my prison students are whooping your asses; they are always working and thinking about [their art].’”

Stevens concurs and adds that the prison classes are “more like a graduate-level class in behavior and work ethic.” Speaking from her years of experience and of observing other teachers, Stevens says, “You will never be the same after you teach in the prisons — and that’s a good thing...[You are] teaching for the sake of teaching. The artist gets to teach what he or she wants to teach — to do something because you love it.”

Grimes hasn’t decided if he will teach a course in the fall, but he’s thinking about it. Speaking of the personal rewards, he smiles, “It’s kind of addictive.”