

Sophie Landres

## Upstate of mind: The evolving concept of art in New York's Hudson Valley

Long an inspiration to artists, the region north of New York City is bursting with old and new art initiatives – and is taking a closer look at its own storied past



Artist Henri Broyard in his studio at Foreland in Catskill, NY. Photo by Tonje Thilesen for Art Basel.

As if New York City breached its borders and spilled into the mountains upriver, the Hudson Valley has all the hallmarks of an international art center: emerging, mid-career, and established artists; museums, foundations, residencies, and galleries; patrons and collectors; public art and sculpture parks; and academic institutions whose faculty and alumnae have strong studio, curatorial, or research practices.

Contrasting this multitude, the region first appeared in the Western art canon through a single-minded fraternity of city-based painters known as the Hudson River School. Proponents such as Frederic Church and British-born Thomas Cole were products of mid-19th century America, a time of rapid industrialization and the escalated displacement of Native people. They were also devout Protestants, as convinced that nature was God's gift to man as they were infatuated with the Sublime: an aesthetic theory on the pleasure of sensing incomprehensible vastness and intensity, which reason would succumb to or overpower. Often juxtaposing ethereal views of 'settled land' with shadowed tangles of wilderness, their unpeopled pastorals reimagined the lands of the Lenape and Muh-he-con-ne-ok so that nature would appear mighty but conquerable by the Western intellect. However, as some theorists of the Sublime emphasized, nothing we see justifies this sentiment: the Sublime exists only in our minds.

Now more commonly understood as illustrating hubris, a fastidious aesthetic, and unconscionable attempts to erase Indigenous cultures, the Hudson River School stands as the indelible first chapter of modern art in the Hudson Valley. The region has since diverged into innumerable artistic perspectives and begun grappling with its haunted history. Ecology has since recast nature less as a possession to lord over than as interdependencies between organisms and their surroundings. Today's art scene is equally ecosystemic.

Rooted in connectivity, River Valley Arts Collective (RVAC) partners with residencies, exhibition spaces, and farms to curate exhibitions, host skill-sharing workshops, and supply artists with ecological materials. It was founded after a year of field research to map and band together the cultural terrain. 'One connection was consistent: a desire to have a relationship with the natural world,' observes founder and executive director Alyson Baker. 'No matter what form the work took, we heard about experiences with the landscape, animals, soil, seasons, weather ... all quite different from dialogues driven by the built environment.' A bedrock of RVAC's program is the annual 'On the Grounds' exhibition, which presents sculpture installations on the majestic grounds surrounding the Al Held Foundation.

Many art programs in the Hudson Valley are predicated on such encounters with the landscape. 'When we put anything on view, the landscape is always an active party to that,' says Nora Lawrence, the artistic director and chief curator at Storm King Art Center, a 500-acre sculpture park featuring new work by artists such as Wangechi Mutu and Sarah Sze alongside permanent installations by Louise Nevelson and Maya Lin, among many others. 'Conversations about landscape,' she explains, 'have moved beyond the bucolic, beauty, or serenity ... to be about history, the presence of stories and people, change, and industry.'

Attuned to this social dimension, visitors who previously came to the Hudson Valley seeking isolation increasingly think of it as a place to find community, especially through institutional offerings. The sculpture and architecture park, Art Omi, facilitates outdoor encounters with art while bringing international practitioners of all creative disciplines together through its residency program. Recognizing that many artists in the United States are gig workers who lack health insurance, the non-profit organization, O+, focuses on the literal well-being of the community. Giving priority to women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ artists, it commissions public murals in exchange for healthcare, while 'expanding our perceptions of who is historically permitted to occupy space, to be seen and celebrated.'

This coupling of environmental and community considerations also drives residency programs like the 120-year-old Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild (whose visiting artists have included Bob Dylan, Philip Guston, and Eva Hesse) along with ChaNorth, 'T' Space, and Wassaic Project, which have public exhibition spaces. Several residencies couch their missions in broader politics: With Lawrence Chua, Julie Mehretu, and Paul Pfeiffer on the board of directors, Denniston Hill convenes artists and thinkers to engage in critical discourse and the pursuit of social justice. STONELEAF RETREAT is designed for womxn and families because, as cofounder Helen Toomer explains, their need 'to escape, rest, recharge, and/or create is great, especially at this turbulent time when their rights are being attacked globally.'

Toomer also founded UPSTATE ART WEEKEND, the annual three-day event that, in 2022, featured 47 open studios and more than 100 exhibitions presented by art spaces of all shapes and sizes. While galleries such as Jack Shainman's museum-caliber The School, Elijah Wheat Showroom, Mother Gallery, and SEPTEMBER, and museums such as Dia Beacon, Magazzino Italian Art, and the consistently excellent Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College's Hessel Museum of Art already function as destinations, alternative or off-the-beaten-path organizations are more difficult for out-of-towners to discover. To Toomer, 'connection is the ultimate objective' for spotlighting the diversity of a region that is often overshadowed by the vibrant metropolis nearby.

Underrepresented Hudson Valley art histories receive critical attention at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz. An exhibition on Kate Millett revealed the artist's 1970s Poughkeepsie art colony to be a crossroad for artists and queer or feminist activists, including Simone de Beauvoir, Barbara Hammer, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and Gloria Steinem. The current exhibition, 'Benjamin Wigfall & Communications Village', illuminates what director Anna Conlan describes as the artist's 'big impact on art in the Hudson Valley.' Wigfall, who was also a printmaking professor, created a community arts center for Kingston teenagers in 1973 that was visited by outstanding Black artists including Romare Bearden, Betty Blayton, Melvin Edwards, Charles Gaines, and Mavis Pusey. His Kingston gallery exposed the Hudson Valley to contemporary work from around the world as well as African art and craft from various time periods.

To gallerist Alexander Gray, who was raised in a Woodstock home that was formerly the site of Alexander Archipenko's art school, the Hudson Valley ecosystem is uniquely centered on artists and experimentation. In 2019, he opened Alexander Gray Associates' Germantown location after living in the town for nearly 20 years. The space began as a white cube within an old barn that displayed intimate exhibitions of a single work of art. It now occupies the adjacent building with a welcoming front garden. 'To have a gallery that is not in proximity to a Chanel boutique sends a different message and that's what's distinct about the Hudson Valley,' says Gray. 'It's about ideas and risk-taking.'

Artist Stef Halmos was motivated by precisely that ethos when renovating three industrial buildings into Foreland, an 85,000 square-meter complex of affordable studios, galleries, and event spaces in Catskill. 'When I allowed my thinking to become expansive, [so] did the physical manifestation,' she recalls. Built to prioritize artists' needs, the complex opened in phases, starting in 2019, and has since given space to the New Art Dealers Alliance fair (NADA) and galleries including Rachel Uffner and Bortolami. Because new art spaces play a role in revitalizing and/or gentrifying their surroundings, Foreland also works to 'fight against the industry of exclusion' by partnering with neighborhood organizations and offering free programming designed to benefit local stakeholders.

Another new space, Forge Project, founded in 2021 by Becky Gochman and Zach Feuer, now operates as a Native-led Indigenous art and decolonial initiative committed to addressing the historical and ecological ramifications of displacement. It currently hosts talks that explore gentrification as a continuation of colonialism and works with the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indian community to reintroduce native medicinal plants to the land surrounding its Ai Weiwei-designed facilities. 'Equitability needs to be structural, but it also needs to be accountable to the histories of this place,' explains executive director and chief curator Candice Hopkins. Thus, Forge is also creating a 'rematriation guide' for Native communities to regain cultural belongings that are presently held in museum collections. Accessibility is the goal for its own collection of work by Natalie Ball, Jeffrey Gibson, Raven Halfmoon, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, and Kite, among others. Such work demonstrates how Native artists shape social movements along with artistic discourses from modernity to the most recent Venice Biennale. In 'current conversations about displacement, migration, and world histories,' Hopkins asserts that 'Native artists are actually the leaders.'

The Hudson Valley is currently abuzz in anticipation of a collaboration between Mendes Wood DM and Blum & Poe galleries, set to open before the end of 2022. It rides the crest of what is predicted to be another wave of dynamic new spaces that see the region as hospitable to aesthetic innovation. But, like any ecosystem, the Hudson Valley is suspended in a delicate balance. Where space was once plentiful and relatively affordable, real estate is increasingly gobbled up as investment property or by post-pandemic migration. Historic inequalities persist. Ultimately, the state of the Hudson Valley depends not just on perceptions, but on the nature of its symbiosis.

Sophie Landres is a curator and art historian based in New York. Her writing has appeared in *Art Comments*, *Art Journal*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Degree Critical*, *Hyperallergic*, *Modern Painters*, and *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, among other peer-reviewed journals, art critical publications, and exhibition catalogues.