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'Now I'm on the Stage': 7 Artists on Their Museum Residencies in Harlem

The Studio Museum in Harlem's longtime residency program has been pivotal to artists of color. Here, alumni look back on why it was so crucial.

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The Studio Museum in Harlem's artist-in-residence program has a storied history. Since its start in 1969, some of the most prominent Black artists working today have held residencies. More than 150 artists have participated in the program, working in media including painting, drawing, sculpture and performance.

The seven-month fellowship was conceived for visual artists of African and Afro-Latin descent. In the 1980s, the museum's director, Mary Schmidt Campbell, formalized the program, standardizing its length and the number of artists.

Three artists are selected each year from a pool of applicants. (In 2020, during the pandemic, four residencies were awarded.) Those selected get studio space in the museum, a stipend of \$37,500, along with regular visits with museum staff members and arts professionals from outside the museum.

Since its inception, the program has addressed a gaping deficit in the art scene: a dearth of platforms that support artists of color striving to find their way through a thicket of financial, familial and personal obligations, while making the art that's true to their vision.

On the occasion of the museum's reopening — the residency program remained open while the museum was closed for renovations — The New York Times spoke to alumni. They provide a glimpse of what their experiences were and why this program is critical to Harlem, the New York art scene and the art world. These are edited excerpts from the conversations.

Sanford Biggers (1999-2000)

One of my fondest memories of being in the program is the camaraderie that I had with the other two artists [Terry Boddie and Nicole Awail], feeling that we were all embarking on a new journey.

We came in exactly when Thelma Golden and Lowery Stokes Sims and Christine Kim came in. So, it was not just being in New York and being in Harlem, it was basically the next chapter of the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was extremely exciting, extremely fertile, and we all just felt like we had come up to some type of art summer camp, excited for the future. I had come directly out of grad school, and every week there we had multiple critiques, which make you a bit self-conscious.

Being in Harlem and seeing the improvisatory nature of the neighborhood and the people, and catching the funk of being uptown — when I took that into the studio it sort of opened up. It freed me in a way that I could be a lot less risk averse. I felt like I was improvising. I felt like, OK, now I'm on the stage, and that makes no sense. Perfect. It makes no sense. Let's do it.

Chakaia Booker (1995-1996)

My residency at the Studio Museum was well timed. It came on the heels of finishing graduate school and working at Socrates Sculpture Park. The residency maintained the momentum I was building and offered me access to people, exhibitions and most importantly, the opportunity to begin regularly showing public works outdoors.

I exhibited "Untitled (Male Torso That Left His Path)" in September 1995 for the exhibition "Listening Sky," a group show of 12 artists that inaugurated the first public space at the Studio Museum dedicated to outdoor sculpture by artists of African descent.

The A.I.R. program was instrumental in allowing me to show at the White House in 1997. While Hillary Clinton was first lady, she initiated a series of exhibitions in the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden to showcase 20th-century sculptors from different regions of the United States.

She wanted to highlight art at the White House and make it accessible to the public. Only works in museum collections were available for the exhibition. My "Repugnant Rapunzel" was in the Studio Museum's collection, so it was eligible.

Opening the doors to public art fundamentally changed the trajectory of my career. When you take off the limitations of space, scale, materials and media, that opens up more opportunities for a career. Like so many in the arts, I have built a career by being focused on the work, finding ways to connect to people through the work, finding ways to put together a living through my work. My time at the Studio Museum allowed me to do that further, faster.

William Cordova (2004-2005)

The challenge was the high standards set by those previous artists that I needed to, you know, rise to that occasion. It was a challenge being there because of that history, layers of history, geography, culture.

It's a huge hub. The residency wasn't just inside the studio. The residency was Harlem too, and so that in itself was a challenge because I also had to filter certain things out, all the information that's coming in. I get sensory overload really fast, and not living in New York before, that could be overwhelming.

In the program I was becoming more aware of the surroundings, the history, geography, the politics, the magic — all the juju that gets absorbed and transformed into work. So, my work became more alchemic because I was interested in alchemy.

My work changed. It became more expansive, installation-based and established me not only in New York but in various communities throughout the country. School is four walls, limited space. Studio Museum was working indoors but also outdoors. I knew that this was a historical moment.

Maren Hassinger (1984-1985)

It was like a free-for-all. We just had a lot of fun doing what we did, and nobody was trying to change anybody. Nobody from a curatorial space would come in and say, "You should make that bigger." And between the three of us, there was no, "That should have a little more color, don't you think?" We made things and laughed and told jokes and it was friendly and supportive, and all of us made very different work.

Before, when you're in school, and learning different skills and techniques, and you're really busy just trying to graduate, you don't know what it's like to be out in the world. Everybody else is a doctor and a lawyer and a teacher, and you're trying to make some art that nobody wants to buy. Nobody can explain that situation to you. The everyday support of being able to come to a studio and make something and have conversations with other artists who are trying to make something — just that alone gave me a big boost. It wasn't easy, but I felt I was a real professional, like I could do it. So, I figured out a way of teaching school and making work and having the studio and showing people my work, and just one thing led to the next, over a very long, slow period of time, and finally, that's what I do.

Sana Musasama (1983-1984)

It was my first exposure to being in a museum. I was exposed to brilliant Black women curators [Deborah Willis, Terrie Rouse, Cheryl Lynn Bruce, Mary Schmidt Campbell], who had focused on a particular place in history and were articulate about it.

My education in ceramics had been very linear. Everything was tradition. These curators would speak about a particular time in history and the Black gaze and how they looked at things, and it expanded my worldview, and was like food for me.

I was intimidated because I didn't know what they knew, but they were gentle and they held me by the hand. One of the curators, Deirdre Bibby, became my mentor, my guide and my best friend.

One memory was being around Alison Saar and James Dupree, who worked with various materials. I only worked with clay, so watching them, I began to think about other materials that could speak my language. I would think about dirt, about hair, about wool, about metal — think

about my vocabulary because ceramics was so linear and what you learned according to tradition was not to mix them. They opened that window for me. I began to think about other materials besides clay.

Nari Ward (1992-1993)

I was really excited to talk about this because for me there was a full-circle moment in that my mentor was one of the founders of the Studio Museum's artist-in-residence program, William T. Williams. He brought me into the art world and when I'd see him in grad school, he was always talking about the Studio Museum program, and so it was a really beautiful, poetic journey for me to end up being there.

The program allowed me to create an inspired piece that is like a masterpiece for me: "Amazing Grace" (1993). That piece has encompassed my entire career in terms of what I want a work to do and how I want it to talk about place and community.

Literally I would go in, in the morning, and punch a clock, which is what they required, and then I'd go out and collect abandoned baby strollers. I did that for four months to collect the amount that I wanted. So, the idea I could do something that talked about specifically the local community but also a bigger world community. That was really what I think set the map for what I wanted to do in my career.

Charisse Pearlina Weston (2022-2023)

I was commuting from Brooklyn, so the commute was kind of hard — also dealing with the expectation that comes from getting into the program because it has such an amazing history. I feel like every Black artist knows about Studio Museum. They have chosen amazing artists who have gone on to do amazing things.

I think the three of us were balancing what we felt was pressure from other people because it's so competitive to get into the program, and people expect so much. So, it's just trying to live up to the standard that's been set. Maybe that was the most difficult part of it, but I think that, for all of us, it kind of pushed us into showing up in our work and in our practice in a way that I don't think we would have been able to do otherwise.

There were a number of things I tried for the first time that have now shown up in my work. I had a lot of pivotal breakthroughs in my practice, and I think it is because I felt I'm a part of this legacy. Now it's time to do it. Don't hesitate. Experiment. Push the limits. Show up.