



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



Escaping the city to rejuvenate with art and green views

This past weekend, I took the train north from New York, up along the Hudson River, into the rich springtime greenery of the Hudson Valley. My trip had two purposes. One was to visit friends and, literally, to have a change of scenery. Lately, I've been feeling stressed and fragmented by all the different demands of upcoming work. I knew if I didn't do something to refresh my mind and emotions, my anxiety would only increase, causing my productivity and performance to decline. I also knew the trip north into the gardens of irises and the about-to-bloom peonies would be the perfect balm.

The second purpose was to visit artists in their studios, combining a little work with relaxation so I wouldn't feel totally slothful. I was recently asked to curate an art exhibition examining black, indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) artists

who live and/or work in the Hudson Valley – an area long associated with sublime 19th-century landscape paintings by white, male artists like Thomas Cole and Frederic Church. The area is now rich with more diverse artists. Because I have rented houses and visited friends in the area for nearly 20 years, I knew some of them and asked them to recommend others. As a prelude to my exhibition, I called several and scheduled studio visits.

The time I spent with these artists, in their studios looking at and talking about their work, served both my purposes. I could feel the calming effect on my nerves and my mind. These visits allowed me to feel part of each artist's creative vision and process – which is so totally different from mine as a writer. Deliberately, I did not google anything about them and their work in advance. I wanted to have no concept, no preconceptions, of what I was going to see, so that I would be mentally and emotionally open to whatever journey they wanted me to take with them.

Walking into each studio was totally fresh and new. Works were on the walls, floors, tabletops, hanging from the ceiling. There were figurative and abstract paintings, sculptures, drawings, collages, fabric hangings. The different looks of each studio really fascinated me. Some were

enclosed construction sites, spaces that were being added to the houses in which the artists live. Some contained random groupings of all kinds of objects, woods, textiles, canvases, and tools on any and every surface that the artists use to create works.

These studios had a fantastical, improvisational feel. Other studios were minimal: painted white with medium-grey-coloured floors and all objects neatly organised on shelves or the floor, as well as in racks. These felt like a hybrid between an art studio and a science lab. Instead of trying to decipher what the look of the studio said about the artist, I patiently waited for each one to tell me in their own words. And they always did. Some conversations left me puzzled, while others made me confident in my perceptions. Most importantly, all of the art I saw left me full of thoughts.

Not all of my time was spent indoors. Walking in gardens and fields, marvelling at the springtime lushness, I thought how seeing and talking with these artists about their creativity felt so in sync with the season. On the train ride back to Manhattan, work pressure far from my mind, I looked at the Hudson Valley landscape going by. I thought about the show I'm curating and how art is, and has long been, a therapeutic force for BIPOC artists. When I got home and sat at my desk, I started to feel worry building inside me anew about how to capture this idea. But the weekend had given me a fresh eye and a fresh mind to tackle the challenge.

MARTINIS BEFORE THE SUNSHINE STATE

Most apartment buildings in New York have one or two long-term residents, typically in their eighties and nineties, who everyone sees often – in the elevator, on the street, in the lobby coming home. Often, they combine a strong personality with a distinctive, long-cultivated style. Fellow tenants may not know them well, but find their presence reassuring, part of the building's DNA.

A woman in my building, who recently turned 90, fits this description. Last week, after having lived in Manhattan her entire life, she reluctantly moved to Florida to be near her daughter. I knew her more than casually, having seen or talked to her almost daily during Covid restrictions. As her former active daily life – Pilates, hair and nail appointments, shopping excursions to the 99¢ store, Rummikub every Saturday afternoon – slipped away she would say, "This is so not like me." She said this more and more as we sipped our extra-dry Tanqueray martinis at cocktail hour.

One recent afternoon, she called me and said softly, "I've been in Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library for two hours and can't find my way back to our building. Please come and get me." I found her sitting calmly on a chair. As we walked home, I sensed she knew that time had come.

Of course, I was in the lobby for her departure. Long-time staff lined up to say goodbye. She was tearful, but gamely said she was looking forward to her new life. Boarding the minibus to the airport, she reminded me firmly that she only wanted one thing from me for her new life: a pair of the vintage Baccarat crystal martini glasses that were part of our cocktail ritual this past year. I packed and mailed them the next day.