

Chelsea^{now}

Fountain House Studio Has Sprawling Space for Artistic Growth

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L to R: Karen Gormandy and Ariel Willmott are the curatorial forces behind the latest show at Fountain House Gallery. | Photo by Dusica Sue Malesevic

BY DUSICA SUE MALESEVIC | Sanctuary. Sustenance. Spacious. Sunny. Sacred.

This is how artists described their new studio space, where work created there is now part of an inaugural show at the Fountain House Gallery in Hell's Kitchen.

Fountain House Studio was about three years in the making, **Ariel Willmott**, the gallery's director, said. The around 2,000-square-foot studio opened at 37-24 24th St. in Long Island City in January last year.

"We did extensive fundraising and programmatic development to... build the foundation for opening that space," Willmott recently told NYC Community Media during a visit to the gallery (702 Ninth Ave. at W. 48th St.).

Prior to the studio's opening, she explained, artists from Fountain House — an organization that established the gallery as part of its mission to help those living with mental illness — “were mostly working independently in their homes and making artwork kind of on their own.”

Robin Taylor, an artist who has lived in a small studio in Hell's Kitchen since 2006, said while her apartment can be isolating, the studio is not. The experience of working at a studio surrounded by other artists has encouraged her to try new things, to “stick with my discoveries. I'm inspired by all the other artists' work,” said Taylor, who has been Fountain House member since 2011.

Karen Gormandy, the studio coordinator for Fountain House Studio, said the increase in space makes a difference. “When you're in a small space, obviously, your creation is limited by just the physicality of where you are and the amount of materials you have,” she said, adding, “When we finally did get the studio and we had people coming in for the residencies... we had a few artists who just sort of exploded in terms of, ‘Oh, I have all this space.’ ”

Around the perimeter of the studio is space designated for the eight resident artists, with open tables in the middle and free supplies on hand, Willmott explained. The studio has drop-in hours for all Fountain House members — encouraging them to get out to Long Island City, she said, noting that is a big factor in deciding who gets a resident space next.

“It's an open space and no one had barriers,” Gormandy said. For example, **Boo Lynn Walsh**, who is also featured in the show, decided to experiment with a resin coating, pouring the medium on large canvases and watching them drip, Gormandy explained. “The beauty of it is we have eight artists in that space, and when one artist sees somebody using a material,” she said, “they go, ‘Oh, I want to do that.’ ”

Willmott added, “You see the cross-pollination that is happening.”



Work by artist Ashwood Kavanna. | Photo by Dusica Sue Malesevic

Artists are encouraged to do workshops to talk about their process and the results of their experimenting, Gormandy said.

Eight years ago, Gormandy started an unofficial evening art program at Fountain House, saying the story was she was supposed to do one workshop. “After the third figure drawing class, they were like, ‘Are you going to be here next week because we’re not quite finished yet.’ It happened, obviously, in a very organic way.”

An artist herself, Gormandy is currently working on some large drawings based on some historic African-Americans. One piece is called “Tom’s Bounty,” a chalk pastel of what she imagines Tom — a slave who was traded by George Washington for lime, rum, molasses, and tamarind — looked like, she said.

Gormandy said she started volunteering at the gallery, and then running the art workshop at Fountain House because her son is a member, and “the only way I could think to give back, the only thing I had to give was my art.”

She still runs the workshop because it acts as a transition for many who say they can’t do art. “Because this is all outsider point of view... you don’t have to have any schooling, you know, you just have to have a curious mind. That’s where we start.”

It’s been “amazing” to see the show at Fountain House Gallery, Gormandy said, seeing the work from its inception to hanging on the walls.

About the studio, Willmott said, “I think it’s been transformative for the members and for our community because now it feels more holistic. We can offer them everything from the creative inception to exhibiting. It’s kind of the A to Z of being an artist — at least that’s what we hope for.”

Taylor, one of the artists in the show, said Fountain House encourages work ethic and creativity, and got her to sculpt, paint and draw.



Artist Robin Taylor says she tends to gravitate toward faces and masks in her work. | Photo by Dusica Sue Malesevic

Another artist, **Marty Cohen**, agreed with Taylor, saying, “Fountain House is a very nurturing place and it gets you to... take care account of your life, you know, and gives you enough room to have freedom to choose what you want to do, get back into life because a lot of the members, especially me, had a very rough time before we got to Fountain House.”

Cohen, who has lived in Hell’s Kitchen for over 11 years, said he grew up watching his father paint in their basement. He said he was influenced by Picasso, Matisse, and Braque, and studied art at SUNY Purchase, then earned his master of fine arts from Carnegie Mellon. At one point, in the 1990s, he was running an art gallery in the East Village, but difficulties ended up leading him to Fountain House, where he has been a member since 1995.

Working at the studio, he said, has also inspired him. “It gets me to grow as an artist. I mean, not only for myself,” he said, “but I love to see how other artists progress.”

In addition to Cohen, Taylor and Walsh, work by **L.B. Berman, Bernadette Corcoran, Stephanie Freader, Ashwood Kavanna, A. Lutz, Anthony Newton, Julie Orton, Angela Rogers, Barry Senft, Susan Spangenberg**, and **Alyson Vega** are also featured in the show.

The Fountain House Studio Inaugural Show is on view through Feb. 21. For more information, visit fountainhousegallery.org.



“It’s always good to be in an art show,” said artist Marty Cohen, shown here with his work. | Photo by Dusica Sue Malesevic



This sculpture by Stephanie Freader started because there was a call for work that was fashion-related, Gormandy said. | Photo by Dusica Sue Malesevic