

Offering Space and Support for Mentally Ill Artists

An innovative New York “clubhouse” provides unique services for older members

By Deborah Quilter July 24, 2017



Robin Taylor's sculpture, *Final Bow*, in the Fountain House Gallery Credit: Deborah Quilter

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At first glance, Fountain House in New York City may seem like any other lively community center. Once you enter the stately double doors into the ample, airy building, you are greeted by a hive of activity — and a feeling of warmth and welcome.

Throughout the building, striking paintings deck the walls and sculpture graces the halls, including a large Degas-like ballerina in *reverence*, the sweeping bow that dancers take at curtain call. The tutu was made of pointe shoes worn by professional dancers, and the whole thing — all 750 pounds pounds of it — was cast in bronze. You'll also see a garden

courtyard, research department, education office, employment office and even a horticultural unit with hydroponic lettuce growing in the window.

What you might never guess about Fountain House from first glance is that this innovative “clubhouse” organization only admits members — many of whom are lifelong artists — with a serious mental illness such as depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

Supporting Artists With a Space for Their Work

Fountain House is not a medical facility and only allows non-violent mentally ill persons as members. It does not dispense drugs or provide psychotherapy, though members can participate in those treatments on their own. The program is totally voluntary, and you must want to be there to partake of its services.

As one member put it, “You can come whenever you want. You have a place to go and someone to talk to and something to do, so you’re not thinking about yourself all the time.”

Although Fountain House is open to all services ranging from housing and employment to college reentry and culinary programs, one of its most unique aspects is its Fountain House Gallery, a gallery that’s a block and a half away from its main building and features the work of member artists.

Fountain House Gallery Director Ariel Willmott estimates that 50 percent of the artists were established before they came to Fountain House and the rest became artists during their membership. She says that Fountain House Gallery helps them navigate the complex world of art in New York City and assists the new artists to transition into professionals.

Fountain House also maintains an artists’ studio in Long Island City, N.Y. Willmott explained that the artists’ program was not used as therapy, where a patient is guided through the process by a professional facilitator to reach a therapeutic goal. Rather, Fountain House provides artists with materials and space to work. The gallery also provides a place where the artists can sell their work: 60 percent of sales goes to the artist and 40 percent to the gallery.

Nonetheless, Willmott observes that people who were previously isolated or introverted tend to make friends and become more socially comfortable in their program.

“People really come out of their shell,” Willmott said. “Showcasing their artwork is really affirming. It transforms how they see themselves and how they engage with others. There’s a lot to be said about being in a community where people have had similar experiences as you have. People are having struggles, but they’re in a space where they are accepted.”

About 30 percent of the organization’s members are over 60; the Fountain House Silver Project was established to serve their needs.

“If you believe people can do great things with their lives, you build opportunities,” said Susan Lieblich, who heads up the Fountain House Silver Project.

One Artist’s Experience

One older artist who has found opportunity through Fountain House is Robin Taylor, the sculptor of *Final Bow*, the massive bronze ballerina statue I had seen earlier. Taylor, 65, created that sculpture during a manic phase of her bipolar disorder. “Sculpting keeps me sane,” she said.

Before entering Fountain House, Taylor had an impressive 35-year career as a musical theater dancer on and off-Broadway and in national tours; she appeared in Broadway productions of *A Chorus Line*, *Nunsense* and others. Taylor has also written books including an autobiography and *Shy Jenny*, a sensitively-written children’s book, which she also illustrated. Working on Broadway is the pinnacle of success for any dancer, and Taylor’s history made her journey all the more remarkable.

For starters, she lived in a car with her alcoholic parents until she was 12. As a baby, Taylor suffered hearing loss, which later led to a stutter. Her ear problems were also painful, so her parents would soothe her with whiskey and honey. Her dance career began at age 5, performing in bars for her father. “Money was tossed onto the floor, and that bought me food and Dad drinks,” she recalled.

At age 10, her mother arranged for Taylor to study dance with a former Ziegfeld dancer. By the time she was 19, she was married. Taylor won the Natalie Wood scholarship at UCLA to study acting; theater gave her order and discipline. “Theater really saved my life,” she said.

However, beginning in college, Taylor started showing acute symptoms of another problem: bipolar disease. She self-medicated with alcohol, becoming “double trouble” — someone who suffers from mental illness and substance abuse.

Everything finally came apart one night in the 1990s, when Taylor found herself sitting in front of a row of pills and a bottle of Gallo. Set to commit suicide, she said she had even changed her underwear, remembering the universal mother’s dictum about not wearing dirty underclothes in case you are hit by a bus.

Taylor was saved by police, who knocked down the door and took her to the hospital, where she endured shock therapy three times a week for 10 weeks.

“You get on the gurney, they give you a sedative and attach lobes to the side of the head,” she explained. “The shock can last as long as 20 minutes. You wake up disoriented. You lose all recent memory.” Taylor was very depressed. “I didn’t talk, and I crawled under tables,” she recalled.

Shock therapy helped Taylor get over her suicidal tendencies, but it affected her memory. “It’s like the center of my life was cut out,” she explained.

From Dancer to ‘Final Bow’ at Fountain House

Taylor had never studied art but taught herself how to sculpt — including figuring out how to set up a mold for a bronze cast. She transforms experiences from her life into works of great moment and meaning.

Ironically, Taylor learned about about Fountain House Gallery by asking to show her work at its gallery, not realizing it was for people with mental illness. She now works in the organization’s Horticulture Unit and also makes cards and bookmarks and spins wool from the sheep on the Fountain House farm in New Jersey.

To gaze upon *Final Bow*, you see faithful adherence to the exacting lines of ballet, in addition to understanding what it would be like emotionally for a dancer who has spent her entire life sweating and training for her art to take her final bow from the stage. Taylor used five models for the statue, which she created to honor a dear friend and choreographer who had breast cancer.

And *Final Bow*, one of the signature pieces in Taylor's body of sculpting work and one of the most stunning pieces on display at Fountain House, seems the perfect embodiment of the organization's ideals and dedication to mentally ill artists.