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# The Magic of Artist Residencies

With Lavaughan Jenkins,  
MAGNET, Danielle Epstein,  
and Dina Schapiro

Words by  
Carolina Porras Monroy

Illustrations by  
Michelle Stevens

For the past seven years, a large part of my life has been dedicated to supporting artists in the creation of their work by facilitating and advocating for artist residencies. I am cofounder of Piney Wood Atlas, a project that catalogs unconventional, DIY residencies around the country. Since starting our project, we have road-tripped to over seventy-five residencies across the US, and our latest publication features eighteen residencies throughout the Northeast. On our travels, we've learned that every space has something different to offer, but what they all have in common is the gift of time and space. Whether independent and family run or embedded into a larger institution like the Studios at MASS MoCA, where I currently work, artist residencies can nurture life-changing magic.

Where I live, where I work, my partner of five years, my communities, the art that I make—so much has been shaped by my residency experiences, and I know many artists can say the same. I think what makes these experiences so impactful is that they encourage the radical act of giving yourself permission and allow for other people to support you in exploring, creating, resting, socializing, or staring

off into space. This type of care for ourselves—and for others—isn't usually granted in our daily routines but is integral to being creative and generating new ideas in art and in life.

For this issue, I explore the magic of residencies as well as the importance of wellness at artist residencies from various perspectives: artists who attend them and staff and founders who make it all happen. I talked with artist Lavaughan Jenkins, who shares his impactful residency experience and the importance of putting one's mental health first. I met with Ox-Bow School of Art and Artists' Residency staff member MAGNET, whose role is to support artists' mental and emotional wellness while in residence. To get perspectives from people who have created a dynamic residency and community space, I met with Marble House Project cofounders and directors Danielle Epstein and Dina Schapiro, who express the profound impact of being immersed in nature and having the freedom to create in a space with no expectations.

*The following conversations have been edited and condensed.*



## Lavaughan Jenkins

*When I meet with Lavaughan Jenkins, he's sitting in a spacious, sunny studio in LA, at his third or fourth residency in half as many years. After this residency he's on his way to another one.*

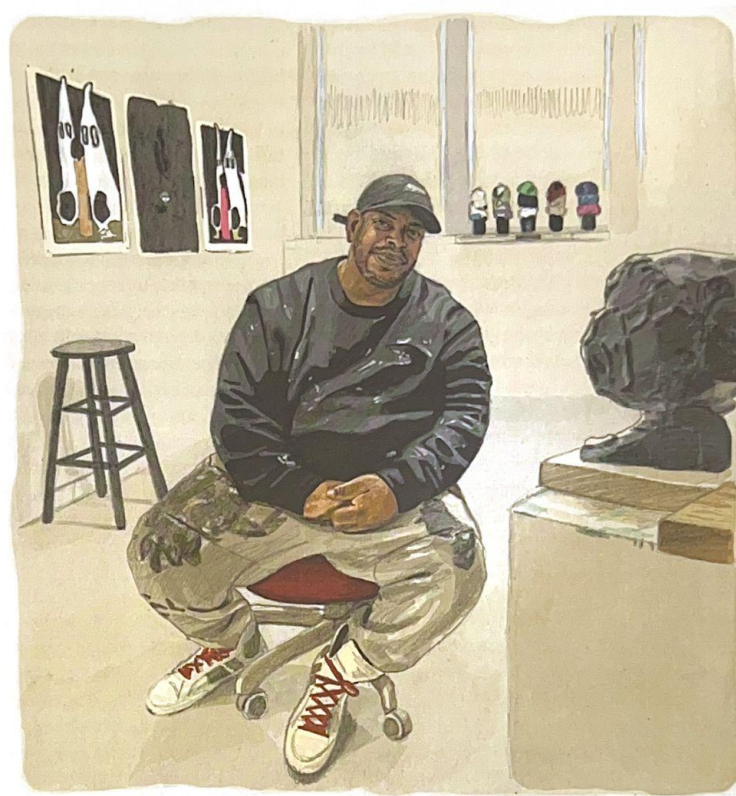
**CAROLINA PORRAS MONROY:** How would you describe your practice to someone that hasn't seen it before?

**LAVAUGHAN JENKINS:** Usually, I tell people I'm a figurative painter; I tend to think of my paintings in the third dimension. I've always wanted to allow the audience to have multiple views of things. I love making paintings that are fighting for justice and to honor and appreciate the women that have done so much to get me to this point.

**CPM:** That's beautiful. Out of the residencies you've been to, which space or experience stands out the most as transformative and why?

**LJ:** My first residency was two years ago at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. It's a seven-month residency in the off-season. It's in October and it's starting to get cold, there are rainstorms and snow. You basically have the town to yourself. My favorite days were waking up in the morning, making a cup of coffee, and walking down to the beach, especially after it snowed. The sea sparkles. It's super magical.

It also can be lonely. The residency had twenty artists, so we got to be together, but



you're still in this big old empty town. Depression is a real thing at residencies, because you're pulled away from your immediate life. But I think that feeling plays a big role in how your work changes when you're at residencies. It's like your whole world is upside down ... The one thing that you've got to do is make work.

My painting changed, but also, I changed. It really pushed my progression and my work. When you're at a residency, all these things in the real world, like bills, don't exist anymore. All you have to do is wake up in

the morning and create. How amazing is that? I think that's the crazy thing about being at a residency: all you have is time.

**CPM:** You've been on the road a lot recently. Do you have certain routines or structures that you like to build for yourself in these new spaces in order to feel grounded or help with feelings of burnout?

**LJ:** Whatever we do in life, our mental health is the first priority—it should be, at least. I love that we're starting to tap into that now and realize that

**Lavaughan Jenkins** is a Boston-based painter and sculptor from Pensacola, Florida. He received a BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2005. In 2019, Jenkins received the James & Audrey Foster Prize at ICA / Boston and has been a 2021 Fine Arts Work Center artist-in-residence and the 2022 Addison Gallery of American Art Edward E. Elson Artist-in-Residence.

Whatever we do in life, our mental health is the first priority—it should be, at least. 🗨️

it's OK to ask for help. It's really nice that people are making the necessary steps to put themselves first. If we do, we'll make better art.

Because I make so much artwork, a lot of people ask if I get tired or burnt out. I took six years off from painting when I graduated college. I didn't want to be an artist. I just started working in bars. I felt like my life was upside down, and I didn't really understand why. Then the day that I started painting again, I experienced a different energy and I was like: "This is what I have been missing." Maybe I had to throw it away to get it back and really appreciate and understand what it's doing for me. I just feel like I was meant to do this. Support and encouragement from the people in my life is a big part of what really drives me and makes me want to keep going.

Now I give as much of myself to other young artists as possible, because I went through all these feelings, so I have a huge understanding of what we go through, especially as a young artist of color. Now I think it's my role to make sure that they don't feel the way that I felt, and see that being an artist is a possibility.

**CPM:** Do you have advice for people looking to attend residencies, especially if it's their first time or they just graduated?

**LJ:** When you go to residencies, you really get to see who you are and if you even really want to do art. Sometimes we make art because we're in school, so taking a little time off between undergrad and grad is good. And residencies

are cool! If you're looking to do a residency, start with a shorter one to see how you handle new spaces, so you can get used to it, and then if you like it, jump into applying to some of the bigger and longer ones. What you don't want to do is burn yourself out or not have it fully thought out and then struggle while you're away.

Find the ones that really fit you and that you think will be a cool experience, because you should have fun. Wherever you are, at whatever residency, you should find the time to connect with the other people there and also experience the area. And enjoy yourself because that's top on the list for creating better art.

## MAGNET

*When I chat with MAGNET, they are Zooming from Ox-Bow School of Art in Saugatuck, Michigan, where they are the after hours and community care assistant. They're sitting outside and I can see lush, rolling meadows behind them. The internet is spotty and we have to start over a couple times, but that's a normal thing at Ox-Bow, which is situated on 115 acres of dunes, forests, and trails. Ox-Bow began a century ago and has a vast range of programming, including an artist residency, workshops, academic programs, and public events.*

**CPM:** Let's start with your art! Could you talk about your practice?

**MAGNET:** I am an artist that works at the intersection of harm reduction, mental health, textiles, and food. I got into

making cakes during quarantine in Chicago. My friends and I would all meet up at the park and bring food. Picnics were the way we could connect with each other. Most of those in my community are queer and trans folks who don't have close relationships with their family because of their identities, so it was an especially hard time for us. So I started baking these really lavish cakes.

A lot of my work is centered around that we can still get together and celebrate, knowing that the world holds joy and pain. In order to save these moments of getting together, we have to fight and advocate for ourselves—gay rights, trans rights, women's rights. The more I like spending time with my loved ones and building queer communities, the more I fight to preserve it.

My art requires another person to function. I think that really comes out in this job and in the ways that I engage with my own community and in my personal relationships.

**CPM:** It is so cool to hear about how it all intersects. What is your role at Ox-Bow and who are you there to support?

**M:** I'm in my second year as the after hours and community care assistant. My function is essentially to act as an on-call safety person, whether it be typical safety, mental safety, or emotional safety. I am also the liaison between the artists-in-residence who come here and the teachers. We are a school that also functions as a residency, so we have classes run all throughout summer. We