

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artsy

The First U.S. Residency Devoted to LGBTQ Artists Thrives on Fire Island

Alexxa Gotthardt

8 August 2017



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Image: Photo by Gregor Haufbauer Photography. Courtesy of Fire Island Artist Residency.

“Years back, my idea of Fire Island came from what I saw in the weekly gay rags: party, party, dance music, more party,” explains Chris Bogia, an artist and co-founder of the Fire Island Artist Residency (FIAR). “That definitely wasn’t my scene—I was more into Leonard Cohen—and I did everything I could to avoid it,” he admits.

It’s early August when I speak with Bogia by phone, and he’s walking around a shingled, wind-worn beach rental, searching for a corner with decent cell service. The stilted house, which serves as FIAR’s headquarters, is nestled in a green, sand-dusted plot in the small town of Cherry Grove. It sits on the skinny strip of wooded land also known as Fire Island, just off the southern coast of Long Island and a two-hour drive from Manhattan.

“The Grove,” as the community is affectionately known, is one of several hamlets on the island that have become havens for the LGBTQ community since the mid-1900s. It’s also where Bogia, despite his initial reservations about the place, established the country’s first residency for LGBTQ artists in 2011. Since then, FIAR has attracted a cohort of gay, lesbian, and queer artists from around the world each year. In the process, they’ve become something of a family.



Image: Photo by Gregor Haufbauer Photography. Courtesy of Fire Island Artist Residency.

The idea for the residency came to Bogia after he took his inaugural trip to Fire Island in 2008. He’d caved after receiving an invitation to join a “cute guy” there for the weekend. And when he disembarked from the ferry—no cars are allowed on the island—his expectations were instantly dashed. Instead of a 24/7 rager, he found a calm, familial, refreshingly offbeat retreat, where open-mindedness reigned.

“I remember thinking ‘Wow, this is really weird and funky and awesomely diverse,’” he recalls of the Grove. “People of all ages, races, gender expressions, and lots of pets were all getting off the boat and filing into this funky town.” By the end of an idyllic weekend, a thought struck Bogia: “Why isn’t there a residency for gay artists here?” As a recent graduate of Yale’s MFA program, he knew the beachside community, with its remoteness, rich history, and picturesque vistas, would make for a perfect residency site. But he wasn’t about to take the project on

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himself—he was a struggling emerging artist, after all. So instead, he filed it in his “dream drawer,” and “hoped some rich queen would come along, have the same idea, and do something about it,” he tells me with a laugh.

The dream continued to nag at him, though. Alongside his friend, curator Evan Garza, he realized the Fire Island residency in 2011.

Bogia pooled his savings (with help from his Partner Rod Sayegh, who became FIAR's Secretary and Treasurer), rented a raggedy four-bedroom bungalow in Cherry Grove that would serve as both living quarters and studios, and began to get the word out. They created a Facebook page, posted a call for applicants, and started phoning art schools with the news. The rallying cry was simple: “Send us your queers, tell them to apply for this,” Bogia remembers.

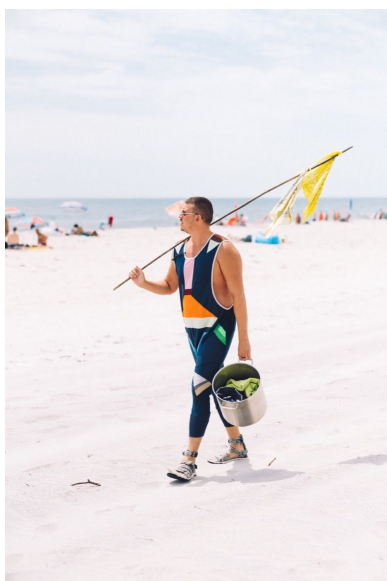


Image: Photo by Gregor Haufbauer Photography. Courtesy of Fire Island Artist Residency.



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“We didn’t have a website, and no one really knew who we were; I thought I was going to need to beg friends to apply,” he admits. But by the deadline, two weeks later, they’d received 75 applications to fill the five spots the residency could accommodate.

Artist and publisher AA Bronson and curator Bill Arning selected the first crew of residents—Travis Boyer, Ryan Brewer, Elijah Burgher, A.K. Burns, and Katherine Hubbard. And that July, Bogia, Garza, and the artists sardined into the beach house.

Since then, FIAR has gained a website, two additional bungalow rentals, the occasional grant and funding from individual donors, and a long list of past residents. Their minds are filled with fond memories of making work by the beach and building a community of queer artists.

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Every year since, from mid-July to mid-August, five artists working in various mediums make their way to Fire Island for the monthlong residency. In return for living and studio space by the ocean, residents are asked to give a 10-minute talk introducing their practice to the Cherry Grove community, lend work to a summer exhibition hosted in town, and organize a “family dinner,” for when guest artists like Nicole Eisenman or Zackary Drucker visit, to meet with residents and discuss their work.



Image: Photo by Gregor Haufbauer Photography. Courtesy of Fire Island Artist Residency.

The rest of the time, artists are free to spend their days as they wish. Some spill out onto the porches of the homes to make art en plein air, others head to the boardwalk to meet and observe the denizens of Cherry Grove.

“Socializing certainly isn’t required, but when you’re in close quarters with four other people, it’s hard for it not to happen,” Bogia explains. “The

residency is set up to be a very natural bonding experience.”

Indeed, it’s the opportunity to meet and make work adjacent to other LGBTQ creatives that attracts many artists to FIAR. It’s also the takeaway that tends to stick with them after they go. “It was so wonderful to not have to explain my queerness, and there was an automatic connection with people,” Jesse Harrod tells me via email. A sculptor and video artist, she was a 2016 resident and has since become FIAR’s studio manager.

It was this atmosphere of freedom and familiarity that gave Harrod “permission to take further risks in my work,” she explains. “Being on the island deepened my commitment to my queer community and the need for allies.”

Babirye Leilah, a 2015 resident from Uganda, echoes the sentiment. She came to FIAR after a lifetime of repression in her home country, where homosexuality is illegal and punishable by death. “Free from discrimination, I felt so welcomed, which changed how I see everything and how I make work,” she explains. While at FIAR, Leilah made an ornate sculptural mirror from found materials, which she dedicated to the drag queens she met on the Island. She placed it outside, so that the community, and those she was honoring, could interact with it. Since then, Leilah has stayed in the U.S. and is in the process of securing asylum.



Image: Photo by Gregor Haufbauer Photography. Courtesy of Fire Island Artist Residency.

As I speak with Bogia, he’s recently welcomed the 2017 class of FIAR residents into Cherry Grove (“my spirit animal is camp counselor,” he jokes), and they’ve already settled in. Like Harrod and Leilah, this year’s participants—Charan Singh, Elizabeth Insogna, Vincent Tiley, Marta Lee, and Rodolfo Marron—have begun making work that responds to the environment and the LGBTQ community around them.

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For his part, Charan has spent his time on photo essays that explore the queer experience in Delhi, where he lives and works, and where homosexuality is a crime. He's also started a new project that "turns his gaze to Fire Island," Bogia tells me, "where LGBTQ oppression has given way to LGBTQ sanctuary and celebration." By interviewing long-time residents of the island about their experiences, Charan hopes to give form to the sense of freedom and safety Cherry Grove has given them—and now him.

As I get off of the phone with Bogia, he's heading to meet the residents. Together, they'll carry work over to the Cherry Grove Community House, one of the country's oldest LGBTQ landmarks (along with New York City's Stonewall and San Francisco's Castor Theater), where they'll hang it in the annual Fire Island art show. "Afterwards, who knows, we might all jump into the ocean," he says, fondly.