

KAY WALKINGSTICK

Hilarie M. Sheets, *The Rockefeller Family Estate Expands to Include New Artists and Audiences*, The New York Times, 21 October 2022



Kay WalkingStick, *Thom, Where are the Pocumtucks (The Oxbow)*, 2020

POCANTICO HILLS, N.Y. — New Yorkers of means have long flocked to the idyllic landscape of the Hudson Valley. Well before the recent wave of city transplants during the pandemic, John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil, chose the highest point in Pocantico Hills overlooking the Hudson River to build his grand home and gardens, completed in 1913 and named Kykuit, Dutch for “lookout.” In 1994, the Rockefeller estate was renamed the Pocantico Center, bequeathed by the family to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and managed by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The 216-acre campus began drawing visitors for tours of Kykuit, filled with art and furnishings collected by generations of Rockefellers, and gatherings hosted at the conference center in a repurposed barn. This month, the David Rockefeller Creative Arts Center has opened on the property in the long-dormant Orangerie, which was designed in 1908 for Rockefeller’s orange trees after the greenhouse at Versailles, and has been adapted by FXCollaborative into a flexible performance and rehearsal space, gallery and artists’ studio.

“The mission of this is to be a place for the creative process, where artists will come and, as they’re creating, make the work in progress available to public audiences,” said Stephen Heintz, president and chief executive of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which oversaw the development of the \$26 million facility. “The connection to the arts is in the family’s DNA and we wanted to make it more vibrant, more dynamic and more accessible, especially to groups that have not historically had access to something like this.” Building on the success of Pocantico’s artist-in-residence program begun a decade ago, with music, dance and theater works previously shown in summer months on the lawn or old tennis court, the new center offers indoor space for the first time for year-round performances.

The 8,000-plus-square-foot Orangerie, with a long facade of arched windows and skylights across the 26-foot-high ceiling flooding the interior with light, now has a sprung floor for performances at one end, retractable seating for

200 people and folding doors to a new back terrace for indoor-outdoor events.

The redesign doubles Pocantico's capacity to eight performances annually. "Untold Tales," a multicultural musical theater and dance piece, is scheduled to take place there on Nov. 16.

The studio at the other end of the building allows for the addition of visual artists in residence. Athena LaTocha, a Peekskill-based mixed-media painter, is the first recipient of the space and the \$25,000 Pocantico Prize.

"We asked nominators from institutions across the country to recommend artists who were from underrepresented groups — people of color, women, disabled or others that have been denied opportunities and demonstrate artistic excellence," said Katrina London, manager of collections and curatorial projects at Pocantico and part of the selection jury. Ms. LaTocha will have an open studio on Nov. 5 and 6 and be visible while working through large sliding glass double doors from the adjacent art gallery throughout her two-month stay.

The inaugural exhibition in this gallery is "Inspired Encounters: Women Artists and the Legacies of Modern Art," organized by Ms. London and guest curator Jeremiah McCarthy and up through March 19. The show teases out a web of intergenerational influences and connections among 43 modern and contemporary works by 22 artists.

The curators have pulled about half the show from the mid-20th-century art collection at Kykuit — including works by Louise Nevelson, Marisol, Lee Bontecou and Grace Hartigan — that was assembled by Nelson Rockefeller during his years as New York's governor from 1959 to 1973 and then vice-president under Gerald Ford. He was the last brother to live at Kykuit until his death in 1979.

"One thing that kept going through our heads was how few works by women are in the Kykuit collection — and most collections of that period," said Ms. London, putting the tally at only 8 percent out of the 174 artists in the permanent collection.

The women artists that are represented at Kykuit came largely from the efforts of Dorothy Miller, a prominent MoMA curator who advised Nelson and, for instance, gave him an intimate 1967 collage of reconstructed eggshell and shredded liturgical texts by the fiber artist and sculptor Lenore Tawney as a Christmas gift.

"Dorothy kind of smuggled them in," said Mr. McCarthy, who with Ms. London has brought such gems out of the "Mad Men"-esque 1960s-era galleries in the basement of Kykuit to the new center's gallery and invited contemporary artists including Sonya Clark, Maren Hassinger, Elana Herzog, Melissa Meyer, Barbara Takenaga and Kay WalkingStick to make new work in response to either the collection or estate for the exhibition.

It had never occurred to Ms. Takenaga, a painter of organically patterned abstractions, that her work shared vocabulary with Bontecou's canvas-and-welded-metal reliefs. The realization on her site visit to Pocantico "was like a little present," Ms. Takenaga said. "I've always thought of Bontecou's work as so ominous and beautiful and strange, a place I wish I could be as well."

In her new painting "Two for Bontecou," Ms. Takenaga superimposed and mirrored the architectural outline of Bontecou's Kykuit relief, which revolves around a dark vortex, on top of her own frothy shapes of poured and pooling paint, finding a sweet spot between their two styles.

Ms. Clark found inspiration in small sculptures suggestive of alphabet letters by the artist Mary Callery; Ms. Herzog in the prints of Anni Albers; and Ms. Meyer in the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Hartigan.

Ms. Walkingstick, in turn, responded to the spectacular views from the Pocantico grounds in her new paintings, echoing landscapes by 19th-century Hudson River School painters and layered with decorative motifs from Indigenous tribes that preceded them.

Ms. Hassinger has energized a large field with 84 units of industrial steel rope, each wavy strand cut to five feet and rising from the grass on a diagonal like dandelions blown the wind. "It represents for me the air currents of the site and power of the river flowing by," Ms. Hassinger said, "just in general the feeling I had there."

Her installation is a counterpoint to massive outdoor sculptures on the estate, such as Henry Moore's bronze sculpture "Knife Edge Two Piece" that Nelson Rockefeller dropped in by helicopter.

"The show is a nod to the past, taking a closed collection and opening it to new possibilities and showing its relevance," said Mr. McCarthy. "How is a place like this usable to artists?"

Such questions are trying to be addressed by the new center.

"It's a worthy way to move forward for an institution that could be thought of as behind the times and connected to a period during which accessibility was not on the forefront of people's minds," said Mary-Kay Lombino, deputy director and curator of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College in nearby Poughkeepsie, who was not involved with the Pocantico project. "Historic homes have been recognizing that they all need to update their ideas and their style of presenting themselves."