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The New York Times

William Holman Gallery artist Liene Bosque featured in The New York Times

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## Peekskill as Canvas for Artists Near and Far

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OCT. 15, 2015



“Inside Peekskill,” a collection of 52 black-and-white portraits of the people of Peekskill by the Danish artist Nina Mouritzen, on an exterior of a Water Street factory building. The exhibit is part of Peekskill Project 6, a citywide art festival. Those who visit Peekskill for the sixth installment of [Peekskill Project](#), the public art festival that began on Sept. 27 and runs through year’s end, should not arrive expecting to experience everything.

Total immersion would mean traveling to about 20 sites around town to encounter works by 56 artists, which may give pause even to determined art seekers. But more important, not every installation is accessible. To see every work made for the project, viewers might have to break into someone's apartment.

"It's possible that a few hosts would open their homes," said [Saskia Janssen](#), a Dutch artist who came to Peekskill last month with her husband and artistic partner, [George Korsmit](#). Mr. Korsmit painted small abstract works on the walls of five randomly selected private homes, and Ms. Janssen documented the process. The paintings were not intended for appreciation by the thousands expected to attend the festival, Ms. Janssen explained recently from a downtown field dotted with rustic tents draped in colorful crocheted blankets — which was itself another installation, by the Australian artist [Lea Donnan](#). Rather, "they were more like a way to interact with the people who live here," she said, "so we could bring that experience to the community."



Drawings by Phumelele Tshabalala. Credit Susan Stava for The New York Times

That is essentially the goal of every installation, said [Emilie Nilsson](#), this year's coordinator. Peekskill Project, organized by the nonprofit [Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art](#), was founded in 2004.

"It's an opportunity for curators working with emerging talents to bring their works into dialogue with the community in public spaces," said Livia Straus, the director of the center. Peekskill Project does not happen every year, or even every other year. Its length and breadth have varied. But each installment is meant to have a distinct vision, guided by its coordinator.

Ms. Nilsson's vision is conceptual and woven with social, political or geographical artistic connections to Peekskill. Works were selected by a jury of 10 art professionals, who evaluated roughly 150 submissions from around the world. Of the 56 artists selected, 15 are from the Hudson Valley. The mix of local and nonlocal artists is crucial to the project's point of view.

"Artists from overseas get the opportunity of exposing their works to a local community," said Ms. Nilsson, a Brooklyn resident. "And Peekskill residents likewise

have the possibility of experiencing artists' works from overseas. Which is important because we want a great cultural exchange to take place." The festival stretches out to about two miles; wandering visitors may encounter the works at random, or they may check in to [the Taco Dive Bar](#) just across from the Peekskill train station, where docents are on hand to guide them to downtown industrial spaces and provide maps. (Maps are also available at the festival's website.)

Ms. Janssen and Mr. Korsmit sought five volunteers who were willing to invite them in their homes and let Mr. Korsmit paint on their walls in early September.

Ms. Janssen put together a booklet documenting the process in words and photographs, which is now available for free at the Hudson Valley Center and on the Peekskill Project site. It recounts the interactions of the artists and their hosts: "Arthur cooks food for us; Emerson plays us nonstop music," Ms. Janssen writes, adding, "It is easy to feel at home and open up at these sort of 'blind dates.' "

Other works, like Ms. Donnan's colorful settlement-like installation, "Hudson Applique," are built less around personal contact. The piece is intended to refer to the history of the Hudson River, which it overlooks from a field on Water Street, with evocations of colonization and the seasonal migration of Native Americans and their struggle for land.

A roughly 12-by-20-foot sculpture by the Polish artist [Jan Baracz](#) in the Hudson Valley Center parking lot, "On the Nature of Dust Deposits, Minerva Owl Flight Patterns & Other Commonly Overlooked Events," collects blank demonstration signs, banners and flags; its composition hints at the [1949 riots](#) that took place nearby as a result of a concert by the singer and civil rights advocate Paul Robeson.

And the Brazilian artist [Liene Bosque](#)'s work "Collecting Impressions" invites visitors and community members to walk through town with her. Ms. Bosque's walking companions will press a small supplied piece of clay into a local landmark of their choosing, such as a building. After two walks are completed, Ms. Bosque will compile the clay impressions at one of the Water Street factory buildings the project has annexed and share stories, through video, of the people and places behind the pressed objects.

Photo



Tents by Lea Donnan on North Water Street. Credit Susan Stava for The New York Times

While Peekskill's history inspired some of the project's artists, others paid it scant attention. For example, [Stephen Schaum](#) of Boston created "A Year of Sunlight," a video and sound installation that compresses a year of sunlight extracted from solar radiance values collected from the New York State climate database. The work, which can be experienced within a theater at the Hudson Valley Center, is meditative but decidedly modern. [Nina Mouritzen](#), a Danish artist, shot photographs of the people of Peekskill this summer as they shopped at the local farmers' market. The result is "Inside Peekskill," a collection of 52 black-and-white oversized portraits that will decorate the exterior of a Water Street factory building for the duration of the project.

[Megan Snowe](#), an artist from Philadelphia, also interacted with meandering local residents for her piece, "The End."

"I asked Peekskill residents if something had recently ended for them, and if they could give me an object that represented that," said Ms. Snowe, who spoke while hanging some of the donated objects — a key, the sole of a shoe, an antler — from the ceiling of a Water Street factory space. She has also recounted the stories collected for "The End" in a booklet available to Project visitors.

Talking to people about ends "opened a lot of conversations about conceptual art," Ms. Snowe said.

It also helped her get under the surface of Peekskill, "which is this great, welcoming community," she said.

Such mutual appreciation pleases Ms. Straus, the Hudson Valley Center director. "Peekskill has changed, in no small part due to investment in the arts," she said. "It is the Peekskill Project that has put Peekskill on the radar of the international and national art community. It's nurturing artists and providing a townwide platform."