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How Can You Maximize Your Time as an Artist in Residence? For Saya Woolfalk, the Key Is to Pick the Brains of Those Around You

The artist has a kaleidoscopic solo show at the Newark Museum of Art, where she recently completed a residency.



The artist at her exhibition "Saya Woolfalk: Field Notes From the Empathic Universe" at the Newark Museum of Art.

Saya Woolfalk's artistic universe is built on a unique blend of science fiction and fantasy, inhabited by a race of time traveling "Empathics" who are able to commune with the natural world.

So when Woolfalk was invited to participate in an artist residency at the Newark Museum of Art (<https://www.newarkmuseumart.org/>), the institution's *herbaria* collection was a natural source of inspiration. Those plant specimens, as well as the museum's landscape paintings, became artifacts to reinterpret from the perspective of the Empathics.

The resulting show, "Saya Woolfalk: Field Notes From the Empathic Universe" (<https://www.newarkmuseumart.org/woolfalk-universe>)," features more than 20 works in a variety of media, including a kaleidoscopic video installation, colorful collages, and textile works. She's even transformed the elevator by installing digital murals that set the stage for her otherworldly vision.

We spoke with the Japan-born, New York-based artist about life in her studio at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and how she adapted her practice during her residency at the museum.

What are the most indispensable tools in your studio and why?

My studio time happens inside and outside of the studio. In either case, the element I need most is a welcome creative collaborator. I am a big believer in collaboration as I believe different people—and different energies working in tandem—spark creativity. A few weeks ago, I went up to the Catskills to the Olana State Historic Site (<https://www.olana.org/>) and the Thomas Cole National Historical Site (<https://thomascole.org/>) to visit curators Amy Hausmann and Kate Menconeri. My spatial memory of the two houses, the conversation I had with the curators, and the land itself are all things I brought back to the studio and am working with now.



Saya Woolfalk's studio at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Photo courtesy of the artist.

What are you most looking forward to doing in the studio tomorrow?

I am really excited to prepare for a meeting with the mayor's office from the city of Los Angeles to discuss a multi-site monument project I've been working on for two years to honor the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. I'm looking forward to spending the day tomorrow thinking about Justice Ginsberg, Coretta Scott King, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas—the three incredible American women whose monuments will be created this year as part of Hulu's Made by Her: Monuments (<https://press.hulu.com/news/2021/05/17/hulu-commissions-three-new-permanent-monuments-honoring-historic-women-to-help-balance-the-ratio-of-male-to-female-statues-in-the-u-s/>) campaign.

How did your studio practice change during your residency at the museum?

I spent my time as an artist-in-residence thinking about how the Hudson River School paintings continue to shape our vision of what America is. We believe in the Hudson River School paintings as historical documents of American land and life. I want to shift the museum audience's understanding of these paintings. These Hudson River School paintings contain the desires, hopes, fears, and love of a certain population of a nascent country. They present America as a kind of Eden that naturalizes the displacement of Native populations, celebrates agrarianism without acknowledging the constant precarity of the lives of tenant farmers, while erasing the enslaved Africans who worked farms all over the country to produce unprecedented wealth for America.

This foundational sense of Americanness was built to leave certain people and stories outside of its narrative, and that is what I have been trying to grapple with.

What kind of atmosphere do you like when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer to work in silence?

When I am in the studio, I spend a lot of time discussing current events, inequality, and what is going on in social media with my brilliant studio manager, Isabel Sakura. Spending my days with her is a joy.



Saya Woolfalk's dog, Mr. Mochi, at her studio at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Photo courtesy of the artist.

What features do you most admire in a work of art, and what features do you most despise?

The Newark Museum of Art recently acquired a [Bisa Butler](https://www.claireoliver.com/artists/bisa-butler/) quilt, and that piece represents a lot about what I love. Bisa is so clearly dedicated to the craft, is generous to the audience in terms of physical and historical material, and amplifies stories outside of the mainstream art world.

I really like the quote "consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" by Ralph Waldo Emerson—it expresses my dislikes pretty well.

What is the one snack you can't live without in the studio?

As an artist who is also a mother, I am often in the studio with my 10-year-old daughter, Aya. She is a big fan of string cheese and popcorn. Those are two things that my studio can never be without!



Installation view of "Saya Woolfalk: Field Notes From the Empathic Universe" at the Newark Museum of Art. Photo by Richard Goodbody, courtesy of the Newark Museum of Art.

When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get unstuck?

I have a group of women artists who are my go-to people. [Wendy Red Star](http://www.artnet.com/artists/wendy-red-star) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/wendy-red-star>), [Heather Hart](https://www.heather-hart.com/) (<https://www.heather-hart.com/>), [Natalia Nakazawa](http://www.natalianakazawa.com/) (<http://www.natalianakazawa.com/>), [Nyeema Morgan](https://nyeemamorgan.com) (<https://nyeemamorgan.com>), [Kira Nam Greene](http://www.artnet.com/artists/kira-nam-greene) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/kira-nam-greene>), [Valerie Hegarty](http://www.artnet.com/artists/valerie-hegarty/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/valerie-hegarty/>), Lauren Kelly, [Paula Wilson](http://www.artnet.com/artists/paula-wilson/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/paula-wilson/>), and [Vadis Turner](https://geary.nyc/vadis-turner) (<https://geary.nyc/vadis-turner>) are badass women I call, text, or Zoom when I am stuck. I am pretty lucky to have them all in my life.

What was the last exhibition you saw that left an impression on you?

I've been spending a lot of time at the Newark Museum of Art. I love the way that American art curator Tricia Bloom rehung the historical galleries to incorporate the history of women representing themselves. I was also just at the [Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts](https://www.pafa.org/) (<https://www.pafa.org/>) (PAFA) for a site visit and saw the incredible [Joan Semmel](http://www.artnet.com/artists/joan-semmel/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/joan-semmel/>) survey (<https://www.pafa.org/museum/exhibitions/joan-semmel>) curated by Jodi Throckmorton [on view through April 3, 2022]. In that show, you can really see how Semmel has experimented with representations of the female body and sexuality ambitiously for so many years.

If you were to create a mood board, what would be on it right now?

I tend to make intuitive dream boards instead of mood boards. The last one I made had lots of animals with human bodies and a picture of me in nature, surrounded by friends wearing white and doing yoga.

"Saya Woolfalk: Field Notes From the Empathic Universe" is on view at the Newark Museum of Art, 49 Washington Street, Newark, New Jersey, October 21, 2021–December 31, 2022.



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