



STONELEAF RETREAT: Creating a Space Where Artists Belong

By Katy Donoghue

Last week, **STONELEAF RETREAT** in Kingston, NY, announced its 2018 artists-in-residence. A first rotation of residencies begins tomorrow, with artists **Sinta Tantra**, **Emma Kohlmann**, and **Liz Collins**. Later this summer, STONELEAF founders **Helen Toomer** and **Eric Romano** will welcome **Mahwish Chisty**, **Theresa Chromati**, **Rena Detrixhe**, **Las Hermanas Iglesias**, **Rebecca Reeve**, **Camille Lee**, **Katiushka Melo**, **Mónica Palma**, and **Elise Rasmussen**.

To learn more about this more robust second seasons of STONELEAF RETREAT, *Whitewall* caught up with Toomer and Romano.

WHITEWALL: STONELEAF RETREAT had an open call for women artists this winter, open to artists of all disciplines but with preference given to artists with a social practice. Why was preference given to social practices?

HELEN TOOMER & ERIC ROMANO: We've been thinking a lot about the power of art and what good it can potentially do, especially in these turbulent times, and we want to support artists who are working through important social issues.

WW: You've just announced the 12 finalists, chosen from over 150 applications. Expanding from three last year to 12 this year, were you overwhelmed by the submissions?

HT & ER: Yes! It was both daunting and amazing at the same time. We were honestly surprised by both the amount of applications we received and the depth of the proposals. We feel truly honored that so many artists wanted to participate in the residency at STONELEAF RETREAT. It was very difficult choosing the artists, but we're really happy with the final artists-in-residence and can't wait to welcome them.

WW: This year's focus is on what it means to belong. How will some of the artists be exploring that idea?

HT: It's not so much that the focus of the residency is on what it means to belong—it's more something that Eric and I have been thinking a lot about. When revisiting the selected artist applications, we realized there were exploratory threads of the notion of belonging throughout their practices. The chosen artists are investigating concepts of labor, truth, the environment, identity, immigration, and feminism, which are part of our everyday lives and either help us feel like we belong or that we are alienated. We're looking forward to discussing this idea of belonging around the dinner table.

WW: You also announced Rebecca Reeve as an all season artist-in-residence. What is Reeve aiming to explore during the full year residency?

HT & ER: Reeve immerses herself in natural landscapes, creating temporal installations, capturing them at different moments and immortalizing them with photography. She will be using the 20 plus acres of land at STONELEAF to create works at the same spots across the property at different times of year, which is something she, and we are, incredibly excited about.

WW: Why was it important for STONELEAF RETREAT to include communal dinners within the two week residencies?

HT & ER: We, and the artists from the first residency—**Leah Dixon**, **Macon Reed**, and **Mia Taylor**—loved the communal dinners. It was a time and place for us and the artists to come together and discuss the day, politics, art, the weather, anything and everything over good food. It was a great way for us all to share, support and generate new ideas and explore different ways of thinking.

WW: Why open up the program to studio visits and dinners with arts professionals, in addition to a final open studio day?

HT & ER: STONELEAF is a welcoming, connective and supportive place, and we want to expand the artists' networks both on and offline. The more people that visit, the more meaningful connections can be made.

WW: Walk me back a little bit. Why were you initially interested in establishing STONELEAF RETREAT? Why are residencies so impactful for an artist's practice?

HT: I really missed working with artists from my gallery days and had always dreamed of running a residency program. When we found STONELEAF, we realized it had to potential to be the perfect place for a residency and Eric was game, so why not? I'm more of a jump in first and learn on the job kind of person, so we just went for it. It's something neither of us have experience in and we're very open to ideas and listening to what the artists need and want. We are lucky because STONELEAF had great bones for the artist's accommodation and the studios, so while we did some renovation—I feel like we just made the space shine a little more—it actually looks like it was always meant to.

It's important for artists, and for anyone really, to be able to have the time and space away from their everyday lives and stresses to focus on themselves, and in artists' cases, their practice or special project. We want to open STONELEAF up to residencies not only for artists, but to any creatives and those who work with them. We know lots of gallerists, curators and arts administrators who would benefit from some time away to focus on themselves, their work and passions, and carve out their next steps. We love the idea of STONELEAF providing a resource for reflection, professional development and supporting its residents in taking the next steps in their careers.

WW: What are you looking forward to most this summer?

HT & ER: We can't wait for the artists to be at STONELEAF, meet each other, exchange thoughts and ideas, collaborate and deliberate over the dinner table. I'm especially excited to see how they will activate the land and their studios and interact with guest critics and the open studios. It's all an unknown, so the beauty will be in the unraveling.

STONELEAF RETREAT will welcome guests this summer for open studios with the artists on May 12, June 9, July 7, and August 4.