

Nancy Cohen Returns to MacDowell

MacDowell, Peterborough, NH • macdowell.org • nancymcohen.com



In her artwork, Nancy Cohen explores nature's ability to renew itself. In September 2023, she was engaged in a renewal of her own, during a five-week artist residency at MacDowell in Peterborough, NH. This was not Cohen's first MacDowell fellowship. Her previous two, decades before, were experiences she remembers as "magical." She'd very much wanted to return, though she wasn't sure what to expect after being away for so long.

Cohen, who's based in New Jersey, primarily works in handmade paper and glass. At this MacDowell residency, she focused on paper. The walls of her studio were hung with works in progress—some just washes of color, others already richly detailed. Her subject matter is often water—textured abstractions of natural waterways, indelibly marked by human industry and pollution. They speak to the entwined fragility of humans and the natural world. Cohen names moving to Jersey City as a young artist

as the source of her focus on the environment. There she looked out from her studio in an old building facing the Hudson and watched the waterfront area—at first nothing but tumbleweed—being built up, road by road, building by building. She hiked and kayaked along nearby rivers that, while brimming with life, were also dumping spots for old tires—which, she noticed, had plants growing out of them. Within environmental degradation, she was seeing renewal. This was something she wanted to explore.

Cohen's process is complex, involving layering paper sheets that she makes from plant fibers, then applying pigmented paper pulp onto the surface either as dilute washes or in thicker, formable pastes to create structured designs. Like the human-interrupted natural environments her work reflects, the combined papers and pulp yield surprising results. Colors present differently on different fibers. Ghost lines of color emerge through translucent layers. The drying

pulp tugs and puckers the sheets beneath it, creating waves of movement.

Cohen didn't begin her career working with paper. As an undergraduate, she studied ceramics and soon began to discover her own artistic leanings. She was more interested in creating forms than adding glazes. She preferred porcelain to clay—it had translucency, and she could pigment it from the start. And she was drawn to more complex forms. She was, she now knows, leaning toward sculpture. She just hadn't realized it yet. This is when MacDowell made its first pivotal appearance in her life.

MacDowell (formerly The MacDowell Colony) is an artist residency program. Founded in 1907, it is the legacy of American composer Edward MacDowell and his wife Marian, a pianist. Their goal was to create a place for artists to work without interruptions in a supportive environment. In MacDowell's century-plus existence, the 450-acre campus with thirty-one private





studios has been a short-term creative haven for over 9,000 artists across seven disciplines. While there, each artist receives exclusive use of a studio, housing, and three meals a day—breakfast and dinner in the dining hall and lunch delivered quietly in a picnic basket to their studio door.

In 1982, at twenty-one and about to graduate, Cohen didn't know what a residency program was, much less about MacDowell. When a classmate shared a list of residencies, she applied to several. MacDowell was the first to accept her.

The experience would change her life. "It was absolutely magic," she said. As significant as it was to have her own creative space and uninterrupted work time, it was the generosity of the other artists she met that would have the greatest impact. That and exposure to art of all kinds. "I had never heard classical music or heard anyone read poetry," Cohen said. During optional evening presentations at MacDowell, she did. She befriended artists a few years older who helped her see what the life of an artist might look like. Some remain close friends. An experienced sculptor helped her understand that her work was, in fact, sculpture and guided her toward appropriate graduate programs. Soon after, Cohen entered an MFA program.

If Cohen's first MacDowell experience led her to the right graduate school, her second, in 1986, led her to the right job. She had been working

seriously as a sculptor and showing her work. However, her job as a secretary in suburban New Jersey allowed her little regular contact with the art world. She applied again to MacDowell in hopes of plugging back into the artistic energy she remembered there. The plan worked, and then some. Again, she devoted full days to her sculpture and, again, she began life-long artistic friendships. Plus, through a chance connection made one night at dinner, she landed a new job as an art teacher. Her new colleague told her about the job, coached her for the interview, and for the job itself. It was another significant course adjustment for the young artist.

Cohen was lucky, twice. However, she sees a common thread that points to something more than luck, which is the extraordinary generosity she consistently received from other MacDowell fellows. Asked if there is something about MacDowell itself that fosters this collective nurturing, Cohen replied, unequivocally, "Yes."

Between her second and third residencies, came Cohen's move to Jersey City and a vigorous artistic career. A residency at NYC-based Dieu Donné, in 1993, introduced her to paper-making. Handmade paper was malleable like clay, translucent like porcelain, and it could be pigmented as pulp. She switched from welding steel to making paper. And she continued to teach art, retiring only this past year. Preparing

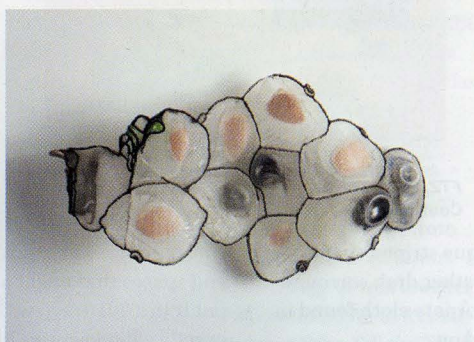
Above, from left: *Water Skeeter* (work in progress), 2023, handmade paper and paper pulp, 47 x 41". Courtesy of the artist. *Fire Season*, 2020, paper pulp and handmade paper, 78 x 67". Photo: Lindsay Walt. *Another Way Through*, 2019, paper pulp, ink and handmade paper, 78 x 86". Photo: Etienne Frossard. Below from left: *Vector Calculus*, 2019, glass and wire, 8 x 17 x 9". Photo: Edward Fausty. *Turbid*, 2019, glass, sand, metal and aqua resin, 10 x 8 x 4". Photo: Edward Fausty. Opposite, from top: A portrait of Cohen. Photo: Sadie Bridger. A view of Cohen's workspace at MacDowell showing works in progress including *The Sound of Rain* (left), 2023, handmade paper and paper pulp, 56 x 52". Courtesy of the artist.

to retire, she thought, *What if I could go back to MacDowell?*

What is MacDowell of 2023 like for Cohen? She said it's been wonderful. She loves the studio's privacy and the natural environment. Deer and turkeys regularly wander by outside the window of her beautifully lit, renovated studio. As for changes at MacDowell, she mentioned technology. In the '80s, composers played the piano for fellows. Now they play concert videos. Back then, there was one payphone for all to use. Cohen has changed, too. More life obligations and upcoming shows to plan make it impossible to disengage entirely. (The library has internet access when she needs it.) Much, however, is the same—great meal conversations, enthralling presentations. She hears younger fellows having the same kinds of exchanges she did when she first came to MacDowell.

Cohen celebrated her 64th birthday at MacDowell this year. She'd had her 22nd birthday there in 1982. She didn't choose the residency dates. It's just an interesting coincidence. Or it may be there really is some magic to the place.

—Alix Woodford



A solo exhibition of Cohen's work will be held at Markel Fine Arts in New York City in spring 2024. markelfinearts.com.