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‘A space for ourselves’: Women’s Studio Workshop turns 50

The nonprofit, which provides paid residencies among other programs, is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a gala on Nov. 16



Women's Studio Workshop's four founders: Barbara Leoff Burge, Ann Kalmbach, Tana Kellner, and Anita Wetzel.

Provided by Women's Studio Workshop

By **Maria M. Silva**, Staff Writer

Oct 21, 2024



ROSENDALE — In 1974, the same year women in the United States were granted the right to open their own bank accounts, four young female artists founded a teaching collective and studio in a small Ulster County town to provide creative opportunities for women who often weren't afforded any.

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In the spirit of fulfilling their collaborative mission, the four founders — Ann Kalmbach, Tatana Kellner, Barbara Leoff Burge and Anita Wetzel — called it Women's Studio Collective. It was later renamed Women's Studio Workshop because the term "collective" was deemed "too communist at the time," said Natalie Renganeschi, the nonprofit's current deputy director.

"They were really struggling to find places for themselves in the art world. They experienced a lot of sexism, discrimination and exclusion," Renganeschi

said, adding that the letter that declared the organization's nonprofit status was addressed, "Dear gentlemen."

"So they thought, 'Fine — if there aren't spaces out there that are willing to make space for us, we'll make a space for ourselves.'"

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Top: Women's Studio Workshop's studio building at the time of purchase in 1980. Middle: Founder Ann Kalmbach works with artist Zarina Hashmi on her artist's book "The House with Four Walls." Bottom: Founder Tana Kellner works with students from the Kingston City Schools in the papermaking studio in 1983. (Provided by Women's Studio Workshop)

This year, Women's Studio Workshop turns 50, having served more than 5,000 artists from around the world, mounted numerous exhibitions, provided residencies to 650 artists, and developed educational programs for children and adults in the community, including through a partnership with the Kingston City School District. The organization has also become an influential publisher of original artists' books, creating more than 240 titles at its printing, papermaking and photography studios that encompass two historic buildings. Many of those works have been acquired by the Library of Congress, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

To celebrate the milestone, Women's Studio Workshop is hosting a [50th-anniversary celebration](#) at its campus at 722 Binnewater Lane on Nov. 16, which will also celebrate the nonprofit's third executive director, Sharon Loudon, an artist and educator originally from Philadelphia. And a new exhibition, "A Radical Alteration: Women's Studio Workshop as a Sustainable Model for Art Making," curated by Maymanah Farhatwhich, revisits five

decades of history through artists' books, printed materials, ephemera and archival materials. It will be on view until the end of the year.



Women's Studio Workshop, a Rosendale nonprofit, has run artist residencies, internship, and art education programs since 1974.

Maria M. Silva/Times Union



The printmaking studio at Women's Studio Workshop.

Carl R. Cox/Provided by Women's Studio Workshop

Women's Studio Workshop has come a long way. In its early days, the nonprofit operated out of a two-story single-family home on the corner of James and John streets, where etching happened in the living room, papermaking was in the attic and screen printing was in the basement. With a limited budget, the founders would go months without a paycheck, so they had to turn to selling handmade paper products and stationary to keep the doors open as well as taking side jobs, said Kalmbach, who remembered working nights at a print shop in and later at Manny's Lounge, an art supply shop in New Paltz.

One of the Women's Studio Workshop's first supporters was the New York Council on the Arts. The founders believed they were one of only three women's art groups supported by the council, according to a June 1975 Poughkeepsie Journal story.

In the 1980s, the nonprofit acquired the Binnewater Arts Center, a larger 18th-century building that was once the Rosendale Cement Company store and the town's post office and now houses studios. The campus grew to add a nearby property that is used for the artists' residencies and interns.

Selected by a committee of experts that changes every year, 650 artists have lived on the nonprofit's campus for four to six weeks since then, each with a particular story to tell. The artists' books are both an advertisement for the artist and the message itself. One of them is by Ruthe Karlin, a 90-year-old photographer and retired teacher from Chicago who just completed a residency. Her photobook, "Karlin in Bed," is a collection of photographs she took in bed with captions in her handwriting that showcase a sense of intimacy and feeling of invisibility that comes with aging as a woman, Renganeschi said.





Top: Artist in residence Ruthe Karlin works on her book, "Karlin in Bed." Bottom: Interns Aurora Brush and Lorraine Cruz (left and right) assist resident artist Skye Tafoya (center) with her artist's book "Ul' Nigid." (Provided by Women's Studio Workshop)

One theme has been constant across Women's Studio Workshop's 50-year run: Gender equity.

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On a recent October afternoon, Renganeschi and Kalmbach discussed how the nonprofit's understanding of gender has evolved alongside society's. Women's Studio Workshop's residencies are now open to transgender, nonbinary, intersex and genderfluid people who are "desperately underrepresented in the arts," Renganeschi said.

But the nonprofit has not shied away from highlighting male and male-identified artists. Lyman Piersma was awarded an Artist's Book Residency to produce "Going to Camp: A Meditation About AIDS, Quarantine, Exile and Personal Loss" in 1987, a collection of poetry, fiction, and images by 20 contributors.

"It was clear we were working in a corner of the world that folks who felt a little bit out of it felt comfortable applying to," Kalmbach said.

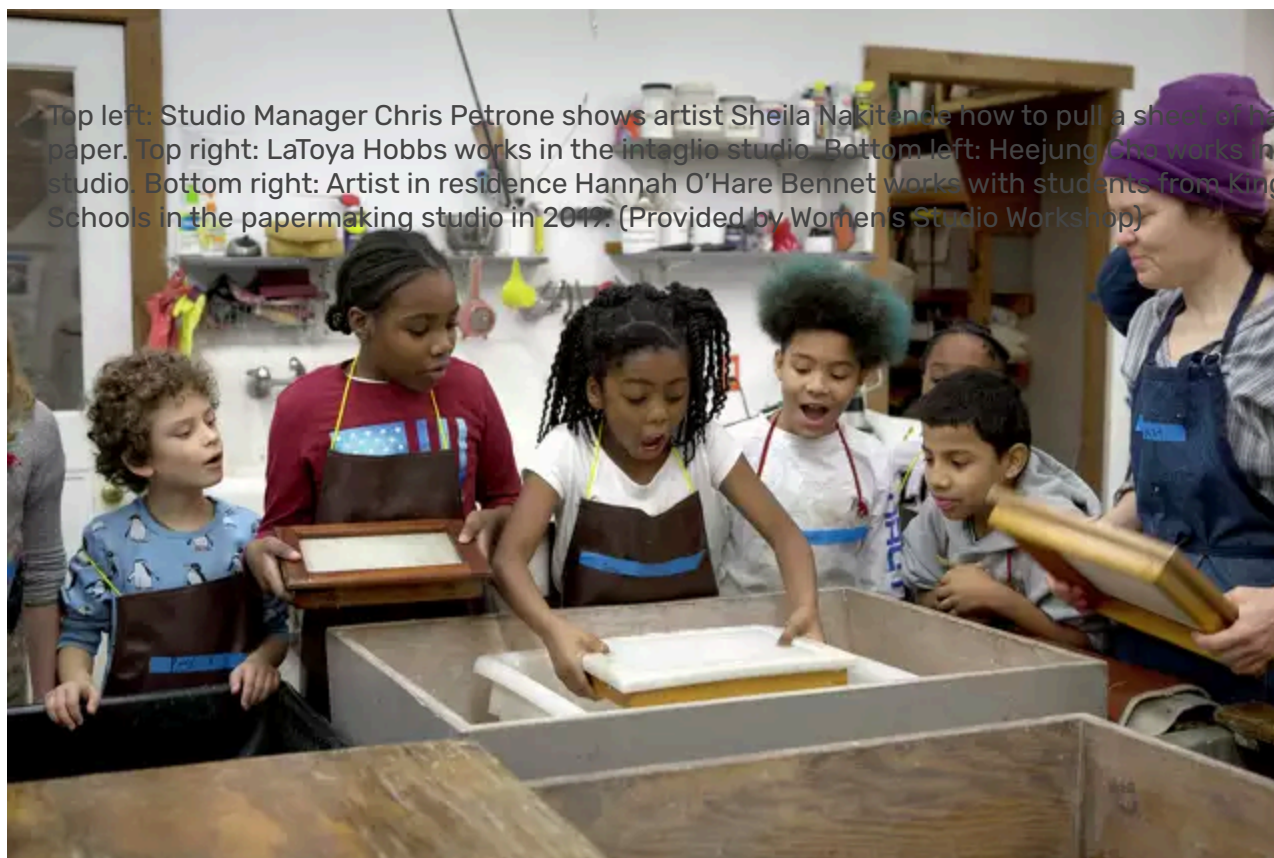
The impact of an artist residency at Women's Studio Workshop can be "career-making and life-changing," Renganeschi said. Artists are given half of their books to sell themselves while the nonprofit sells the other half. Artists receive 50% of the earnings of all sales in perpetuity.

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Top left: Studio Manager Chris Petrone shows artist Sheila Nakitende how to pull a sheet of handmade paper. Top right: LaToya Hobbs works in the intaglio studio. Bottom left: Heejung Cha works in the intaglio studio. Bottom right: Artist in residence Hannah O'Hare Bennet works with students from Kingston City Schools in the papermaking studio in 2019. (Provided by Women's Studio Workshop)

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At its Nov. 16 bash, Women's Studio Workshop will honor its four pioneering founders. Kalmbach, who lives across the street, visits the nonprofit regularly, popping in and out for coffee, nonprofit management advice, and artistic encouragement. Her wife and lifelong collaborator, Tatana Kellner, has also

been a supporter since she retired in 2017 to pursue her art career full-time. Leoff Burge, who is 91, has become a beloved community member. In honor of Anita Wetzel, who passed away in 2021, the nonprofit created the Anita Wetzel Residency Grant to provide opportunities for artists aged 45 and older. The four have passed the torch to a new generation entrusted with maintaining the nonprofit's legacy and taking it to the next five decades.

"On some levels, this is my artwork," Kalmbach said. "So I don't really have an end to it."



Women's Studio Workshop's staff portrait in 2024.

Provided by Women's Studio Workshop



Women's Studio Workshop's staff portrait in 1980 on the front porch of the studio building.
Picasa/Provided by Women's Studio Workshop

Louden, the new executive director, sees herself as a catalyst for that growth. She said her first priorities will be seeking fundraising opportunities and fostering more partnerships with individuals and organizations.

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“This organization should be more nationally recognized, and so my vision is to make it much more visible, especially during this time where you have unfortunately so many people who are underserved, whose voices are not amplified,” Loudon said. “We amplify those voices just by opening our doors. This place is not just a safe space — it’s a brave space for artists to freely express in the way that they want.”

Oct 21, 2024



Maria M. Silva

STAFF WRITER



Maria M. Silva joined the Times Union’s Hudson Valley team in 2023 to cover news with a sprinkle of food and dining stories. Born and raised in Spain, she moved to the U.S. in 2017 to complete her undergraduate degree at Utica University, where she was a proud student journalist. Maria previously covered food and culture for the Observer-Dispatch in Utica. Find her once a month at Radio Kingston’s [La Voz con Mariel Fiori](#) sharing Times Union stories in Spanish.

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