

RAREFIED A-I-R



Photographs by Megan Cump: "Spell," from her series "Feral" (left); "Black River," made during her Saltonstall residency (right). Below: Cump.

Whether photographers want access to a particular part of the world in order to create a new body of work, or need some time to scan, edit and print an existing body of work, artist-in-residence (AIR) programs offer photographers a unique and valuable period of focused remove. Each has their strengths and benefits for an artist—be it beautiful facilities, a helpful staff, an idyllic setting or post-residence exhibition opportunities. Many offer all of the above. *PDN* recently spoke with artists who participated in five residencies to find out why they chose them, what they accomplished and what they might do differently the next time they have an opportunity to leave everything but photography behind for a while.

THE MACDOWELL COLONY: MEGAN CUMP

Located in Peterborough, New Hampshire, the residency program at The MacDowell Colony provided Megan Cump, a photographer who lives in Brooklyn, New York, with two things she finds essential to her work: uninterrupted time to shoot, and access to wilderness. Cump, whose photographs examine forests as a source of folktales and myths, and as a symbol of the unconscious, says she chooses residencies based in part on the nearby landscape, "because I prefer to shoot while I am on the residency, and I thrive in places in wooded areas or wilderness." She did two residencies at MacDowell, one for six weeks and another for four. In that time, she explored and photographed what she calls the "really otherworldly landscape" in the colony's little corner of New England. She adds, "I like places that are remote, and that offer a lot of free time."

Known primarily for its history of supporting writers and other artists like James Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, Alice Walker and Meredith Monk, MacDowell has also hosted many photographic artists in recent years, including Simen Johan, Alice Attie and Zoe Leonard. The residency provides each artist with a studio or a small cabin, and three meals a day. MacDowell has two darkrooms, but photographers have to take a "do-it-yourself" approach to printing, says Cump, who used her time at MacDowell to shoot rather than to print or edit. She notes that unlike some residency programs that have a more structured schedule, MacDowell delivers lunch



baskets to each artist's cabin or studio, so they don't have to stop work for meals. "To me it shows a deep understanding of an artist's process that there is uninterrupted time to make or do your work," Cump notes.

In such an environment, she says, "You're living and breathing the project the whole time you're there. The work grows by leaps and bounds."

Cump says that during her residency, she spent days scouting locations, sometimes with a 35mm camera or a sketchpad before she returned to photograph with her Mamiya 67, or to set up a trap camera to photograph wildlife. "I like to go back to locations at different times of day or in different weather and develop a relationship with the site."

Unlike photographers who choose to print or edit their work during their residencies, Cump finds that time away from her daily routine is most helpful when she's just begun researching and shooting a project. "Then I can wake up, read, go out, shoot, come back, go out again, have an interesting dinner with people, read some more."

At the end of each day, Cump says, "It's wonderful to come home from hiking and shooting and have dinner made and a warm shower." The mix of writers, performers and other artists that MacDowell attracts, she says, "makes for spirited discussions at dinner." Last winter, by contrast, she did a residency at Saltonstall Arts Colony in Ithaca, New York. Limited to New York State residents, Saltonstall allows only five artists during each month-long residency: one photographer, two writers and two visual artists.

She notes that the isolation some residencies provide may not be convenient to every photographer. "It might be hard to get a camera battery," she says. "Are you going to be shipping film back to see what you've been doing?" She also advises other photographers considering residencies to decide first if they want feedback from fellow artists, or if they have the self-discipline to work on a project while in an unstructured environment.

"MacDowell is a place for someone self-directed, who wants to focus on the making of the work, and you decide how social you want to be," Cump notes. "There are people you rarely see and you wonder how they're eating. Others are playing pool or Ping-Pong all night."

—Holly Stuart Hughes