The Hudson Eye
Small City. Big Vision

John Isaacs


Hudson is a very small city (around 6,000 inhabitants) on the east bank of the Hudson River, in sparsely populated Columbia County, a mere one hundred or so miles north of the world’s preeminent cultural megalopolis (which begs the question: Why does Hudson, N.Y. need its own mini-arts festival?).

The place, like the river, is named after the intrepid but hardly beneficent English explorer Henry Hudson, whose crew of twenty sailors dropped anchor there on September 15, 1609, and was briefly entertained by local Mahican people, presumably to everybody’s astonishment. In due course, the place was apparently peaceably occupied by early fur-trading settlers from the Netherlands, who in 1669 bought the whole area from the locals and officially named it “Claverack,” in reference to the clover that then proliferated on that stretch of riverbank. To this day, the surrounding towns abound with Dutch place and family names, and there remains a smattering of Dutch architecture throughout the region. But Hudson as an established entity has a different provenance. Well after the British had subsumed the colony of New Netherland, during the revolutionary upheavals of the late eighteenth century a community of Quaker merchants from the islands off New England, whose business was whaling, established a strategically safe harbor and lucrative blubber-processing facilities there, and Hudson was incorporated as such in 1785. Very early on, someone had the ingenious idea to expand the town on a grid, so all its principal thoroughfares and cross-streets intersect at right angles, like a mini-Manhattan, but even before Manhattan. The settlement grew rapidly, and within a few decades was the fourth largest city in New York State with, even then, around 6,000 inhabitants. Obviously not much in terms of population, but actually quite a lot otherwise changed between then and now, and more than a lot lately.
While the whaling business eventually tapered off, Hudson became a prosperous factory town. A slew of industrial and commercial enterprises supported increasing prosperity through the boom years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Population rose to as much as 12,000 by 1930. But not for long. The Great Depression, and competition from other, larger and more dynamic upstate cities, hit Hudson hard. So, the city turned itself into the SEX capital of New York State: Diamond Street (since renamed Columbia Street) became the center of a booming prostitution industry, conveniently located steps away from the train station, amidst a plethora of dive bars. Until, that is, the state police, on the orders of Governor Dewey in 1951, closed down the entire operation in a single day’s sweep.

Thereafter, Hudson in the fifties appears from contemporary photographs to have become a rural American town indistinguishable from any other backwater: a busy main street with mostly ageing vehicles but a few flashy sedans, a tram service, the occasional horse-drawn cart, diners and soda fountains, modest department stores amidst a proliferation of mom-and-pops, a down-and-out hotel or two, marching bands and baton-twirling schoolgirls, and boringly prettified parks. But yet again things went further downhill. For three consecutive decades, businesses were progressively wiped out by tacky malls constructed on the outskirts. Downtown buildings fell into disrepair, and in more than a few cases, entire blocks were torn down and replaced with faceless federally subsidized housing (still a blot on a city that for the most part retains today a remarkable diversity of historic architecture, largely because it fell upon such hard times).

Then and thus, in the late 1980s something remarkable transpired. A trickle of enterprising big city souls discovered that rare architecturally distinguished houses and commercial properties were available for pennies and began snapping them up. The fact that Hudson was a station stop on the Amtrak Empire Service was no small incentive. As antiques dealers in particular began to acquire and restore buildings, furniture restorers and other specialist craftspeople followed in their footsteps. By the turn of this century, Hudson had become something of an antiques mecca, and a concurrent infusion of new and innovative restaurants and bars helped create a completely transformed urban landscape. With the energy of a few enlightened curatorial souls and the bonus of an affluent body of second homeowners within range, a handful of arts venues and galleries added to the mix, and suddenly, almost out of nowhere, Hudson became something of a cultural destination. Warren Street on weekends started buzzing like Brooklyn.

The phenomenon wasn’t bound to snowball, but with some serious community organization it managed to. Today, despite the pandemic, little downtown Hudson can boast hundreds of unique storefront businesses and galleries (mercifully, it
simply isn’t large enough to support chain operations, nor do zoning laws now permit them); several very snazzy boutique hotels; classy B&B’s and bars galore; well over a dozen locally sourced restaurants fit for gastronomes; three supremely innovative and flourishing arts centers; a cavernous, totally wired library; a visionary community radio station; more than enough community websites; a gazillion health and fitness and mind-expanding opportunities; and a storefront named *Incident Report* whose windows display an ever-changing cabinet of curiosities but which never opens.

While (mercifully again) still a bit rough around the edges and far from manicured, Hudson has become a decidedly model small-town community. It has significant minority, immigrant, and LGBTQ populations, a highly energetic and engaged young black mayor, and local government representatives and business leaders who do actually represent the broad cross-section of the community, manage to sustain engaged, albeit often contentious civic discourse, enact enlightened initiatives, and—memorably, in the case of a proposed giant cement plant within the city’s boundaries—forestall grotesque corporate ventures.

A born-and-bred upstate New Yorker, Jonah Bokaer is one among many Hudson residents whose active dedication to their community is profound. Active in Hudson since 2006, Bokaer is a dancer, choreographer, and media artist who trained with Merce Cunningham and Robert Wilson, and who has since spurred countless initiatives in performance across the world, from Brooklyn to Bangalore, but who remains deeply committed to local arts programming. He is founding director of The Hudson Eye, the second iteration of which took place in a host of city venues in late August/early September, and is now an annual event of considerable complexity and great imagination, embracing multiple media, and involving artists and performers with both local and international reputations in a ten-day extravaganza of quite deliciously idiosyncratic invention, rich in contemporary relevance.

Bokaer and his small team, notably the energetic and wise independent curator Aaron Levi Garvey, conduct the event under the auspices of the Jonah Bokaer Arts Foundation, supported by Columbia County Tourism and by private contributors. This year’s Hudson Eye, needless to say, involved the extra challenge of presenting ten days of programming, with dozens of participants and hundreds of attendees across fourteen venues as well as virtual programming, in the midst of the pandemic—no small logistical feat, and managed more than capably.

After months of almost total desertion, by the last week of August, downtown Hudson was in fact beginning to feel a bit more spirited. Warren Street had become a “shared” street with a five-mile-per-hour speed limit, sidewalk restaurants were
David Hammons. Untitled (African American Flag). 1990. Canvas and grommets. 59 × 94 1/2" (149.9 × 240 cm).

Thea Little. Decide-by-Side Duet.
Shanekia McIntosh. *The Spiral As Ritual*.

Jonah Bokaer, founding director of the Hudson Eye Festival, at its closing event, Tschabalala Self's *WildBlueCherry*.

Photos: ©2020 Enid Futterman.
attracting locals, if not visitors from further afield, and the weather was even more gorgeous than usual. On Promenade Hill, a sliver of park high above the tracks clinging to the bank of the vast river, the Eye raised Hudson local David Hammons’s iconic masterwork *African American Flag* alongside the Stars and Stripes, a markedly prescient and poignant statement given the prevailing social climate. It flew proudly for the duration.

For openers, on Saturday, the Second Ward Foundation’s funky but cavernous repurposed school building on North Third hosted the delectably wacky performance duo Bibbe Hansen and Sean Carrillo and a handful of skillful sidekicks re-performing a sample of the pieces created by Bibbe’s father, legendary Fluxus artist Al Hansen. Their age—the pieces,’ not the performers’—was beginning to show, but their iconoclastic idiocy was still delightful and resonant. How many times and in how many ways can you repeat “Blah, blah, blah . . .”? Forever, maybe.

Visual installations sprang up all over town. In its elegant ground floor gallery, Hudson Hall, the city’s extravagantly restored former city hall, bank, and opera house, featured more of Hammons’s work plus a range of museum-quality pieces by local artists Myron Polenberg and Filiz Soyak. Tanja Grunert’s buzzing space in the Princess Beatrix House on Prospect Avenue housed sculptor William Stone’s mindbendingly indefinable objects; the Galvan Foundation, responsible for rehabilitating numerous residential, commercial, and industrial buildings throughout the city, made available the dilapidated old library to the Eye as a makeshift museum of local art, both serene and subversive, notably James Autery’s mesmerizing videograph of Carolee Schneemann, and Laetitia Hussain’s organometric constructions. Just outside town, at the Rip Van Winkle Bridge concourse, Soyak’s blissful array of *Breath Flags* flew in sync with the vast Hudson Valley landscape lorded over by Frederic Church’s personal paradise *Olana*.

Throughout the week, the Eye presented daily streamed panel discussions that examined a broad range of approaches to nurturing local culture. Eminent participants included gallerist Sean Kelly (on collecting), Asia scholar Vishakha Desai (on the impact of COVID on cultural expression); and American-Samoan artist Dan Taulapapa McMullin discussing indigenous art with Native-American cultural historian Heather Bruegl. The dialogues, ranging from the universal to the specific, from global to local, were each a valuable contribution to understanding the ways in which cultural activism can animate and enrich community life.

Among the numerous performances (music, dance, and indefinable): In the modest but lovely storefront space of The Hudson Milliner, a packed house (at least by well-observed corona-standards) was treated to a highly eccentric presentation
by New York-based modern dancer Thea Little, a small person with enormous heart and range, who (against a background reel of some of her more expansive productions) twirled and squeaked and quacked, stretched and fluttered and eventually (kind of) vocalized a succession of random thoughts. What began as a rumination on self-consciousness evolved into an obsession with what she thought was a cyst on her neck, which evolved in turn into her cysta (sister, that is), another dancer who sidled onto the stage to transform what had been a soliloquy into a strange and compelling thirty-minute dialogue. After which, a subtitle appeared on the projection informing the audience that the performance was over and that we should leave the space. It sounds inconsequential, but it was delightful, powerful, and it stuck.

Sunday night’s performance (at a packed, again by corona-standards, First Presbyterian Church on Warren Street) was a good deal more earnest, as it should be by the Hudson black spoken-word poet Shanekia McIntosh, who took it upon herself, with great courage, and ear-splitting organ and percussion accompaniment, to vociferously lambast and rightfully mock, from a soapbox no less, white elitism, privilege, and prejudice.

In that vein, the following day, the final day of The Hudson Eye, the brilliant, now internationally recognized young black artist, Tschabalala Self, closed out this year’s program with an appearance at Window on Hudson, on the city’s South Third gateway, from which her provocative four-and-a-half-second animated video WildBlueCherry had been, for the week, projected onto the street for the edification of passing drivers: simply put, cherry soda is a mean and nasty trope. Will you get it, please?

Exposing culturally induced and culturally sustained prejudice is a vital function of modern art, because we sure as hell can’t leave it to anyone else. The Hudson Eye and its wide-awake team have done us a formidable favor in bringing their astute, lively curatorial fervor to Hudson’s own backyard. In a world of canned programming, fake news, and flippant philistinism, they, along with all our other established and burgeoning arts initiatives are working against great odds to transform our little city into a beacon for the value of community-centered life in the twenty-first century.

(That’s why.)

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