EXOTIC ISLE FOR ARTISTS, RIGHT IN CITY

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By ROBIN POGREBIN
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When New York City artists plan their workdays, they usually don't have to factor in a ferry boat.
Then again, they usually don't have studio space on Governors Island, either.

But since March, 24 visual artists and 4 performing groups have been making art in a former munitions storehouse there, rising early to catch one of the first ferries from Manhattan for workers on the island (they start running at 6:45 a.m.) and then rushing at the end of the day to catch the last boat, at 5 p.m. But the bankers' hours have their compensations.

"I've never had a cannon out my window," said Birgit Rathsmann, who is making a series of abstract computer compositions incorporating quotations from the likes of Wittgenstein and Johnny Cash that will be installed on the ferry's upper deck this summer.

The studio program is run by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, a nonprofit organization that helped revive the arts downtown after the terrorist attacks of 2001 and has for several years found donated spaces around the city for artists. It selected two groups of artists for four-month residencies in Building 110 on Governors Island. The first crop has essentially had a corner of the 172-acre island to itself, though that will end on Saturday, when the island opens to the public on weekends, through Oct. 10.

The first structure visible to those getting off the ferry, Building 110 was built in the 1870s to store munitions and later became offices for the Army and the Coast Guard. Last year 14,000 square feet of the building was converted into an arts center, with partitioned studio areas, two performances spaces and a gallery for exhibitions, as well as expansive views of Lower Manhattan and New York Harbor.

Some of the artists are not only grateful for such picturesque surroundings but also for any space at all.

"Before we had this studio, we were meeting in coffee shops and wherever we could find," said Heather M. O'Brien, part of a three-artist team called the Work Progress Collective that interviewed passengers on the ferry and will use their words in wallpaper strips of images that illustrate the recent recession with photos of tent cities, foreclosures and Wall Street executives.

Erica Leone, another member of the collective, added: "We're the first full-time artists on the island. There is this buzz in the air, and this momentum."

As part of Governors Island's public-access season, visitors will be invited to watch the artists at work on three weekends, those beginning on Saturday, on July 23 and on Oct. 8.

"If you're not part of the art world or friends with an artist, you're not able to see the creation of art," said Leslie Koch, president of the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation, established in 2003 to oversee the island's redevelopment. "We're very excited about there being more arts here."

Many of the artists, who were selected by a panel of experts, have drawn on the island for inspiration. Larry Shea has constructed a Styrofoam scale model of Fort Jay, the island's largest structure, on which he projects video of geometric imagery inspired by the Russian Constructivists and post-World War II Latin American geometric abstractionists.

Jenn Figg is making a series of illuminated drums for a performance installation in the fort because she was intrigued by the notion of "the potential of a battle that never really happened there."

Matthew Jensen took photographs all over the island and gathered found objects like dirty golf balls, a battered fork, coffee cup shards and abandoned doorknobs.

The island has "definitely affected what we've made," said Jeffrey Kurosaki, who, with his partner, Tara Pelletier, is creating a painted wooden staging area for performances, with a ladder for people to climb and survey the island through binoculars.

For the artists, the island studios are a kind of utopia of their own, a place close to the city but far enough away to give them the space and calm that are conducive to creativity and often hard to come by.

"It's so meditative," said Sungmi Lee, whose work combines her art and her journals. "I got really inspired by the space but also the trip that I make."

Read the full article here: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/arts/design/02governors.html?adxnnl=1&hpw=&adxnnlx=1275595476-A04tb6GGxbtd2NSYCv9rag