

In Catskill mountains retreat, dancers find creative voices

The Petronio Residency Center has announced its 2023 awardees



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For longtime choreographer Stephen Petronio, making art is about “the power of zero” — liberating oneself from the pressure to “produce” to focus on the creative process. The Petronio Residency Center aims to provide just that in the heart of the Catskill mountains in Greene County. On Jan. 27, the Petronio Residency Center announced its 2023 residency awards, granting three dancers weeklong stays at the 175-acre space surrounded by woods. The facility includes a state-of-the-art studio and grounds, a lead artist stipend, a travel stipend and chef-prepared meals so artists don’t have to worry about anything, Petronio said. The goal of the residencies is to provide artists — especially Black, brown and Indigenous creatives — space and time for researching, recharging, finding inspiration and developing their own creative process to reflect on what dance will look like for the next generation. While there are exceptions, the awards recognize people who are “filled with promise” and are somewhere along the early part of their career, Petronio said.

Three artists will be headed to the residency this year: dancer and choreographer nia love, who is the recipient of the 2023 Petronio Award, created in 2017; visual and dance artist Malcolm-x Betts, who received the 2023 Retreat & Restore Residency for artists affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; and choreographer Gillian Walsh, who obtained a Partnership Residency in collaboration with Danspace Project, which matches artists to a presenter or venue to produce new works. “The pressure is always there, and here, you’re invited to do whatever you want, and I think when you have a limited amount of time and a high-pressure cooker, it produces a certain kind of work — sometimes good, sometimes bad,” Petronio said. “But I do think as an artist, we all deserve the time to do some really authentic research without a goal. And that’s where interesting work could be born.” Love, who defines dance as “a way to move beyond the body,” said she intends to take the time at the residency center to work with her collaborators, trust in the unknown, and reflect on her recent project “UNDERcurrents,” a multimedia performance that touches on the Middle Passage, memory and trauma.



“This place is special because you, the artist, are put at the center of creation,” love said. “We can actually sleep under the same roof, wake up, have breakfast together, take a walk on the paths, do yoga, smile, and think to ourselves and to each other: We are human and our art brought us here together to reimagine the world again.” Early in Petronio’s career, modern dancers like Merce Cunningham and Steve Paxton took him under their wing, becoming important influences. Now, more than 40 years later, Petronio says it’s important to him to pay it forward. “As an artist, you leave a series of works in your wake whenever you leave this world. If you’re lucky, a couple of good ones get remembered,” he said. “But for me, the thing that makes me happiest is that creative process, with bodies in the studio, researching something unknown, and that’s what you can do here. And if that’s the legacy I can leave behind, I’ll feel very, very happy.”