



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



The healing magic of an embrace from a stranger

Something magical happened this past weekend when I attended my first party since most of the Covid-related restrictions were lifted in New York. Unsurprisingly, it was a garden party. While it had rained the previous day, causing the hosts to quickly reschedule the event, on the day of the celebration in the late afternoon, Mother Nature delivered perfect weather – sunny, warm, low humidity, the azure sky filled with fluffy clouds. It was postcard perfect.

The occasion was the opening of *Subliminal Horizons*, the first exhibition of contemporary art I have curated. The exhibition focuses on the works of 20 ethnic minority artists who live and/or work in the Hudson River Valley, an area about an hour north of New York City. The towns in the Valley have been my weekend destinations to visit friends for more than two decades. I have seen it transformed from a place of small, sleepy, parochial towns to vibrant locales, where diverse groups of creative and entrepreneurial young people of all

backgrounds now make their full-time or second homes. It is the diversity and dynamism of this change that inspired my exhibition.

My friends hosted the party at their country house, which has expansive views of the Catskill Mountains. I invited the participating artists along with friends, colleagues and associates. The gallery owners invited their friends, as well as artists the gallery represents and clients in the area. Some of the people knew each other, but many were meeting for the first time. Most importantly, for nearly all of us, it was our first coming-out-of-Covid group gathering where wearing masks was not required. Everyone invited to the party and bringing guests knew there was only one requirement, and it was an honour-based system – you had to be double vaccinated.

The joy and goodwill were almost palpable from the moment guests began arriving. People opened their arms widely to greet each other. It was clear that hugging a friend or colleague was both an emotional release and a reassuring comfort for many. Some, on the verge of tears, commented that it was the first time they had been able to hold a friend in their arms for close to 18 months. When people stopped embracing, they would invariably look at each other's faces, look into each other's eyes, and sometimes embrace again, holding on longer. There was so much care in each look, as though each person were gleaning signs of how the isolation

and fears of the pandemic had affected their friend. Some showed residual nervousness about being close to another person. Some showed signs of lingering trauma. Some showed how deeply the person had retreated into themselves. Others revealed an eagerness to move forward, reclaiming the joy of living and being around people.

As the sun began to set, I found myself standing on the side and looking back at everyone covered in the beautiful, golden, early evening light. The gathering of so many diverse people – ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic – enjoying this occasion together humbled me. In that moment, looking at people standing in groups – some embracing, some chatting, some laughing, people sitting on a checkered blanket on the lawn, a handful standing along just looking at the magical view in the radiant sunset – I suddenly understood and felt the title of my exhibition in another way.

Subliminal Horizons is more than an exercise in building community, shifting narratives and reframing dialogue about the Hudson River Valley. The exhibition's title and the artworks the show contains are also about people's need to stay connected to the support of individual relationships, to the camaraderie of community, and to the optimism of renewal and expansion. While we were all gathered to celebrate the community of artists in the Hudson River Valley, it struck me that we were also a community of survivors – of the pandemic and of our losses.

LUCK WILL HAVE ITS WAY

Recently, a young man I've been mentoring, and who'd applied for an arts grant, received a rejection, a not uncommon experience for many of us. It was the first time he had submitted an entry for such a competition and, perhaps because of this, he thought he might win as he'd worked on the application with impressive diligence. I explained that the first lesson from this rejection is that effort, no matter how demanding, may not yield success. Understandably, he was somewhat depressed, with increasing self-doubt that could undermine his progress forward. I shared my stories of having TV and radio programme proposals rejected, having book manuscripts rejected, having podcast ideas rejected, yet I continued to push forward.

I advised him to not deny the sting of the rejection, but also not to ignore the knowledge to be learned from the experience. The insights gained and thoughtfully used in the future will make him wiser, smarter, and a more effective competitor. I told him it was important to remember that he has produced a truly useful template. The document he created for the submission can be reused, edited, amended, refined and improved for other competitions. Actively learning from the rejection can increase his chance of future success.

Effort is important, but luck also plays a role. I believe luck is in each of our lives, in small and big ways, all the time. However, we don't always recognise it. I know from experience that some of the best things that have happened, and will continue to happen, in my life are the result of my being – totally by chance – in the right place at the right time. My goal is to help this ambitious young man persevere, just as I did, while also becoming better prepared, intellectually and emotionally, to recognise, seize and transform luck when it comes his way.