

Dustin Yellin's Modern Community-Building



David Brooks JULY 21, 2015

When Dustin Yellin was 17 he dropped out of high school. The school was filled with jocks and cheerleaders and he clearly didn't fit in. Plus he wasn't intellectually engaged.

He hitchhiked around New Zealand and returned to Colorado. He became an apprentice to an eccentric physicist who believed he could get free energy from space and who performed experiments on Yellin involving crystals, baths of saline solution and hallucinogenic drugs.

When he was 18 Yellin hatched a plan. He would go to New York, become a successful artist and create a place where painters, scientists, writers, billionaires and other cool people could gather to try to change the world. Yellin turns 40 this week, and that's more or less what he's done.

Yellin is a successful artist with a staff of 23 and a studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Four years ago he threw the vast bulk of his money (and more) into [buying a large brick warehouse](#) that was built as the Pioneer Iron Works in 1866. The building now hosts, well, [a little bit of everything](#).

Artists from as far away as France, Israel and South Korea work there in residencies averaging three or four months. There are also a magazine, a radio station, a recording studio, a film editing room and spaces for scientists working on everything from nanotechnology, astrophysics and virtual-reality software to 3-D printing. The building has a cathedral-like exhibition space, a bookstore, classrooms for adults and neighborhood school kids, and lecture programs featuring Nobel Prize-winning physicists and other notables.

Yellin calls it a “museum of process.” You can walk through the structure and see different kinds of people doing their art, or just hanging out. The first time I went, a few months ago, a band was playing, hundreds of intimidatingly hip young people — part model, part geek — were talking, looking at sculpture or playing with their kids in the lush gardens off to the side. It was like a modern version of Andy Warhol’s Factory, with microbrews, web designers, quantum mechanics and consilience.



Dustin Yellin at his studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, flanked by two of his sculptures.
Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

Yellin did this outside the system. He came to New York, completely ignorant of the canon of art history. The city was his education. He’d meet someone at a bar who’d recommend Dostoyevsky’s “The Idiot.” Elsewhere he picked up Joseph Cornell and Hieronymus Bosch, who are influential in his work.

Yellin started experimenting with layers of resin and found he could draw in three dimensions. Worried that the resin was too toxic, he switched to glass. He takes up to 50 sheets of glass, up to six feet high, and stacks them together. Between the sheets he inserts hundreds of little pictures, drawings and images clipped out of magazines, art books and the like — Inca masks, soldiers, pictures of old machines.

The effect is a colorful, complex, three-dimensional landscape of the unconscious, what the critic Kenneth Goldsmith called a “pop-up utopia.” The works are instantly beautiful and absorbingly complicated.

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Most fascinating about Yellin is his style of community-building. He's a product of the highly distracted Internet age. During the day he bounces between his studio and the Pioneer Works Center next door, multitasking among sculptures, planning a lecture series or helping edit the magazine. He says he's a problematic boyfriend because he's there till midnight. His studio is a physical manifestation of his mental

thrill-seeking and pluralistic attention — there are literally thousands of little images of everything under the sun. “I don't worry about inspiration as much as system overload,” he says.

And yet he has brought everything into some sort of cohesion. His sculptures often have the coherent shape of the human figure, but viewers can examine a different part of the figure and then move in any direction to create their own sequence of meanings.

Pioneer Works is a social sculpture that works the same way. It is a cohesive physical community but informal and pluralistic. It is not siloed along disciplinary lines like a university. On the contrary, artists, scientists and writers are jammed together, encouraged to borrow one another's methodologies in pursuit of a project that is both individual and common — finding the hidden order of things.

Yellin's community seeks to be an interdisciplinary Jane Jacobs ballet: hundreds of bodies in different fields going about their own business interminglingly. I wouldn't want it to replace the university (the danger of dilettantism is real), but the creative pyrotechnics are inspiring.

The only question is whether Yellin will be able to enjoy what he's built. He's created a new institution and brought his life to a coherent point — hard things to do in a scattered era. But he can't sit still long enough to have patient conversations with the geniuses he's gathered. He's racing off to the next thrill, a creator too restless to fully savor his living creation.