

WORKING FOR THE WORK WEEK

A deeper look at two of the Midwest's artist residencies, Harold Arts and ACRE, and how they're balancing funding issues and big plans.

By James H. Ewert Jr.

Some people leave town to take recreational drugs at an out-of-state music festival, others to follow a neurotic love interest or flee a pending financial obligation, still others just want a nice vacation. Whether it's a mid-life crisis, late-onset spring fever, or an obsessive compulsion to travel, everyone needs a break every once in a while, yet most generally take a break *from work*, not *to work*.

It was, however, the latter that brought a few dozen artists out of their hiding places to descend on two obscure towns in Wisconsin and Ohio for Chicago-spawned artist-residency programs: ACRE (The Artist's Cooperative Residency and Exhibitions Project), and Harold Arts. The point wasn't so much to *get out of town* as to *get into* another.

Chesterhill, Ohio and Steuben, Wisconsin may not seem like posh locales to take in the warm glow of the mid-summer sun, but for artists seeking respite from the daily hustle and the chance to shake out some neglected creative cobwebs, the two towns might as well have been Xanadu.

photo courtesy of Kirsten Leenaars

For the artistically inclined, residency programs are a virtual right of passage into serious respectability. They're kind of like a vision quest, and while some are different than others, most include plenty of campy bonding, booze and essential hours of personal contemplation. Harold Arts' Jeffers Tree Farm in Southeastern Ohio and ACRE's Steuben Lodge in Southwestern Wisconsin offered visiting artists this summer plenty of all three.

Founded in 2006 by Chicagoans Joe Jeffers, Jamie Branch, and Nick Wylie, Harold Arts is the elder of the two residencies. ACRE is in its inaugural year and was begun by Harold co-founder Wylie, Emily Green and a number of former Harold staff and residents. Without specifically intending to, the founders of both organizations are continuing a long-held artist tradition—and in this case, one specific to Chicago.

100 years ago, a group of artists ventured out 150 miles from the industrialized havoc that surrounded them in Chicago and sought temporary refuge from the perpetual swirl of an urban metropolis. They were looking to acclimate themselves to a more natural mental and physical environment than what Chicago's bustling railways offered. What they found was a remote area of southwestern Michigan called "Saugatuck." The creative retreat they started in Saugatuck evolved and matured over the course of a century into a nationally renowned artist residency called Ox Bow.

Now a summer artist residency and affiliated, programmed and maintained by The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Ox Bow is not solely responsible for placing the little Michigan town of Saugatuck on the map, but deserves a great deal of recognition.

What was once just an indistinguishable blip on the radar is now a thriving fertile crescent of cultural activity and artistic production.

Though Harold Arts and ACRE weren't cast in Ox Bow's shadow, they were both created in the same Chicago furnace, and both offer residents that delicate balance of rest and recreation that turns a two-week stay into the most productive ones of the year.

Seven hundred miles separate Steuben from Chesterhill, but both towns have the same remote beauty and welcoming community, and while each group's mission may differ esoterically, ACRE and Harold are really more similar than different.

Harold's sprawling 3,200 acre property can accommodate artists and a staff, and features a litany of workspaces ranging from audio/visual recording and editing studios to a well-stocked woodshop. Including personnel, ACRE's 1,000-acre Steuben Lodge can accommodate up to 30 residents at a time in the property's eight buildings, which feature large communal and personal workspaces, a large screen-printing studio, access to both digital and analog recording equipment, as well as a wood shop. Each residency allows participants to determine the length of their stay, and both end in mid-to-late summer.

Through a series of mid-August email interviews, *Jettison* talked with the founders of both ACRE and Harold about the ongoing difficulties involved in organizing and securing funding for artist residency programs. The interviews offered a glimpse into the fun, yet stimulating atmosphere of the respective encampments, where residents are just as likely to be painting themselves in Insane Clown Posse makeup over beers by the campfire as they are developing and critiquing new experimental concepts for artwork.





photo by Jacob Kart

In its first year of inception, ACRE founders Wylie and Green wrote via email that while they've certainly had their share of obstacles to overcome, the program's first year has gone astoundingly well.

"Our problem solving skills have become finely tuned and now, nearing the end of the first session, things really feel like they have fallen into place," Wylie wrote. "We have an extremely talented and hardworking staff who are passionate about what we are all doing. From cooking to setting up a compost system to organizing programming; the staff barely has time to rest, but are invigorated by the atmosphere."

"Campy" is the most playful way to explain that atmosphere, but "art-campy" may be a more appropriate description. It's one-part creative production, two-parts community building, and three-parts social interaction—all mixed together and smothered in one two-week-long drunken-hug.

"It's hard to shake some camp traditions," Jeffers wrote. "We eat s'mores, we play capture the flag, we make out, we write letters to our friends from last summer. While I have never actually been to camp, these campy activities seem a-okay."

Wylie said the collegial atmosphere is inevitable, yet the residents are harder working, more self directed and motivated than traditional campers. In the first week of ACRE's program, a feature-length video had been screened and critiqued, and whole suites of paintings and photographic series were created.

Wylie wrote, "One of the things we think we can credit [to the amount of work being made] is the extended length of the residency from previous years with Harold," Wylie wrote. "12 days allows for residents to become acclimated for the first couple days, settle in, and really have at least a whole week of dedicated work time, which is pretty rare and one of the main reasons residencies are so valuable to artists' practices."

Both residencies charge a minimal fee to artists for room and board, but each have relied on alternative fundraising methods like art auctions, donations and special events to keep them afloat. Having been established a few more years than ACRE, Harold has developed funding relationships with groups like the Illinois Artists Council and the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, but Jeffers said those funds have been rapidly dwindling, making it more challenging for the residency to remain.

Harold was fortunate to be able to turn to The Jeffers Tree Farm, which had been in the Jeffers family for years, to serve as a staging ground for the beginning of Harold. Conversely, ACRE faced the difficulty of finding the location, facility, and starting capital to begin its residency. For that, ACRE turned to Kickstarter.com, a crowd-sourced micro-fundraising Website through which the group was able to procure nearly \$3,500 in online donations. With that seed money and through a network of personal acquaintances, some of which Wylie established during his previous time at Harold, ACRE was able to secure the property of Bob and Rosa Samuelson in Stueben, Wisconsin. The couple had spent the past 20 years building Steuben Lodge, and improving the property with salvaged timbers from Chicago demolition sites that Bob Samuelson had encountered throughout his career. Wylie said Samuelson arranged a meeting with ACRE founders a year ago and the group found the property absolutely idyllic.

At their core, the founders of both ACRE and Harold Arts are community builders, abroad and at home. Both groups are constructing and establishing artist colonies, networks of artists whose collaboration and critical encouragement they hope will foster cross-discipline and cross-country exploration.

Where Harold and ACRE appear to differ the most is in the direction they're going, not where they've been. Both Chicago-based founders

can't say enough about the Chicago and midwestern artist communities that have helped them grow. Yet, Jeffers said that even though Harold has maintained some Chicago-centric idioms, the organization is looking more outward than inward for inspiration.

"As we spend more time in Chesterhill, the program here begins to occupy more of the calendar year, and as we become more engaged with the local community, a full time schedule of programming in Chicago seems difficult and potentially unnecessary," Jeffers wrote. "We want Harold to be a think tank for artists from around the globe, rather than a place to reconsider cultural activity in Chicago... We hope to create [an] [inter]national network for the organization and its participants."

For ACRE, the idea, Wylie wrote, is to work with an assortment of alternative spaces and apartment galleries in the Chicago area to offer residents their own solo show. However, Wylie is quick to point out that this is just the starting tenet.

100 years since that first group of ambitious artists retreated from Chicago's urban noise to refocus, another group of Chicago artists are heading out on their own creative midwestern expeditions. With a lot of money, a little luck, and some good-old-fashioned patience, they too might be able to turn places like Chesterhill, Ohio and Steuben, Wisconsin into the kind of vibrant and growing cultural sphere Ox Bow helped establish in Saugatuck. ▀



Acre Staff member Stephany Colunga studio table || photo by Catlin Arnold



photo by Kristen Leenaars