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At the Surf Lodge This Summer, Art Kids Are Crashing Montauk's Endless Weekend Parties

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Madison McGaw/BFA.com

Usually, there tends to be a self-congratulatory languor to the art world's off-duty summer activities in the Hamptons. The gallery openings, especially, are relaxed to the point of being soporific—no major artist is offering weekenders the first look at their most urgent new work. It's a comfortable, faraway exurb where a big-name artist can sign a few copies of their book, say, or put on an un-stressful exhibition of editions, or cobble together some works to sell at a local gallery because they were asked nicely. Deals are still done, of course, but best if it's on the beach while surfing.

The painter Richard Phillips knows this. Like many New York artists of his generation, he had a place in the East End, in Amagansett, for a long time (a decade, by his guess) before it became a destination for social-media influencers and the brands that court them. He'd seen and done all of the above, so by the time the Surf Lodge in Montauk came calling about hosting an exhibition of his work a few years ago, he declined.

Though a natural fit for the hotel's open-air chapel-like gallery—a surfer himself, Phillips might be best-known outside the art world for his portraits and video of Lindsay Lohan in a wetsuit—he felt he couldn't really add much to the conversation at that point. "I would just be contributing to the same old thing," he said recently, with a sigh. "So when they came to me again this year, I said, 'There needs to be a comprehensive change.'"

Instead of hanging his own work for the usual month, the artist instead agreed to take over the Surf Lodge's art program this summer from June through August, so that he could seek out three energetic young galleries—Bushwick's Signal, the Lower East Side's Kai Matsumaya, and Basel's Weiss Falk—to come and shake things up at the Montauk hot spot where Justin Bieber was spotted partying over Memorial Day weekend.

"I told the galleries I'm not curating these shows, that it was up to them to decide how they want to approach the Surf Lodge, its multifaceted grounds, and the trainloads of people that end up there every weekend," Phillips explained. He sounded especially enthused by the artists-out-of-water aspect. "None of these galleries have been out there on a Saturday night when it feels like the end of the world, with people with mojitos on their knees. That's where the potential for them is—you either embrace it or you don't. That's an attractive opportunity."

The first show, a group exhibition of Signal's artists that opened two weekends ago (and is up through June), really leaned into the bacchanal. The artists Nathaniel DeLarge, Raine Trainor, and David Kirshoff even built a white tent that acted as a super-sized rosé vaporizer, making use of all the wine from the sponsored dinners at the Surf Lodge's porch restaurant.

Meanwhile, the performance duo FlucT did their hardcore thing on the patio stage among the Saturday party animals, while others artists also strayed far afield of the gallery space, like Aidan Koch, who painted portraits on the awnings of the well-known Surf Lodge rainbow'd facade.

And when Kai Matsumaya arrives at the beginning of July, they will bring with them both a reputation for interesting conceptual art, as well as backup in the form of their Lower East Side friends, fellow young galleries like Magenta Plains. They are taking Phillips's idea and pushing it even further, to his delight. As he said, "All I wanted to do was set the conditions where art could likely happen."