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Post-Sandy, NYC Artists Find a Slow Road Back to Creativity

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In the best of times, the life of an artist is difficult. Lean years, sacrifice and solitude are the norm. Add a natural disaster and life becomes even more precarious.

Such is the fate of seven artists in residence at the [Smack Mellon](#) gallery, whose building in Dumbo is separated from the East River by a sliver of Brooklyn Bridge Park. The location is inspiring, with views of Lower Manhattan and the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, but it also was in Hurricane Sandy's sights.

The artists were in the middle of their yearlong tenure at the gallery, set up in spacious basement work studios, when Sandy hit, flooding the building with six feet of salt- and sewage-laced water. Their sculpting tools and tubes of paint, not to mention painstakingly created works, were ruined, as was their precious space to create.



*Workers remove walls in the damaged basement on Nov. 2, 2012
(Photo credit: Smack Mellon/Flickr)*

"The artistic process just stopped," said [Blane De St. Croix](#), a sculptor who was among the artists in residence. He estimates that he lost \$58,000 in tools, supplies and art work in the flood.

But despite the financial setbacks and the loss of the studio, which suited his work in large-scale, environmentally-themed sculptures, De St. Croix is beginning to coax the creative process forward. The need to create is a powerful force that cannot be dampened for long, even by a disaster of the magnitude of Sandy.

"To live and work as an artist in New York City is a constant struggle," said Smack Mellon's executive director, Kathleen Gilrain. "To have something like this happen to them is to see how resilient they are."

The artists are continuing their residency program, which runs through the spring, in donated office space in a nearby building. Temporary walls have been erected to give each artist some defined space but it does not compare to the large, high-ceilinged studios with concrete floors and access to a kitchen, computer lab and wood shop that they had at the gallery.

The disaster, too, has become a shaping force in their work.

For De St. Croix, returning to work has meant spending more time at his computer researching his next project, an examination of environmental changes in the Arctic. After experiencing Sandy, he is resolved to find [funding for an expedition](#) to conduct an on-site survey, which he often does for a new work.

"It's reinforced the need for me to go to the Arctic. What happened in New York is in direct correlation to environmental change and global warming," De St. Croix said.

Throwing himself into [the Arctic project](#) has lessened the sting that lingers from having to destroy his last installation -- 12-foot-tall sculptures of wood, stucco, dirt and acrylic paint that celebrated the preservation of the Palisades cliffs. The sculptures were displayed at [Wave Hill in the Bronx](#) and the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers in a show that closed Dec. 2.

Preserving the works was not an option. With the financial hit he took with Sandy, De St. Croix said he could not afford new storage space and he no longer had a studio large enough to accommodate the works when the show closed. He does not know how the installation was destroyed. A curator at Wave Hill took care of it because De St. Croix said he would have found it too painful to be present. "I had nowhere to put them," he said.