

FINDERS, RETREATERS

This Sonoma County artist offers up her land for private residences. She can change the course of your life—if you can find her.

TEXT TRACY ROSS

Years before Merlin Coleman knew that her mother would bestow her family's eight-acre plot of fertile farmland in northern California to her, she was identifying herself as a "drawer"—of the kind not that holds pants but that puts pencil to paper.

That was the 1970s, and the region was shifting. There were hippies and alternative folks wanting to "get back to nature," and Sonoma County was an agrarian idyll, replete with rolling hills, salt-scented air, and fertile soil. On Coleman's mother's invitation, the back-to-the-landers would drive up from places like Berkeley or San Francisco to work on the barn, soak in the sun, and make art. "It wasn't an intentional community in the sense of buying food, but they spent a lot of time together," says Coleman. "And everybody was always naked. I still hold that value. The right to be naked."

Another element from those times that stuck: the enjoyment, and dedication to, making art. "I was always sketching as a kid, (hence the self-identification of drawer) "and that transferred into music, in the sense of drawing with sounds," says Coleman.

As a teen, she attended the artsy Northwest School in Seattle, studying cello, but, "I wasn't very connected to myself," she adds. That lasted until one day when she was 19 in a practice room at Cornish College of the Arts and a light went on. "I was playing around on the piano and started to write things down," she says. "I had this huge moment where I knew I wanted to write music instead of being an instrumentalist or a singer. And I have never looked back on that aspect of my life."

Since that time, Coleman has performed and recorded experimental music for a multitude of instruments, including voice, cello, piano, and found sounds, with an emphasis on text and word play. She performs solo or with small ensembles and has written scores for numerous choreographers, made recorded works for multi-channel sound spaces, engaged in performance art happenings, and directed a gargling chorus. And she has held on to the cherished piece of family land in a part of California that has attracted pioneers and the Grateful Dead, Joan Didion and John Steinbeck, and, more recently, every-

one from organic farmers seeking to live closer to the rhythms of the earth to burnt-out tech execs fleeing Silicon Valley.

Coleman still exudes an air of the dreamy kid who wandered around her mother's land with her sketchpad or cello in her hands, the one who also dreamed of one day working the ground to help it produce fruit and vegetables. In 2012, after a 10-year stint of living and performing in Berkeley, she returned to the land and has since added a sizable garden (she had visions of building a commercial farm but zoning regulations wouldn't allow it). In the years since, while raising her two sons, she has opened the space once again to the same kind of people that formed her childhood visions of the future.

She still dedicates her days to the creation of art, which she has done in collaboration with a choreographer and video artist since 1999. Their first workspace was a warehouse in Oakland across from the Mother's Cookies factory they fittingly dubbed Milk Bar. After 12 years, U-Haul moved in, so they relocated to Bridge Arts in Richmond. And since 2004,

COURTESY JAMES MORGAN



TOP: Artists have to be comfortable with the beauty (and lack of conveniences) that come with rustic living.
BOTTOM: Merlin Coleman has always been dedicated to making art.

they've curated "MilkBar salons" in a vibrant 40-seat venue. The salons host a dynamic and diverse range of artists, creating a unique collage effect of mixed disciplines such as local butoh (a form of Japanese dance), experimental Russian and Turkish film, mixed media photo installations, rooftop performance art with audience participation, and singer-songwriter performances. On the weekend of March 12, the founders celebrated their 50th salon.

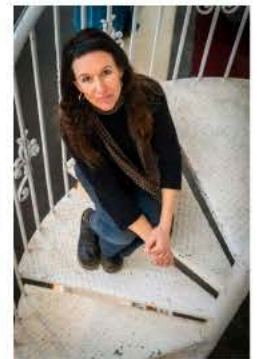
But all along, Coleman wanted to share her own space with a community of artists. So, since 2018, she has offered a residency on her land. It's very grassroots—private and word of mouth. Here's how she views it: "an antidote to other big residencies, which are shiny and pedigreed—you need your art résumé and samples and to have a fancy art degree. That's not bad, but it's highly competitive. Meanwhile I take it on the face that you are really dedicated to your work. I do care that peo-

ple who come here are making quality art. But, sort of like body positive, I'm art positive. I just want to provide a place where you can come if you're really serious about your work and you have heard about me from a friend or rumored person in the Bay Area. If you know your boss's daughter needs a retreat, send them my way. That kind of thing."

Once an artist finds Coleman, and Coleman vets their work and them, she says they have a call—or better yet, the candidate visits in person—to talk about logistics. Housing for the residency is in a three-story-high tower that you access via ladder and has no running water inside. "So I ask, 'is a tower going to work for you?'" she says. "Are you okay with the rustic nature of having a bathroom outside? We talk about some of the guidelines. There are kids running around, so I make sure they're okay with that. I also have a media rule of no cell phones of any kind being out in a common area."

Artists prepare their food in a shared kitchen, often with vegetables from Coleman's prodigious garden. She invites artists in for one family dinner, mainly so her kids can meet a variety of different makers. And, at some point during the residency, she will arrange "a little show and tell—that's what I call it. Part of what I don't want to do is scare people—this is time for them to regenerate and make art," she says. But she does want to give artists a chance to showcase their work to the local community, so she sets up a gathering complete with snacks and drinks for community members to come and witness them.

Ultimately, Coleman wants to offer a place where artists can rest and regenerate. "Oftentimes artists will come here and sleep for the first two days," she says. "That's fine with me, because I don't believe you can do good work unless you're rested." But there is one catch. Coleman let artists find her through word of mouth. Consider



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY MERLIN COLEMAN (X3); KRISTINA ISLAS



LEFT: Why, yes, I'm the black sheep.

RIGHT: Coleman offers artists a place where they can unplug from the frenzy of contemporary life.

this story a starter map to doing that. But like any good drawer, you will have to connect the dots.

You can start by checking out merlinman.com. Then find these other three California idylls, which are perfect for resting and creating.

The Mesa Refuge, Point Reyes Station

Since its founding in 1997, Mesa Refuge in Point Reyes Station has supported more than 600 writers addressing compelling issues related to the current time. They come for two-week deep dives into their projects, staying in cottages placed among paths winding through colorful gardens. Explore your way to your space and work, undisturbed, into the wee hours. Then group up with your co-writers and cook together (or not) in the communal kitchen. Mesa's priority is to support writers focusing on "ideas at the edge" of the areas of nature, human economy, and social equity. Spring and fall residencies are two-weeks long, and there is no fee (though you

are responsible for your travel and food). Application directions and more can be at mesarefuge.org/residencies/application.

Chalk Hill Artists Residency, Healdsburg

Founded in 2010 on a 280-acre ranch and vineyard bordering the Russian River, Chalk Hill is the vision of the late John Carl Warnecke, a renowned architect who championed "contextual architecture," a design response to the literal and abstract characteristics of one's surrounding environment. Warnecke wanted artists to live and work together in what he deemed the most beautiful place in the world, and that's what they get when they come to the ranch at Chalk Hill. Stays last two to six weeks. Residents use the artist house, studio space, and ranch property. They have the opportunity to exhibit and sell their work at Open Studio events. And applications are open to artist of all mediums, including but not limited to fine arts, multi-media,

design, singing/songwriting, and poetry. Residencies cost \$400 per week, but scholarships are available. Check out chalkhillresidency.com for details.

Wilbur Hot Springs, Williams

Wilbur isn't technically an artists' retreat, but you should visit anyway. The property offers natural hot mineral springs in the heart of an 1,800-acre nature preserve located two and a half hours north of San Francisco. Here, you can hike or bike on the reserve's many trails and then bathe, clothed or naked, in the medicinal healing pools. Expect an ambiance of earthly calm—Wilbur uses only solar energy, and the water comes from natural springs. The indoor lodging—small cabins, a hotel, or the solar lodge—is airy and clean; six separate campsites are also available. Leave your technology at home: Wilbur is a Wifi- and cellular-free property. Let the digital detox, soothing waters, and immersion in nature fuel your creativity. Go to wilburhotsprings.com for more information. **■**

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