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At These Rural Get-Togethers, the Gathering is the Point — and the Art

The idea is to bring people together in places that are not always thought of as art hubs, and produce new art along the way.

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Reporting from Burnsville, N.C.

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This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how the world of art and museums is pushing boundaries.

On a sunny Saturday in late September, around one hundred people gathered in the Blue Ridge Mountains at the studio of the artist Mel Chin. The afternoon event was part picnic, part community-building exercise, part homecoming — and part Conceptual artwork in progress.

Whether they knew it or not, on some level the guests were the materials, and the event itself was the medium.

It was one of 12 such happenings in a yearlong, roughly once-a-month series of artist-led assemblies in rural areas across the country from this year into 2027, for a project called "Why We Gather."



Community members gather as Shùnyù Huáng pours tea during the event on Chin's property. Kaoly Gutierrez for The New York Times

The idea is to honor the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence by bringing people together, looking at the creative richness of places that are not always thought of as art hubs and producing new art along the way.

The first gathering took place in Rushville, Neb., in August, and future installments will happen in the San Juan, Puerto Rico, metro area; and Arivaca, Ariz., among other places.

The independent curator organizing the "Why We Gather" events, Abigail Winograd, explained her approach. "I asked all the artists to host a meal and to give a gift," she said in an interview. "That was the simple invitation."



Abigail Winograd, curator of the "Why We Gather" event, said that the focus on rural communities was partly intended to balance out the increasingly international scope of museums and the larger art world.
Kaoly Gutierrez for The New York Times

In turn, Chin and the nonprofit he founded, SOURCE Studio, had invited a group of people to his studio who have a special connection to the building — they had been born in it during the decades when it served as a maternity hospital. Some local residents were on the guest list, too.

The gray stone building was constructed in 1931, on a property just a few miles from the Tennessee border, past evocatively named byways including Snakebite Holler Lane and Hardscrabble Road. Before it was a maternity hospital, the structure had been a craft center, and that was part of the creative backstory for the event.

Chin, a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation's famed fellowship, known as the "genius grant," had a metaphor at the ready.

"If you were born here, I want to introduce you to the ideas I gave birth to here," he explained in a phone interview before the event.

The guests toured the studio compound and reminisced, both about their local roots and the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Helene, which caused catastrophic damage in the Carolinas, Appalachia, Georgia and Florida. Chin wanted to use the timing to underscore the importance of community.

The meal offered was not an afterthought. "In 2026, we think of food as an art form," Winograd said.

Chin was born in Houston to Chinese parents, and moved to North Carolina in 2002. For the event's food, he pointedly picked chefs now based in the region who were born elsewhere — China, Puerto Rico and Egypt — to make food reflecting their heritage and to get at the idea of belonging.



Garry Fox holds his gift, meant to look like a U.S. passport, which marks his birth on the property in 1954 when it was still a maternity hospital.
Kaoly Gutierrez for The New York Times

The gift to the guests came in the form of what Chin called a "Pas(t)port," a card resembling a U.S. passport that included a checklist inside — options included "was born here," "shared stories" and "got creative, helped birth new ideas" — complete with a headshot taken at the event.

One of the guests was Morris Williams, 68, who was born in the hospital in 1958 and now lives near Spartanburg, S.C.



Morris Williams attended the event, and was also born on the property in 1958 when it was still a maternity hospital.
Kaoly Gutierrez for The New York Times

"Burnsville has always had an artistic side for sure," Williams said, noting the local tradition of making cane-backed furniture. He added that he was "thrilled" that Chin had opened the property up for the event.

"There's something special about this area," Williams said. "You can get in touch with yourself, the earth and the spiritual side here better than you can anywhere else."

Another guest, Nina Silvers Randolph, has an even stronger connection to the property. Not only was she born there in 1956, she said that her grandparents once lived in the white house just behind the former hospital.

A friend of Chin's who now lives in Johnson City, Tenn., Randolph had some idea what to expect from him as far as artwork. She, too, emphasized the importance of local craft traditions, particularly quilting.

"Look at a beautiful quilt," Randolph said. "To me, that's art for sure."

The idea for "Gather" came out of a meal Winograd had in Los Angeles last year with Rachel Levin, president of philanthropy at the Hearthland Foundation, and the artist Jeffrey Gibson.

Hearthland — established by the director Steven Spielberg and the artist and actress Kate Capshaw, his wife — was a donor to Gibson's exhibition at the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2024, and Winograd was a co-curator of that presentation.



The gray stone building was constructed in 1931. Before it was a maternity hospital, the structure had been a craft center, and that was part of the creative backstory for the event. Kaoly Gutierrez for The New York Times



Mel Chin, on the left, used the "Why We Gather" event as a kind of generative, collaborative engine, with a to-be-determined outcome. Kaoly Gutierrez for The New York Times

"We've been interested in the 250th anniversary for a number of years," Levin said. "We think a lot about storytelling, and anniversaries are an important narrative hook."

According to Hearthland's website, the foundation "began with a question: What can we do to help this country?"

At that fateful dinner, Levin asked Gibson what he would want to do to commemorate the anniversary with art.

"I said it would be a time to acknowledge the communities that already exist, something that would reflect the diversity of the country," Gibson recalled in an interview. "Communities are already doing things — we just need to spotlight them."

Levin agreed, tapped Winograd to organize, and now Hearthland is funding "Gather."

It was an easy choice for Winograd to reach out to Chin, as they have worked together before, notably on a 2021 MacArthur Foundation show in Chicago, where Winograd lives and the foundation is based.

For Levin, one of the keys to "Gather" was that the artists be already rooted in each location, and no one was "parachuting in," she said.

Underlying the project is the uneasy tension in American politics and culture.

"There's no question we're polarized and divided," Levin said. "But in spending time with each other, the divides fall apart."

Along with artists Anita Fields and Yatika Starr Fields, Gibson hosted October's installment of "Gather" last week at Camp Sevenstar, part of the Cherokee Nation in Tahlequah, Okla. Gibson is of Cherokee descent through his mother, who grew up in Oklahoma, and a citizen of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians on his father's side.

Winograd said that the focus on rural communities was partly intended to balance out the increasingly international scope of museums and the larger art world.

"You may learn more about modernism in Argentina at an art museum these days than you do about modernism in Nebraska," she said.

By design, the "Gather" series does not fit traditional art definitions, and is occurring outside of what Winograd called the "recognizable frame" of a museum.

"We're doing what you might call social sculpture or relational aesthetics," she said, referring to the idea that an interaction between people can count as art.

All the "Gather" events are deeply different, and somewhat unpredictable as far as what they leave behind. For the Oklahoma edition, two new murals made by the hosting artists will remain on site.

Chin, on the other hand, used the event as a kind of generative, collaborative engine, with a to-be-determined outcome.

With Winograd, Levin and a few dozen members from the crowd looking on, some from under a white tent as they sampled the food, Chin went up to a microphone and asked for ideas.

"I'm here to work with you," Chin said. "Let's come up with something."

Some in attendance wanted to ask him about the works they saw in his studio buildings.

"What's going on with that big head in there?" someone asked, and Chin explained that the sculpture in question, depicting the 19th-century Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind, was part of a project he did in New York's Times Square in 2018.

The back-and-forth with the crowd settled on a few seeds of ideas that could be turned into art, including a bell. Randolph, Chin's friend who now lives in Tennessee, remarked that in the old days, a church bell would ring when someone in the community died.

Chin immediately started thinking aloud about the "cracked" state of Liberty Bell and said he would ponder it. The tree of life archetype was also suggested as another possible avenue for an artwork.

The gathering had spoken. Chin said he would be in touch with the guests in the future to get further feedback, and to give progress reports.

"Now we have something cooking," he said, seemingly excited by the prospect. "We'll see how it develops."