

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Culture Corner

An Interview with Artist Ann Chernow of Westport, Connecticut

BERNIE LANGS

The artist Ann Chernow was born in 1936 and grew up in New York City. She has worked extensively in the mediums of lithography, silkscreen, etching, and colored pencil as well as oil painting. Known as “The Queen of Noir,” she achieved extensive recognition for her portrait-style works evoking the images of female cinematic figures from the 1930s and 1940s, especially those appearing in black and white films. Ms. Chernow has lived in Westport, Connecticut for many years, where she is a long-time and beloved leader of the extended arts community.

Chernow’s second husband, Burt Chernow (d. 1997), was an art historian and professor at Housatonic Community College, where he founded the Housatonic Museum of Art. The couple established a wonderful art collection, including prints and works in various mediums by some of the greatest artists of the twentieth century. She later became the life partner of actor and documentarian, Martin West (d. 2020). Chernow has traveled the globe and befriended numerous artists and art dealers.

When you view Chernow’s works in person, you can’t help but be struck by her use of representation and portraiture as a means of evoking a sense of veiled mystery. Chernow’s work elicits a tactile response to the many textures of her graphic details. Her works grab the beholder with immediacy and profound emotion.

In late August 2020, Chernow was kind enough to respond to interview questions by email:

You are in your 80s and you’ve said that with so many ideas for new works, you’ve considered putting together an Andy Warhol-like “Factory” of assistants to speed up the process of making prints, etc. Is it both a blessing and a curse that after decades you are as creative, if not more, as ever?

There are many artists who have as-



Photo Courtesy of ANN CHERNOW

sistants actually creating the artist’s work. I have had years of studio help but never had people making my work though I’ve considered it because I’ve never been able to bring to life all the images crowding and dancing in my mind. I usually fall asleep mind-creating images. If I could live hundreds of years, I

could never realize all of them. Choosing the images I actually produce is akin to choosing what children you would keep. I’ve come to an acceptance that I can only do so much. But I decided long ago never to have other people

CONTINUED TO P. 2

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selections.rockefeller.edu
nseditors@rockefeller.edu



BERNIE LANGS | NATURAL SELECTIONS

Left to Right: To a Wild Rose, Paper Doll, and Night and Day. each is a lithograph from one stone.



BERNIE LANGS | NATURAL SELECTIONS

Tea for Two, circa. 1981, oil on canvas, depicting the artists' sisters and inspired by a Judy Holiday film.



Photo Courtesy of ANN CHERNOW

Moonlight, lithography from one stone; 11 x 14.

CONTINUED FROM P. 1

making my work.

I have many non-artist friends who are retired but I've never thought about retiring. One of my mentors, the artist Isabel Bishop worked every day. Even in her late years with Parkinson's as her devil, she took a subway when she was able to from the Bronx to her studio in Union Square in Manhattan. She, and others like her, are my heroes. It's neither a blessing nor a curse that the images just keep coming, it's just work; it's my life.

I consider you one of the few remaining creatively original and great representational artists. What motivates your reality-based work?

During the past fifteen years most of my work has been informed by the movie genre of film noir. The images are based on specific impressions related to movies from the 1930s

CONTINUED TO P. 3



Shadow of a Doubt series; each image: 36 x 90", litho, pencil ink, sandpaper, wax pencil, and whiteout.

CONTINUED FROM P. 2

and 1940s then freely interpreted without altering the spirit of the chosen cinematic information. I try to create a sense of *déjà vu* or nostalgia without the sentimentality often associated with specific film references...I alter the perception of "star" using contemporary models; this attitude brings an image closer to the contemporary viewer. Depicting a universal gesture and establishing dramatic moments are paramount. Once experienced, a movie is never totally forgotten. Memories from films are channels, metaphor and private reverie through which I address the human condition. I've never followed "trends".

Serious work began in college, NYU's art programs offered new insights. It was the 1960s and Abstract Expressionism was the style of choice. I was asked to leave a number of classes because I refused to work abstractly. The artist Jules Olitski was the only instructor who understood what I was trying to reach, and even though he was an Abstract Expressionist, he allowed me to work realistically, telling visual stories. I've never deviated from that approach.

Your *Shadow of a Doubt* series evokes an amazing response when experienced in person. How did you conceive of the series?

Shadow of a Doubt uses images culled from the film noir, *Laura*, which is one of my favorite films. I've watched it many, many times, sketch from it, then push the aesthetic to reach a satisfying composition with many levels of the colors black to white. The various media I used: lithography ink, pencils, sandpaper, razor blades, and "white out" (yes, it's the liquid that erases mistakes on paper, but it also works on other surfaces). I use this media combination with paintings, drawings, and prints. I usually concentrate on images of

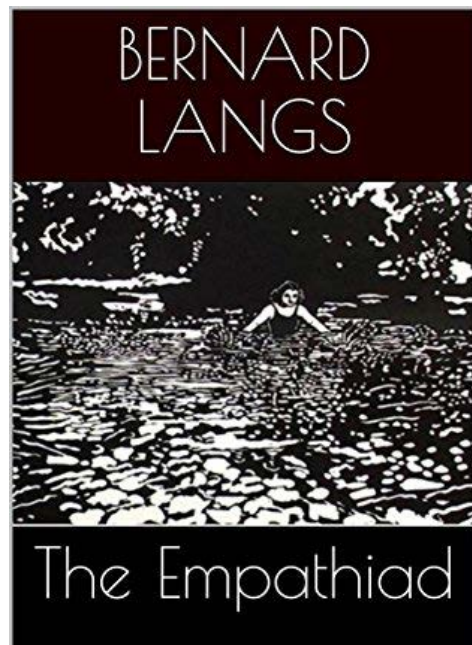
femmes fatales and Gene Tierney as Laura is [a] quintessential [*femme fatales*].

From late March to May of 2020, the Center for Contemporary Printmaking in Norwalk, CT had an exhibition, "Collaboration 2020: Ann Chernow and James Reed Explore the Lithographs of Pablo Picasso" where you researched Picasso's techniques extensively and created a set of prints using what you had learned. How did the project and exhibition come about?

My master printer, James Reed, and I had the idea five years ago to try to replicate the surface feeling of a Picasso print. We researched and soon realized that even the most detailed catalogs did not include specific information on the methods or actual material processes used by Picasso. Further research and speaking with experts revealed that no printer could supply that information. So, James and I set out to use an image of mine to achieve this [texture]; we tried many experiments with various materials. When we finally successfully completed one print, we were so excited that over the next five years—between other print work—we realized sixty-one Picasso/Chernow works, most of which were experiments with media.

You were close friends with the artist Christo, who recently died, and his late wife and collaborator, Jeanne Claude. Your late husband, Burt Chernow, wrote a biography of the couple and your late companion, Martin West, was also deeply involved with their monumental projects. What can you say about having been so close to Christo and his influence?

My heroes are those whose work ethic dominated their lives. Christo and Jeanne Claude lived their work, not much else interested them. Once, their lawyer persuaded them they needed to take a vacation; after two



days they came home, bored with doing nothing. That work ethic is what I most admired, along with the wonderful absurdity of their realized projects. We worked on every one from 1971 until the Central Park *Gates*. Before he wrote the biography of the Christos, Burt and I spent three weeks in Bulgaria, where Christo was born and lived until 1968 when he fled that country for France. It was one of the most interesting trips of our lives. Burt died before *The Gates* was realized. Martin West and I took open "rickshaws" around *The Gates*, and he [Martin] filmed them. All our lives were enriched by the years with the Christos.

My novella, *The Empathiad*, has your *Lady in the Lake* on the cover; seeing it changed the direction of the book after I discovered it online. Do you consciously aim to be inspirational and mysteriously obscure to your viewers and other artists?

CONTINUED TO P. 4



Photo Courtesy of ANN CHERNOW

View of the studio space of Ann Chernow.

CONTINUED FROM P. 3

Lady in the Lake embodies the *raison d'être* for my work: it's a reinterpretation from a film noir [film]. It's a subject that's universal, open to the viewer's interpretation; what the *femme fatale* is doing is open to the imagination, it's dramatic, it could be a placid moment or dangerous, but it's accessible. To quote from Alice Munro, "You just have to have the will to disturb."

How would you describe the magic of Westport as a haven for artists?

Westport, Connecticut has, since the early 1900s, been known nationally as a haven for visual artists, writers, theatre people, musicians, art collectors, entrepreneurs, and teachers. One of the first artists to arrive here in the early 1900s was Arthur Dove, whose work here changed the face of American art. It happened like the Pied Piper: artists would move here, for the summer or for the year, their artist friends would visit and then follow. Martin West, my life-partner and documentarian, addressed this in his 2000 film *A Gathering of Glory*, which covers all the arts. In 2009 he created another film, *[Years in the Making]* about fifty Westport artists over the age of 70 who were still actively working in their studios and having national exhibitions. It won seven awards in national film competitions, had a red carpet opening at the local cinema in 2010, and was shown on national television. Martin was developing a documentary about

my work, called *A Moment in Time*. A filmmaker friend hopes to complete it next year.

Martin West was an extraordinarily kind and generous man. What else can you tell us about him?

Martin began his acting career in New York City in the play, *The Andersonville Trial*. He was 22 when he made *Freckles*, his first movie in Hollywood. [He also appeared in the last film made by the legendary Alfred Hitchcock, *Family Plot*]. Before leaving Hollywood and moving here [Westport] in 1993 to open a filmmaking business, Martin starred in over thirty movies, [spent] nine years as a soap opera star as *General Hospital's* Dr. Brewer, and [appeared] on numerous TV shows including *Perry Mason*, *Gunsmoke*, *Law and Order*, and *Bonanza* among others. He was an extraordinarily wonderful person, smart, funny, empathetic, interesting, kind, and every other positive adjective to describe a special person.

You've had a difficult past year with the loss of Martin and Christo, being confined by the pandemic, and living without power for days after a recent hurricane. What lies ahead of you as an artist and with your commitment to the Westport artistic scene?

Yes, this has been a daunting year so far with both human and natural disasters. Work is my salvation. I have just completed ten lithographs for a portfolio titled, *Femmes Fatales*. I'm also illustrating a group of poems written in noir style by a friend about the



Photo Courtesy of ANN CHERNOW

Actor and filmmaker Martin West.

seven deadly sins. I'm co-author of a monthly column: "ART TOWN" in *The Westport News*. I've been made an honorary member of the Westport Collective, a group of about 150 artists from in and around Westport. I continue to work with the Westport Public Art Collections, and the Housatonic Museum and Norwalk Community Art Collections. I write short stories when I'm too tired to make art [and] have had one published, which won an award. Towering above all of this, I have a caring family who has kept me sane through all of the major difficulties of the past year. I have always been a "glass half full" person and hope to continue working for a long number of years. ■

Three Degrees of Separation: Hideyo Noguchi and Me

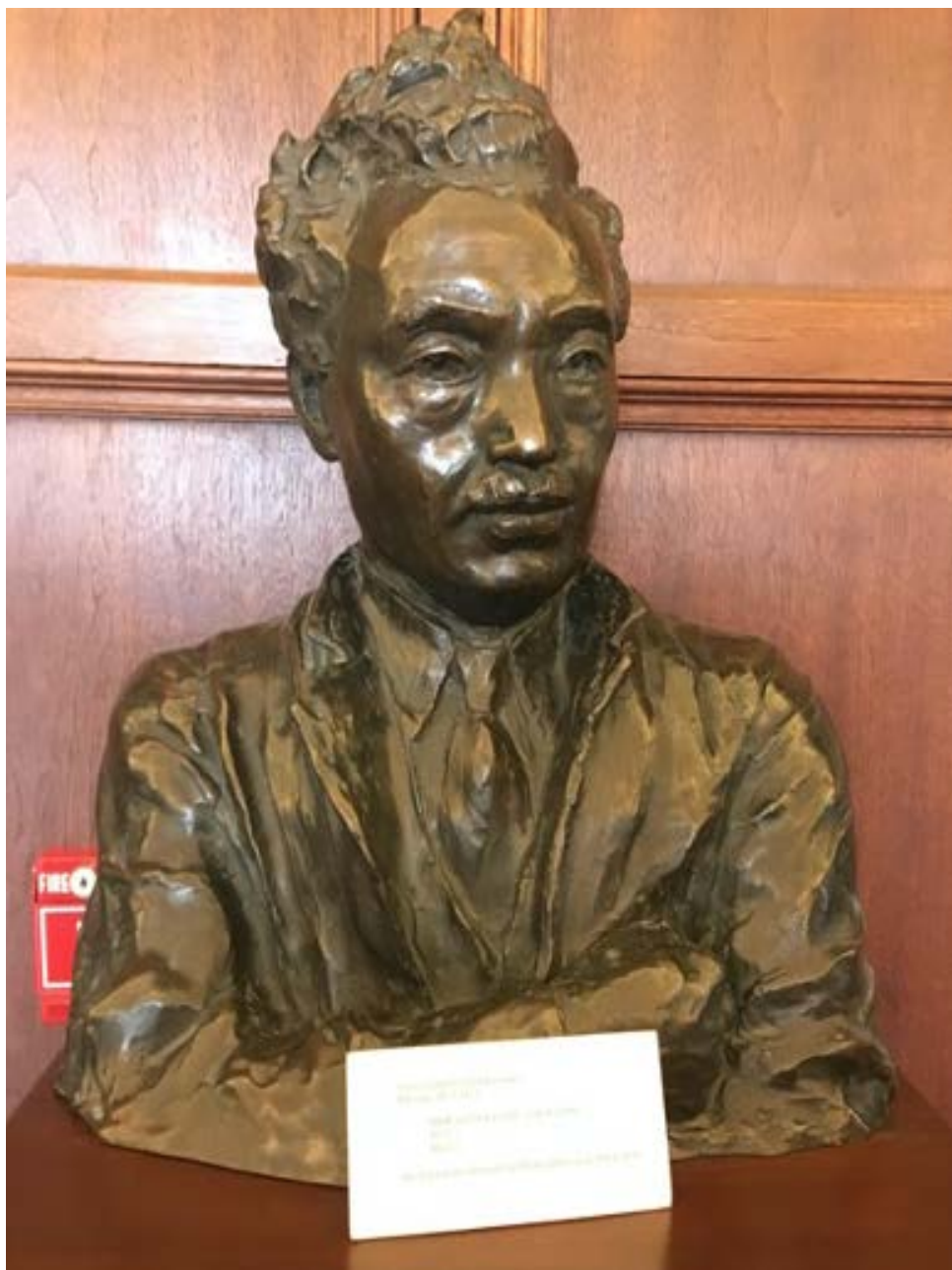
GEORGE CROSS

Who among you could guess what experience my grandfather, great uncle, and the revered Rockefeller scientist Hideyo Noguchi (whose bust decorates our library) have in common, and how might they have met?

Friends and colleagues who are nice enough—or foolish enough—to enquire about my activities in retirement risk being regaled about two undertakings that have preoccupied me in the past few years: political activism and genealogical research. With the coronavirus shutdown and the bleak weather upstate this spring, I no longer had an excuse to evade writing about either. After five years of research, for myself and others, I have a few ancestry stories I'd like to tell. One of them concerns the unlikely connection between my grandfather, my great uncle, and Hideyo Noguchi, the revered Japanese bacteriologist sometimes (mistakenly) credited with discovering the causative agent of syphilis. In December 1900, Noguchi travelled to the United States to join Simon Flexner's lab in Philadelphia and moved with Flexner to The Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research in 1904, where he worked on syphilis and other infectious diseases, including, fatefully, yellow fever.

After our parents died, my cousin Peter and I discovered a few boxes containing family documents we had not previously seen. To our amazement, these boxes contained some of our grandfather's ships' logs, notebooks, letters, and other original documents. Having the time and knowing almost nothing about our ancestors, even those in our grandparents' generation, Peter's wife Sheila and I started our projects. Grandfather William Herbert Cross (1870–1918) was a Master Mariner, certified to captain merchant ships. He, along with his older brother Charles and younger brother Frederick, moved up the ranks to this position in the 1890s. They captained mainly cargo ships, both sail- and steam-powered, circumnavigating the globe and making many crossings of the Pacific Ocean between Japan and the United States. I have notes and photographs showing that my grandfather carried a few famous passengers to Alaskan gold-rush towns, and I have photographs of him taken in Brooklyn, when he was an apprentice seaman.

Today's tale starts with one letter we inherited, which was remarkable for the insight it provided into Herbert's character and his close relationship with Charles. This letter



Sergei Konenkov's 1927 bust of Noguchi, which stands in the Rockefeller library.

to Charles, dated 1909, announced in flowery language his plan to marry. The letter included the following passage, with a riff on the number nine: "...the date fixed for this voyage is Sep 29th, 1909. My intended wife is 29 and I am 39 so you will see we are not seven but 9, not No. 9 Yokohama, no I have given that a miss for a long time."

Which brings us to the answer to my first question, initially provided—unsurprisingly—by Google. No. 9 Yokohama is a brothel; a quite famous one apparently, or perhaps I should say infamous. Some of its [history recorded online](#) includes a photograph showing

"Gorgeously dressed prostitutes...standing in the windows of the Nectarine brothel in Yokohama, a world-famous house of prostitution also known as No. 9 or Jimpuro [sometimes translated as Jinpuro or Shimpuro]." This website went on to describe No. 9 as well as one of its more famous patrons:

Jimpuro was not only popular with foreigners, but with Japanese men as well. In 1900, bacteriologist Hideyo Noguchi (1876–1928), who now

CONTINUED TO P.6

graces Japan's 1,000-yen bill and was nominated for a Nobel Prize three times, blew almost 500 yen (a small fortune at the time) at Jimpuro during a single night of pleasure. Some 300 yen of which he had received from an acquaintance, on condition that he marry her niece. Even worse, part of the money was supposed to have been used for the purchase of a ticket for passage to America. He managed [again] to borrow money from a friend and did make it to the States, where he eventually became a top bacteriologist at the Rockefeller Institute. He never married the niece, though, and left the repayment of the 300 yen to the same friend he borrowed money from for the ticket to the USA.

To publish this story, I thought I'd better do some fact checking. I found the above account to be entirely consistent with the 1929 *Science* obituary written by Rockefeller's first president, Simon Flexner, and with the extensive and authoritative 2003 biography *Dr. Noguchi's Journey: A Life of Medical Search and Discovery* written by Atsushi Kita and translated into English by Peter Durfee. The story of how Noguchi overcame physical disability and an impoverished rural background to find his way to Rockefeller is truly awesome. I recommend Kita's book, which is in the Rockefeller library, to anyone interested in the early twentieth century history of viral and bacterial diseases; it's a very readable and fascinat-

ing history of a Japanese and Rockefeller icon.

The biography tells us that, when he had cash in his pocket (he borrowed frequently from friends and mentors), Noguchi drank heavily and frequented brothels while training in Tokyo (1). It confirms that he obtained the money to pay for his move to the United States dishonorably, by accepting three hundred yen from a family whose daughter he agreed to marry when he returned to Japan (2), which he never did. Finally, it confirms that, a few days before his departure, he insisted on treating his Yokohama colleagues to a grand banquet at Jimpuro, the famous brothel and "supposedly finest restaurant in Kanagawa Prefecture at the time," which cost him nearly the entire 500 yen in his possession (3). This expense led Noguchi to once again beg one of his mentors for money to buy a ticket to San Francisco. He departed on December 5, 1900 (4). He traveled by train from San Francisco to Philadelphia; imagine doing that today. He was 24 years old. Coincidentally, 500 yen is the entry fee to the [Noguchi Memorial Museum](#) in his birth town.

The biography provided a plausible answer to my second question. I doubt that Noguchi and my ancestors met at the brothel, but they might have met through the job Noguchi held briefly in September 1899 as a quarantine officer in the port of Yokohama (5), where he was apparently the only officer who spoke English. A quarantine officer's duties included meeting incoming ships to check their crews and passengers for communicable diseases. I know for certain that my grandfather was in Yokohama exactly one year earlier, and that he made additional trips there between 1898

and 1904, and perhaps until shortly before his marriage in 1909, but I don't have any ships' logs or other records from 1899 onwards. Shortly after his marriage, my grandfather retired from his seafaring life, considering it too dangerous given his family responsibilities (his first son, Peter's father, was born nine months after his wedding). Ironically, life on shore proved more dangerous than at sea, as he and another of his brothers died in the second wave of the 1918 flu pandemic.

On April 10, 1912, Noguchi married Mary Dardis, whom he had met while in Philadelphia. Late in 1917, they decided to build a small cabin in the Catskills town of Shandaken, about ten miles west of where I now live, by a stream that I have to assume was the Esopus Creek. The biography has a photograph of this cabin, with its mountainous backdrop, but I could not identify its exact location today. Noguchi died from Yellow Fever in Accra, in the country known today as Ghana, on May 21, 1928. I was able to find his name on the passenger list of the ship that conveyed him from Liverpool, on the 2nd of November 1927, to Accra.

That's my story, the first of several I'm hoping to tell. ■

Footnotes:

1. Kita, Atsushi, *Dr. Noguchi's Journey: A Life of Medical Search and Discovery*, (2003) pp. 82, 89-90.
2. *ibid.* pp. 122 and 125
3. *ibid.* p. 126
4. *ibid.* p. 128
5. *ibid.* p. 109

Pets of Tri-I

POOJA VISWANATHAN

For this issue, I interview **Edith** and **Lio**, the cats who live with our very own **Audrey Goldfarb** (Graduate Student, The Rockefeller University).

Pooja Viswanathan: How old are you? In human years?

Edith: We turned 2 in August! We're twins.

Lio: I'm technically thirty seconds older though.

PV: Is there a story behind your names?

E: There's a story behind our middle names!

L: Mine is "Finch" after the family in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Edith needed a bird middle



Lio (left) and Edith (right)

name too, so we picked “Pigeon.”

PV: Are you related? If not, what did you think of each other when you first met?

E: Yes, we’re sibs! We love each other sooooo much :))))))

L: When I first met Edith, I thought she was pretty weird, but her personality has grown on me over the last couple years.

PV: What is your first memory?

E: Breakfast! Speaking of which, I think it’s about time for lunch.

PV: Where do you live?

E: We live in Faculty House with four humans: Audrey, Joanna, César, and Marley.

PV: What are your favorite neighborhoods in NYC?

E: The kitchen and the bedroom!

PV: What are your favorite foods?

E: Why, do you have some? I’m not picky!

L: I usually snack on important paperwork and beloved plants.

PV: Besides your human roomies, who is your favorite human in the Tri-I community?

L: No comment...we don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.

PV: Do you have a funny story to share with us?

E: One time, Lio misjudged his trajectory to jump up on the table and fell off in the most inelegant way possible. It was hilarious.

L: That was you, and it has definitely happened more than once.

PV: Is there some way we can see more pictures of you on the interwebs?

E: Yes, we’re famous on Instagram! [@edith_lio](#)

L: We have thirty-three followers.

PV: If you could have any human ability, what would it be?

E: I wish I could grow my fur out as long as the humans were growing theirs during quarantine! So much fashionable potential.

PV: How have you helped your human get through these times?

L: By exemplifying stoicism in the face of adversity.

E: Snuggles! ■



Edith (left) and Lio (right)



Lio



Edith

New York Rhymes

KONSTANTINA THEOFANOPOULOU

MOLES

Just like a mole you lie
Beneath the ground's surface

You come out
Within my greater cavities

You taste my mainland it tastes
like olives

Like the moles that lie on my skin

Ky Konstantina

Poetry: Dr. Konstantina Theofanopoulou
(Instagram: [@newyork_rhymes](#))

One line art: Mikaella Theofanopoulou
(Instagram: [@m_theta_art](#))



Natural Expressions

Digital

This month, Bernie Langs of The Rockefeller University Development Office and Angelica Arroyo from Great Performances teamed up with El Indio to compose and record an original song, "Starry Eyes." Arroyo and El Indio wrote the lyrics while Langs wrote and performed the instrumental accompaniment. Vocals were contributed by Langs and El Indio. "Starry Eyes" can be heard on Langs' [Sound-Cloud page](#).

Email Megan E. Kelley at mkelley@rockefeller.edu to submit your art/music/performance/sporting/other event for next month's "Natural Expressions" and follow [@NatSelections](#) on Twitter for more events. Digital and online events/releases are welcome!

Digital

On Running and Resilience

ANNA AMELIANCHIK

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes to the lives of New Yorkers, including limited opportunities for exercise. While gyms, fitness studios, and yoga centers were shuttered, many New Yorkers turned to outdoor running in an attempt to boost their physical and mental health during this major public health crisis. Now that gyms are opening their doors again, novice runners are still sticking to their pandemic fitness routines—and with good reason!

[A recent study](#) published in *The Journal of Neuroscience* showed that voluntary physical activity in mice increases the brain's resilience to psychological stress, which is a major risk factor for several mood disorders, including anxiety and depression. In fact, just three weeks of unrestricted access to a running wheel caused mice to display less anxiety-like behaviors in response to a light foot shock. This change was due to an increase in the levels of the protein called galanin. Galanin is produced in large quantities in the brain and spinal cord; its functional role

in the central nervous system is widely debated, but [several studies](#) suggest that galanin might be important for coping with stress. To confirm that an exercise-related increase in galanin in the brain boosts stress resilience in mice, researchers used genetic tools to artificially increase galanin levels in the brains of sedentary mice. As a result, sedentary mice became just as resilient to stress as mice that had access to a running wheel but did not undergo any genetic manipulations. Would routine aerobic exercise confer a similar resistance to stress in humans? Considering how conserved the brain circuits that regulate stress responses are across species and how important they are for species survival, we would expect similar results in humans, though this has not been directly addressed. In addition, exactly how much aerobic exercise is necessary to give you nerves of steel remains unclear.

In the rodent experiment, mice ran up to 10-16 kilometers (6-9 miles) per day, which might not be feasible for us bipeds

with full-time jobs. Moreover, high-volume and high-intensity running (such as often practiced by competitive runners) increases the risk of developing [hip and/or knee osteoarthritis](#), a common condition that causes the protective tissue at the ends of bones known as cartilage to wear down. Conversely, recreational running protects your cartilage from wear and tear, especially when you compare recreational runners to people with a sedentary lifestyle. Taken together, these studies hint that there is a sweet spot when it comes to how much running you need to engage in to achieve maximal benefits for your physical and mental health. Although weekly running distance may vary depending on fitness level and exercise goals, [studies](#) suggest that clocking in as little as fifty minutes per week improves overall health and longevity and reduces mortality, especially when it comes to death from cardiovascular diseases and cancer. So, lace up, mask up, and get moving—your mind and your body could use a little more resilience. ■