

The obsessive guide to family fun in New York City

Playdates



PHOTOGRAPH BY CANDACE REBELE CASTELLO

At this Long Island City studio, kids can watch artisans carve ice sculptures—and even wield a chisel themselves. **See Art & Museums.**

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Art & Museums



At Okamoto Studio, children practice their penmanship on ice.

Clay is for amateurs—in Long Island City, kids are sculpting with ice.

By **Leanne French**

When Shintaro Okamoto was growing up in Anchorage, Alaska, he often drove with his father, Takeo, to a desolate frozen lake a half hour outside the city. There, surrounded by distant evergreens, Dad would cut out a large block of ice and, in minus-20-degree weather, painstakingly transform it into art. "I remember complaining about the cold until my father pulled the ice out," says Okamoto. "And then I forgot the cold because I was in awe. That's what I think happens here at the studio—the kids forget the cold when they see the ice."

Indeed, Okamoto's daughters—Nadya, 9, Ameya, 7, and Issa, 4—spend their free time hunched over ice chunks, employing small chisels to form basic shapes at the family's Long Island City atelier, Okamoto Studio. The workshop

supplements its primary business—churning out tons of sculptures for corporate clients (Google, Tiffany & Co. and Sony, to name a few)—by hosting kids' parties and free teaching visits for small groups of children.

Led by in-house artists, many of whom double as middle-school art instructors, young ones huddle inside a ground-level garage where the urban substitute for an Alaskan lake—an ice-making machine—inspires discussion about the science of solidifying H₂O. After the lesson, the group examines the fruit of the machine's labor: 300-pound ice blocks, which are stored in a walk-in freezer set between minus-10 and minus-30 degrees.

Next, kids observe the sculptors carving away in the adjacent (nonrefrigerated) production studio. Designs and three-dimensional conceptual drawings of the works cover the walls, aiding the artists as they craft carousel creatures, life-size hockey goals and ornate luge

tunnels that will channel liquor or juice into waiting glasses. Just as fascinating is the room's stash of chain saws (an ice sculptor's tool of choice, since it provides the greatest flexibility and least amount of resistance), chisels, drills and invented gadgets, like a plastic cup studded with screws for creating smooth spheres. In a Q&A session, the artists emphasize safety; the take-away message: Kids should not try this at home.

Unless, of course, their parents ask Okamoto to stage a party, at which children ages seven and up can carve their names in a wall of ice or decorate ice mugs using a small, safe chisel. "The big finale is that you drink from your mug," says Okamoto, "and then you break it. It's a good lesson in letting go."

Okamoto Studio, 10-02 34th Ave at 10th St, Long Island City, Queens (212-842-0630, okamotostudionyc.com). Call to schedule a tour.

Face value

Yaron Leshem left the Israeli Foreign Ministry to study photography just eight years ago and moved to NYC in 2004, but he's already built a stellar résumé: The Jewish Museum recently showed his work and MoMA owns his photo of a makeshift Arab village used for the Israeli army's war exercises. So we were intrigued to learn that Leshem—dad to Eden, 6, and Maya, 2—has opened Leshem Loft, a Flatiron District family portrait studio and boutique. We chatted with him about the space, his career and his approach to snapping kids.

How did you get from photojournalism to Leshem Loft?

For me, it wasn't really much of a transition. The camera has always fascinated me. When I moved here, I photographed people just because there were a lot of them in New York.

Have you found shooting New Yorkers challenging?

Americans in general are sensitive to photography. It's almost a religion here; people are very aware of how they should look. You pick up the camera and bang: The smile, it's there. It makes a photographer's work much harder.

How do you avoid that canned look with city kids?

With children it's easier, because their mechanisms of protecting themselves are not as sophisticated as adults'. You just have to be their friend. If they trust you, that's it.

What makes a portrait art?

It goes beyond the print, and transmits something in photographic language. You're looking at a piece of paper with pigments on it, but it makes you feel like you're engaging in conversation with a person.

—Laura Palotie

● For a peek inside Leshem Loft, go to timeoutkids.com.