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Brooklyn Couple Offers Artists a Country Refuge—For Free

by Leslie Brody
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Artist Robert Nava worked in the barn at The Macedonia Institute this month.
Photo: Richard Beaven for The Wall Street Journal

When a young Brooklyn couple fell in love with a country house and bought it last May, they couldn't bear to have it sit idle while they worked in New York City during the week.

So they invited artists to live and work in their white farmhouse in Chatham, N.Y., for a month at a time for free. Now painters, sculptors and performers come to mix colors, hammer and rehearse. When the owners drive up on weekends, they share spaghetti dinners, wine and board games.

Call it a salon with a pond. About 130 miles north of the city, "The Macedonia Institute" is named for the road it sits on and its initials, TMI, slang for "too much information." Artists get TMI baseball caps upon arrival, complete with a logo of a flying pig, inspired by a porcine weather vane perched on the red barn used as a studio.

Things don't always go according to plan.

A 30-year-old from the Bronx, Yves Scherer, brought a chain saw. One of the owners, Aidan Thomas, told him if he got bored he could take down the dead tree out back. The

sculptor chopped the wrong one, cutting a live apple tree in half, and used the wood in some of his pieces.

The owners laughed off the mishap. "I don't want to be worried about my things," Mr. Thomas said. "I want to be worried about connections and people."

The sculptor says he plans to make it up to them. Since the institute encourages artists to leave something behind for others to remember them by, Mr. Scherer is designing a bronze apple to hang from a branch of what remains of the tree. It "will be carrying 'fruit' in the winter, which will be beautiful," he said. "Like the eternal object of desire in the garden of Adam and Eve."

Mr. Thomas bought the 4.5-acre hillside property with his fiancée, Devora Kaye. (He proposed in the farmhouse kitchen by writing, "Will you marry me?" on the chalkboard.) She is communications director at the city's Department of Education. He is a dean of curriculum at a charter school, Leadership Prep Bedford Stuyvesant, and training to be a principal there.

ROBERT NAVA



The barn at The Macedonia Institute where artists are invited to work on their projects. Photo: Richard Beaven for The Wall Street Journal

Opening up their second home to artists is a fun way to foster creativity, the couple said. "The sharing economy is one of the better acts of the world right now," Mr. Thomas said.

"It seemed such a shame to have a house we could only come to six or eight days max a month," Ms. Kaye added.

They would like it to be used more often.

In millennial fashion, the pair of 31-year-olds invite artists they like on Instagram to participate. They meet candidates to make sure they click before scheduling a "residency." So far, eight artists have stayed at the institute, usually one at a time, and more than a dozen are on the calendar.

For some, the near silence of the countryside is a welcome change. "It's cool to hear your own thoughts," said Robert Nava, a 32-year-old from East Williamsburg. During two weeks this month he filled the farmhouse basement with bold paintings of monsters, vehicles and cryptocurrency. He even spray-painted piles of snow outside.

One challenge was getting groceries because he doesn't have a car and couldn't find an Uber driver in the area. "I befriended the only taxi in town," he said.

Lex Brown, a 28-year-old sculptor and performance artist from the Bronx who finished a Master of Fine Arts degree at Yale last spring, toured the studio on Sunday before settling in for a month's stay. "I'm so excited to have all this space and time," she said. "Navigating the city takes so much creative energy."



Artist Robert Nava recently worked in the barn at The Macedonia Institute. Photo: Richard Beaven for The Wall Street Journal