A couple of New York City collectors have found their calling: cultivating a plot of land in the Hudson Valley. Alix Browne visits their green acres.

Photographs by Jason Schmidt

Above: The property's main house, designed by the architect Brad Cloepfil. Opposite: The house, activated by the artist Doug Aitken's multifaceted projection Lighthouse, 2012.
In a corner of New York’s verdant Hudson Valley, some unusual things have been cropping up of late. A pile of monolithic concrete- and-limestone orbs. A collapsed spiral staircase taller than a tree. A scattering of large colorful metal objects, like the discarded toys of a bored 40-foot toddler. Such strange bounty—sculptures by the artists Sol LeWitt, Monika Sosnowska, and Franz West, respectively—says less, perhaps, about the quality of the land (which is magnificent, with rolling hills, dense woods, a bubbling creek, and epic views of the Catskills) than it does about the couple who have enthusiastically and tirelessly cultivated it for the past decade. The husband and wife, Manhattanites who prefer to remain anonymous, have long collected contemporary art and individually sit on the boards of several cultural institutions. But before they bought this almost-400-acre parcel, which was formerly the working farm of the James Cagney farm (they cringe at the word “estate”) was the landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh, whose firm is currently working on Brooklyn Bridge Park. “I have the Sol LeWitt seal of approval, and that helped a lot,” he says. And you know she means it sincerely.

Having seemingly limitless space hasn’t made their art undertakings any easier—it has merely raised the bar. “Do something you have never done before” is the mandate of almost every commission the couple makes. Not because they place a premium on exclusivity but because for them the thrill of collecting is about rolling up their sleeves and getting their hands dirty in the creative process. “It was very important to us to find an architect and artists we can have dialogues with,” the wife says. “We don’t do plop art.”

One of the first people the couple spoke to about their plans for an art farm (they cringe at the word “estate”) was the landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh, whose firm is currently working on Brooklyn Bridge Park. “I have the Sol LeWitt seal of approval, and that helped a lot,” he says. Much of what Van Valkenburgh did is invisible to the eye. “The maintenance looks effortless, but it’s not,” he says, adding that “the mowed topography is the equivalent of white walls in a museum or gallery.” Though the job remains a work in progress (he’s going into his 12th year), Van Valkenburgh has come to embrace the couple’s constant involvement and their keen ability to extract the best from every collaboration. “I don’t think I’ve done a single piece that is more of a signature than that road,” Van Valkenburgh says, referring to a nearly mile-long entry road that is as important to the experience of the place as any of the art.

For the main house, as well as a guest house and an art barn, the couple enlisted the Portland, Oregon, architect Brad Cloepfil, who would go on to gain notoriety for his redesign of Edward Durell Stone’s iconic Lollipop Building at 2 Columbus Circle in Manhattan. Cloepfil describes working on the Hudson Valley project as an adventure. “I mean, these are people who have an eyeball in their fireplace,” he says, referring to the Tony Oursler sculpture in the living room of the couple’s city apartment. “How many clients can you say that about?” At first, the husband resisted the idea of a house, claiming that all he wanted was a place to put sculpture, a barbecue to cook on, and a tent to sleep in—and no doubt there were moments when a tent seemed like an attractive solution. “This was the first time in my career that I’ve ever started over—and I started over twice,” admits Cloepfil, who finally arrived at a mind-bogglingly elegant orthogonal helix (or 3-D figure eight) with two opposing 40-foot cantilevers. “They really challenged us.”

There is one part of the process that has always gone smoothly: The couple are incredibly in sync regarding the artists they like. “We have been known to walk into an exhibition with 50 paintings in it and choose the same one,” the wife says. “It’s almost creepy.” The Danish artist Jeppe Hein has two pieces on the property: Modified Social Bench C, 2006, a confounding circular seating arrangement with no point of entry, and Site Rotating Pavilion, 2008, a mirrored labyrinth he describes as the most comprehensive work of his career thus far. “It was a very complex production,” Hein says of the latter. “They had to build a huge foundation, excavate tons of earth, and a new road was needed for the big trucks. But when the piece was installed, everything disappeared; nature and forest looked untouched.” So much so that a flock of turkeys, thinking their turf had been invaded, attacked their reflections. “Someone had the great idea to spread fox urine around the installation, and the problem was solved,” Hein says. “No joke.”

Sabine Hornig’s cast-concrete floating staircase took two years to realize. “I cannot think of any other private collectors who are as understanding of the development process as they are,” the German artist says of her patrons. “Their motivation in art is of true knowledge and curiosity.”

Still, there are limits. The artist Mel Bochner originally had his sights set on the pool—an idea that was vetoed when it became clear that his proposal entailed moving it away from the house. The piece he ultimately created, To Count: Intransitive, 1972–2009, for the main house’s central atrium, consists of 10 15-foot glass panels that were fabricated in Germany and then kiln-fired in Austria, before being shipped to upstate New York, where they were installed with a crane. If any one panel had cracked or chipped, all 10 would have had to be redone. “It was a nail-biter,” Bochner says.

The German painter Franz Ackermann claimed the family room for his mural Inhabitat Hills, 2011. Doug Aitken took over the facade with Light-house, 2012, a multifaceted projection piece that he filmed on the property during several seasons. “Some artists don’t know how to work without walls,” the wife observes, hinting at the different forms of support she and her husband have provided over the years, from simply facilitating installations to sourcing materials and fabricators. “Right now, one artist is trying to figure out if she can cast bronze on-site.”

No less energy is invested in the installations that go up in the art barn, which they open twice a year by invitation to small groups from museums and art schools. The latest, “Urban Archaeology,” includes Martin Kersels’s Dionysian Stage, 2004–2005, an enormous spinning bird’s nest entangled with household items like chairs, a crib, and a grandfather clock. “When I bought it, I thought the whole thing went in a crate and that was the end,” says the wife about the piece. In fact, it required a team of tractor trailers just to get it there, and two basket weavers from Denmark spent a solid week assembling it. The couple’s spring show, “Thinking Through the Lens,” will center on one of their latest acquisitions, Christian Marclay’s wildly popular 2010 24-hour video The Clock. Both the artist and the technically exacting piece are reputed to be complicated to work with. “I can’t wait for that one,” the wife says. And you know she means it sincerely. •
This page, clockwise: From top left: In the living room of the main house, Rachel Harrison’s sculpture “Signature Roll,” 2010; in the art barn, Sarah Braman’s sculpture “Breakfast,” 2011; and, scaling the wall, Elmgreen & Dragset’s “Social Mobility, Fig 3 (The Collections),” 2008; (below) Mel Bochner’s “To Count: Intransitive, 1972–2009; Franz Ackermann’s “Inhabitat Hills,” 2011. Opposite: The exterior of the art barn.
This page, clockwise from right: Franz West’s Mercury, 2004; Retro, 2004, and Yellow Sculpture, 2005; Sabine Hornig’s Entrance With Floating Stairs, 2008; Jose Dávila’s Container #2, 2008; Sol LeWitt’s Dome Structure, 2006; Roxy Paine’s Fallen Tree, 2006; Monika Sosnowska’s Steel Fir Tree, 2011. Opposite: Jeppe Hein’s Site Rotating Pavilion, 2008.

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