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# Fieldwork

In upstate New York, undulating meadows and former farmland now yield bountiful harvests of monumental sculptures. The crops of works change with the seasons.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Alon Koppel, Molly Stinchfield, and Bryan Zimmerman WRITTEN BY David Masello

Blue metal clouds hover thirty feet over the undulating terrain of Art Omi in Columbia County, New York, and they prove more compelling to visitors than the white diaphanous versions drifting by thousands of feet overhead. Elsewhere, on the 120-acre property, grain bins that once held corn now hold swaths of sky and air. Visitors trek to the top of a steep hill to spin a Modern house that rests on a concrete column. A glossy yellow beam hyphenates across a field like a punctuation mark in nature before it angles sharply upward. And a Dutch canal house stands tall in grasses—until the visitor realizes that its wavy façade replicates the effects of a reflection in water.

To visit Art Omi is to find sculpture and architectural elements both serious and humorous, but which always encourage direct interaction—to climb over, look into and through, listen to as their parts respond to breezes. “For the thirty years that Omi has existed,” explains Co-Executive Director Ruth Adams, who shares the title with Gavin Berger, “we’ve wanted people to take a physical journey through the park, out in nature, and design their own experiences of the art and the place. There’s no clear path to take.” As Berger adds, “The magic that began here is still here. Omi has grown organically over all this time and is still growing.”

Ever since the visionary real estate developer Francis Greenburger purchased the land and began to install monumental sculptural works on it, while also

Opening page: While Art Omi in Columbia County, New York, functions as an outdoor sculpture and architecture park, it also has on-site gallery space, which now houses a landmark exhibition of quilts, garments, drums, prints, and a video by Jeffrey Gibson; his large-scale (90" x 103 1/2") quilt, *She Knows Other Worlds*, is on display in the Newmark Gallery. Above: Art Omi Co-Executive Directors Ruth Adams and Gavin Berger oversee works that include (top left) *Clouds* by Olaf Breuning and (top) *Sensory Journey* by Wendy Evans Joseph.



Above: *Magnetic Z* by Cameron Wu features a spiral staircase and landing from which visitors can see out onto the Art Omi fields. Below: Native American artist Jeffrey Gibson, whose works are on view through January 2, 2022, at work in his studio.



establishing an unprecedented onsite residency program for artists of multiple disciplines, Art Omi (named for the mostly nonexistent village that once stood nearby) has evolved as an internationally recognized cultural institution. Columbia County, a vast bucolic expanse two and a half hours north of New York City, has morphed into a popular second-home destination for city dwellers, while remaining the year-round home of permanent residents, some of whose ancestors began to settle the region as early as the eighteenth century. “For New Yorkers who have come up here, the big activity for many years was to fix up their homes and hold dinner parties,” says Berger, who admits to having been one of those very people, but who now works full time at Omi and lives in a historic house nearby. “This area is now where people come to have an art fix.”

When Omi opened The Charles B. Benenson Center and Gallery in 2008, a handsome stone-and-glass edifice (with LEED certification) that assumes the presence of Modern sculpture on the landscape, Adams recalls watching one of the first cars to pull up that day. “It was a gleaming, white stretch limousine. The back door opened and a woman wearing all white and dark sunglasses got out. It was Yoko Ono. She looked around and then drove off. Word had obviously gotten around that Omi was a place for art and a place to visit.”

The sheer scale of Omi (with plans to expand) allows the artworks and architectural elements to be sufficiently spaced on the land, with each occupying a generous plinth of grass and dirt, hillside and fresh air. And yet, says Adams, “We may have a lot of land, but it’s shocking how fast you can fill it with big sculptures.” Some sixty artworks on loan (only a couple dozen feature in the permanent collection) are carefully placed along wooded trails, beside natural streams and ponds, or out in the open in full sun.

And there is room, too, for artists in residence, who are housed in a charming nineteenth-century house. A series of nearby barn studios enables artists to work simultaneously. “In July, every residency culminates in a public sharing,” says Berger, to which the public is invited to see the work of the resident artists. “We have five disciplines—art, music, dance, writing, architecture—and I can honestly say that those are everything I love. So, every day I come to work here, I’m giddy with delight.”

Because there is a constantly rotating assemblage of artworks on the property, every visit provides a new experience. But even if visitors see the same sculptures on multiple visits, other elements come into play to alter the art—weather conditions, sunlight, clouds, shadows, the very moods of the season. The art takes on new identities with each viewing.

“There’s not a gate or fence here,” Adams emphasizes. “We say we’re open from dawn to dusk, but sometimes local teenagers gather and make, shall I say, some mischief around the sculptures. But it’s okay. It means they’re with art.” ■



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