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## Cars as Canvas; Walls as Artwork

### Marshall Heyman on the Hamptons and the Art Scene

By MARSHALL HEYMAN | July 31, 2013



*Gordon M. Grant for The Wall Street Journal*

Artists Justin Lowe and Jonah Freeman, who have been given residence for the summer in the former home and studio of Elaine de Kooning in East Hampton by Chris Byrne who now owns the home, seen at left.

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y.—Everywhere you go in the Hamptons this summer, there are signs for art fairs. As impossible as it sounds, there might be more signs for art fairs than there are Range Rovers on the road.

Last weekend, there was an art fair in Southampton. Before that, there was one in the middle of Nova's Ark in Water Mill. The reason? Lots of potential buyers with plenty of disposable income and space on the walls in their McMansions. The relationship between the Hamptons and the art scene can be perplexing and confounding sometimes, but also just plain fascinating.



*Gordon M. Grant for The Wall Street Journal*  
Chris Byrne

Take, for instance, a few events that Samsung hosted at Gallery Valentine on Newtown Lane here over the weekend. This space sells work by such artists as Alex Katz, David Hockney and John Chamberlain. But at both a cocktail party on Friday hosted by Tommy Mottola and a dinner on Sunday hosted by the artist Stephanie Hirsch, who often works in the medium of surfboards, Samsung displayed its 85-inch UHD TV smack in the middle of the place. At \$40,000, the retail price is certainly equivalent to some contemporary artwork.

A block or so away, at the Eric Firestone Gallery, the artist Kenny Scharf celebrated the opening of his new, colorful "Amerikulture" exhibit with lots of doughnuts, some iced just like his own doughnut paintings. A barbecue followed in Mr. Firestone's nearby backyard.

"When people are looking at art and they're eating a doughnut, it just looks good," said Mr. Scharf. "I like doughnuts. They represent a lot of things, including the universe and mass consumer media. It's the ultimate thing they're selling you that's bad for you."



*Gordon M. Grant for The Wall Street Journal*  
An overview of the studio.



*Antoine Bootz*  
Cole Sternberg, Moises Esquenazi and Bryan Graybill at the Arted House.

Earlier in the day, Mr. Scharf had spray-painted cartoon-like animals on cars at Mr. Firestone's house, including the gallerist's vintage Mercedes. "A Mercedes is a nice car," said Mr. Scharf, after putting the finishing touches on a nondescript SUV. "I prefer to do a boring car."



*Gordon M. Grant for The Wall Street Journal*

Exterior of the former home and studio of artist Elaine de Kooning in East Hampton.

Mr. Scharf starting painting the cars while working on a mural in Mobile, Ala. People would stop and ask if he would do their cars. He's since done a dozen. "I don't charge," he said. "I consider it a public service."

Over in Wainscott this summer, the real-estate developer Bryan Graybill and the interior designer Moises Esquenazi have taken the canvas even larger. They've turned a small house they're renovating in the exclusive enclave known as "south of the highway" (with the goal of eventually selling it) into an art installation for the Los Angeles artist Cole Sternberg. The artist has been living in the space, too, which Messrs. Graybill and Esquenazi have called Arted House.

Mr. Sternberg's exhibit includes a video homage to the collagist and correspondence artist Ray Johnson, who killed himself in nearby Sag Harbor in 1995, as well as neon, found objects and several paintings of which Messrs. Graybill and Esquenazi will take a percentage of the sale.



*Billy Farrell*

Artist Kenny Scharf with his wife, Malia.

"We can't compete with the bigger real-estate developers out here, but we hate McMansions," said Mr. Graybill, who described Arted House as a laboratory. "The idea wasn't really to showcase the house, but we wanted to experiment with how you can create value for a property."

Meanwhile, in the northwest woods of East Hampton, Chris Byrne, the curator and co-founder of the Dallas Art Fair, as well as the author of a 12-part graphic novel series called "The Magician," has transformed a house he purchased into the home base for a loose artist-in-residence program.



*Billy Farrell* Eric and Parker Firestone with the Mercedes Mr. Scharf spray-painted.

The house (and studio) on Alewife Brook Road has an important artistic history: It previously belonged to Elaine de Kooning and, after her, John Chamberlain. Since Mr. Byrne purchased it, José Lerma, Joe Bradley and Liz Markus have all set up shop there. For much of this summer, Justin Lowe and Jonah Freeman are the lucky lendees of the saltbox home.



*Justin Lowe and Jonah Freeman* A work titled "#4 (the liquor store)" by Messrs. Lowe and Freeman.

After buying the house in 2010, Mr. Byrne ran into a friend who was getting ready for his first museum show.

"I said, 'Why don't you go out there and use the studio?'" Mr. Byrne recalled. "It evolved in that way. The artists are really my guests. There's no set time for them to stay. It's not really a regimented residency."

Eventually, Mr. Byrne might create a more formal program. "For me, it is about the history of art in the Hamptons. You're just pulled into it."

On a recent gorgeous morning, Mr. Freeman was in the studio.

"Well, for one thing, the light is amazing," he said. "I can already feel the different choices I'm making because of it."

In the last few weeks, he and Mr. Lowe have been working on various canvases as well as a short film. "It's very tranquil, and we can spread out," said Mr. Freeman. "I don't have to be as focused as I am in the city. We can just push paint around and be more

experimental. It's nice to have a clean slate and try new things, to not have a specific deadline for results. To play and just see where things go."

And eventually sell enough artwork to buy a really fancy Samsung television.

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