

## The Place Beyond the Fire Island Pines

By PHILIP GEFTER OCT. 23, 2017



The illustrator Aleix Pons imagines upstate New York in the mid-19th century as a gay paradise. Credit Aleix Pons

COLUMBIA COUNTY, N.Y., a two-hour drive north from Manhattan, is a bucolic vision of rural America — lush rolling farmland, cow-dotted hillsides, stalwart red barns. The Hudson River School artists of the mid-19th century captured the visual splendor of the region, including the English-born painter Thomas Cole, who first encountered upstate New York in 1825 and once remarked that “the Hudson for natural magnificence is

unsurpassed.” Though primarily agricultural, the area has long attracted gentlemen farmers: Over the years, various Livingstons, Rockefellers and Roosevelts have made homes here.

In modern times, however, the county has also been distinguished by its outsize share of gay artists and writers, refugees from the city. Gore Vidal was a pioneer, purchasing Edgewater, his nearby mansion on the Hudson River, in 1950. It was here that he threw his legendary parties, with guests ranging from Saul Bellow to Shirley MacLaine. (Vidal called the Hudson River — which connects the region to New York City — “a splendidly convenient boulevard.”) In the decades after Vidal left to begin life as an expatriate, he would be replaced by successive generations of gay artists: Ellsworth Kelly moved here in 1970; the director-producer team James Ivory and Ismail Merchant in 1975; the poet John Ashbery in 1978.



One of Tom Bianchi’s classic Fire Island Pines Polaroids, which he shot on the island between 1975 and 1983. Credit Copyright Tom Bianchi, courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art

The more recent gay artists and thinkers are hidden in plain sight: There’s the photographer Lyle Ashton Harris and the writer Wayne Koestenbaum, and a few years ago the New York contemporary art dealer Jack Shainman opened the [School](#), a museum-quality exhibition hall in a renovated 1929 high school in the town of Kinderhook. (Nick Cave and El Anatsui have had solo shows here.) The creative director Simon Lince lives with

his husband, Cary Leibowitz, the artist known as Candyass, in a 1795 farmhouse in Ghent, flamboyantly redesigned by architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, with a sign hung over the back balcony that reads “Linceowitz.” Franklin Tartaglione, a painter, bought an old concrete-block sheepshearing mill in 1986, and, over the last 30 years, he and his husband, the writer Dave King, have transformed it into a thoroughly original residence — part Brutalist structure, part Edith Wharton mansion, part homestead.

In addition to creative renovations, more and more contemporary houses by formidable architects like Michael Bell, Steven Harris and Joel Sanders are popping up. My husband and I bought land here in 2002 and hired Bell, whose minimalist work we had seen in a 1999 exhibit at MoMA called “The Un-Private House.” In the years since, we have watched the region become — both slowly and all at once — a gay utopia, a place where art is made and taste is manifest and our sexual proclivities are taken for granted.

Columbia County, like all gay utopias, has its own aesthetic — one foot in the avant-garde, another in the historical. It is a place that regards creativity as native to our being at least as much as our sexuality.



Simon Lince (right) and the artist Cary Leibowitz, better known as Candyass, outside their farmhouse. Credit Christian Patterson

THE IDEA OF A GAY UTOPIA, an invented queer homeland, is not a new one. There are and have been gay communities in almost every major American city for decades. And there are de facto gay resort towns across the country, such as Palm Springs and Provincetown, which are defined by their distinctive natural beauty: The latter, at the farthest tip of the Cape Cod peninsula, has the feel of a sleepy New England fishing village gone disco; the former is a lavish desert enclave sprawled along the base of several spectacular mountain ranges. While Provincetown is residually bohemian and Palm Springs outwardly conventional, both offer the same promise of protection, a camaraderie of shared otherness. They are a safety zone for their residents, who invented these communities, in part, to partition themselves from the judgments of mainstream America.

The precursor for the modern gay American utopia was 1920s and '30s Nollendorfplatz, the Berlin neighborhood that the writer Christopher Isherwood discovered when he moved to the city in 1929, and which he eventually immortalized in "[The Berlin Stories](#)," collected in 1945. Here were eccentric figures in drag, torch singers like Marlene Dietrich and legendary venues — “dens of pseudo-vice,” Isherwood called them — like the Eldorado, known for its sexually fluid parties. Nollendorfplatz, like every gay utopia that followed, was borne from necessities both sexual and political. The neighborhood was a shelter from persecution and censure, and beyond the parties and openness and extraordinary characters, it was an environment in which gays were finally able to recognize themselves and experience basic human dignity — in society, if not from the law.



A contemporary Columbia County house designed by Joel Sanders overlooking the Hudson River. Credit©Peter Aaron/OTTO

For years, I considered my personal Nollendorfplatz the Fire Island Pines, a Dionysian Mount Olympus off the southern shore of Long Island where unparalleled sexual freedom was enjoyed with celebratory abandon. A decade before I started going there in the '70s, before the word “gay” had even entered my lexicon, I was an alienated teenager lying on my bed in the suburbs of Florida in a state of despair about my future. Where in

the world would I find a place for a homosexual like me — a word I was too ashamed to utter aloud. On Dec. 15, 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed “homosexuality” from its list of psychiatric disorders. It was front-page news across the country. For the emerging gay community, though, it was vindication.

New York certainly offered more for a young gay man in the '70s than Florida, but I didn't truly feel like I belonged to a community until the Pines. This sliver of a sandbar had been the exclusive preserve of closeted gay men since the 1960s, but, thanks to the former model John B. Whyte, who helped develop it as a gay resort, it attracted the likes of Robert Mapplethorpe, Calvin Klein, David Geffen, Edmund White and other members of the so-called “gay mafia” throughout the 1970s. In the years between Stonewall and AIDS, it was colonized by a newly liberated generation fed up with being made to feel like “un-apprehended felons,” as the activist Cleve Jones referred to the cost exacted by the tyranny of the closet, or “deviates,” as homosexuals were referred to in *The New York Times* until the late '60s. Given the tenor of the era, it's no surprise that a sense of solidarity formed around the summer rituals of a newly claimed freedom — cruising openly, dancing triumphantly and idling on wood-slatted decks. Back then, as today, the concentration of pulchritude on any given afternoon inspired a collective libidinous frenzy. The photographer Tom Bianchi captured the physicality of this tension in his well-known series of Polaroid images of poolside frolics and beachfront flirting that, for those who had grown up with prejudice and homophobia — in other words, all of us — became emblematic of the Pines. Those sybaritic thrills were a balm on a deep, historic wound.

THE PINES HAS remained a summer playground for subsequent generations of gay men; some are discovering it for the first time, others rediscovering it and finding new meaning. It's tempting to think of Columbia County as the place where the citizens of the Pines in the 1970s went to retire, but the reality is more complicated. Perhaps the growing visibility of gay culture in post-Stonewall 1970s Manhattan is what drove those first pioneering gay artists to Columbia County. The unprecedented and persistently open sexual presence in the city became a kind of oppression, one from which there was no escape. As a refuge, Columbia County is in some ways the anti-Pines: The indulgences have given way to solitude and creativity, the bright sandy beach to leafy glades and grassy meadows — much like queer culture itself, the place both defies expectations and refuses to conform to the rules of what a haven might be.



The Columbia County home of the writer Dave King (right) and his husband, the painter Franklin Tartaglione. Credit Christian Patterson

Yet the significant gay diaspora in Columbia County didn't really converge until after 9/11, when the impulse to escape, to seek refuge on safer ground, took on an almost literal urgency. After watching the World Trade towers fall from our West Village

apartment, my husband and I visited the area at the urging of several friends, and soon after, built our home there. I like to think of the region as a sprawling artists' colony, where everyone is almost pathologically productive, keeping a safe distance from one another in their secluded studios while still wanting to know what everyone is working on. If the Pines was a season-specific playground, where the swimming pool was the dominant feature (as well as a backdrop for the more essential architecture of the community: the nearly naked, well-toned male body) then here, the dinner party is the primary social currency. This shift from bacchanal to domesticity mirrors the assimilationist trajectory that many gays of my generation have followed, even if we didn't expect to. It may seem like a small thing, but these dinner parties — a table of people engaging in conversation in what feels like a triumph of maturity and mutual respect — is as important to the culture here as the pool was to the Pines.

And yet there is another, more profound reason that Columbia County feels so precious, and this community so close: We are, after all, a group of people who survived. We speak a common language derived from the legacies of several well-won battles for respect and, quite literally, life and death. Age — most of us are in our 50s and 60s — has rearranged our priorities and adjusted our requirements for a peaceful life. When I was younger, my priority was exercising my sexual freedom, but it took settling down in a quieter environment for my utopian dream to become a reality.

Still, I'm amazed at how relevant my teenage fantasies of belonging remain. After a half-century of social and legal battles that have resulted in an almost assimilated gay population in America, our civil rights are now, once again, just as frighteningly fragile as when I first sought refuge in the Pines. Columbia County is my idea of a queer space, one where my sexuality is not only accepted but is also, in many ways, an afterthought. The community here offers the idea of home, and preserving it has become as important as it ever was.

***Correction: October 24, 2017***

*An earlier version of this article misidentified the New York county where Gore Vidal bought a home. It was in Dutchess County, not Columbia County.*