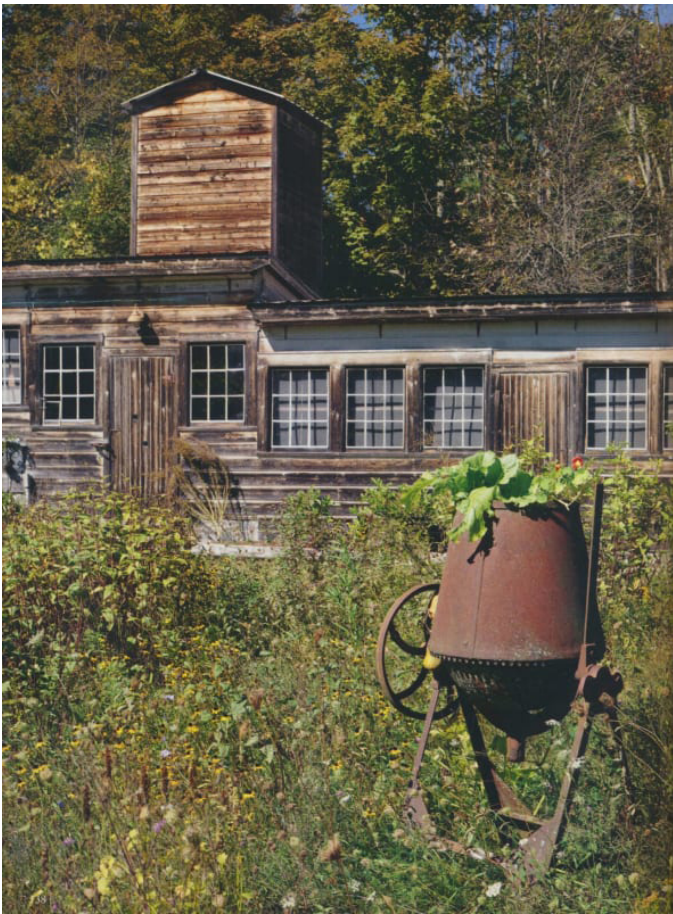


ARTIST'S DIGS – GEORGIE HOPTON

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Georgie Hopton and Gary Hume's farm in Upstate New York.

Photo by Simon Upton

Seeking a second home far from the heady London art scene. Georgie Hopton and her husband, Gary Hume, decided to put down roots - literally - on a 40 acre farm in upstate New York. Here, she makes good use of their bumper crops of fruit and veg, creating vibrant monoprints for general consumption. Augusta Pownall gets a slice of the couple's parallel life abroad.

When the artist Georgie Hopton and her husband - the painter Gary Hume - were looking for an escape from the hectic social whirl that revolves around their Bloomsbury town house (*WoI Oct 2017*) and the exhibition openings of their YBA friends and contemporaries, their number-one priority was space. 'We decided we had enough money for a country house, but we realised we didn't have enough to do it (in the UK), because we both needed a studio,' she explains. Almost 17 years ago, they opted instead for the vast open spaces of America, when the pound was strong compared with now.

The spot they chose, and to which they have been making annual pilgrimages ever since, is a bucolic early 20th-century farmstead in upstate New York, half an hour's drive from Woodstock. It consists of a scattering of barns, chicken coops and outbuildings that house their respective studios, clustered around the main farmhouse, which they have doubled in size. The 40-acre property encompasses woodland, meadow, bog, three orchards, ponds and even a potting shed-cum-sauna ('I know, so luxurious!'). It's a fair amount of land to take on, and not for the fainthearted. 'If you turn your back - I'm not joking - after a few weeks it's a wilderness.' Sprightly, bright-eyed and with the warm but nonsensical candour of someone brought up in Harrogate, Hopton has risen to the challenge.

For an artist so interested in colour, as her collages, prints, wall-papers and textiles attest, the particular quality of the sky at the farm is a bodily experience. 'It becomes a material thing. The sky touches the ground. And so it's very, very beautiful because I feel like I move through the sky as I go through the landscape,' she explains. 'And the sky, of course, has a colour. So it feels like I'm moving through colour.'

They found the place while visiting a friend of Hopton's from her time at Central Saint Martins. The house had belonged to a sheriff and before that a Swedish woman who kept chickens and sold the eggs to Kodak for coating photographic paper with albumen. On a three-day trip scouring the area, they returned every day. 'We had sun, we had snow and we had pouring rain, so we could see it in all this different weather and we still loved it.'

Sometimes, Hume flies out in February to tap maple syrup from the trees. The pair of them then return in May for a fortnight to plant the vegetable garden and in mid-July for four months to make the most of the resulting glut, conditions permitting. 'Hopefully, the weather doesn't trash everything,' Hopton says, throwing her arms up. When she says 'everything', she means it. Beans, blueberries, butternut and white-bush squashes, tomatoes, sunflowers, asparagus, beetroot, dill - they grow the lot, as well as meadows full of flowers. It has been a revelation. 'I always liked nature but it was never really part of my life,' she says. 'I didn't grow up going to the countryside or with rural pursuits. It just wasn't what we did. But I was always interested in still life and then you can't help but be interested in flower arrangements and Dutch paintings and whatnot.'

The 'absolutely ginormous' radishes appear first. Rather than arranging them as Jan van Huysum might, Hopton cuts her crop and applies paint directly to its surface to produce vibrant monoprints. 'The shape of the vegetables dictates what happens. I don't plan it. I get what I'm given,' she says. These abstract patterns also in-

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form her range of hand-blocked wallpapers and linens, which have names such as 'Circles and Sticks' and 'Bird Feet'. As with her monoprints, the designs evoke the feeling of the plant, rather than being an exact replica, yet are somehow instantly recognisable.

She cites the influence of the Bloomsbury set and Wiener Werkstatte on her fascination with decoration and craft. 'I used to be a little bit out on a limb. I was always very interested in making,' she says. That set her apart from a scene that favoured 'a man with a brush and a canvas and some paint'. Challenging the notion that craft had no place in contemporary art, she now feels that the community has caught up with her. Collages she saves for rainy London, working from 'memories of walking through the woods and the brambles', and using painted paper, wool, dried beans, seeds and the colour-saturated floral vinyls she was first drawn to at college. 'I was using this artificial, kitsch version of nature, which I still totally love. I love all that crap, can't get enough of it. Just give me nature in whatever form. I don't care if it's real. I want all of it!' She has drawers of patterned papers at the ready. 'I have to have colour,' she says. 'How anyone can spend their life making black-and-white pictures, I've got no idea.'

Her studio in the States is a huge, white space, with a pitched roof and a polished cement floor laid on a slab of concrete that might have been the remnants of a slaughterhouse. The room was originally Hume's, and the paint splatters underfoot are his. Hopton pins her latest experiments to the wall and the worktable overflows with whatever has sprung from the ground that morning. Dried sunflowers are thrust into pots or hung in bunches between stems of goldenrod. Days are split between the studio and the garden. Apart from a Buddhist friend down the road whom they visit to witness the tea ceremony, and the siren call of a new gourmet pizza joint that caters to out-of-town New Yorkers, there's little to tempt the two of them away from their work.

Hopton is currently planning an exhibition for the New York Armory fair that will see her set her work in conversation with Hume's. Then it will be time to retreat back into the vegetable patch. 'My ambition was always to be able to make my work and to live,' she says, delighted to have been able to marry the growth in the garden with that in the studio.