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HOME & GARDEN

In Hudson, N.Y., Painting by Numbers



In the front parlor, an excavation by Ruby Palmer, at left, called “Reveal.”

Hudson, N.Y. — Last month, Isidro Blasco and Sarah Jay invited a few friends over to help renovate the 164-year-old, brick two-family house they bought in November. But if you’re imagining an episode of “This Old House,” think again.

In a kitchen cupboard, Mala Iqbal, a painter from Queens, had built a perfect miniature diorama that recalled something out of “The Last of the Mohicans,” except if you looked closely, there were graffiti tags on a cliff. On the porch beyond, Grace Sullivan had washed the interstices of the studs with pale yellow-and-blue watercolor pocked with squares of decaying cork tile and explosions of silver thumbtacks, inspired, she wrote in an artist’s statement, by a scientific report about bacteria that subsisted on electricity. Upstairs, Max Goldfarb had hung a light bulb from a tangle of wires that lit up at the sound of your voice. He had also made a window from rainbowed Plexiglas; when you looked through it, the street beyond was tinted like an old Kodachrome.

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In every room, in fact, artists — 14 of them in all, some local, some imported from the city — had burrowed and excavated, embellished and upended and generally messed about with the space.

On Saturday, the house and their efforts were open to the public, in a show called “Interventions II.”



A hatch in the floor of the front parlor was part of Ms. Palmer’s piece.

Why Part II?

Mr. Blasco, 52, is a Madrid-born artist whose own work explores ideas about architecture and home through construction and photographs — like the anthropomorphic, strangely familiar structures he once made from plaster and board, which were inspired by photographs of the corners of his bedroom. This event, he said, was a sequel of sorts.

He and Ms. Jay, 46, a journalist and food writer, used to own a house in Philadelphia that they had invited friends to intervene in, as the saying goes, in a similar fashion. Except the artwork was lost because the contractor they hired wanted extra money to preserve it. In Hudson, they hope to keep as much as possible, and Mr. Blasco imagines he will be doing most of the work himself, after which they may rent the place out as a kind of art B&B.

This being Hudson, they are not the only couple trying to leverage their real estate by presenting renovation as an alternative art performance. (I’m not going to mention Marina Abramovic.) Jon Wang and Sean Roland, for example, have turned the downstairs of their two-family former wreck into what Mr. Wang described as a “full-time Airbnb project space” called the ZeZe Hotel. Everything from the furniture to the cat toys has been made by an artist, and is for sale. Mr. Wang said that “exhibiting

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artists will reinterpret common household items to produce lifestyle proposals that can only be experienced by renting out the place for a night,” adding that he also likes “that Airbnb is an accepted form of voyeurism that inspires a certain performativity, where for a weekend you can pretend to be someone else and sleep between their sheets.” Zeze, he said, “is an informal Japanese term for the moments between sleep and consciousness.”

In addition, the space comes with a cat. An art kitty?

There is a long tradition of artists challenging the built environment, or using the idea of home to explore all sorts of personal, cultural and political narratives, as Mr. Blasco pointed out. Most people have a set of assumptions about the function and look of a house, he said: “But why not entertain other options?”

Mr. Blasco said he was inspired, in part, by his involvement in a show put on by No Longer Empty, an arts organization that stages site-specific installations in unused New York City buildings and storefronts.

Manon Slome, president and chief curator of No Longer Empty, noted that “there’s just something about a house, or the image of home, which goes to our deepest core issues. And that’s why it has figured prominently in relation to feminist art and racial issues — think of Judy Chicago, or Project Row Houses in Houston. From the cave to the mansion, the house is a space for individual and cultural memory and increasingly for environmental issues.”

As she put it, “You are taking familiar materials, and baking them in a different way.”

Laetitia Hussain, a Hudson-based artist, was interested in making a room basically unusable. She had built an aluminum armature in the shape of a giant pyramid and affixed it to the ceiling of an upstairs bedroom. “It’s an odd shaped-room,” she said, “and I liked the idea of putting an odd shape in it.”

The pyramid’s struts were hand-notched and strung with thread, a process, she said, that was enormously tedious and painstaking: “We thought if someone were watching us through the window, they would think we were doing some weird ritual.”

Every afternoon at about 2, she said, the sun pours through the window and spotlights the gleaming solid aluminum tip. (Just one of those spooky pyramid things.)

In the basement, a colossal paella was being put together over an open flame by Ms. Jay. It turns out that she is a paella evangelist — she sells pans and other accouterments at paellapans.com — the result of spending a semester abroad in college during which she lived with an Andalusian family for whom paella was a Sunday ritual.

Since then, she has been enamored of all things Spanish. Years later, in New York City, she met Mr. Blasco at a party of Spanish expats. He needed help with his English, and she with her Spanish, and one thing led to another. Mr. Blasco said he is much less

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dogmatic about the dish than his wife. Their daughters, Olivia, 11, and Sidney, 9, were assisting as line cooks.

Working between two 36-inch pans, Ms. Jay began cooking grated onion and tomatoes into the rich, rust-colored alloy known as sofrito. Mr. Blasco quickly closed the door at the top of the basement stairs.

“Sound and light are two of the most important interventions you can do in a house,” he said, pointing out an acoustic piece in a dark corner, a wooden box outfitted with a light bulb and a metal frame, and embedded with a speaker playing something solemn and electronic. “And also smell. Which my wife is contributing. She’s taking over.”

Upstairs, Ms. Sullivan was sniffing the paella-thick air approvingly. “No matter where you are, it’s the one element that creeps into every artwork.”

By early afternoon, the house on State Street was clogged with guests, nearly 300, Mr. Blasco estimated, by the day’s end.

One was Harold Smith, 59, a retired UPS driver who had grown up in the house and whose parents sold it in 2003. He was flooded with memories, he said, and you could tell they were more vivid to him than the artwork.

He peered into closets and, skirting Ms. Hussain’s pyramid in what used to be his bedroom, laughed at a blooming patch of decayed plaster on the ceiling. “That’s been there a while,” he said.

Mr. Smith recalled Saturday night spaghetti dinners cooked by his mother, Anna, and the operatic tiffs of his great-aunts. His father had his own cleaning business, he said, and Anna worked in the mill around the corner (in the building that now houses the Etsy office).

“They were living the American dream,” he said proudly. “They raised four boys here. I was so lucky. It was a great place to grow up. I’m smiling from ear to ear.”

Then he went downstairs to try the paella.