

A visit to Crooked Brook

A former Off-Broadway director and Gotham hack driver cultivates an 'art farm' outside Wadhams

Words and pictures by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, January 6, 2006

A decade and a half ago, Edward Cornell bought Crooked Brook Farm, outside Wadhams.

Today, Cornell is an “art farmer,” painting and sculpting with the refuse found on his property.

The life he lives now is quite different from the one he led before.

CORNELL CAME to the Adirondacks from Brooklyn in the early Nineties.

Most of his working life, up to that point, had been spent directing plays — and with some success. In 1970, one of the plays he directed, Charles Gordone’s “No Place to Be Somebody,” was the first off-Broadway production to win the Pulitzer Prize. A revival he directed of “Johnny on the Spot” won a 1980 Obie, the Village Voice’s award for off-Broadway theater.

“I was right at the center of the action in those days, and I loved it,” he said, “but it’s not something I intended to do. I was a philosophy major in college, and I had a different vision of things, somehow.

“It was after my great successes that I drove a cab for a couple of years. I was also a freight brakeman on the Penn Central Railroad.”

Why?

“I liked just *living*,” Cornell said. “I continued directing, but I didn’t want to do it all the time.”

Later, for about 8 or 9 years, he

became half of a two-man investment banking firm that specialized in tax-exempt bonds to fund the construction of rural hospitals.

“It was a strange life, for someone like me,” Cornell chuckled, “but I only did it part-time.

“I would go out of town for a couple of months to direct a play, or I would be a visiting professor at Hofstra, or Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. I would maintain telephone contacts with my clients, but I was always able to keep it at a distance. As much as I loved it, it

didn’t consume me.”

When Cornell inherited “a little money” from a great aunt he’d never met, he took the opportunity to strike off in a completely new direction. He bought a farm in Essex County, moved here, and started teaching himself to paint.

Thus was born the “art farm.”

THE HOUSE where Cornell lives was built in 1910, part of a “brother farm” — two farms, owned by two brothers, whose operations were integrated as one.

The artist, with the help of his son, has slowly reshaped the old farm to serve his needs.

One end of a horse barn has been enclosed and reinforced, with floor-to-ceiling windows installed on the east and south walls, levered to provide for plenty of ventilation in the summer. The room is bare except for the light that fills it and a simple platform bed lying close to the floor.

“It’s a great place to sleep on a hot summer night,” Cornell said.



Ted Cornell with his farm-junk sculpture, “The Angel of Inerrancy Conveying Well-Meaning Souls to Hell,” frozen to the ground last month.

Cornell uses the farm's old hay barn as a display space.

The barn has been reclaimed from what would otherwise have been an inevitable slide into self-destruction. Each spring melt and each heavy rain had been slowly carrying the barn farther and farther down the hillside upon which it was built, until Cornell and a neighbor installed some underground drains beneath the structure. That, and the installation of a very large set of north-facing windows, has made the barn into a big, rustic gallery.

As Cornell opens the barn's large sliding door, a radio can be heard playing inside.

"I never turn it off," he said. "It keeps the birds out."

CORNELL SHOWS us some of his work, explaining a little of his artistic philosophy as he goes.

"Accidents have a lot to do with how you paint. You have to wait for the answers sometimes," he said. "You're painting, and you don't know how it's going to come out. All of a sudden, a passage or a series of strokes add up — and you have to be ready to collect them as they come in.

"Paintings are as much a collection of accidents, in that sense, as they are anything else."

Cornell pointed to a painting displayed in his barn, "A Meeting in Manhattan," made from a photograph he took some 20 years ago. The painting shows two women, from the back, who are apparently looking together at something the viewer cannot see.

Normally, one would not display a picture of the backs of peoples' heads, but there is something about this scene that draws one in — one wants to peek over the subjects' shoulders and find out what they're looking at.

"There's a secret, somehow," Cornell said, nodding his head. "The first hundred times I looked at this photograph I said, 'Oh, well.' But the 101st time, I had this insight, this accident, that led me to say, 'Alright, let's spend some time on that'."

The same theory of "artistic accidents," it seems, applies to Cornell's sculptures, which draw their materials from the refuse left by the previous inhabitants of his farm.

"This was a graveyard for a generation of farmers," Cornell said,

walking through a snow-covered field, gesturing toward a pile of metallic confusion half-hidden behind a rough wooden fence. "All this stuff was just sitting out there. I pulled it into this yard, and now I mine it for my work."

THREE OUTDOOR sculptures are visible on Cornell's farm; none of them are static.

"All these things move," he said. "Even the stone cone out there floats on the water."

Cornell pointed to something on the nearby frozen pond that looked



"Stone Cones," an environmental sculpture, was built to float on the surface of a pond at Ted Cornell's art farm. In wintertime, its motion is frozen by the icy waters.

like a rocky cairn rising against a background of rushes at the pond's edge and the snow-covered field beyond it.

"It's a hexagonal raft," said Cornell, "with a cone shaped from chicken wire, and the stones are laid on top of that."

His other two environmental sculptures are built with farm junk.

One is a huge piece of twisted metal curving in upon itself, slowly turning atop a post that's implanted in a big, *big* chunk of buried concrete. Cornell calls it his "Rotating Installation of a Minimally Processed Found Object, or, The Phoenix of Wadhams."

"It was the top of a silo from the farm next door," Cornell said. "As soon as it fell over, I knew what to do with it."

His other piece of outdoor sculpture is something that looks like a sailboat from Hades. Not surprisingly, Cornell calls the sculpture, "The Angel of Inerrancy Conveying Well-Meaning Souls to Hell."

"It's a meditation on how long it

would take to get to Hell," he explained. "It's a long, cumulative journey."

The mechanism of his "Angel of Inerrancy" was dismantled for the winter when we visited him last week, but Cornell showed us how the sculpture is built so that water is passed between two chambers, one forward, one aft. A timer and a pump facilitate the transfer of water from one chamber to the other, and the entire contraption gently rocks back and forth, looking like a demented ferry traversing the River Styx.

THIS IS NOT the first time we've met Ted Cornell. The LPN first encountered him last summer, preparing for the Essex County Harvest Festival Farm Tour.

"I loved being the 'art farm'," Cornell said last week, "and we actually had a couple hundred people drop by for that!"

Now, he's thinking about more ways to open the farm to more visitors.



"A Meeting in Manhattan," by Edward Cornell, on display in the gallery barn at Cornell's art farm

Pointing to his back acreage, Cornell said, "There's a beautiful granite ridge that runs behind those trees, and for several years I have maintained a road that goes around there.

"There are places I've been making in there, places where I like to paint — that shack, for example," he said, pointing to a small, square structure on a far hillside. "When you're in that shack and looking through that window, you can see the pond with the hill behind it, and you see it in all different weathers and different lights.

"Those kind of places are strung along a 3-mile road through a hundred-year-old hemlock forest. It's wonderful up there, mysterious and dark — I love being up in there.

"I think what I want to do," Cornell said, "is have a couple of weekends next summer where people get on a cart behind my tractor, and I drive them up there, and then they can walk around."

But summer is a long ways off.

Until then, you will probably find Ted Cornell at work in his wood-heated studio, standing quietly in front of his easel, paintbrush in hand, alert and waiting for his "accidents" to come.



This old barn serves as the primary exhibition space at Ted Cornell's art farm.