

The Colony Clubs

By Ash Carter

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Ranger Love

An American
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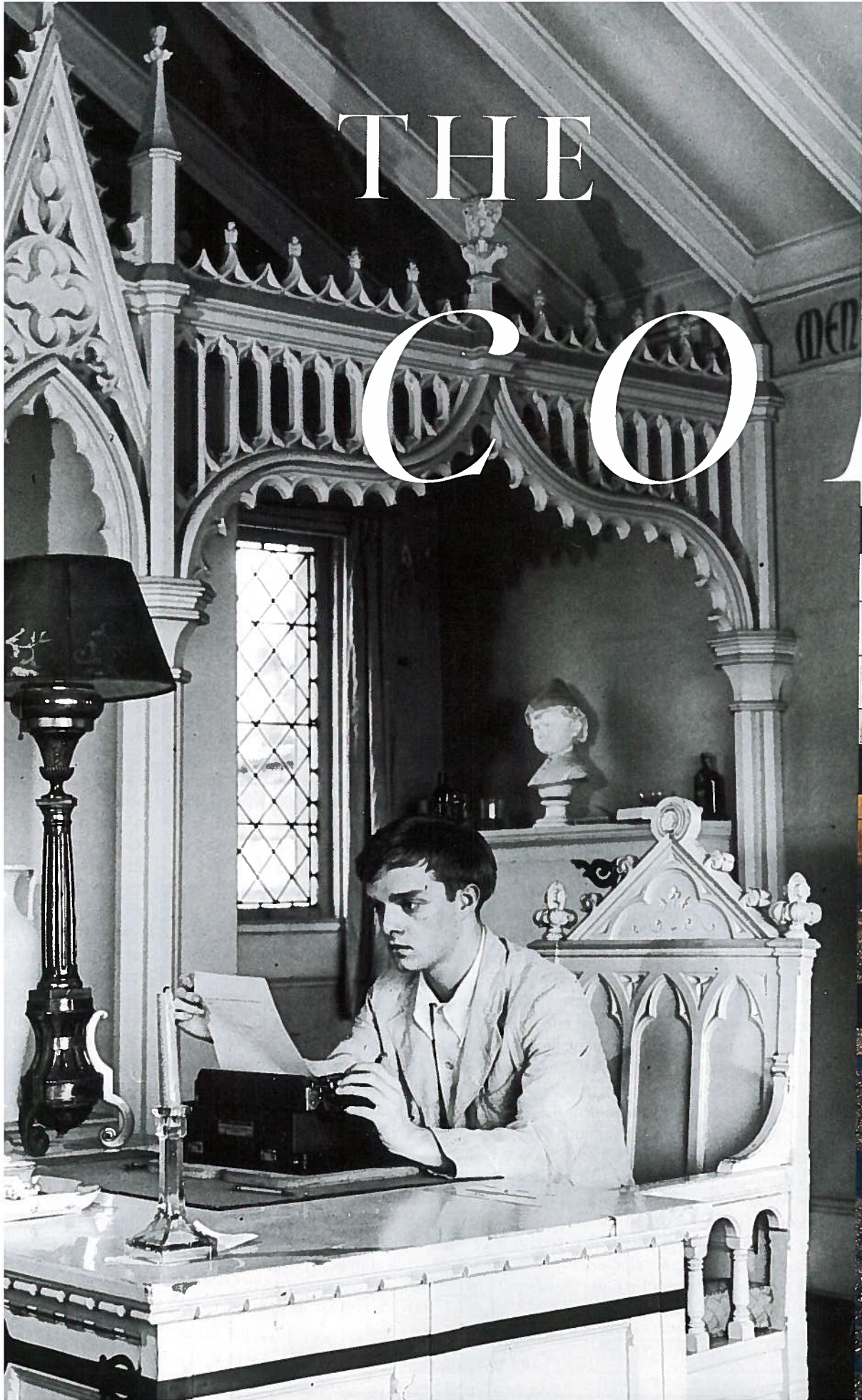
Armie Hammer and his

A century ago an American composer named MacDowell bequeathed his farm to the artistic community. Today creative retreats, from upstate New York to West Texas, are where novels are begun, symphonies are composed, paintings are completed, and marriages are made—or unmade. Along the way, masterpieces are sometimes born.

By ASH CARTER

Photographs by JOSHUA BRIGHT

THE COLONY CLUB



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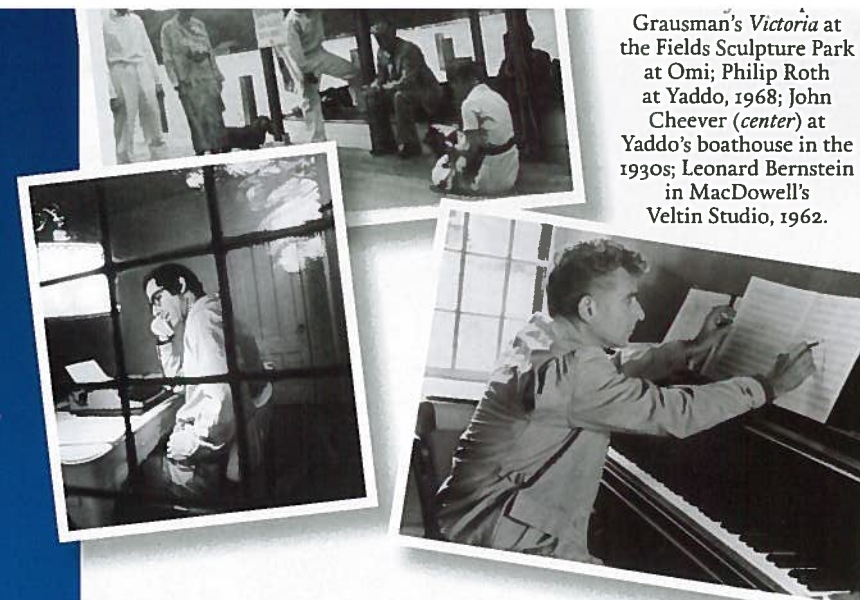
ANSWERED PRAYERS
Filmmaker David Fenster closes the front gate at the Chinati Foundation. Opposite: Truman Capote with a page from *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in the Tower Room at Yaddo, 1946.

USA LARSEN/TIME & LIFE PICTURE/GETTY IMAGES

J.P. MORGAN
REFUSED TO FINANCE
“A DAMN FOOL
SCHEME FOR INDIGENT
BOHEMIANS.”

COURTESY MACDOWELL COLONY (2P); BOB PETERSON/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES (ROTH)

Grausman's *Victoria* at the Fields Sculpture Park at Omi; Philip Roth at Yaddo, 1968; John Cheever (center) at Yaddo's boathouse in the 1930s; Leonard Bernstein in MacDowell's Veltin Studio, 1962.



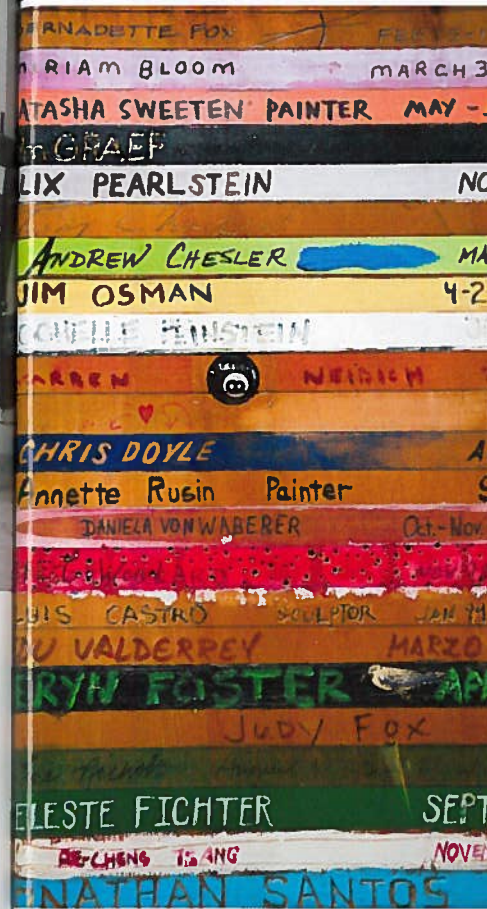
NEAR THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY, the son of a widowed landlady wrote a letter to Edward MacDowell, a well-known composer. MacDowell invited the young man to his Manhattan apartment and, finding him full of promise, agreed to teach him free of charge. The composer asked only that his newest protégé get a haircut. “The day of long-haired and greasy musicians is past,” he said. MacDowell died in 1908, at age 46, with no reason to believe otherwise.

In his life MacDowell had been “foremost of American composers” and the first to impress European critics, but today he plays a bit part in our music history. He is better remembered as the founder of the MacDowell Colony in New England, an artist retreat that has fostered everything from *Our Town* to *The Corrections*.

In 1896, the same year MacDowell was picked to head Columbia University's new music program, he and his wife Marian bought an 80-acre farm in Peterborough, New Hampshire, to which she added a small log cabin studio. Between school years MacDowell spent his days confined to that studio, composing at his piano. He didn't even have to break for lunch: Marian would leave a well-stocked picnic basket on his doorstep for afternoon refueling. His proposal to bring Columbia's various arts offerings together in a “Faculty of Fine Arts”—at that point, music was domiciled in the philosophy department and taught for no credit—was “dismissed,” he said, “as being impossible and revolutionary.” MacDowell resigned, and his health began to worsen. (Friends were quick to diagnose a wounded sensibility, but scholars say a 1904 run-in with a hansom cab aggravated the condition.)

He channeled what remained of his energy into another big idea: turning the Peterborough farm into “a tiny imitation of the American Academy in Rome.” MacDowell believed Marian had created the perfect working environment, and he wanted to see it institutionalized. Donations were solicited from various prominent citizens. J.P. Morgan offered to pay Marian a pension so long as none of it went to finance what the world's banker judged “a damn fool scheme for indigent bohemians that would never work.” The MacDowell Colony opened, without Morgan's backing, in the summer of 1907.

lice Walker in
Dowell's Irving
e Studio, 1974.



"I ALWAYS THOUGHT YOU HAD TO BE INVITED TO MACDOWELL," MICHAEL CHABON SAYS. "SUDDENLY, A HAND WOULD REACH DOWN FROM THE SKY."

Edwin Arlington Robinson came, with some apprehension, in 1911, carrying a phony telegram ordering him home. He tore it up and returned 23 times. DuBose Heyward met Dorothy Kuhns at MacDowell in 1922 and proposed marriage in the sheep pasture. In 1924, Heyward sought feedback on a novel in progress called *Porgy*, soon to be adapted by George Gershwin. "He plied us with personal charm, orange juice, and so-called gin," one colonist recalled, "but to small purpose. We all agreed that the story of the little crippled Negro was atrocious." James Baldwin wrote *Giovanni's Room* in 1954. In 1956, Milton Avery taught Marcel Duchamp to play pool. Of Marian, who managed MacDowell into her late eighties, Evelyn Waugh's brother Alec said she gave "an impression of lace and taffeta and whalebone." Extant photographs confirm this. When she died, in 1956 at age 98, the colony was seven months shy of 50.

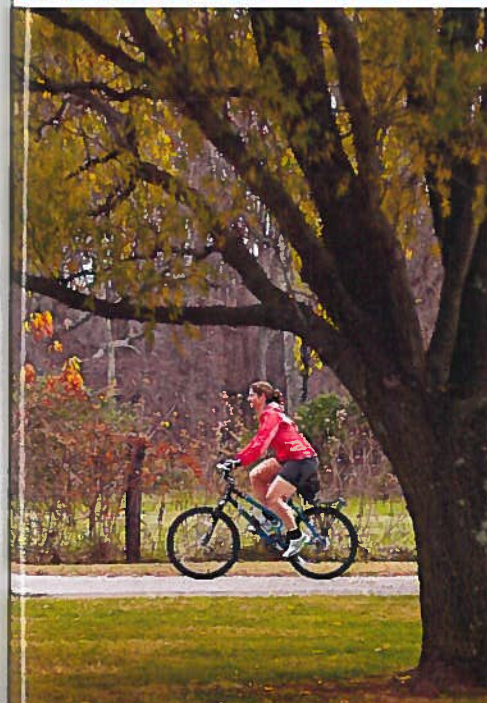
Michael Chabon first applied in 1996, at the age of 33. Before that, he says, "I always thought you had to be invited—suddenly, a hand would reach down from the sky." He has now been 10 times, always for a period of two weeks, usually in winter. It's a good place to start a book, he has found. "But," he says, "it's also a good place to get unstuck, to take your project apart and look at it critically." Oh, and to finish things—e.g., *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Final*

Solution. "Sometimes you go down a blind alley. You think, 'What if I add a talking squirrel?' And you do it; you write the talking squirrel into the book. Later you think, 'It's just not working.' But that's a part of the process too." Three years ago Chabon was appointed chairman of MacDowell's board.

"By noon you're at your desk," Ruth Reichl says, "pretending to be deep in thought, but actually obsessing about what's for lunch." Reichl made her sixth trip to MacDowell earlier this year. "Anyone can find a desk, but a lunch that whispers encouragement is a very rare thing." So is one delivered to your doorstep in no expectation of a tip, a tradition that reaches back to MacDowell's beginnings. Today that midday shot of pep is administered by Blake Tewksbury, a colony staffer of more than 30 years. "It used to be a PB&J or a ham sandwich," Chabon says. "Now it's different every day. If it is a sandwich, it'll be a po'boy or a muffuletta."

What MacDowell called "the Peterborough Idea" went viral. Yaddo, the 55-room hideaway of Spencer and Katrina Trask in Saratoga Springs, New York, was deeded to the Muses in 1926. "Very likely," said John Cheever, Mrs. Trask "imagined a decorous community of women with parasols and poets in gleaming boots walking among the statuary in her Italian rose garden. She certainly couldn't have imagined that her

COURTESY MACDOWELL COLONY



LIFE STUDIES
Clockwise from top left: Veltin Studio at MacDowell; one artist's materials at VCCA; a quiet moment at Yaddo; the weather vane at Yaddo; the exit sign at VCCA; a dance workshop at Omi; darts at VCCA, a popular pastime; transportation at MacDowell; a "tombstone" logs the guests at Heinz Studio at MacDowell; the chef's quarters at Yaddo.





FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE
Yaddo, built in 1893, in Saratoga Springs,
New York. *Opposite:* Donald Judd at
the Marfa National Bank in 1993, one
year before his death.

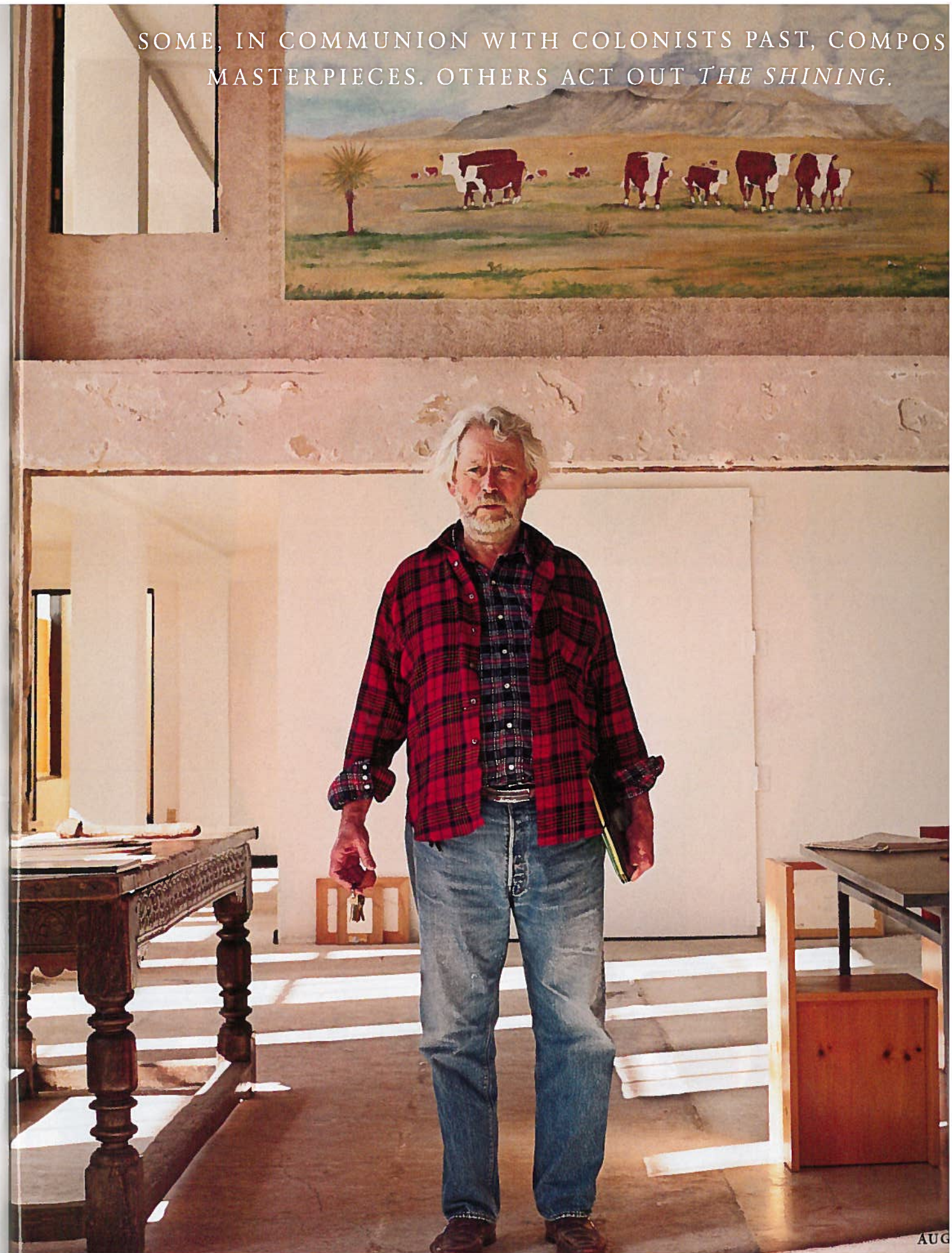
led windows would light the parturition of Studs Lonigan, Portnoy, and Henderson the Rain King." For many years the key to Yaddo's filigreed gates was a kind word from somebody inside. In 1928, Mark Van Doren tapped Lionel Trilling; in 1942, Trilling proposed Alfred Kazin; and in 1955, Kazin recommended Sylvia Plath: "the best writer at Smith, and a remarkable girl in every way... She is the real thing." Likewise, in 1928, Irita Van Doren, Mark's sister-in-law, nominated Malcolm Cowley; in 1946, Cowley saw "great talent" in Truman Capote, who wrote his first novel at Yaddo (an event documented by *Life* magazine); and in 1948, Capote endorsed Patricia Highsmith, who wrote *Strangers on a Train* as a guest that summer. (By the same process, in 1960, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were considered "doubtful cases.")

The idea spread farther. A cinderblock farmhouse in Amherst, Virginia, became the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, which was founded in 1971. "I've heard that VCCA is the gateway colony," says Monique Truong, a novelist with a 15-year residency habit. The Chinati Foundation, Donald Judd's permanent installation in Marfa, Texas, began its program in 1989. Lucky applicants live on the museum grounds. It's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, only minimalist.

Omi International Arts Center, in Ghent, New York, which encompasses Writers Omi at Ledig House, was established in 1992. International outreach is a priority, to the point that unaccented English begins to sound exotic. And there are dozens more, all cast in the mold of MacDowell.

One can now almost live from residency to residency, and many have tried. ("I'm trying to cut back," Truong says.) Depending on the testimonial, the scene might be compared to a symposium or a singles bar, a monastery or a cult. And that's from the true believers. Some, in communion with colonists past, compose masterpieces. Others act out *The Shining*. Marriages are made—Jeffrey Eugenides and his wife Karen Yamauchi met at MacDowell—or temporarily forgotten. Most schedule their visits in summer, when, as E.A. Robinson noted in 1916, "the sights, smells, temperatures, and noises of New York City" form a distraction. A smaller number follow Chabon, or Alec Waugh, who favored the winter sessions because, he said, "the climate of the South of France was capricious. It could rain a lot in Tangier." But like Edward MacDowell, they all just want a quiet place to work and some stimulating conversation at dinner. "It was the smaller things in life that annoyed him," Marian said of her husband, and that was before e-mail. •

SOME, IN COMMUNION WITH COLONISTS PAST, COMPOSE MASTERPIECES. OTHERS ACT OUT *THE SHINING*.



LAURA WILSON (JUDD)