

domino

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DON'Ts of all time

bright lights of marfa

Following in the minimalist footsteps of Donald Judd, an artist couple decide to offset their hectic NYC life with a serene retreat in the hip desert oasis of Marfa, TX. Their 3,000-square-foot live/work space is a testament to creative resourcefulness—namely, how to do high design using local and affordable materials.

photographs by MELANIE ACEVEDO *text by* ZOË WOLFF





In their gas-station-turned-home, Meghan Geesey and Michael Phelan stand before industrial doors that lead to the patio, an expanse of gravel beneath a galvanized-tin "thatched" roof.

opposite page: EXTERIOR PAINT Graphite #1603 (mixed with black), benjaminmoore.com for stores WINDOWS Kawneer Company glass and aluminum framing #451VG from \$35/ square foot, and DOORS #350 medium stile from \$1,500 each, The Glass House, Inc.® (915) 592-5583

fashion: DRESS Rachel Pally modal jersey \$220 shopbop.com SHOES (similar to shown) MICHAEL Michael Kors leather "West End" thong \$89 lordandtaylor.com for stores



Back in June 2005, Michael Phelan took part in a group show at local gallery Ballroom Marfa. He and his wife, Meghan Gerety, fell in love with the desert-set town, and within a week they were signing a check for a former gas station on East San Antonio Street, the main road that winds through this tiny artists' colony (pop. 2,400) in far west Texas. "It looked like an Ed Ruscha painting," Phelan enthuses. Gerety pipes in, "For years, we'd fantasized about buying an old gas station out west. We walked in and thought, 'This is it.'"

Although the cinder-block building was in decent shape, it wasn't quite ready for domestication, both practically speaking (no bedrooms) and in terms of its new owners' aesthetic demands. So the couple staged an "architectural intervention" that honored the rigorous, repetitious modernism of Marfa's artistic pioneer and greatest legacy, Donald Judd. They devised a modular design in which the front third of the building is divided into exactly measured quadrants, with an art project space occupying two of them and two bedrooms each allotted a quarter of the structure's right side. They refashioned the facade accordingly, replacing two storefront windows with custom-size rectangles that are partially glazed—to maintain privacy in the bedrooms while letting in ample light—and that line up with the original casement window on the left side; the front door was moved six feet to accommodate the new configuration. The painted slate-gray exterior required many trips to the hardware store. "We kept having to add more black to get the exact shade we wanted," Gerety explains.

Inside, they covered the cinder block with friendlier drywall and erected several walls, but they left the ceiling beams and steel rafters exposed and kept the poured concrete floors as they were. To divide the living quarters from their exhibition space in front, they used a barn door and a metal track picked up at a feed shop in nearby Alpine. The sliding 4' x 8' particleboard bears its original stamps (date, grade of wood). "It's nice to leave things raw, so you can see where they come from," Gerety says.



A rotating art collection and Jonathan Adler accessories introduce jolts of color to a neutral palette of white, sand and brown.



STOOLS "Frosts" \$12.99 each, hea.com for stores **HEXAGONAL TABLE** Isamu Noguchi aluminum "Prismatic" \$545 five modern.com **CURVESIDE TABLE** Solid alligator juniper wood \$800 bentongarza.com for information **DARK BROWN STOOLS** Sori Yanagi "Butterfly" \$635 each, dwr.com **GEOMETRIC PILLOWS** Custom wool \$175 each, Jonathan Adler (877) 287-1910 **BLUE VASE** "Chroma Cylinder" \$185 and **SMALL BOWL** \$115 jonathanadler.com **ARTWORK** (on wall, left) Eileen Guinlan "Smoke and Mirrors #30, #32 and #33" c-prints (sold), suttonlane.com for similar works by artist **WALL PAINT** Latex flat in Super White, benjaminmoore.com for stores **opposite page: ARTWORK** Michael Phelan dye on linen "The Best Way Out Is Through (No. 14)" (sold), michaelphelanart.com for similar works by artist **fashion: TUNIC** Thread Social linen \$530 scoopnyc.com



An outdoor bathtub—actually a horse trough from a feed shop—sits beneath a 2' x 6' grid of oxidized iron tubing that recalls a Richard Serra sculpture.

their green life

- The home requires little electricity (Marfa is very sunny), and what the couple do use is wind-powered. All the lights are on Lutron dimmers, which extend bulb life. The building is cooled naturally with ceiling fans.
- The major appliances in the house (washer/dryer, hot-water heater, fridge) are EnergyStar.
- The couple buy produce from the Marfa Farm Stand and steaks from local ranchers.
- Gerety is spearheading a recycling and composting program for the city. The recycling center should be functioning by September. "It took research to figure out how to make it work in such a rural area, but through the process, I realized that every person can make a difference in their community," she says.

Buying locally made furniture, or designing your own, is a necessity in middle-of-nowhere Marfa. "You're forced to rely on your own skills out here," Gerety says. Self-reliance is also cost-efficient; it's expensive to have pieces shipped. The bases for the two dining tables were welded by the hardware store down the street and topped with 10' x 10' x 2" pine slabs from a lumberyard in Alpine—at a total of \$250 each. The non-homemade furniture is mostly IKEA (the couple drove a truckload from the Houston outpost), plus a few mid-century-modern icons. "It's very utilitarian stuff, which reflects how we use the house," Phelan says.

While they wanted a loftlike flow, bedrooms were called for. The two identical white cubes nod not just to Judd but to Phelan's Eloise-style childhood years at the Shamrock Hilton in Houston. "He loves standardized hotel-room living," Gerety says. To counter the blank modernism, they found old mahogany bank doors at a salvage joint in El Paso and built frames to suit their unusual 8' height. In each bedroom, dressers and freestanding closets from IKEA do storage duty, while custom additions include untreated birch headboards and desks that match the dining tables. Cowhide rugs, from the Big Bend Saddlery in Alpine, cozy things up. To keep cool, the couple installed \$50 Westinghouse industrial ceiling fans. "They were more modern than any fancy ones we saw," Gerety says, reiterating their belief that good design doesn't have to come at a steep price.



The bedrooms get their quirk from rainbow-bright textiles, avant-garde art and a stash of locally set movies, such as *Giant* and *Paris, Texas*.

The couple host frequent dinner parties, inviting local chef friends to cook and setting the table with Marimekko linens and IKEA dishware.

PINE PLANES (similar to shown, as tabletop) Up to 23" wide \$6.50/square foot, pioneermillworks.com for information
VASE "Koskinen" \$55 ilttala.com for stores
PLATES "I" \$3.49 each, and **GLASSES** "Svalka" \$4.99/set of six, ikea.com for stores
NAPKINS "Pieni Unikko" \$25 each, and **PLACE MATS** "Unikko" \$14 each, kiltosmarimekko.com for information
opposite page: HEADBOARD (similar to shown) Birchwood \$65/square foot, pioneermillworks.com for information
BEDDING "Irma" linen blanket \$525 and shams \$70 each, arealineshop.com
BLANKET Peruvian "Frasada" \$275 thunderbirdmarfa.com
THROW PILLOW Custom wool \$95, Jonathan Adler (877) 287-1910
BIRD SCULPTURE (on desk) \$65 jonathanadler.com
TABLE LAMP Philippe Starck "Gun" \$796 mossonline.com
DESK CHAIR Harry Bertola \$384 dwr.com
SHEEPSKIN (on chair) "Rens" \$19.99 and **FLOOR LAMP** "Samtid" \$34.99 ikea.com
ARTWORK Rirkrit Tiravanija silk screen on paper "USA: Fear Eats the Soul" (sold), whitecolumns.org for information
BATHTUB 6' galvanized-steel water trough \$145 Johnson Feed Shop (432) 837-5792 for information

