

ARTIST FRANCESCA DIMATTIO AND HER HUSBAND AND FELLOW ARTIST GARTH WEISER IN THE COURTYARD THAT SEPARATES HER STUDIO, IN THE BACKGROUND, FROM THE POOL HOUSE. LARGE DOORS ONTO THE COURTYARD ALLOW DIMATTIO TO WORK OUTSIDE IN SUMMER

# Studio time

Artists Francesca DiMattio and Garth Weiser bought 17 acres of Upstate New York, and a house they sprayed silver, to build together-but-separate creative spaces

PHOTOGRAPHY: DANIEL SHEA WRITER: STEPHANIE MURG

In a way, we did know what we were doing, and in another, we knew nothing at all,' says artist Francesca DiMattio. She is talking about the multi-year adventure of building her dream studio in the rolling hills of upstate New York with husband, and fellow artist, Garth Weiser. She could just as easily be describing her first foray into ceramics: another leap she took a few years ago, having to that point devoted herself to painting. Judging by the sculptures and canvases adorning her bright, airy new workspace and bound for a solo show at London's Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, this October, all of the risks have paid off. 'We learned everything on site, as we went,' adds DiMattio. 'Everything.'

Determined to find an escape with a view, New York-born DiMattio, 34, and Montana-raised Weiser, 36, settled in 2011 on 17 acres in Hillsdale, just a few miles west of the Massachusetts border and a two-and-a-half-hour drive from their Manhattan apartment. 'We'd never been here before – we didn't know where we were,' says DiMattio. 'But the second we arrived, we knew this was it.'

With stunning, elevated vistas that stretch up to a bird sanctuary, their sloping plot of land, once part of a tree farm, came with a ranch house and a barn. DiMattio decided to spray-paint the house silver. 'Because it was ugly. It's still pretty ugly, but it's better,' she>>





THIS PICTURE, IN HER MAIN STUDIO SPACE, WITH HER WORK *CONFECTION*, 2015, DIMATTIO LOOKS THROUGH IMAGES OF CERAMICS THROUGH HISTORY  
BELOW, THE CONCRETE WALL ALONGSIDE THE STUDIO AND POOL HOUSE IS A MONUMENT TO THE COUPLE'S ORIGINAL CHOICE OF BUILDING MATERIAL; CONCRETE WAS ULTIMATELY BESTED BY METAL CLADDING

says, seated at a picnic table between the house and vegetable garden. Far more inclined to work late than to rise early, DiMattio and Weiser covered some of the house's windows with black paper to minimise feelings of exposure – a concern as construction workers began to multiply.

The plan was always to demolish the barn, but not before DiMattio could get a feel for the site, where she envisioned building her studio. 'I wanted to be close to the house, especially in the winter,' she explains. 'I had these notions of porridges or stews I'd make, so I wanted to be able to check in on them.'

Weiser, a painter of seductively textured abstractions, opted to start fresh in a nearby patch of pine forest, much of which was cleared to leave only a protective fringe of trees. His studio, completed before DiMattio's, has tall windows that are pushed to the corners, making the space feel larger while optimising the views.

'I wanted an interesting building,' says Weiser. 'It has to be functional, but for me, it was about design first.' An 'LC4' chaise longue and a 'Barcelona' day bed offer perches from which to contemplate trees, sky and the large canvases in progress ('He's neater than I am,' notes DiMattio, so we got him nice chairs'). A



back room houses a spray-painting booth and doubles as a cosy garage for a 1982 Porsche.

'The key thing for me was function,' says DiMattio as she heads from Weiser's studio to her own. Following a path marked by a new concrete wall, she passes another new building – a kind of pool house-cum-future living quarters on which interior work will soon get underway – and then a gravel

courtyard studded with biomorphic planters: slabby, footed vessels she whipped up out of a mix of cement, peat moss and Pearlite.

She slips into the studio through one of the side-by-side garage doors that open onto the courtyard. The doors were among her highest priorities. 'I want to be able to have everything open, and to allow paintings and sculptures to go out easily,' she says. 'I worked outside all summer, which felt amazing.'

The formal front entry to the studio takes a visitor from the industrial-feeling doorstep through an intimate corridor that concludes with the dramatic reveal of DiMattio's workspace. On one side is a wet room and on the other is the main space that looks out to the landscape. 'In theory, this is the sculpture room and that's the painting room, but I'd glaze in there, too,' she says, standing in the smaller space and pointing to the drain in the floor. 'This is just the messier room.'

The couple worked with Sotirios Kotoulas, an architect they have known since their days at The Cooper Union (they met as undergraduates before going on to earn MFAs at Columbia). 'It was great to have a sounding board for design,' says DiMattio, who grew more confident with each of the 'million little decisions' she had to make. 'With every >>





LEFT, DIMATTIO'S STUDIO SEEN FROM THE ROAD. THE FRONT ENTRANCE IS VISIBLE TO THE LEFT, AND FACES THE HOUSE WHERE THE COUPLE CURRENTLY LIVE, WHILE THE STUDIO SPACE'S BANK OF WINDOWS IS TO THE RIGHT

BELOW, SOME OF THE ARTIST'S RECENT WORKS IN PROGRESS AND, BOTTOM, *TEPHRA*, 2015 (DETAIL), 174 X 133.4 X 121.9 CM

decision, you felt you were deciding the rest of your life,' DiMattio says, noting that she and Weiser took to visiting buildings with tape measures to determine the ideal height of their studio ceilings (16ft). 'I wasn't great in the beginning,' she admits. 'I had strong feelings, but I'm not a from-nothing person! Even with a painting, I've got to get it going, and then I start making decisions, but initially, I almost need anything to react to.'

In the course of preparing for her second solo show at Pippy Houldsworth, one of the most significant changes afforded by the new studio has been the opportunity to work on sculpture and painting in the same place. DiMattio began experimenting with ceramics several years ago on trips to Arizona, where Weiser's father, Kurt, a ceramics artist, has a studio, and then later at her childhood home, where her mother has a kiln. Work on paintings, meanwhile, was limited to her studio in Brooklyn. 'My life was displaced – the works were two hours apart,' she says.

It was DiMattio's paintings that first caught Pippy Houldsworth's attention, in 2007. 'I was drawn to her use of architecture and the shifting planes of perspective,' she says. 'Two years later, having followed her career with keen interest, I was bowled over by her paintings in "Abstract America" at the Saatchi Gallery and felt even more compelled to include her in the gallery programme.'

DiMattio's new 'Confection' show will combine paintings with ceramic sculptures. Houldsworth expects from the exhibition 'a striking conglomeration of opposites: beauty and vulgarity, masculinity and femininity, decay and fecundity, high art



and kitsch, excess and restraint, brutality and delicacy,' she says, and sums up: 'Delicious!'

The London-bound sculptures in the studio live up to the hype. Their unique, irregular forms transition from glossy to matte, colour to monochrome, here bedecked in cake-frosting flowers and there lava-glazed to approximate the mottled surface of the moon. Fragments of past works – rogue teapot handles and spouts, the necks of beautifully decorated vases – surface and then disappear into the bold yet lively wholes.

'It wasn't like I wanted to make ceramics and then I wanted to make these pieces,' says DiMattio. 'I wanted to make these pieces and then I had to learn to make them in ceramics.' The task required a willingness to take risks and break rules – mixing clays, wonky weight distributions – and then to calibrate the balance of aggression and domesticity: it's surprising how fast rough-hewn, finger-pinched undulations lose their potency in the presence of shiny references to the stuff of Sèvres and the Ming Dynasty.

As construction winds down and she moves on to new paintings – one large canvas has the base texture layer of a sequin dress – DiMattio is looking ahead. She and Weiser are expecting their first child in January and plan to renovate their Manhattan apartment. Meanwhile, she's full of ideas for the living spaces of their upstate idyll. 'I'm interested in infusing a modern structure with arches,' she says. 'And then we'll take what we've experienced from my space and Garth's space and we'll just combine the best parts.' ★  
'Confection' is at Pippy Houldsworth, London, 12 October – 14 November, [houldsworth.co.uk](http://houldsworth.co.uk)