

Artists are given free rein at Djerassi Ranch



(Spread) The “Old Barn” (named the John & Sue Diekman Old Barn in 2017) is a late 19th century structure that was stabilized and now serves as a space for temporary performances and visual arts installations.

PHOTOGRAPHS MICKEY CARROLL

An intersection of both art and science in the Santa Cruz Mountains

By Jeanette Prather

Nestled deep among the enormous redwoods and rustic purity of the Santa Cruz Mountains lives 583 acres of land, so artistic and so magical, that it’s concealed to the public, used now (mostly) for hosting cohorts of undistracted and undisturbed creatives.

“We’ve always had a strong focus on arts science,” said Djerassi Resident Artists Program Director, Terra Fuller. “It’s always been this way, but why?”

“My dad, Carl, was an organic chemist with a lab at Stanford, but he was also a huge art appreciator and collector,” replied Dale Djerassi, one of the original founding Trustees, board member, and last of the Djerassi Resident Artist Program’s family legacy. “One could say that inherent in this place is science in art and art in science.”

The Djerassi parental team conceived the now-40-year-old residency program while abroad in Italy grieving the untimely suicide of Dale’s 28-year-old sister and revered Stanford artist alumni, Pam. “What was a tragic incident and a conversation in Italy, turned into this program,” said



(Above) Looking toward the Pacific Ocean, the view from the ridge above Djerassi Resident Artists Program campus gives a wonderful idea of the terrain. The Artist's Barn is located on the left and the Diane Middlebrook Studios are on the right.

Djerassi.

In a partnership with Stanford University, the Djerassis launched a residency for female artists to live and create in Pam's former home for the duration of one year. But there was a problem: "Every former participant loved the residency but highlighted some of the isolation that onset while out here," said Djerassi. "As a result, my parents decided to take the former ranch building and expand it to different disciplines and all genders."

Backing it up to the "former ranch building" statement, Djerassi added, "This original piece of land was bought by my (birth) parents while I was young at about 55 acres of land consisting of trees with no buildings. My father gradually bought more neighboring land and eventually got a substantial amount of land to raise pure-bred short-horned cattle."

The large, 12-sided cattle barn, also known as a dodecagon, according to Fuller, now houses multiple artists' studios. "It was originally built for cattle management," said Djerassi. "Studio C used to be horse stables," Djerassi referenced a barn-like door to the studio.

Adjacent the former horse stable, is a vibrant and very realistically painted rug on the



(Above) The cavernous interior of McElwee Family Artists' Barn provides many creative options including a music room, photography darkroom, artist studio, and fabrication shop.

cement floor. "This was from a Pakistani artist," said Djerassi. "She finished it with a group of children who were touring through here."

Artistic collaboration is a major element embedded within the ethos of the Djerassi

Resident Artists Program. "We haven't strayed from our original mission of allowing artists undisturbed time to do their work, but we have added more of a collegial approach over the years," said Djerassi. "We've had lifelong



(Above) The Diane Middlebrook Studios were completed in 2012. The complex consists of four studios which overlook the Pacific Ocean. They have become a popular choice especially for writers who find a quiet solitude within their walls.

friendships, marriages, and professional collaborations born from this residency over the decades."

One such collaboration and example of the communal artistic nature innate within the residency, came from composer John Adams, architect Frank Gehry and choreographer Lucinda Childs. According to Djerassi, Adams was the original composer who occupied the composer's studio, and simultaneous to his stay during the residency, were Gehry and Childs' stay. The trio teamed up to create a performance piece for the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles called "Available Light." "Adams then named his composition piece "Light Over Water," inspired by the six windows overlooking the Pacific along the back wall of the studio," said Djerassi.

"If I weren't in this studio, then my composition piece wouldn't have been," added Julie Herndon, a composer residing in the studio since last April. Herndon is working on a piano piece that uses the pianist's natural bio rhythms that supports the musician's attunement to their internal system and making that audible. "My studio definitely inspired this invention because of its relaxed feeling."

Herndon also mentioned another piece that she's working on, called the "Shadow Prism." It's a miniature geodesic dome that's programmed to make natural creek sounds.



(Above) Dale Djerassi carries on the Djerassi family's artistic legacy. An artist and filmmaker in his own rite, his films range from socially significant to environmentalism to jazz legends.

"I'm reprogramming it to be more of an indoor instrument by teaching it to listen to indoor light because I originally designed it to create outdoor sounds powered by outdoor

light," she said.

Herndon's composure studio sits in the dodecagon building alongside three more visual arts studios and a choreographer's studio, all but one visual art studio hosting their own bedrooms. The art creation space doesn't stop there. Sprawled up the hillside are the staff quarters that also house a handful of artists in addition to the residency's kitchen, as well as the Middlebrook Studios designed for writers.

"As it turns out, I grew up with the architect of the Middlebrook Studios as a kid in the 70s," said Djerassi of the architect, Cass Calder-Smith. "He lived on a commune down the way and had long hair. This kid, Cass, would run around here until they moved. I didn't see him again until years later when I ran into him at an event in San Francisco. Turns out he's this accomplished architect, such a difference from this little hippy kid running wild. When he heard that we wanted to create these studios - in honor of my stepmother, Diane Middlebrook - he really wanted to do it."

From serendipity to artistic muses, there certainly isn't a scarcity of creative vibration emanating throughout the Djerassi land. And even more, there seems to be a bleeding of boundaries and categories that occurs regularly between artists and scientists who inhabit the Djerassi Resident Artists Program. "We see a lot of people who are working at the intersection of both art and science," said



(Above) Stanford student and composer Julie Herndon, who currently resides at the ranch, demonstrates her musical Shadow Prism in the Artists' Barn.



(Above) *Cartas a Pam* by Lizbeth Velez. A very simple box set up along one of the walking paths, the *Cartas a Pam* allows passersby to write letters to Pamela Djerassi. Though the box was never intended to be opened nor the letters read by people it is filled with letters.

Fuller. "It's really indicative of the times that we're living in," added Djerassi.

Despite having studios that are typically closed to the public in addition to taking a COVID-related hiatus from their usual 11-person, 1-month residency, the program didn't want to cut-off all public contact and instead, pivoted to include docent-led hikes through their vast outdoor gallery space.

"We started a scheduled hiking program so that there is a way for people to come and see all of the works left by our former residents," said Djerassi. "The notion of this whole program is to give artists undisturbed time, and all artists take something with them, but every so often an artist is inspired to do something site-specific and leave it here." More information on the Sculpture Hikes can be found by visiting djerassi.org/events/



(Above) Every dancers' dream would be the Djerassi dance studio with impeccable floors, vaulted ceilings, and incredible lighting.

sculpture-hikes.

According to Djerassi's 2020 Sculpture Map and website, there have been over 60 outdoor installations spread throughout the hundreds of acres, all ranging between large, obvious sculptures, interactive structures, light games, nearly invisible pieces, and everything in between. "We pretty much allow the artists to do whatever they'd like unless it negatively impacts the forest and surrounding environment," said Fuller. "Everything must decompose back into the earth, which shows the impermanence of things; art that deteriorates. Our artists really embrace that."

One of the few very notable pieces, although all installations hold their own mysteries within each of their stages of decomposition, includes the *Torii* by Bruce Johnson, a 17-foot-tall wooden sculpture of a Japanese torii gateway indicative of Stonehenge, as well as the inspiration for Djerassi's logo. Another prominent and quite interactive installation is the *Estaciones de Luz* by Mark Reeves, a large catacomb-like structure that people physically walk through. "The experience of walking into the sculpture requires great trust on the part of the viewer," writes Djerassi.org. This is because the viewer quickly gets consumed into darkness before slowly resurfacing back into light in an outdoor echo-circle.

A couple of installations utilized the Djerassi family's original rustic barn on the opposite side of the property from the studios. "Nicole Buffet, Warren Buffet's estranged granddaughter, created this installation as a game to try and capture the light," said Fuller of the sporadic balls spread across the floor of the barn, some sitting within squares of light and others not. "The small squares in the barn's ceiling produces light on the ground, and by the time you get all of the balls in the light, the first one's light is usually leaving again."



(Above) *To Market, To Market*, is a sculpture created in 2000 by artists Ann Weber and William Wareham. The organic forms filling the wagon were Weber's way of representing elementary foods familiar to most cultures. They were placed in Wareham's wagon which is implicative of a primitive vehicle or enormous market basket.

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(Above) Longtime friends of Carl Djerassi and supporters of the ranch Sue and John Diekman donated this modern, renovated kitchen to the artist's house.



(Above) *Torii*, an iconic 17 foot tall redwood gateway by Bruce Johnson, is one of first things to greet you as you enter the ranch.

The list of fascinating artistic outlets doesn't stop. For more of an in-depth look at the plethora of creations woven throughout the property, visit djerassi.org/sculptures.

One very notable piece is the *Cartas a Pam* box by Lizbeth Velez. A very simple box set up along one of the walking paths, the *Cartas a Pam* allows passersby to write letters to Pam. "It's a great way for people to communicate with this soul who's now gone," said Fuller. Although the box was never intended

to be opened, nor the letters read by people, it is filled. One might wonder if Pam's presence helps the creative potency thriving among the Djerassi land.

"The response to something so tragic can be meaningful and expansive instead of allowing the trauma to really define the situation," said Djerassi. "I've had a lot of people really respond to that. This has clearly turned into a place that meaningful work comes out of."

More Info

What's next on the agenda for Djerassi?

On October 17 the Djerassi Residency held their annual fund-raiser, Artful Harvest, to benefit artists, the artistic process, and the mission of the Djerassi Resident Artists Program. The event was held from 3 – 7 p.m. on their property in Woodside, California. To attend future events, purchase tickets, donate, and learn more about the program, please visit djerassi.org/events/artful-harvest-event

Interested in applying to the residency?

"We are currently working to serve our 2020 postponed artists in 2022, and newly accepted artists in 2023," said Fuller. "Therefore, we are not accepting new applications for the next two years."

During non-pandemic times, however, the composition of the artists in the residency strives for a diverse mix of artists of color as well as international artists. "The curation of the artists here really influences the residents' experiences," said Fuller. "We have a strong international influence with about 25 percent coming from the Bay Area, but that fluctuates."

Comparable to the MacDowell Fellowship in New Hampshire and the Yaddo residency in New York, Djerassi maintains a small percentage of accepted applicants. "We can only accept between five- and seven percent of applicants only because we can't accommodate a higher number of people," said Djerassi.

More information, including the link to apply to the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, can be found by visiting their website at djerassi.org.

Explore the land that has inspired countless artists

Djerassi Resident Artists Program Hike Program offers free, docent-led tours of the property every Sunday through the month of November. Reservations required. *Hikes for Fall are fully booked.*

For reservations for future hikes visit; djerassi.org.

Djerassi statistics at-a-glance:

- 6 distinct habitats at Djerassi
- 583 acres of Djerassi property
- 11 artists per session
- 54 countries Djerassi artists originate from
- 1122 total applicants in 2019
- 6 percent of applicants accepted in 2019
- 2511 artists in residence since 1979
- \$10,000 cost in US dollars of each residency

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