

# ELLEDECOR

## EASY LIVING

**LAID-BACK  
SUMMER STYLE**

**A BRIGHT & BOLD  
BEACH HOUSE**

**THE NEW  
COUNTRY CHIC**

**CLASSIC UPDATE  
IN NASHVILLE**



JULY/AUGUST 2014  
USA \$5.99  
ELLEDECOR.COM





In the great room of Benoist Drut's weekend house in New York's Sullivan County, a porcelain piece by Jean Girel sits atop a circa-1960 French lacquer desk, the antlered wall sculpture is by Michael Combs, and the Jugendstil birch dining table is Swedish; the walls and bookshelves are painted in Sherwin-Williams Emerald in Iron Ore. **FACING PAGE:** Architect Antonio Viola designed the house, which is clad in stained cedar board and batten; the mid-20th-century lanterns are American. See Resources.





# NATURAL SELECTION

*Even when he heads to the woods in upstate  
New York, consummate dealer  
and collector Benoist Drut of Maison Gerard never lacks for  
suitably stylish surroundings*

---

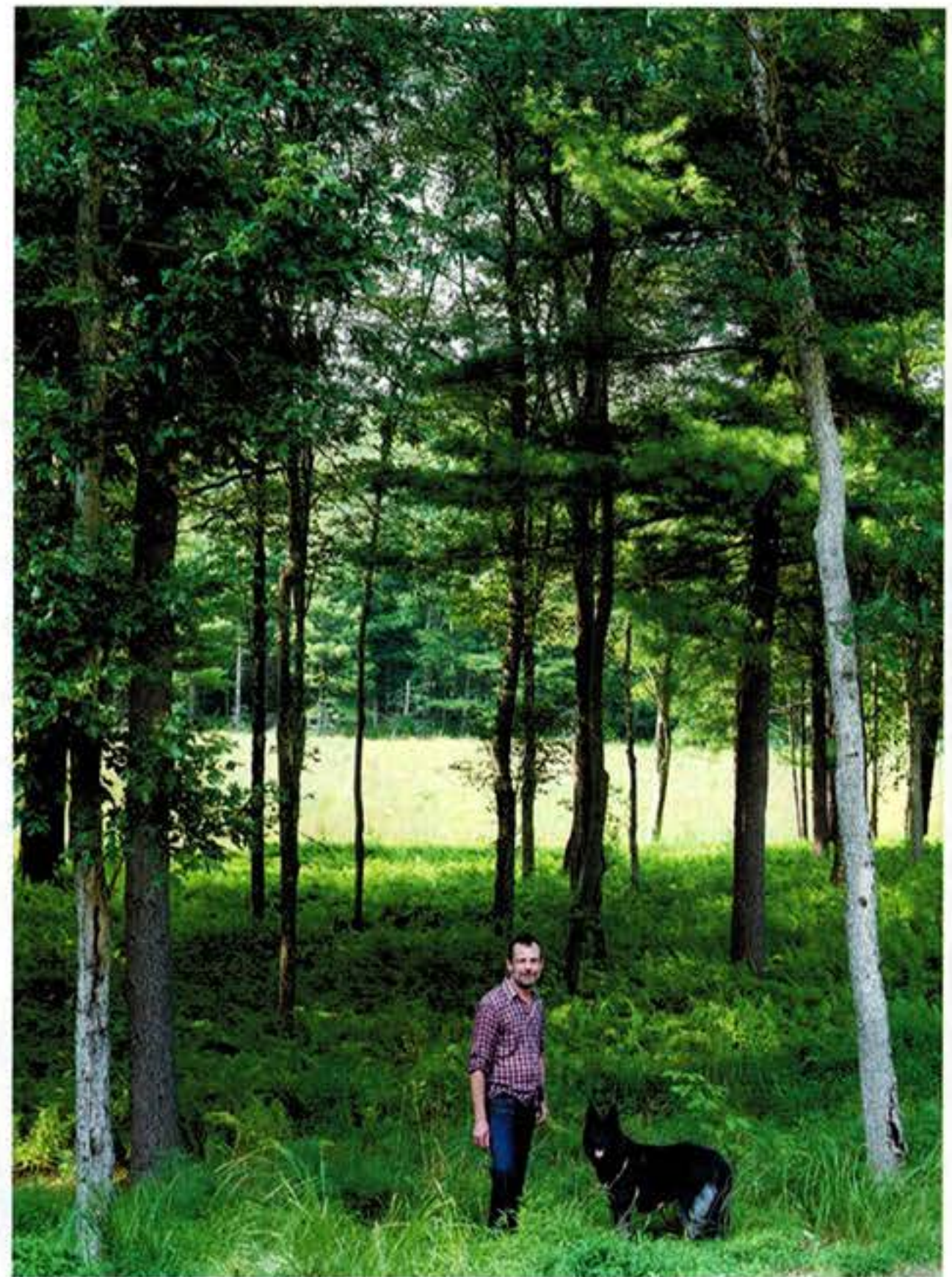
TEXT BY CELIA BARBOUR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM WALDRON  
PRODUCED BY ROBERT RUFINO



**FACING PAGE:** Drut on the property with his rescue dog, Maxine. **THIS PAGE:** In a living area, a photograph by Nadav Kander hangs above a 1940s American daybed, the armchair at left is by Ayala Serfaty, and the cocktail table is by Karl Springer; a circa-1935 lacquered table by Jules Leleu holds candlesticks by Hervé Van der Straeten and a lamp by Achille Salvagni, the shelving unit is by Guy Roisse, the poles were originally designed for cultivating mussels, and the rug is Moroccan. See Resources.







**BEAVERS ARE UNRELIABLE.** Who knew? Not Benoist Drut, who fell in love with a 35-acre parcel of land in part because it featured an idyllic little pond, beside which he planned to build a weekend house. Shortly after purchasing the property, Drut drove the two hours from New York City only to discover that “the busy beavers,” as he calls them, had completely disappeared—along with the pond formed by their dam.

Drut was distraught. But not for long. By temperament both buoyant and hardworking, he soon began to conceptualize Beaver Dam, the quirky, rustic estate that now perches like a reverie come to life at the edge of a meadow once filled with water at the southern tip of rural Sullivan County.

As co-owner, since 1998, of Maison Gerard, the high-style antiques and home furnishings gallery in Greenwich Village, Drut brings that energy to everything he tackles. Under his guidance, the gallery, which had already earned a stellar reputation for French Art Deco pieces, evolved not only to embrace midcentury French design, but also to represent contemporary decorative artists.

Surely it was Drut’s combination of fierceness and creative flexibility that prompted an architect friend to make a storybook titled “Le Château Sur La Rivière”—the castle on the river—shortly after Drut acquired the property. “When he gave me the booklet, I said, ‘Bah, you misread me. I don’t want a château,’” says Drut, who had envisioned something more like a converted barn. “But he made me comprehend what I wanted. He totally got it.” Namely a vast interior space, invincible floors, colossal furnishings—and all of it









Drut bought the kitchen's vintage cast-iron woodstove from a local garage, and the circa-1800 side chair came from the South of France; the vintage limed-oak island originally served as a cutting table for a Lyon textiles firm, the pendant lights are mid-20th-century French, and the shovel sculpture is by Cal Lane. See Resources.





surrounded by fantastic grounds that radiate outward into the landscape, like some backwoods Versailles.

Traipse through the forest around the house today, and you will discover a frog pond, a nascent orchard, several seating areas, wood walkways, an iron pergola, a marble table, obelisks, a vintage tractor seat perched by a stream, and an eight-foot-tall cast-iron replica of the Eiffel Tower, centered in one of a pair of allées Drut is wresting from nature. The tower, lit at night by spotlights like its Parisian *grand-mère*, does not stand alone in the clearing. “Technically, in France, you would not have an allée with a tree in it,” says Drut, regarding a handsome oak nearby. “But there are rules, and then there are rules not to be respected. So anything that’s a good tree—‘good’ means ‘not a pine’—is allowed to live. Even if it’s in the middle of the allée.”

The interior of the house is equally idiosyncratic and intoxicating. Alongside a set of delicate wood doors from Uruguay is a pair of Plexiglas lips puckered on a metal stand. A bearskin rug cozies up to a Lucite table. A Louis XV chair shares the stage with a Leleu table from the 1930s. Throughout the house are monumental items, like 15-foot-tall pillars from a mussel farm, and a kitchen island that was originally a silk-cutting table from Lyon.

“It’s a happy accident,” adds Drut of the fact that his house is so capacious it can accommodate things that wouldn’t fit in most homes—allowing Drut to snatch them up for a song. “Look at the dimensions!” he says of the kitchen island. “It’s unsalable!”

Although the house feels like an extension of its owner, it is hardly an accurate rendition of his initial vision. “This was to be a house with





The settee and armchairs in the great room are by Alain Gaubert, the tables are by Pierre Lebe, the wood sculpture is by Zigor, and the Plexiglas one is by Nicola L; the sconce is by Guy Roisse and the rug is Moroccan. **FACING PAGE** **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** In the dining area, a pair of 1962 Maison Leleu chairs flanks a table by Hervé Van der Straeten; the portrait is by Nicholas Howey. A photograph by Pierre Gonnord above a table by Carol Egan in the master bedroom; the circa-1910 chair is German and a sculpture stand holds a mid-20th-century ceramic lamp base. Wood doors from Uruguay and a sculpture by Nicola L in the entry. See Resources





“I LEFT EVERYTHING BEHIND IN FRANCE WHEN I  
 CAME TO NEW YORK,” SAYS DRUT.  
 “THE COUNTRY HOUSE WAS TO BE MY ANCESTRAL HOME—MY ROOTS  
 HERE IN AMERICA. BUT I  
 MADE IT ALL FROM SCRATCH.”

one bedroom, with two little guest pavilions connected by paths. The idea was, if you come for the weekend, you're independent. I am independent. And everybody finds it comforting." But zoning codes proved as problematic as beavers. Likewise, a desire to arrive at the house via a bridge over the stream turned out to be unfeasible.

Yet setbacks seem only to increase Drut's obsession with the house. He is constantly fine-tuning the ambience, moving objects, adjusting the lights. "I spend my life turning lamps on and off, dimming bulbs, lighting candles," he says. "I love lighting."

For Drut, such creative restlessness is relaxing. "When I'm here, I don't want to go anywhere." Indeed, even though it's not the estate he first envisioned, Beaver Dam faithfully serves a higher function.

"I left everything behind in France when I came to New York," he says. "The country house was to be my ancestral home—my roots here in America. But I made it all from scratch."

Meanwhile, Drut clings to his hope that his clearing will one day again be submerged in water—this time without the help of the local rodents. "I have studied beavers," he says philosophically. "They are really destructive. At my friend's house, we watch them and, my God, every weekend they take down two to three trees. So the beaver is not really the solution," he says with a shrug.

After all, unlike Drut, beavers don't discriminate—not between good and bad, or brilliant and dull. And certainly not between what's impossible and what's worth aspiring to nonetheless. ■





Photographs by Monte Coleman, José Picayo, and Jaimal Odedra line the walls of the walk-in closet; the stool is by Carol Egan, and Drut found the Oriental rug at a local yard sale. **FACING PAGE:** In the master bedroom, the bedcover is custom made, the pillows are by Miguel Cisterna, the chest of drawers is by Karl Springer, and the painting above it is by Salvatore Scarpitta; the photograph is by Adi Nes, the wall is painted in Benjamin Moore Black Bean Soup, and the rugs are Moroccan. See Resources.