



21st Century Pastoral: The Blithedale Romance at Chashama 42nd Street Gallery

by [Sarah Snider](#)

February 22nd, 2011



*Chashama
gallery space
at 217 east
42nd Street /
Image:
Google Street
View*

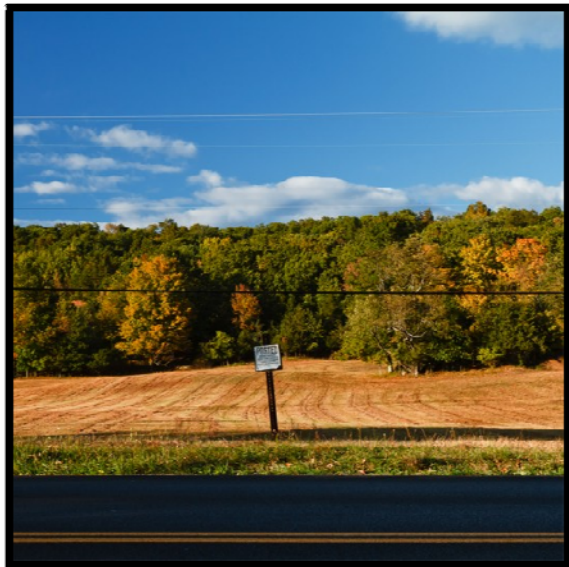
Many New Yorkers know about [Chashama](#), the arts organization Anita Durst founded in 1995 to help artists and curators find underused spaces to house temporary exhibitions, performance spaces and studios. The organization relies heavily on the Durst family's history in New York City real estate, and acts as a diplomatic Robin Hood of real estate. Based on the idea that empty property does not always serve the interests of landlords and developers, some have been willing to donate their spaces on a short-term basis. And through these direct space donations and many public and private grants, Chashama is able to offer spaces to artists at subsidized rent rates or for free.

This socialism of the arts – [from each according to his ability and to each according to his need](#) — helps sustain a diverse, dynamic and provocative cultural environment in New York, in the face of a disappointing lack of affordable space for creative production and dissemination in the city. chashama currently has three galleries and two window spaces in Manhattan, and two studios spaces in the outer boroughs. Because of the lowered barriers to entry into these spaces, exhibitions run the gamut from [independent video game arcade curators](#) to nomadic fine artists to all-ages DIY concert mavens, all within a few months. Likewise, the diversity of audiences that are linked through this one organization is astonishing.

[The Blithedale Romance](#), currently on view at the Chashama gallery at 217 East 42nd Street, is a retrospective exhibition of monthly groups of artists from last summer's chaNorth residency in Pine Plains, New York, curated by the 2010 chaNorth residency manager, Veronica Kavass. chaNorth is the pastoral corollary to the chashama project in New York City, giving artists space and time to which they might not otherwise have access. While in New York



City, Chashama offers artists and curators the scarce resource of real estate, in Pine Plains they are given the rare opportunity to live the country life: white farmhouse, meadow, fireflies, hammock, weather-worn barn shed, just the right-sized pond, and a bikeable backroad to town. This idyllic setting is complemented by the hard work inherent to agricultural life. Residents are expected to contribute to the productivity of McEnroe Organic Farm — also a Durst property — by planting, hoeing, picking, and generally getting their hands dirty. In return, the farm is the primary source of food for the house, and residents cook and eat

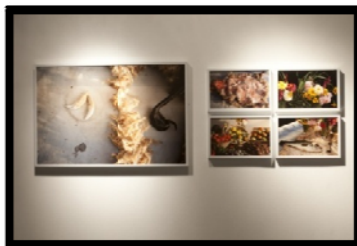


their locally sourced meals together daily. It's a bit "[hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner...](#)" so to speak.

"Power Lines" by Brandon Neubauer

Both the excitement of displacement and the physical routine of chaNorth foster an intense communalism and interdependency. The residency aspires to the tradition of rural utopian experiments; the title *The Blithedale Romance* comes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictionalized account of his time at [the Brook Farm experiment](#). Transcendentalists, shakers, and hippies have all sought to build communities outside of society as both protest and inspiration, be their motives religious, creative, or political. The geographic removal from cities and towns symbolizes a distance in ideas and ways of living and relating to one another. The rural setting explores alternate venues for inspiration, productivity, health, community, and sustainability.

The new twist with chaNorth (and its newer neighbor, [The Wassaic Project](#)), is that it is essentially framed by an urban art world that supplies artists, funders, administrators and visitors to the project. The day-to-day of chaNorth may be a model of pastoral living, but it would not exist without the city a train ride away. That's not to say that it wouldn't be possible. But this relationship between ChaNorth and the city generates questions regarding how the residency functions as an outlet and support for individual artists and for existing creative networks in the city itself. Many of the artists return home to their respective cities feeling refreshed, with finished work, a new local network of creative professionals, some recipes, a book deal maybe, and firsthand knowledge of where garlic scapes come from.



Left to right: *"Harvest, Skin, Coyote"* by Suko Presseau, *"Pioneers (Assembly)"* by Cosme Herrera, *"Departure"* by Yuko Oda

The Blithedale Romance is on view at the chashama gallery at 217 East 42nd Street through February 28, 2011. You may have missed Sara Bouchard's performance of her new song cycle and Brook Stephenson's group reading of his intense coming-of-age-as-a-person-of-color novella, but you can still catch that summer feeling in four fantastic films, a letter of intrigue and mystery, bright and colorful multimedia pieces, bold paintings and bucolic



photographs, and woodcarvings-cum-mapping projects. Artists on view are Emily Bolevice, Aneikit Bonnel, Murray Dwertmann, Yuko Oda, Cosme Herrera, Stephen Holding, Elias Melad, Brandon Neubauer, Suko Presseau, Ryan Schneider, Eliza Stamps, Linsey Wallace, Christine Wang, Seldon Yuan.

Human Dam" (video still) by Murray Dwertman

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Taken from: <http://urbanomnibus.net/2011/02/21st-century-pastoral-the-blithedale-romance-at-chashama-42nd-street-gallery/>