

GAGOSIAN



Sky-high ambition: the New York artist on a mission to beat hunger *Dan Colen's move to the countryside has turned into a fight to end inequality*

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© Quil Lemons | Members of NYC community activist group Playground Youth model Sky High Farm's merchandise

Artist Dan Colen had absolutely no intention of starting a farm when he moved out of Manhattan in 2011 to a 40-acre sprawl in upstate New York. Primarily, he wanted space to build a sculpture studio so he could start fabricating his own large-scale work. Newly sober, he was also looking to escape the city, having spent the previous 10 years – along with artists Ryan McGinley and Dash Snow – partying hard as stars of the downtown art scene.



Dan Colen at Sky High Farm © Ryan McGinley

But not long after relocating to the Hudson Valley, Colen realised something was wrong. The satisfaction he hoped to derive from the rolling hills and grazing cows just didn't materialise. "Instead of it being something I could commune with or connect to," he says, "the land became a thing I owned." He instinctively felt the way to rectify that was to give back and "do service". Within a year, he had launched Sky High Farm with the sole purpose of combating food insecurity in communities that were underserved.



Sky High Farm © Ryan McGinley



Members of NYC community activist group Playground Youth model the farm's merchandise © Quil Lemons

Since it started, Sky High Farm has donated more than 70 tons of organic fruit and vegetables and pasture-raised meat to food pantries (which distribute food directly to those in need) across New York State. The achievement seems remarkable, given how little Colen knew about farming at the start. “Setting up a farm is really ambitious,” he admits, and readily acknowledges the efforts of his full-time team. “Trying to change a landscape and rebuild the soil health is a lot of work. But what stands out aren’t the hard things but the breakthroughs. We started doing rotational grazing, where you move the animals around the field, they eat all the grass and the weeds stop growing. In one season, the pastures came back to life. Different grasses were growing. It was a different colour. That was amazing to see.”



Members of NYC community activist group Playground Youth model the farm's merchandise © Quil Lemons



The collaboration is the first in a creative series exploring art, food, film and design



T-shirt, part of the collaboration between Sky High Farm and Dover Street Market to fight food insecurity

Alongside 30-something acres of pasture, the vegetable garden covers 2.5 acres. “We have lettuces, brassicas, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, different kinds of corn, tomatoes and all the nightshades. We actually planted our first wheat field this season,” he says. Colen’s girlfriend, Lexie Smith – artist, baker and local-grains advocate – threshed and milled the wheat by hand to make the bread. For Colen, something as simple as pulling a carrot out of the ground is a source of pleasure. “It’s like popping a pimple,” he says. “It feels so good. Then bringing it to a kitchen and putting it in a pan – for me that captures the entirety of how awesome it is to farm.” When internships fell through this summer because of stay-at-home orders, Colen and Smith spent a lot of time working the fields themselves. “To be connected to that kind of productivity and growth at a time when everybody felt so paralysed was lifesaving and kept me much saner,” he says.



Sky High Farm jam, \$14, from Dover Street Market New York . Sky High Farm honey, \$12, from Dover Street Market New York

The produce from Sky High Farm goes to neighbourhoods where fresh, nutritious produce is often scarce. “People are shopping for their families in bodegas [corner shops],” says Colen. That means processed food, which leads to diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, and poor development in children. Even in the pantries Sky High Farm works with, Colen notices the stark contrast between Sky High produce and what is otherwise on the shelves: “Seeing lettuce or string beans next to a can of Goya beans, or a porterhouse steak next to a packet of hot dogs, is like night and day. A lot of this is about nutrition, but it’s also about offering everybody an equal experience, making them feel important, proud.”

For Colen, the main task now is responding to what these communities want. “At the beginning, a lot of it was about providing amazing chops and pork loins. But maybe somebody’s working two jobs and doesn’t have time for that and would prefer ground beef. Or maybe they don’t have a way to store all this stuff and they would rather have root vegetables than lettuce,” he says. “There is also a lot of data we can start collecting. If we’re offering families whole diets and we can track information such as how much they’re spending on healthcare, that can shift into policy change.” Ultimately, he believes regenerative farming should be feeding everyone, not just the privileged few.



Rhubarb grown on the farm. Sky High Farm x CPFM tote, \$80, from skyhighfarm.org © Quil Lemons



One of Sky High's T-shirts, \$65, from Dover Street Market New York

For the past nine years, Colen has funded and run the operation from his own pocket. This summer the farm acquired non-profit charitable status and he initiated a year-long collaboration with Dover Street Market, which will see a series of merchandise collections go on sale to raise funds. The project kicked off in October with streetwear produced with brands including Supreme, IRAK and Noah. It will be followed in February by an “artist phase” where figures such as Jeff Koons, Elizabeth Peyton, Takashi Murakami and Rita Ackermann will contribute artworks to be used on clothing. Partnerships with fashion designers, filmmakers and celebrity chefs will follow.

Colen hopes these collaborations will be an entry point for people interested in food justice who want to be part of fundraising, particularly as food insecurity becomes more prevalent as a result of the pandemic. “There are hungry people everywhere,” says Colen. “And that includes an astonishing number of senior citizens and children. It’s important to stay connected to that and

figure out ways to participate, because healthy food is a basic human right, and without a healthy diet there is really nothing.”