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At Sky High Farm, Food Justice and Fashion Joyfully Intertwine

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*Sky High friends and collaborators (L to R): Sidney Munch, Connor Holloway, Matty Friedman, Dan Colen, Lexie Smith, Daphne Seybold, Soba Eshima, Quil Lemons, and Sinderela Park.
Photo: Daniel Arnold*

When I visited Sky High Farm, about two and a half hours north of New York City in the tree-filled Hudson Valley, the fields were covered in a thin layer of snow that reflected the brilliance of the winter sun. Beehives sat wrapped in black covers that kept their occupants cozy as the sweet smell of hay drifted from the barn, where cows stood together eating lunch. A few paces down the hill, the farm's founder, Dan Colen, was in his studio among his wall-size canvases-in-progress, wearing a knitted XXL women's Patagonia cardigan over a vintage Hawaiian shirt and a brown bonnet borrowed from his girlfriend, Lexie Smith, an artist and breadmaker. Colen also wore the Double Knee denim that's part of his new clothing line, Sky High Farm Workwear. Produced with DSMP, the Dover Street Market incubator that has supported emerging brands like ERL and Vaquera, the debut collection combines whimsy with craftsmanship, including organic-cotton chore jackets and loose-fitting sweaters emblazoned with the Joana Avillez-illustrated strawberry and moon that have become the farm's signature. And there are a few "delicate pieces," as Colen calls them, including a set of silky cupro shorts embroidered with butterflies drawn by Botticelli Ceramics' Marc Armitano Domingo. With the majority of the collection made of deadstock materials—Comme des Garçons will be donating fabric for Sky High Farm Workwear to customize—Colen's launch fits right in with the environmentally conscious tide that has finally been pulling at the fashion industry.



PASSION FRUITS

*Artist Lexie Smith in a sweater from Sky High Farm Workwear.
Photo: Ramie Ahmed/Courtesy Of Sky High Farm*

“We’re trying to incorporate the principles that we’ve committed to in agriculture,” Colen, 42, says, “so it’s very much about seasonality and nose-to-tail.” And just as his farm donates all of its produce—from garlic and onions to carrots, blueberries, and strawberries—to New Yorkers who might not otherwise have access to fresh vegetables, the brand has been created solely to support the farm’s mission of food justice.



PROMISED LAND

*Scenes from around Sky High Farm, where a team led by founder Dan Colen grows produce for New Yorkers in need—and is empowering would-be farmers to get their hands dirty.
Photo: Ryan McGinley*

Not so long ago, Colen, part of the Gagosian stable, could have never imagined he would become a farmer—or a fashion designer. In the late aughts he was, along with his friends and occasional roommates Ryan McGinley, Nate Lowman, and the late Dash Snow, at the center of a raucous downtown art scene. It’s been a little more than a decade since he purchased these 40 acres to serve as a refuge from the city—but while farming did prove to be a big step away from freneticism, Colen has found the agricultural community to be just as character-filled. He says it’s given him welcome access to more craziness—the good kind. “It’s like, you get 10 farmers in a room, you have 10 artists in a room: The artists are going to seem really normal. And I love that.”



Photo: Ryan McGinley



Photo: Ryan McGinley

Colen had already worked with Dover Street Market on a series of clothing drops over the last few years, collaborating with brands and artists in the orbit of Sky High Farm. A full-fledged line seemed like a natural approach to raising both money and awareness for the nonprofit. “We realized that with the interest people have in conscious consumption, Sky High Farm Workwear could carry the company’s message in a way that felt modern and accessible,” says Daphne

Seybold, now the brand’s co-CEO after 15 years as head of communications and marketing for Comme des Garçons.



ANIMAL INSTINCT

Dan Colen, with one of the farm’s young charges.

Photo: Ryan McGinley

In addition to releasing two Workwear collections each year, the brand will produce seasonal capsules under the name Sky High Farm Family. Denim Tears designer Tremaine Emory was chosen as the first collaborator, but previous design experience is not a requirement: The photographer Quil Lemons has created the next capsule.

“What’s unique about Dan—and something that we share—is the commitment to bridging visual artistry and other forms of creative culture to the food space,” says Jon Gray, the cofounder of Bronx-based cooking collective Ghetto Gastro and a Sky High Farm board member. That commitment has resulted in a business model where fashion doesn’t just symbolize their values: It furthers them, too.



Photo: Ryan McGinley



Photo: Ryan McGinley

Along those lines, Sky High Farm has partnered with Forge Project, an Indigenous arts and culture organization in upstate New York, to develop educational programming around an outdoor kitchen and two acres of land, where aspiring farmers can pilot new ideas—and has set aside \$250,000 for grants to farmers who come from the communities that Sky High Farm serves, or to “people who are interested in careers in agriculture that have historically been excluded from the conversation,” says the farm’s COO, Josh Bardfield. (Considering that more than 95 percent of American farmers are white, the potential for change is great.)



*Spring Summer 22 Sky High Farm Workwear.
Photo: Ramie Ahmed/Courtesy Sky High Farm*



Photo: Ramie Ahmed/Courtesy Sky High Farm

For anyone who knows Colen, the fact that Sky High Farm is also fertile ground for good times comes as little surprise. “What the farm has been trying to do resonates into all these other creative industries,” Colen says. “And people want to participate—there’s just been an incredible amount of help.”



*Bounty from Sky High Farm.
Photo: Dan Colen*



Photo: Dan Colen/Courtesy OF Sky High Farm

To mark the launch of the Forge partnership, they held a rocket-building workshop for local teens—blastoffs included—with artist David Roy, who founded BLACKNASA as “a space agency to promote the use of rockets for peaceful purposes only,” and their picnic fundraiser featured American Ballet Theatre RISE dancers executing jetés and sautés beneath swaying oak trees.



Photo: Dan Colen/Courtesy OF Sky High Farm