



# Two Legendary NYC Artists in Their Once-Bohemian Village Garden

*Painters Pat Steir and Francesco Clemente spent the pandemic painting and chatting with one another across their back yard.*

By **Diana Budds** | Sep 28, 2020, 11:30am EDT



Pat Steir and Francesco Clemente have lived across from one another in the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens historic district for thirty years. They took portraits of the other this summer. | Portraits by Pat Steir and Francesco Clemente, courtesy Lévy Gorvy

Painters [Pat Steir](#), 80, and [Francesco Clemente](#), 68, have been neighbors for three decades and friends for even longer. They're from a generation of artists who came into their own during the 1970s and 1980s and settled in then-raffish parts of town which have since become almost unbearably polished. Steir, who once wryly told the *New York Times* that she'd been "forgotten and rediscovered many times," has [a new documentary about her life and work](#). Clemente has had a steady and successful career. They live across from one another at the [MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens](#), a courtyard in Greenwich Village that you can only access from the townhouses surrounding it. Inside, [you'll find](#) a stone path looping around a lawn and very tall trees.

“When we moved in there in 1990, I sort of elbowed my way into controlling the garden,” Steir says. “So I planted, with the help of two other neighbors, shrubs and grass and we made it what we thought was beautiful.”

It’s one of those old New York spaces that seem like they should’ve disappeared years ago, and in some ways it already has. Condos are now adjacent to the historic townhouses (a few years ago, Anna Wintour, another famous resident of the Gardens, railed against them at a community board meeting) and the area has steadily changed from a Beat-era enclave — Bob Dylan and Alexander Calder were residents — into something much less bohemian.

As new residents have moved in, the fences around the private gardens have grown taller, and the plants more cookie cutter. Some residents hired professional landscapers and gardeners. Things became more “normal” looking, as Steir describes.

“They wanted privets, I wanted flowering shrubs,” she says. “I’m in a constant battle with the new tenants. I had to ward off people who wanted to plant fake grass. And I said, ‘No! It will kill your children. It will off-gas!’ They thought I was an old coot.”



Painter Francesco Clemente's watercolor, titled *5-8-2020*, is part of [an exhibition](#) at Lévy Gorvy, which includes over three decades of his work. Clemente works across many different mediums, and watercolor is one he returns to time and again because of his itinerant lifestyle.

| Farzad Owrang; courtesy Lévy Gorvy

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Meanwhile, life has become much quieter. The annual May Day dinner parties, which were once organized by Alexander Calder's late daughter Mary, no longer take place. Clemente and his wife Alba, a costume [designer](#), raised their family in the garden and recall days when all of the kids would just run around playing together. But now children aren't as common.

The strangeness of this summer struck some residents as familiar: "When the pandemic started, all of a sudden Soho was all boarded up and looked exactly as it did when I moved to New York 50 years ago," Clemente says. "So for me it was not a shock; it was a sense of tenderness and 'oh the past is coming back.' Now it's not like that. But you know, beauty and the economy don't necessarily go together. Less options may create more beauty and so a more prosperous New York isn't necessarily a more creative New York."

Clemente and Steir often try to speak to one another by yelling across the courtyard. Meanwhile, they've turned their backyards into makeshift studios. Steir — who's known for her enormous abstract paintings that look like cascading waterfalls — and Clemente, who is known for surreal portraits and landscapes, currently [have concurrent shows](#) at the Lévy Gorvy gallery.



Pat Steir is known for large, monumental canvases. But the current exhibition at Lévy Gorvy showcases a survey of her works on paper, which she are a regular part of her personal practice but are rarely released for public view. *Untitled* — an oil, pencil, ink, and acrylic work from 2008 — is one such piece. | Farzad Owrang; courtesy Lévy Gorvy

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In April, Clemente’s daughter Nina, the chef at the Standard hotel, married her longtime partner Wayne Rambharose, in the garden. Clemente, who is ordained, officiated the wedding.

“They’ve been a couple for many years, but it took a lockdown to get married,” he says.

“I saw it from a distance,” Steir says.

What will come of the MacDougal-Sullivan gardens in the future? In a way, the garden has evolved to reflect the neighborhood — and the city — that surrounds it. And as the West Village and Soho have become blue-chip real estate, it has come to feel less like an artistic enclave and more like a playground for the wealthy. Salman Rushdie — who is a friend of Clemente’s — set his 2017 novel *The Golden House*, which centered around a rich family’s fall from grace, in the garden. The family, fleeing Mumbai, moves into a townhouse that’s **maintained as an anonymous holding**.

“When I am in conversation with my American friends, they always say: We have no history. But of course there is history everywhere,” Clemente says. “In the garden, there is history. We are all worried. Because when history moves, there may be blood. So we hope that this will not happen, and we look for a joyful outcome ... maybe we’ll all be able to hug in the garden again.”