



DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN

Inside Artist Brice Marden and His Wife Helen's Bohemian Caribbean Haven

The artist and his family arrived by chance and turned a lush paradise into a living canvas.

by **CARL SWANSON** and **PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN** OCT 22, 2018

**B**

e careful what you wish for,” says Helen Marden, the formidable, delightfully sly wife of the revered artist Brice Marden. Helen, truth be told, seems rather like

someone who has gotten everything she might want. She's calling on the landline from their 18th-century home on Hydra, the Greek island where they have spent their summers since the early 1970s—Leonard Cohen had a place there, too—but I can hear her eyebrow arch.

She is not speaking of the Mardens' 50th wedding anniversary this fall or Brice's 80th birthday last month; she is wryly referring to the irony that she and her husband somehow ended up the proprietors of two bespoke inns, one in Tivoli, New York, and the other, Golden Rock, on the lush Caribbean island of Nevis (where these photographs for *T&C* were taken).



A ROOM AT THE GOLDEN ROCK, THE INN ON NEVIS THAT THE MARDENS OWN.

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Decades ago, before fame, before the retrospectives and the accolades, it had been Brice's aspiration to go into hotel management. That life path hit a dead end, Helen explains, because "he couldn't get into Cornell," the Harvard of hospitality. This despite, she notes, a family connection there. "I tease him about it now," she says.



Unlike many people of their generation, Helen and Brice have not ossified in their emeritus years.

The Mardens stumbled into the hotel business when Helen was in her sixties, shortly after Brice's glorious 2006 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, when the *New Yorker* hailed him as "the most profound abstract painter of the past four decades." Today their properties are a kind of controlled, perfected world, an encapsulation of everything the Mardens stand for.

Their daughter Melia, who herself has gone into the restaurant business in New York, drolly tells me that "it's a cosmic joke that he ended up a hotel person," and their other daughter, Mirabelle, a photographer and video artist, has in various ways helped run the boutique retreats. "It's like a fantasy from high school," Helen says. "Like Hemingway's 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' where people can gather."



THE MARDENS PERSONAL SPACE AT THE GOLDEN ROCK IS APPROPRIATELY ECLECTIC, WITH MODERN DESIGNS—A RONAN & ERWAN BOURULLEC VEGETAL CHAIR FOR VITRA, A PATRICIA URQUIOLA TROPICALIA DAYBED, A BANJOOLI SETTEE AND TABLE BY SEBASTIAN HERKNER FOR MOROSO—BRUSHING UP AGAINST HELEN'S FINDS FROM HER TRAVELS.

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Helen is telling me these and other family secrets—the Mardens like to gossip, and they are prominent enough to also be the subject of it—while Brice is upstairs in his studio, a big sunny room that the house's original seafaring owners used for repairing their sails. “We got here just yesterday, and he's already working,” she says. “Brice won't go somewhere unless he can work.”

(“He and Helen are a great team,” says the gallery mogul Larry Gagosian, who knew the couple for decades before signing Brice as an artist in 2017. “There's really a great dialogue between them. She gives him the space and support to allow him to work. And Brice just wants to work.”)

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nlike many people of their generation, Helen and Brice have not ossified in their emeritus years. She is a painter herself, one mustn't forget, and they recently bought their sixth home, in Marrakech. And at an age when most artists, if they're still making new work at all, are coasting on their greatest hits, Brice is “experimenting, rethinking, flying by the seat of his painterly pants,” as the art critic Jerry Saltz put it.



The hotels are mostly Helen's preoccupation. Brice is still in the painting business.

When Brice shocked the art world last year by leaving Matthew Marks, his blue chip dealer for two decades, he distinguished his first show with Gagosian Gallery with paintings that looked away from his calligraphy-derived work of the last 30 years, seeming to time-hop back to and reinvent the monochromatic pieces he made in the 1960s and '70s. (They sold for millions of dollars, too.)

The hotels are mostly Helen's preoccupation. Brice is still in the painting business. She once attempted to put him in charge of ordering the linens, and he ordered far too many sheets. "He had no idea," Helen says with affectionate exasperation.

"They've had a very complicated relationship, but a very close relationship," says Gary Garrels, who has known them for more than 20 years and who curated Brice's 2006 MoMA retrospective. "Brice is private and even a little shy. And Helen follows the beat of her own drummer all the time."



IT WAS MIRABELLE WHO TURNED HER PARENTS, BRICE AND HELEN, ON TO NEVIS AFTER A VISIT. "YOU WOULDN'T LIKE THE FOUR SEASONS RESORT," SHE TOLD HER MOTHER, "BUT YOU MIGHT LIKE IT UP IN THE HILLS."

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In many ways the Mardens are a fantasy of a cosmopolitan New York family: Melia was photographed as a child by Robert Mapplethorpe, and Mirabelle grew up to co-own for a time a spectacularly hip downtown gallery called Rivington Arms, where both Dan Colen and the late Dash Snow showed.

For years the Mardens threw open their impeccably eclectic West Village townhouse to their daughters' friends for annual Christmas parties at which you might run into both Joan Didion and Inez & Vinoodh. "There used to be all these chic bohemian families in the city," says novelist Christopher Bollen, a friend of Mirabelle's. "I don't think they exist so much anymore."



THE REDS OF THE ROOM AND BOARD PARSONS BED POP AGAINST THE LUSH BACKDROP.

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“It was a beautiful world we got to live in,” says the low-key Melia of her well-curated upbringing, when we meet on a bench outside Smile to Go in Soho, one of her artisanal cafés. “I think Mom has made Dad’s life a lot bigger and more interesting than it would have been otherwise. Honestly, she overrules my dad on everything. My dad can always go into his studio, which is maybe why, or part of why, they have been together for so long. She made his life much more expansive.”

Helen Harrington grew up in Pennsylvania. “I knew from when I was 12 I wanted to get out of there,” she recalls. For college she got only as far as Penn State, but she studied art, and afterward she traveled around Europe with no money and, because she had been reading Paul Bowles, hitchhiked through Morocco.

“I traveled a lot for myself by myself,” she says—a habit she has maintained. Back in New York in 1966, she got a job as a waitress at Max’s Kansas City, the now mythic hangout of artists, musicians, and writers. “And then I met all these people. I was really lucky.”



Everybody knew Brice stood out. He is just an incredibly gifted artist,

Among them was a handsome young artist named Brice Marden. After his hotel management dream was dashed, he studied art at Boston University. There he met Pauline Baez (Joan’s sister)—both he and Helen have a rather uncanny ability to meet interesting people at just the right time—and they married and had a son, Nicholas.

Needing money for his young family, Brice got a job as a guard at the Jewish Museum in New York, where he saw Jasper Johns’s 1964 exhibition, which proved to be something of a revelation (he took to adding beeswax to his paint to improve the depth of the color, as Johns did).



FROM EARLY ON, BRICE AND HELEN MARDEN INGRAINED IN THEIR DAUGHTERS MELIA AND MIRABELLE A SIMPLE PHILOSOPHY: "YOU KEEP LIVING AND DOING WHAT INTERESTS YOU," SAYS MIRABELLE (PICTURED HERE) .

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In 1966 artist Dorothea Rockburne helped get him a job as Robert Rauschenberg's assistant, and that year he had his first solo show in New York, at the Bykert Gallery.

"Everybody knew Brice stood out. He is just an incredibly gifted artist, and very serious about being an artist," Garrels says. At the end of 1965, Max's opened. Brice would sit in the alcove up front, close to the jukebox so he could play Hank Williams and watch the people head to the back room to kowtow to Andy Warhol. It was there that he met Helen. "Even when I saw her

working at Max's, she was a formidable presence," says Angela Westwater, a Max's fixture who today owns Sperone Westwater Gallery.

Brice and Helen fell for each other quickly, as evidenced by his 1967 gridded work *Patent Leather Valentine*, in which he inscribed tiny hearts in each square to her. That year he also completed *For Helen*, a two-panel monochromatic painting in her exact dimensions: five feet nine inches tall, 17¾ inches wide.

It's a pinkish gray color, based, she realized later, on the hue of the mudflats she had seen on a trip to southeastern England that she had described to him over the telephone. Somehow, as if by a telepathic link, he got it right. By 1968 they were married, and in 1971 she took him to Hydra for the first time. A few years later they bought their first house there, on the top of a hill—there are 280 steps up to it—for \$18,000.

Their often public romance has been tested in ways that might have sunk a less assured partnership. Ask any of their friends and they'll make sure you look up that time in 2011 when Page Six reported that Helen had walked up to socialite Helen Lee Schifter in a restaurant and slapped her, loudly accusing her of having an affair with Brice. The other diners reportedly applauded this fabulously soap-operatic spectacle, and Brice later admitted to the "non-platonic" relationship that he had been accused of.



They care about family deeply. It's a big part of their lives.

Brice's health too has been a concern; over the last year he has waged a battle with cancer that is not a secret, given Helen's habit of referring to it on Instagram. Their daughters are a reflection of their bond. Mirabelle, 40, is "more like me, more volatile," Helen says, while Melia, 38, "is more stoic and more tough in a way you don't notice, like Brice."

"I think we had a very fortunate and interesting life. We took it for granted a little, but we came to appreciate it as we got older," Melia says of growing up Marden. "Because both of them cared

about aesthetics and beauty and created this exciting visual world for us. We were surrounded by a lot of artists.”



A MARK THORPE TABLE AND PATRICIA URQUIOLA'S GENTRY CHAISE LOOK OUT ONTO OVERGROWN GREENERY.

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Now that Melia is married herself (to ur-hipster Frank Sisti Jr., a.k.a. DJ and filmmaker Kid America), with two kids under five, she hardly travels. She even missed the family reunion photo shoot on Nevis because she had to work.

“You keep living and doing what interests you,” Mirabelle says when I track her down at her tiny gallery and shop, Plain Pleasures, under the Manhattan Bridge. “I think it’s amazing my mom runs two hotels and works on her paintings, that she could start something new in her sixties. She always loved traveling and finding places that mean something to her. Then it sort of became part of what we do as a family.”

When Brice says, “I wouldn’t have gone anywhere without her,” he means a lot more than just that he wouldn’t have had his passport stamped so many times. “They care about family deeply. It’s a big part of their lives,” Gagosian says.

It was actually Mirabelle who cleared the path to the Caribbean. She happened to visit Nevis with a friend, and she told her mom, “You wouldn’t like the Four Seasons resort, but you might like it up in the hills.” Helen and Brice went for Christmas in the mid-2000s and, Helen recalls, “we stayed in this funky place, and I looked all around with the real estate woman and went to lunch at Golden Rock,” a faded inn built on a former sugar plantation. “I said to Brice, ‘I want it.’ He said, ‘What?’ ”

Of course, she got it, and she teamed up with architect Edward Tuttle and landscape designer Raymond Jungles to conceive an 11-room resort that sits on the monkey-gorged slope of a dormant volcano. They spent years cultivating the garden, an overgrown Eden that brims with plants they shipped over and is anchored by a majestic tree with deep roots near the resort’s old entrance. “The day we signed,” Helen says, “I remember thinking, Now that tree is safe.”

The place continues to evolve. This past summer Helen started selling homemade popsicles, and many of the locals—she always wanted the place to be accessible to the island's residents—come by just to have one and enjoy the Tuttle terrace. The couple come here for at least six weeks every year. Brice combined two of the guestrooms to make a studio, and he also paints in the garden, where he had some big rocks arranged to his specifications. But these days he spends much of his time at their home near their inn in Tivoli, north of New York City. You can often catch him at the restaurant there.

Helen hates it when people talk about all the houses they have, as if it's some indulgence. Brice, after all, can't just stay in a hotel room. He needs a studio, and he has one at each property. And all this travel does his work good; you can see the effects of the local light and vegetation in the paintings he has made in Hydra, Tivoli, and Nevis.

“Brice always was reluctant to travel,” Helen says. But then she points to the paintings influenced by the olive trees in Hydra to show that her project of getting him out in the world was more than just vacationing. “And I'm hoping that the pink afternoon light in Morocco” might influence him too. “He doesn't like me to say it, but I see it in his drawings already.”

But, just for the record, Helen says, “Contrary to rumor, there is no other hotel in the works. We're not opening one in Marrakech. I can't worry about showerheads and broken beds until I'm in my nineties.”

She pauses, considering whether to let me in on a secret. “Of course, we might do something...”

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