



Terence Koh returns after two years out of the limelight

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The former art-world bad boy talks about how his move to the country has changed his art—and his life



Following his debut in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Terence Koh took off on a meteoric rise that led to major [art museum](#) and [gallery](#) shows and six-figure prices for his work. Touting himself as the “Naomi Campbell of the art world,” Koh partied with the likes of Lady Gaga. But in 2014, he abruptly pulled up stakes for the simple life in upstate New York. Now he’s back with a new, nature-inspired [art show](#)—and a Sia-like strategy of refusing to have his face photographed. *Time Out New York* sat down with the once-ubiquitous, now semi-reclusive art star to talk about his reprioritized life and fascination with bees.

You seemed to have had it all when you left New York City. What made you do that?

I was visiting friends in the country and just decided that’s where I should live. I’d been such a downtown person that I didn’t even know upstate existed! Going above Delancey Street was like being uptown for me. But I just felt a calling. I believe there’s a mysterious force that flows throughout the universe, so maybe that had something to do

with it. But I'm not sure whether it adds up to a belief in mysticism or Zen Buddhism. Part of why I'm in the country is to figure that out.

You've filled the gallery with dirt, planted an apple tree and built a large beehive for people to sit in for this show. What's going on?

It's my conception of the Garden of Eden. So that's why I've included an apple tree, though it's actually a sick tree that I want to try and nurse back to health here. Then I'm going to replant it at my place upstate.

What about the bee chapel, as you call it?

I was watching a video with the Indian philosopher [Jiddu] Krishnamurti, and someone asked him how we can change society, and he answered that you have to first change yourself. Once you're able to understand the spirit of humanity, everything will take care of itself. So that's the purpose of the chapel: You sit alone, surrendering yourself to the bees hovering around the queen in a screened-in area. There's a tube to the outside that lets bees come and go as they please. There's also an audio component: a mix of background sounds of the universe and of the bees themselves, among other things. All of these vibrations captured as sound are also being broadcast back into outer space. Solar panels power the whole thing.

Have you learned anything about your life and career while you've been away?

Well when I left the city, *New York* magazine said that I'd quit the art world, but that was never the case. I've always been an artist and still am, but I went to the country to become self-sustainable. Living there has taught me that having an art career and feeding your ego doesn't matter all that much, while things like choosing between getting the firewood or freezing to death actually do.