Inside this fold, you will learn about ideas behind The Mastheads, a new literary and architectural project in Pittsfield. In the coming weeks, we will publish two more collaborative issues of The Berkshire Eagle: THE PLACE on July 30 and THE PRODUCT on August 13.

Text by John Babbott
Drawing by Chris Parkinson

1. Project name: The Mastheads
2. First, they were five tiny boxes, the size of a matchbox. Ghost houses. On stilts or spider legs.
3. A masthead. The highest part of a ship’s mast.
4. We moved to Pittsfield. The new studios soared across the Lichtenstein River, on sloping white bases, amidst dreams of wood. We questioned ourselves when a critic said the Hawthorne studio looked like a Howard Johnson hotel.
5. “In the serene weather of the tropics it is exceedingly pleasant the mast-head: nay, to a dreamy meditative man it is delightful. There you stand, a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were gigantic stilts, while beneath you and between your legs, as it were, swim the biggest monsters of the sea, even as ships once sailed between the boots between your legs, as it were, swim the hugest monsters of indoors with the freedom of outdoors.” - Herman Melville, The Piazza
7. Earlier name: Isolatoes
8. “I don’t think they even notice it.”
9. “It is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.”
10. The studios got doors. They tightened up into clean geometries. With helical piers and metal cross-bracing, we would disassemble and reassemble every year!
11. Mastheads: between solitude and nature. Isolatoes: acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own.” - Herman Melville, Moby Dick
12. “They make sense, but they are less interesting.”
13. “I like piazzas, as somehow combining the coziness of indoors with the freedom of out-doors.” - Herman Melville, Seven Gables
14. And last, the foam core models, with rough edges and pencil marks. We placed the CLT order.
15. “There is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.” - Herman Melville, Moby Dick
16. And Sarah went to the schools. The kids touched the studios with love, on their desks, felt relived, felt free, empathized, or so it seemed.
17. In Raccoon, A Fable. Longfellow’s main character has an idea. But he never writes it down, never begins his book, never tests his thoughts, because the main comes, the kids come, the neighbors come, the kids need to be put to bed. The fear of our own ideas can freeze us.
19. “We must add to our heritage or lose it.” - George Orwell
20. The secret is they’re on trailers, wrapped in wooden skirts. A solution to temporality and moveability we so long resisted as too obvious, too mundane.
21. “This is such an odd and incomprehensible world. The more I look at it, the more it puzzles me, and I begin to suspect that a man’s bewilderment is the measure of his wisdom.” - Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of Seven Gables
22. We coated them with pine tar. The studios became black velvelt, plush plywood. Abstract. A scary day - the fear of a misstep. The bees in the knots. Sealed up.
23. “Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?” - Henry David Thoreau, Walden
24. We drove the route with a fishing pole tied straight up against the bed of the pickup truck to test the height ahead of time. Would we whack an electrical line, a low hanging branch.
25. Fireflies like those ideas that come in a flash and if you don’t catch them and you usually don’t catch them.
26. Studios in the landscape. The Housatonic River, the Berkshires, Mount Greylock, the lakes. Individuals in a community Mariam, John, Justin, Greg, Maria.
27. “I keep wondering if someone will get a tick.”
28. “I went and I didn’t see it. The caretaker had never heard of it.”
29. Another disgruntled neighbor.
30. “I don’t think they even notice it.”
31. “I don’t think they even notice it.”
32. What happens when we’re not young anymore?
When I get tired I go to bed.

and a cactus.

and there are more birds, too,

There is a bird, a small one,

There is a little pond and frogs.

There are holes in it so I don’t think it’s newly built.

There is a hallway.

On the inside it’s pink of all things or colors.

I write inside of it and draw.

and it’s a really big house.

All the plants wilted

It smells like it was just painted.

or it’s not a house.

It’s a creative house

On the outside it’s plain and it’s dark.

The House

On the outside it’s plain and it’s dark.

It’s a creative house

or it’s not a house.

It smells like it was just painted.

All the plants wilted

and it’s a really big house.

I write inside of it and draw.

On the inside it’s pink of all things or colors.

There is a hallway.

Walking up the hill toward the studio for the first time, seeing it isolated there, away from any trees it may have otherwise had to compete with for its authority, I was reminded of that pivotal early moment in the film, when, after the monolith appears in the night, one walking hominid plunges a flake from a pile of remains and sees for the first time not just a bone, but a club, a tool, one easy to use, and capable of fracturing a skull with a single inspired blow. In part, this is to say the ape didn’t invent what he needed; he discovered it. But something he’d seem many times before, but this time looked at it until it was something new.

There’s a permission also about art and art making—one celebrated and spread wide by the late public television landscape painter Bob Ross—that an artist’s job is to insert into a world what was always meant to be there. Here, if you put a happy little tree by the pond, where the man in the cabin lives, at the foot of the area inspiring snow-capped mountain, his paintings never surprised me, never shocked me into seeing this world as new, changed, necessary, which is what makes Bob, god rest his soul, a fine craftsman, but a poor artist. Chris and Tessa are artists. Their studios are art. The structures are in and of themselves a prompting to search for what is necessary in what may seem frivolous. They don’t aspire merely to agree with their surroundings, which they do, but also to dissent. To stand in front of them is to be assured that discovery, which is change, which is somehow improbable, is inevitable.

Justin Burnett
2017 Mastheads Resident

In Arthur C. Clarke’s Space Odyssey, monoliths are advanced technological machines built presumably by an unseen extraterrestrial species. I like to think of the Thoreau studio as a machine built by unseen extraterrestrial beings. Both the monoliths of 2001 and the Thoreau studio at Springside Park seem to hold the same indestructible power. One that, watching the Kubrick adaptation, I would always assumed emanated from whatever advanced whizzbang lived inside it. But considering the whizzbangless-ness of the Thoreau studio, maybe there’s some other explanation for the monolith’s strange, divine ability to inspire.

But Now, For a Space

Space is a full field. Everythingbreathes you as wholly as you breathe it. In the sweet smelling, Spartan cupboard of this studio, the oxygen stretches deeper into my fingers and toes. My scalp pinches, brain radiating alpha waves beneath it, like a tiger’sily built tested tiger air with its mind before expiring. Here, the moment unfurls vertically, up and down, the soul remembers its height and depth. The herculean cross like a good lover, and I love it and don’t kill it. It is the anchy of the medico-di of the whisking leaves and swaying needles, the animated song of tiny fingers and twigs. The scour of all fluids closely beneath the surface of so raging a beauty. Raspberry loops incarnate into the distance like chase-work. Hawthorne’s aorta his fingers like cat’s feet down my arm, it writes. Melville whispers machine in my ear. There are no centuries here at Arrowhead. The tie of time is as obvious as a wooden box. Its doors open and I am. And who am I? I am the writer in the talking box. My spirit shines here; it knows its breath as Melville’s swelling lungs, as Hawthorne’s scribbling arm. Part of me will be here for all time.

Greg Allendorf
2017 Mastheads Resident
“I’m going to build one in my yard,” my partner says in response to pictures I have sent him of my studio, which I think along with the caption I left it too is the record for most words written in a three-hour sit-up. This man, who despite my own worries, never had a doubt I would be a writing machine during my month at the Farm., though, so don’t tell anyone anything in The Piazza, on Melville’s porch, reading a book turned to a page with a Byron epigraph (I’ve been meaning to ask what the book is) and then scram—are polite. It’s comfortable: the solid walls, wood grain, and my favorite knots. My roommates—a couple days., which is just to say: ugly. But god, it was good. That first night we sat on the floor on a rolled-up carpet we scavenged and drank tall cans of Budweiser, smokers them one after another from a plastic bag, and then we seemed an unimaginable luxury because it was very hot and we were both unemployed. We slept on the floor. I think we both successfully scavenged beds within a couple days.

Any single feature of this studio has more beauty and thought poured into it than every stick/lump of that house combined, though I have to mention first the familiar magic the two have in common: emptiness, possibility, and the implicit invitation, from the structure itself, to do anything.

The Holmes studio is a tiny prairie house with a canvas, this infinite possibility. But always in the context of: this emptiness, this blank, this potential, this infinite possibility invites the world in, and keeps me connected to it, scarecrows hard at work. The spare elegance of this in itself, to do anything.

I do not know if this was intended, but the Holmes studio is oriented—to the degree—heating and writing, or watching the meadow, and when the wind whips its grass it looks like a beard a beast being stroked by an invisible hand.

I remember moving into a new house seven years ago with a friend—it was an eight house, in a school neighborhood, and we loved it. The inside walls were that lumpy mache-squished stuff that conjures the, or perhaps Daniel Colmanti’s room-complex in A Room in The Human Aid, which is just to say: ugly. But god, it was good. That first night we sat on the floor on a rolled-up carpet we scavenged and drank tall cans of Budweiser, smokers them one after another from a plastic bag, and then we seemed an unimaginable luxury because it was very hot and we were both unemployed. We slept on the floor. I think we both successfully scavenged beds within a couple days.

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All of this is to say that although Melville apparently moved to Pittsfield with the idea of becoming a sort of my admiration for his genius" (he would dedicate "The Past in the Present: Pittsfield’s 19th-Century Literature Project, Pittsfield, Berkshire County, Massachusetts and the iconic English rural environ

Richard Birdsall has referred to midnineteenth-century Berkshire as the “American Lake District,” drawing a parallel between the mountainous county of Western Massachusetts and the iconic English rural environment that fostered the two greatest British Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge—

For over two years, Melville chased whales off the coast of Brazil and in the South Pacific, jumped ship in the Marquesas Islands, and stopped at a series of ports from Lima and Valparaiso in South America to the Hawaiian island of Tahiti. These voyages provided the raw material for the highly embellished tales of his early novels Typee, Omoo, Mardi, and White Jacket, as well as the background for the whaling descriptions in Moby-Dick. Even as Melville began to incorporate more domestic themes into his Pittsfield works of the 1850s and 1860s, he never lost sight of his childhood experiences. “I and My Chimney” is literally about home improvement.

Following a brief stint as a schoolteacher in Pittsfield, he reveals how his summertime escapes to Pittsfield as a young man Melville in the Berkshires, Marianna Poutasse extended family owned an estate just a mile from his eventual home at Arrowhead. In Power of Place: Herman Melville in the Berkshires, Marianna Poutasse suggested that it was Melville’s recombinative powers that fostered the two greatest British Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge—

“With my Chimney” is literally about home improvements, he imbued the local landscape—“the distant locales he had visited. Hawthorne famously suggested that it was Melville’s “comprehensive powers of observation and reflection” that imbued his Pittsfield works with the spirit of “Birdsall’s phrase has the virtue of correcting the still dominant view that Concord was the furthest outpost of antebellum New England literature. But it also suggests a plurality and isolation to Berkshire life belied by the county’s growing immersion in the national (and international) currents of the mid-nineteenth century.

All of this is to say that although Melville apparently moved to Pittsfield with the idea of becoming a sort of the South Seas whale (with its “hump like a snow hill”) which inspired his next novel to his favorite neighbor to the north, Mt. Greylock. But the gathering was also significant for the other antebellum cultural figures it brought into contact. Duyckinck was the editor of the upstart The Saturday Evening Post, and he was in fact putting down roots in a region rich in literary associations and increasingly connected to the nation’s cosmopolitan channels. The cultural historian Richard Birdall has referred to midnineteenth-century Berkshire as the “American Lake District,” drawing a parallel between the mountainous county of Western Massachusetts and the iconic English rural environment that fostered the two greatest British Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. Birdall’s phrase has the virtue of correcting the still dominant view that Concord was the furthest outpost of antebellum New England literature. But it also suggests a plurality and isolation to Berkshire life belied by the county’s growing immersion in the national (and international) intellectual currents of the mid-nineteenth century.

Melville’s novel was released in 1851. From: Justin Boening

July 11, 2017 2:10 PM

To: me, justin_boening, joe.durwin

From: Justin Boening

July 11, 2017 2:10 PM

To: me, justin_boening, joe.durwin

FW: Artist Station

Sent: Tuesday, July 11, 2017 2:07 PM

Subject: Art show canceled

Sounds menacing but I’m pretty sure that guy sleeping inside it was me.

Jeffrey Lawrence

Comics by Melissa Mendes

Melissa Mendes was born and raised in Hancock and now lives in Adams. She’s working on her third graphic novel, The Weight, which you can read at mmmendes.com.