

Out on a Limb



The outdoors is in now, and the new means of getting chummy with one's environment is having a custom-designed tree house. And no one builds them quite like Roderick Romero. Here, a down-to-earth tête à tête with the Tarzan to the stars. Grab a stump and stay for a while.

For the past decade, Roderick Romero has made a name for himself as a tree-house builder to eco-conscious notables. His clients include Sting, Donna Karan, Val Kilmer, and Julianne Moore, and price tags for his custom roosts often start in the mid-five figures. He is also the lead singer of the Seattle band Sky Cries Mary. Romero's ponytail braids put Willie Nelson's to shame, and he wears his mystic spirituality on his tattooed sleeve. But it doesn't mean he can't share a laugh at his own unique calling.

BLACKBOOK: Are you in any way affiliated with the Swiss Family Robinson?

RODERICK ROMERO: [laughs] I'm the bastard son of Mr. Robinson.

BB: What was your childhood like?

RR: My parents have this great section of land near Seattle that had some giant cedars and some Douglas firs, so my brothers and I built our first tree house there, around 1975. It was more like an old-school-style tree fort. People still call them that: "Oh, you do tree forts, that's so cool," and I think of a tree fort as, like, throwing two-by-fours up and nailing them to a tree. That is totally different from what we're doing now, which is, heavy engineering so that we're not hurting the tree, and so that we can build these massive structures way up in trees that are going to last as long as the tree does.

BB: Did you have any formal training in engineering?

RR: No, totally through experience.

BB: What was your first commissioned tree-house job?

RR: It's called Nest. This woman asked me to be part of this 500-acre sculptural garden show. I was doing sculpture already at that time. And I was like, OK, I guess I could build a big nest that you could sleep in and then we'll stick it way up in a tree. And she's like, "OK, let's do it," and gave me a check for 15 grand. It's really funny because it changed my whole life. I totally made it up; to really make it happen it took about eight months. Now, almost 20 houses later, I can do them within probably six weeks.

BB: Do you build every house from wood you find around its site?

RR: I use only re-salvaged, recycled wood. That's a really huge part of what I do. I'm celebrating nature. If I'm hurting nature at the same time, I might as well give up.

BB: Any upcoming projects for high-profile clients? Does Lou Reed need a tree house?

RR: Lou and I have become pretty close friends. We talk mostly about music—though he really loves what I'm doing, architecturally. The next house I'm doing is for Jack Nicholson's daughter, in Santa Monica.

BB: Do you still perform with your old band?

RR: We stopped for three years, and then just picked it back up when we got a song of ours on the soundtrack to *The Bourne Supremacy* film. Suddenly we were getting all these hits on the website. I had just fallen and broken my back really badly. I was in a body cast for six months. I was totally laid up, and I started writing a whole bunch of lyrics. And all these songs came out of it, so we decided to make this new record, *Small Town*, which should come out in a few months.

BB: Do you sleep in the tree houses while you're building them?

RR: It's a ritual of mine, for at least the last week or two, to sleep in them. It's a really important part of finishing touches. You hear all the creaks and cracks, and you get to know it.

BB: Is it hard to let your tree houses go when you finish them?

RR: It's really hard to let them go, and I get attached to the families, too. At the end, once the wires come down, it is like cutting the umbilical cord on it.

BB: Do you ever go back just to visit the tree houses?

RR: A lot of times I will because I want to go see them again. I'm so curious to see how they're doing. Now that I've built in Mexico, Morocco, Italy, and so many houses in the States, I could almost spend most of my year touring my own tree houses.

BB: What is the bathroom situation in a tree house?

RR: I'm putting a bathroom in my new one. There's a company that has this thing called Incinolet, and it's an incinerating toilet. It just incinerates it and then once a month you pull out a tray of the smallest, minute amount of ash and you just throw it over the railing because it's like compost. But I don't like putting toilets up there, I don't like plumbing them, and I really don't even like putting electrical in, to be honest. I'm doing it now, more often than not. But I feel like they should be more like a real return to nature. I understand people are spending more and more money on these houses and they're expecting that, but I'm trying to rebel against it.

BB: Do you ever get teased about your double ponytails?

RR: I've been covered in tattoos, and had hair past my butt for 18 years of my life now. I forget that it's there. It's hilarious when someone's like, "Oh, those tattoos!" I'm like, Oh, I totally forgot. Out here the other day in Hawaii, some people stopped me in the middle of the sidewalk, and they're like, "Your hair—it's not real, right?" And I'm like, What?

BB: Tree houses seem to act as a spiritual refuge for your clients, but do they have a crazy side? Are they used as love shacks or opium dens?

RR: Oh, I'm sure it's happening all the time. I think in the tree-house community, we've all experimented with psychedelics. Not the chemical side—it's not a cocaine community. We like our mushroom tea.

BB: What kind of real houses do you like?

RR: I really like a mixture, which I think is what my form is—a kind of contemporary-primitive. I like all the interiors to be really spacious and open, and no clutter, but I like the outside to just look like it's always been there.

BB: Is it hard to live in New York, with almost zero vegetation?

RR: I spend 90 percent of my time in nature, but I love cities and I love New York. If I wasn't in New York, all these things wouldn't have happened. Everyone comes through New York. The Sting and Trudy [Styler] thing wouldn't have happened. I was in a yoga class with Trudy. And then I'm doing their place in Italy, and Donna [Karan] comes by and says, "Do one for me."

BB: Have you ever built yourself a tree house?

RR: No, except for when we were kids. I'm still waiting for my trees in Seattle to get big enough to actually build in. But I do feel like each time I do it, I am doing it for myself. And they're all like my art. They become so much a part of me that it's like I've built 18 houses for myself—even though they're not on my land. But does anyone really own anything anyway?