

## ARTIST

## Inspired by Environs, From City Loft to Country Trailer

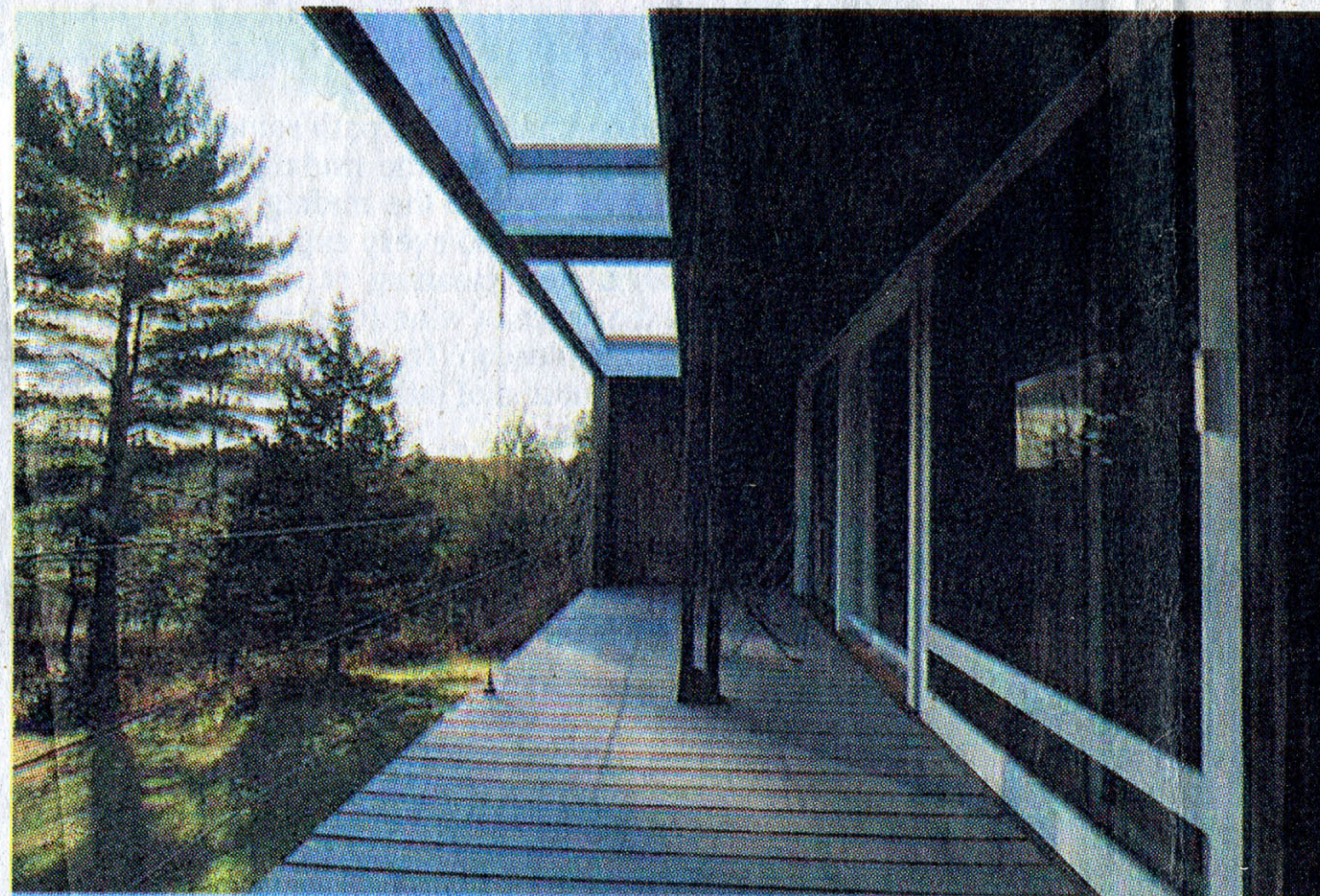
By CATHERINE SPAETH

DAVID DIAO'S earliest works are now rarely seen, but today one hangs prominently in the exhibition "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975," at the National Academy Museum in Manhattan through April 22.

"I hadn't seen this painting in 37 years and so approached it with fear and trembling," Mr. Diao said recently. "I am glad people who have only seen bad reproductions finally can see one in the flesh."

"High Times, Hard Times" romanticizes an earlier art scene in New York, when artists were squatting in lofts. "The beauty of the times was that you didn't need to work a full day job to survive," Mr. Diao said. "If you felt blocked in your work and you think a change of studios would help, you simply picked up and moved to another loft."

For Mr. Diao, picking up and moving began early in life. He was born in 1943 in Chengdu, a city in Sichuan Province in southwestern China. Leaving his mother and two siblings behind, he came to New York City in 1955 to join his father. After studying painting and philosophy at Kenyon College in Ohio he landed a job at Samuel Kootz Gallery in Manhattan. The Kootz gallery was best known for carrying Picasso, but was also an avid supporter of Abstract Expressionism. Combining his experience with abstract painting, Mr. Diao began to form his own practice and quickly became



part of what was a small but thriving art scene.

Many of these artists have had long careers since then, and Mr. Diao is one of them. For 31 years he taught painting in the independent study program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and he regularly exhibits new work. "I am the kind of artist who is the first to find fault or lacking in their own work," he said, "and subsequent work becomes attempts to redress the

shortcomings."

Mr. Diao describes his painting in "Hard Times, High Times" as "a storybook example of the kind of abstraction allowed by the critical thinking of its time."

"It had to be abstract and only deal with formal issues," he said. "I couldn't continue to produce that work because I found the strictures too confining."

Though Mr. Diao still has a loft in TriBeCa, he also has a house in Salt Point, Dutch-



Eric Strausman (Diao, below left)

**UNCONVENTIONAL**

David Diao lives in Salt Point in a Marcel Breuer house, far left, attached to an Airstream-like trailer, above.

ess County, designed by Marcel Breuer. A strange union of high modern architecture and pop culture, the house is attached to an Airstream-like trailer. Called a Spartan Mansion, the trailer was manufactured by John Paul Getty, and has a streamlined refinement and attention to detail that isn't often found in an Airstream. In the house, Breuer echoed the details of the "land yacht," nautically splicing metal cables on the porch.

"I was not looking to buy a country house," Mr. Diao said. "I am very much a city person. But when given a chance to own a piece of architecture by one of my own heroes — how could I resist? The place was a wreck, and I spent the better part of the next 10 years bringing it back. I became smitten by the brilliance of the original owner, Sidney Wolfson, on insisting that the trailer be part of the design."

The house had an impact on Mr. Diao's art. "Soon stories in and around modern architecture joined those behind modern art and became fodder for my paintings," Mr. Diao said.

"Endangered Species 2" (2004), a map of modern houses in New Canaan, Conn., has a corresponding key showing those houses that have been demolished and those that are at risk. (The destruction of a Paul Rudolph house in Westport, Conn., in January brings home this sense of loss with immediacy.) And in "Sitting in the Glass House" (2003), Mr. Diao sits and reads a newspaper in Philip Johnson's famous New Canaan house, now managed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation (preview tours of the house began this month; the inaugural picnic is June 23).

"I was confronted with the fact that nothing stays new," Mr. Diao said. "At some point I realized I was facing but another instance of the slow fading of the promise of modernity, an underlying subject of many of my paintings."