

Home/Work | Robert McKinley's Beach-Chic Style at Home in Chelsea

DESIGN | By JULIE EARLE-LEVINE | MAY 2, 2014 6:00 PM



Robert McKinley in his living room. *Nicole Franzen*

"This piece of wood, I can see having for the rest of my life," says **Robert McKinley**, rubbing his hand along the edge of an ash wood table in the Chelsea apartment he shares with his fiancée, Kate Nauta. "Maybe it will be a bench or something else one day," says the 38-year-old designer, hotelier, D.J., artist and creative director. "I try to reuse wood as much as possible." The slab of wood began its life as the leftovers of a project: McKinley brought the scrap home while designing the hotel **Ruschmeyer's** in Montauk. Now, it sits atop matte black powder-coated tubular steel legs in the couple's third-floor brownstone space, where they like to entertain. "He makes fabulous pasta," says Nauta, a model, actor and singer who just returned from the Bahamas, where she recorded her first album with Lenny Kravitz as producer.

McKinley, an avid surfer, also owns a beach cottage in the Long Island hamlet of Amagansett; his wave-riding pals include the Beastie Boy Mike D, with whom he collaborated on operating a charity food truck in the Rockaways after Hurricane Sandy. His love for the sand-and-sea lifestyle shines through in his design work, which also includes the low-key **Surf Lodge** in Montauk and the rustic-glam **Sant Ambroeus** restaurants in SoHo and the West Village. His Chelsea apartment, likewise, features an eclectic, beachy-chic mix that nicely sets off the space's wide floorboards, functional fireplaces and large original windows.

McKinley designed most of the furniture in the living room, including the table and benches. The wide white oak sofa features cream-colored Loro Piana cashmere and wool cushions, a design he replicated in mahogany for the Waikiki hotel he's currently designing; he hand-shaped the coffee table from statuary marble and bronze. The bedroom is also outfitted with a suite of custom furniture hewn from a single piece of 100-year-old American Walnut. Unique vintage and found objects are sprinkled throughout: an antique mirror from Brooklyn Heights hangs above the fireplace, an original gas chandelier from the late 1800s lights the living area. Scandinavian chairs from Paris sit fireside, and a gold-leafed skull, from a series that was custom sat for GoldBar, a boîte he designed in 2007, rests on a circa-1950s Franco Albini rattan ottoman from Rome.

The designer's next project is Tijuana Picnic, a Lower East Side restaurant set to open next month by the team behind the perennial hot spots **Indochine** and **Acme**. McKinley, a partner in the project, says that despite the mostly Mexican menu, he's staying away from south-of-the-border clichés. "We'll be channeling a modernist 1960s Mexico City," he says, citing design elements like a hand-painted mural, polished concrete floors and diner booths. It will be McKinley's first time working with the restaurateur Jean-Marc Houmard, whose Indochine turns 30 this year and who tapped McKinley for what he describes as the designer's "effortless" style. "He can do high-end," Houmard says, "but his talent is striking and interesting without having to spend on expensive materials."

Looking forward, McKinley also hopes to build packable beach cabins — shipping containers with teak floors, kitchens with brass inset sinks and, of course, Loro Piana fabric sofas. "They could work in Montauk, maybe Malibu," he says. "You can even put them on a boat to Australia if you want."

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In the room he calls "the den," Robert McKinley stores his collection of underwater cameras alongside a vintage James Bond book and vintage French spy novels from the SAS series. Elephant bookends were sourced from the flea market on 26th Street in Manhattan, and the little oil painting was found at an antiques shop in Hawaii. *Nicole Franzen*



The den has a custom oak sofa-daybed designed and built by McKinley, and a rattan chair he sourced for a hotel project but ended up keeping. The palm photograph above the mantel is by the New York photographer Scott Rudin, whose work McKinley also displays in the Sant Ambroeus restaurant in SoHo. *Nicole Franzen*



So much is personal in the couple's bedroom: the art on left side of room is by a friend, Salvatore Termini, and the tray of knickknacks at the foot of the bed tell the story of their travels. McKinley found the giant clam on an uninhabited island in the Maldives, during a surf trip with Mike D. "We were attempting to harvest fresh coconuts to bring back to the boat," he explains, "and I stumbled on this giant clamshell!" *Nicole Franzen*



McKinley made the table in the living room from hand-shaped statuary marble and bronze. Its grandeur is humbled by the zebra-skin rug it rests upon, which McKinley purchased on a shopping trip in South Africa in 2003. *Nicole Franzen*



McKinley also collects rosary beads and crucifixes on his travels, some of which greet visitors at the entrance to the apartment. *Nicole Franzen*

