



SOHO REVIVAL

A CUBAN ART COLLECTOR AND HIS LONGTIME DESIGNER CREATE A WARM MODERN BACKDROP FOR CONTEMPORARY ART THAT PRESERVES A BIT OF THE PAST BUT ALSO FULLY INHABITS THE HERE AND THE NOW.

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Artist Kcho's Cuban flag, made to look like makeshift rafts, not only nods to the owner's heritage but is also a commentary on emigration. It hangs above a Kravet fabric-wrapped 1960 Adrian Pearsall bench from Hamptons Antique Galleries. A rolling paper work by Jac Leirner is at left.



The relationship between designer and client is always an intimate one. Just ask interior designer Eddie Lee. “He introduced me to his parents as his first wife,” he jokes, speaking of his client, a Cuban merchant banker and wine importer in his mid-40s. After designing six previous residences together—beginning during Lee’s 10-year stint with legendary decorator Greg Jordan—and living through the client’s marriage, birth of a child and eventual divorce, “I just know what he wants,” he says.

Primarily, what Lee’s client has consistently desired over nearly 15 years were spaces in which to display his ever-growing collection of contemporary art—his greatest passion. “I bought my first piece in the summer of 1992 with student loan money,” recalls the homeowner. “At first the collection was heavily Cuban-centric. Then, I branched into general Latin American art, and starting in the early 2000s, I began looking outside of that.” Currently, the collection is evenly split, he says, between Latin art and contemporary art of other nationalities.

Appropriately, the SoHo loft the client purchased was at 420 West Broadway, “the most important gallery building in New York, bar none,” he believes. Originally built in 1900, the building eventually became the first and most prominent space to house the galleries that put SoHo at the center of New York’s art scene during the 1980s and ’90s. In 1977, pioneering art dealers Ileana Sonnabend and Leo Castelli opened exhibition spaces here and, together with other gallerists who followed, such as Mary Boone, created the market now referred to as blue chip. This represented, among many other bold-face names: Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Gilbert & George, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Christo, Julian Schnabel and Jeff Koons.

In 1999, the building had been converted to residential lofts after many SoHo galleries decamped to Chelsea. So when the time came to start making this blank slate a home, Lee and his client decided on authenticity as a recurring theme throughout. “We wanted to stay true to its industrial roots,” explains Lee of their intentions. “I love seeing all the cracks, the steel ties holding the walls together, the original wood windowsills.” Collaborating with architect Edward Wendt and builder Ash Suri, Lee and his discerning client devised a plan that preserved that history, but also ushered it into a new millennium.

The owner and design team appreciated the existing industrial features such as exposed-brick walls and a rustic wood ceiling beam that runs the length of the apartment. Others were less fortuitous. “The apartment only has windows at the front and back,” says Wendt, “and we wanted to get light into the central area,” which they accomplished by enclosing the gym at the rear in glass so as not to block light offered through a rear window.

Lee then turned his attention to finishes and furnishings. “In every interior I’ve done for my client, blue has been

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a theme,” says the designer, who suggested radically altering the fireplace by surrounding it with a wall of handmade bricks glazed in a vibrant cobalt blue. Yet even the best marriages have their disagreements, and this proved to be one of them. “I pushed back pretty strongly,” remembers the owner. “If it were anybody else I would have said no immediately. But I did say to him, ‘Don’t be upset if I knock it down.’” In the end, he concedes, “It’s one of those things I love the most,” especially because it proved an ideal foil for a favorite Rashid Johnson painting. The blue acts as the main accent color throughout, set against the relaxing neutrals that the homeowner craved.

As for the furnishings, it was for this project in particular that aesthetically the duo had seemingly evolved in their choices. Previous projects had more traditional environments inflected with Art Deco flair. Now, the homeowner favored something more contemporary but still grounded in history. “I had grown to like midcentury furniture since our last project and saw its value,” says the owner. But neither Lee nor his client wanted a predictable greatest-hits survey of midcentury modernism, so the designer also mixed comfortable present-day Italian furniture into the array of classics, thus bringing the look into the 21st century.

Custom pieces, such as an oversize dining table modeled after one the client had seen at a French château, emphasize the rustic-industrial chicness of the beam and columns. But Lee didn’t want to overdo it. So in other areas where wood was deployed, he amped up the more sophisticated elements. The custom kitchen cabinetry and barn door that rolls across to conceal storage, for example, were both fabricated from bleached walnut that was sanded and oiled to give them a sleeker look to encourage balance.

For now, the relationship between the table and the kitchen is still, as they say, in development. Lee characterizes his client as “an astute entertainer,” who noticed the bottleneck that forms when guests gather around the kitchen at dinner parties. The two are now talking about raising the table to bar height, thus making the prepping and eating spaces feel more contiguous. Lasting marriages, after all, must continue to evolve. **L**



In a sitting area fronting the fireplace, a Rashid Johnson work pops against a wall of hand-glazed blue tiles from Clé in Sausalito, California. Maharam's Divina by Kvadrat felt covers a custom tufted ottoman, while floor cushions are sheathed in Mokum's De Rosine abstract floral fabric, purchased through Holly Hunt.



Florian Maier-Aichen's nocturnal panorama of Los Angeles hovers above the living room's vintage Folke Ohlsson sofa from Habitat in Los Angeles. Custom mirrored tables let the colors and textures of a dusty blue Patterson, Flynn & Martin rug and a 1950s Grasshopper chair dominate the space.

Right: A faux-flower installation by Roberto Behar and Rosario Marquardt of R & R Studios in Miami projects its positive message from behind a custom wine-tasting table and Perch stools by From the Source.

Opposite top: Contemporary pieces—Antonio Citterio’s Cowtan & Tout-upholstered Luis sofa and Naoto Fukasawa’s Papilio chairs, both from B&B Italia—mix with Harvey Probbler tables from Christopher Anthony in Palm Springs as well as a midcentury lamp.

Opposite bottom: A small table holding decorative mementos sits next to a circa 1970 leather Rock chair by Gerard van den Berg for Montis that the designer found at Amsterdam Modern in Los Angeles.



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Just inside the entry, set against the loft's exposed-brick walls, glass sculpture by Cuban artist Jorge Pardo sits under an embroidered canvas by Egyptian-born artist Ghada Amer.



The dining area's custom table, fabricated by Artistic Frame, is illuminated by an Olafur Eliasson pendant lamp. Between the windows is a work by another Cuban artist, the late Carlos Alfonzo.



Above the master bed, dressed in Restoration Hardware linens, is an El Anatsui hanging. At the foot of the bed sits a 1940s French pommel horse from Big Daddy's Antiques in Los Angeles; at right is a pressed-tin mirror from Hidden Galleries and an Eddie Martinez painting.



In the master bath, Axor fixtures complement a Victoria + Albert Barcelona tub. The sinks are set atop a custom butternut-wood vanity fabricated by Korts & Knight. Ephesus Dune stone tiles from Akdo pave the floor.