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p1/2

The New Alchemists

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Feature Home April Style & Home
Truly provocative designers and architects today constantly collect and then bring their discoveries home. Each lives among chosen pieces, studying and savoring, editing relentlessly to create spaces that are themselves works of art. Here are the residences of four such collectors whose private experiments are influencing and shaking design and architecture far beyond Northern California. Theirs is not the sedate world of antiques. They embrace bold materials (carbon fiber, Provista plastic) and international stars (Konstantin Grcic, the Bouroullec brothers, Marcel Wanders, Marc Newson, Garouste & Bonetti, Tom Dixon). They group eccentric finds next to rare treasures, interested only in the unique. As these creatives explore and redefine design, they also push decorating away from formula and forward toward rigorous, searching individualism and an era of discovery.

Soma incubator “I’ve always been interested in the pre-factory- made era, when craftsmen

could take time and achieve perfection,” says Steven Volpe, the interior designer and partner in the influential Hedge Gallery, based in Jackson Square.

He started collecting in the late 1980s, while he was a design student in Paris, and his purchases then reflected his passionate Francophile taste: museum-worthy, signed French furniture with an art deco sensibility. Now that Jean-Michel Frank and Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann are priced in the stratosphere, Volpe is turning to emerging artists and designers (his favorite dealers include the Belgians Axel and Boris Vervoordt) and new global discoveries from tiny galleries on the side streets of Paris.

“I strive for pieces that have integrity, no matter their style or approach,” Volpe says. “Now, more than ever, collecting is individual, and every piece must have merit, must be able to stand alone.” Whereas he once gravitated toward furniture in mica, shagreen, crocodile, or macassar ebony, his new treasures might be made of plaster or galvanized steel. “They look modern, fresh, and original,” he says. “They shake up a room.” Each fall, designers and editors look forward to the Hedge booth at the SF20 Modernism Show, where they can catch a glimpse of Volpe’s latest direction. The aesthetic: Signed French furniture from the mid 20th century mixed with modern pieces by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec and emerging Dutch artists.

LUIS DE JESUS LOS ANGELES

2685 S La Cienega Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90034
T 310 838 6000 | F 310 838 6001
gallery@luisdejesus.com | luisdejesus.com

The clients: Financiers in San Francisco, London, and Paris; tech tycoons and venture capitalists in Silicon Valley; young social couples.

The circle: When he's not advising young designers, Volpe is at openings at SFMOMA, the de Young, and SoMa galleries, and when he isn't cooking at home, he can be found dining at Cotogna with Hedge partner Roth Martin.

Philippe, Paris. Idris Khan's digital print on aluminum, Blossfeldt... After Karl Blossfeldt, part of Khan's series is from Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

Nob Hill laboratory

"I don't buy for 'investment'; I buy for the love of the object," says San Francisco architect Andrew Skurman, a lifelong collector. Françoise Skurman, his wife of 11 years, adds, "When we travel, it's usually to art shows or architecture exhibits and art galleries. We collect together. We each have veto power, but generally we agree." The showcase for their daring yet rigorous assemblage of contemporary pieces and fine antiques is a bright aerie on Nob Hill. Andrew created the all-white interior architecture for a client 20 years ago, installing exquisite lacquered-wood wall panels and Japanese glass-tile floors. Six years ago, through a stroke of luck, the couple were able to purchase the apartment for themselves, and they turned it into a hothouse for their ideas. "Modernism is the expression of design for our day, but it is important to recognize and appreciate all the epochs that have gone before," Andrew says. "Quality pieces will work together and create a lively dialogue. Refined classical will always work with the best of modern. Then throw in an art piece. Your room will vibrate."

The aesthetic: The clean lines and symmetry of an architect whose work is inspired by Palladio, his own classical and modern education, and his wife, who studies and makes sculptures.

The clients: Ultra-private residents in Nob Hill and in Atherton, Carmel Valley, Paris, New York, and Texas who want a custom apartment or country house.

The circle: Andrew, who was recently named a chevalier by the French minister of culture and is a longtime adviser and creative director for the S.F. Fall Antiques Show, leaves his Sacramento Street studio for dinner with Françoise at Quince or at home, where art curators, Sonoma Valley vintners, authors, and artists come to break bread with them. He can also be spotted at student art shows, scouting for new talent.

While the engine of the US art market continues to purr from Manhattan, these days youthful fuel comes from Los Angeles. The number of top-palette art schools, affordable rents, density of creatives, and growing network of art enthusiasts, collectors, gallerists, and museum curators—as demonstrated by last year's Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980 surveying postwar and contemporary SoCal art of more than 120 exhibitions and public programs at 130 galleries and museums—makes for a perfect storm of SoCal cool, creativity, and productivity—especially for young and midcareer artists.

As a result of this boom, Los Angeles has become a factory town for contemporary art much like it was for film while the studio system was in place, with galleries and museums great and small playing the studios' role, and artists, the new actors. Stars such as Ruscha, Baldessari, Hockney, and Moses are well known. The question is who are the stars of tomorrow?

DENNIS KOCH The Colorist by Numbers

A quick inspection of notes posted in Dennis Koch's studio gives a glimpse into the inspiration that puts the pulse in his drawings: logarithmic J-curve, Seirpinksi triangle, self-modifying feedback loop and nonlinear time, electrosmog, stereo isometric reflections, embedded polarity, Tesla scalar waves, and parallel process.

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Saturated with color, often psychedelic and wild, Koch's work is also cerebral, meticulous, highly disciplined, and multilayered. Through principles of mathematics, physics, Jungian archetypes, cycles, sequences, recursions, cymatics, planetary movements, and movement of thought between the brain's hemispheres, Koch is concerned with underpinnings and structure, macro to infinitesimal, apparent or subliminal.

Even the relationship between conception and execution is inherent in his pieces, representing its own symbiotic cycle of realization and regeneration, a kind of meditative assembly line Henry Ford would be proud of. "My work gives my hand repetitive tasks that allow room for thoughts and ideas to appear and grow," explains the 35-year-old erstwhile Iowan who received his BFA in studio art practice from The University of Iowa. "I wish everybody had that experience with time."

A precocious drawer as a kid, Koch was fascinated with portraiture. But even then, what he calls an obsession with geometry was making itself known. Intricate grids and panels would serve as a subject's background, and abstract geometric doodles fill the margins of childhood notebooks and sketchpads. "When I look at those doodles now I see a direct link to my work today," says the artist, who relishes the relationship as an illustration of how ideas "bubble up."

Similarly effervescent has been his professional trajectory. Upon moving to Los Angeles in 2006 to be with his wife, Rebecca Sanabria, a photographer and voice-over actress, Koch took freelance jobs at powerhouse galleries such as Gagosian Gallery, which in time started selling his drawings. "The majority were from a series called Circle Sets, five rings on either side that look like dual hemispheres of the brain, or five fingers around the eyes," says the artist, "but much later I realized how they also chart how magnetic fields emanate from planets."

