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# SATURATION POINT

*A young Houston couple passionate about both contemporary art and vivid color enlists designer J. Randall Powers to conjure a masterful composition that balances daring with tradition*

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When J. Randall Powers visited the former abode of his Houston-based clients, who were then living in Manhattan, the walls of their smallish space were jam-packed with their impressive art collection. "It looked like wallpaper," Powers says. Their current home, a 6,500-square-foot house in the leafy enclave of Pine Shadows, allowed for a bit of airing out, but the focus is still on the art.

The initial surprise to Powers was that the couple flatly rejected what he calls "the *American Psycho* look"—the ultrasleek, monotone decor so often adopted to showcase modern and contemporary art collections. It turned out that the husband, who is in private equity, and the wife, a former art adviser, "are both fearless when it comes to color," says Powers. "And I mean *fearless*." Indeed, the wife says that as soon as she looked at the house, she knew she'd paint the library red, "down to the window mullions." Her summers, she adds, were spent in New England, in a center-hall Colonial that didn't have a single white wall. "They were all either wood-paneled or wallpapered." Her parents' home in Houston was full of contemporary art and "very early English antiques—lots of William and Mary and dark oak," so she was also accustomed to a brave mix.

Ironically, when he first met with the couple in 2006, Powers himself had been in a bit of a neutral rut. "When they reached out to me, I wasn't really into that whole English-American style of decorating. I'd been doing a lot of clean-lined contemporary stuff with a

**LEFT:** In the living room of a 1963 Houston house by architect John Staub, which was decorated by J. Randall Powers, the custom sofa, slipper chair, and ottoman are upholstered in Pierre Frey fabrics, and the club chair is covered in a Brunschwig & Fils chintz; the cocktail table, wallpaper, and curtain fabric are also by Brunschwig & Fils, the print is by Robert Longo, the floor lamp is by Paul Ferrante, the side table is George III, and the sisal carpet is by Stark. **ABOVE:** The bench in the entry is by William Haines, the painting is by Pat Steir, and the rug is by Stark. For details, see Resources.





The dining room table, chairs, and sideboard are George III, the walls are covered in a Rogers & Goffigon glazed linen, and the trim was painted in a mix of Benjamin Moore's Linen White and Decorator's White; the artwork was commissioned from Ryan McGinness, and the custom rug is by Stark. For details, see Resources.





The library's sofa and ottoman are covered in a Pierre Frey linen velvet, the William Haines cane chair and cocktail table originally belonged to the wife's grandfather, and the artwork is by Vik Muniz.



The Schumacher sofa in the living room is covered in a Pierre Frey silk, the cocktail table is 1940s French, and the painting is by Beau Chamberlain.



The library walls are painted in Fine Paints of Europe's #WC-48, and the club chairs are covered in a Brunswick & Fils print. For details, see Resources.





predominantly neutral palette. But I was burnt out and ready for something different," he says. "We hit it off, and I just went in with both feet forward. I had a blast with it."

Powers might not have worked in the particular vernacular, but he was certainly familiar with it: "Being a kid from the '80s and a voracious consumer of magazines, I'd studied the look." When he got the job, he did some digging, he says, "back in the archives in my head," tapping into the vibe of Keith Irvine (Irvine & Fleming had decorated the wife's childhood homes) and Mario Buatta. "But because the clients are young, I didn't want it to feel like Buatta had done the house 30 years ago. We updated the silhouettes of the furniture, we updated the lighting." Better yet, he got to dig into the clients' own extensive collection. "They keep a separate space packed with totally great antiques and paintings that they rotate through." Included in the trove are many pieces by legendary Hollywood decorator William Haines, who designed multiple houses for the wife's grandfather. "I'd say we needed a sideboard and eight dining room chairs, and they'd say, 'We have those.' They know what's good in furniture, what's good in fabrics. They know their stuff."

They also want to be surrounded by it. As it turns out, rather than interfering with the art, the exuberant mix enhances it. "I

**FACING PAGE:** The kitchen's lower custom cabinets are painted in a strié effect; the upper cabinets, in Sherwin-Williams's Roman Column; the sink fittings are by Rohl, the range is by Wolf, the refrigerator is by Sub-Zero, the wall tiles are by Walker Zanger, and the stools are by Mecox. **THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The breakfast room's Regency table is surrounded by Mies van der Rohe chairs covered in a Jane Shelton check, and the light fixture is from Carl Moore Antiques. The garden furniture by John Salterini dates from the 1950s; the chairs are upholstered in a Sunbrella fabric. The back porch, with cast-iron planters from Adkins Architectural Antiques. For details, see Resources.







**FACING PAGE:** In the master bedroom, the bed is upholstered in a Schumacher fabric, also used for the curtains, and the console is a family heirloom; the French chair is circa 1780, the wallpaper is by Farrow & Ball, and the carpet is by Stark. **LEFT:** The master bath's tub by Waterworks has fittings by THG, and the marble counter and floor are from Walker Zanger; the chandelier was found on 1stdibs, the chair is Louis XVI, and the artwork is by Marilyn Minter. For details, see Resources.

think there's more of a conversation going on with the art," says Powers. "There's not the usual submissive quality in the interiors." And besides, he adds, even bright colors can provide the perfect background. In the dining room, for example, the lively green Ryan McGinness painting was commissioned for the space. "I wanted it to be such a standout that it took over the room," he says. "In there, the brown and red become neutrals." The wife agrees: "Somehow, when color is everywhere, it's not as jarring."

Though the clients favored streamlined white cabinets in the kitchen, Powers gave them only half their wish, painting the lower cabinets and an island in a bright green strié: "We had to figure out how to make it feel like the rest of the house." He also added "a little humility" to the room with the Mecox barstools. "Not everything needed to be fine." In the master bedroom, the wife had asked for a comparatively serene blue-and-white mix, and Powers complied

with hydrangea-printed chintz. "I love that fabric," she says. "It reminds me of my summers on the East Coast—but then nothing Randy does is a coincidence."

In the end, the house—the last one designed by renowned Houston architect John Staub (most famous for Bayou Bend, the house commissioned by oil heiress Ima Hogg)—is a happy family home in the best American tradition. "Some people like to call this style English, but it's not," says Powers. "It's classically American, because it's fearless." It's fearlessly lived in as well.

"We use the house like crazy," says the wife, who adds that she and her husband are frequent hosts of school parties (they have an eight-year-old daughter), museum groups, and, most frequently, festive casual gatherings that might feature an Armandos taco truck (a Houston favorite) parked in the driveway. "The space is lively and livable at the same time," says Powers. "Nothing is off-limits." ■



