

free association

**Jeffrey Bilhuber brings
Outsider art and family life
together in a Manhattan loft**

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tHE DESIGN PROCESS in this case was what adventurous New York interior designer Jeffrey Bilhuber calls “a matter of resonance.” There he was, on one side of the equation, with Ronald and June Shelp, a couple who describe themselves as “pretty traditional people,” and who happen to have an impressive collection of Outsider art, on the other.

The Shelps had just attended a seminar at Sotheby’s, where Bilhuber, one of the speakers, was talking about how to display art. June was particularly impressed with the designer’s “gift for hanging people’s collections.” Parents of two young children, the Shelps were about to take on the renovation of a former film-editing office in Manhattan’s Flatiron district—a loft big enough for the family and with enough space to accommodate works by such self-taught artists as Thornton Dial, Sr., Mary T. Smith, Bessie Harvey, and Lonnie Holley.

The Shelps started collecting Outsider art about ten years ago, and in part because he is from Georgia and she is from Texas, their collection is now “all southern, all African-American, and all contemporary.” It also is focused on a group of artists who, Ronald says, “lived through a segregated South, the civil rights movement, and the turbulent times that followed.”

“I’m sure what stuck with them,” says Bilhuber, referring to his talk at Sotheby’s, “is my signature of installing art in a more fluid and rhythmic manner. It’s not one over the sofa, two over the sideboard, one atop another here.” Soon Bilhuber’s agreement to consult on displaying the Shelps’ art turned into a full-scale architecture and design project. In spite of the spectacular 18-foot-high ceilings, the 4,400-square-foot space had the typical problem of most lofts and town houses: there is natural light at the front and back of the building, but darkness in between. “It was truly hideous, and all cut up,” says Rebecca Rasmussen, the architect who



HIGH CEILINGS AND ample wall space allowed Bilhuber to display the Shelps' collection in interesting ways. A large work by Joe Light hangs above the window. Custom-made wool braid rugs from Stark swirl dramatically across the floor. The structural columns are wrapped in nautical rope. The sculpture in the corner is by Lonnie Holley. The ceramic garden seats are from Far Eastern Arts & Antiques, NYC.



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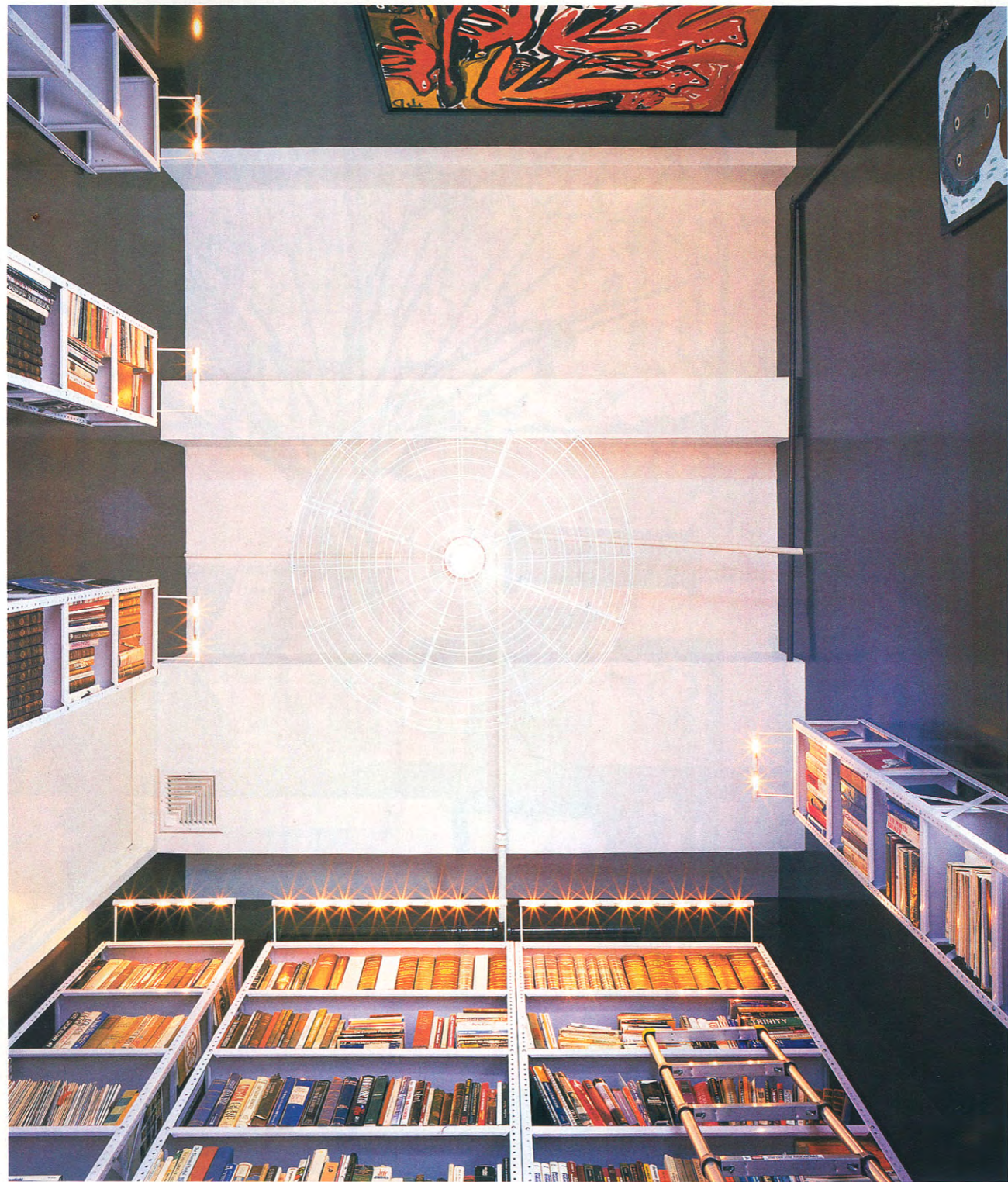
—JEFFREY BILHUBER

A MEZZANINE ALLOWS a
bird's-eye view of the living
room, which is furnished for
comfort and family life. The
sofas, inspired by Billy Baldwin
and the easy chairs with saddle
arms were custom-designed by
Bilhuber, Inc. They are uphol-
stered in Telluride Denim in
azure and navy from Henry
Calvin. The Lucite cube tables
are from Plexi-Craft, NYC.





WHITE ENAMELED-STEEL SHELVING from Pyramid Steel Equipment Corp., made into bookshelves and towers in the library—with its 18-foot-high ceilings—these pages, stand out dramatically from the brown walls. The sofa and ottoman are covered in Bolchoi, a cotton from Boussac. The bright-red wool shag rug, from Beauvais Carpets, NYC, is both fun and striking. "I got tired of shag having a bad name," Bilhuber says.



collaborated with Bilhuber and the Shelps on the renovation.

Gutting the space completely came first. "What that revealed," says Rasmussen, "was a great volume. We all worked on a three-dimensional architectural job from the very beginning." Rather than hide the big structural columns, Bilhuber emphasized them by having them wrapped in nylon nautical rope. In addition, enormous ceiling fans provide visual interest.

In choosing the furnishings, Bilhuber showed his appreciation for the originality, naïveté, and sophistication of the self-taught artists in the collection. "I see Outsider art as a direct and very American response to familiar materials seen in a fresh way," says the designer.

In the main living space, for example, custom-woven braided round rugs swirl across the floor. "They are given a sense of urban modernity by being rendered in huge concentric circles," says Bilhuber. "I refuse to be limited by the proverbial rectangular rug." The rugs are also practical. "With round rugs, you can keep spinning them to hide stains, and when you've finally worn out your options, you simply flip them over," says the designer. The large sofas, inspired by interior decorator Billy Baldwin's classically American St. Thomas sofa, are also practical. "I particularly like the fact that these sofas don't reference nineteenth-century France or the Edwardian age," says Bilhuber. Paired with Thonet



bentwood chairs, the sofas and easy chairs provide a reassuring counterpoint to the sometimes unsettling artworks.

Billhuber points to his choice of denim as the primary upholstery material as one element of what he calls "tension and dialogue. From indigo blue to acid-washed, I feel that denim is a creative response to the art collection and is the other great American element here," he says. The use of unexpected versions of familiar furnishings also adds to the liveliness of the interior. For example, a shag rug dyed fire-engine red covers the floor in the library, the room that doubles as a home office for Ronald, the chairman of the Curatorial Art Advisory Service, a company that advises

clients on buying art and organizes traveling exhibitions. Brown walls and floor-to-ceiling white metal bookshelves also provide a dramatic contrast. "I wanted to bring the mechanical aspect forward," says Billhuber.

Throughout the loft—from the kitchen to the traditional dining area to the open living area—the hanging and placement of the art turned into an activity of mutual admiration. "It was nice to have someone else's eye," says June. Especially Billhuber's, who, with his inimitable enthusiasm, hung the colorful and powerful paintings in what he calls a lyrical manner. "I want my clients' passion to register at the front door," he says.

It does.

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American response
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"IT'S SO DAMN REFRESHING to see a marigold-yellow kitchen," says Bilhuber, who equipped the large room, this page, with cabinets from a medical laboratory supply house. The Alvar Aalto stool is from ICF. The drawings are all by Thornton Dial, Sr. **THE CONTRAST** between the textural boldness of a painting by Thornton Dial, Sr., and the Shelp's traditional mahogany table and chairs gives the dining area, opposite page, its distinctive air. The chairs are upholstered in a shiny lacquered fabric from Gilford. Sources, see back of book.