



VOICES *of*  
TOMORROW



The entry makes a memorable first impression with Joel Hernandez's papier-mâché art *Heaven* consists of a mouth and an eye sculpture, and the latter is in the living room; a handcrafted bench from Vintage on Point; a pair of Gio Ponti walnut chairs with handwoven rush seats (circa 1935); and a custom stained-glass window by Dan Gamaldi.

# Story Time

A design firm puts artists and makers, as well as their narratives, at the forefront

by ANH-MINH LE photography by EKATERINA IZMESTIEVA



In the dining room, a custom table by Klein Agency joins a banquette sofa, a stool, a light fixture (with vintage milk-glass shades) and an art piece (a headboard), all designed by Studio Ahead.



In the early days of Studio Ahead, there were times when homeowners would reach out to founders Homan Rajai and Elena Dendiberia requesting interiors replete with furnishings from an upscale chain. “They wanted us to fill their homes with things we didn’t relate to,” recalls Rajai. “Now that we’ve built out our portfolio, potential clients understand our ethos: They want custom homes, they want to know the stories behind the artists and furniture-makers and they want to support people who are on the rise.”

Indeed, their five-year-old practice, which encompasses interior and product design, emphasizes collaborations with creators who have Northern California ties or a multicultural point of view—sometimes both, much like Rajai and Dendiberia themselves. He is a Bay Area native of Persian heritage, while she hails from Russia. “We have a local and a global perspective, and it’s not Euro-focused,” he explains.

In San Francisco’s Noe Valley, a couple in their thirties, who are expecting their first child, enlisted Rajai and Dendiberia for a 1920s residence. “The clients loved that it had a history, but it had gone through three or four remodels that had given it a Frankenstein reality,” says Rajai. “They wanted to keep some of the traditional elements but also contemporize it in a way that functions for how they live.” Although he



Studio Ahead designed the cabinetry with a walnut inset that contains a painting by Gracie DeVito and a ceramic work by Nathan Lynch. A dining chair by Marcello Ziliani has been transformed by Lane Alexis, whose hand-braiding covers the piece.



The honed black basalt-topped cabinetry and hood were installed by contractor Larkspur Builders, while the walnut stools with green-and-cream braiding are by Shaker Chair Reproductions and the vintage pendants were sourced from 1stDibs.

and Dendiberia spent more than a year on the project, she notes that they are still in the process of “layering, elevating and adding more art—another level of detail.”

Studio Ahead’s approach is on display from the moment you set foot inside. The stained-glass window next to the front door was custom made by master stained-glass artist Dan Gamaldi of Cradle of the Sun, which was established in San Francisco in 1977. Amid Gio Ponti’s walnut-and-rush Fireside Chairs, circa 1935, and a handcrafted wood bench from Vintage on Point hangs a papier-mâché sculpture by Joel Hernandez, a Mexican-American artist based in San Francisco.

A hand-loomed sisal carpet from Stanton flows from the entry to the living room, then through to the dining room. The living room is anchored by a custom sofa and chaise that come in handy during movie nights. Indeed, the ability to accommodate the clients’ large extended family was key. Between the dining room and kitchen—which open onto each other—a custom 13-foot banquette sofa, several Shaker Chair Reproductions chairs and counter stools and Studio Ahead’s own Sheep Stool provide ample seating for guests. The latter, along with the Sheep Headboard treated as wall art in the dining room, are composed of cream merino wool felt from Sebastopol’s JG Switzer. (In the primary

bedroom, the headboard is used for its originally intended purpose.)

Throughout the home, Rajai and Dendiberia removed extraneous details—like the picture rail moldings that visually broke up the walls, making the ceilings seem lower than their nine feet—and relied on copious amounts of white paint. In the living room, they extended the brick fireplace to the ceiling—again, to give the impression of greater height—painting it white as well. Against this minimalist backdrop, says Rajai, “the focus became the forms,” including designs by Studio Ahead that are “more sculptural and art installation-like.”

The soft palette nods to the clients’ fondness for the town of Inverness, just north of San Francisco in Marin County. Studio Ahead also worked closely with makers in Marin, such as Shaker Chair Reproductions, woodworker Ido Yoshimoto and ceramist Nathan Lynch. “Part of our practice is explorative,” says Rajai. “When we meet with artists, we ask them, ‘What other artists should we know?’ It’s fun; it brings joy to our lives, to our clients’ lives and to the artists.” And although this home brims with singular items, according to Dendiberia, this project “wasn’t so much about having things that no one else would have. What was important was creating this ecosystem, telling stories through these objects.”



The primary bedroom is appointed with the Sheep Headboard by Studio Ahead and a solid cypress sculpture by Jesse Schlesinger that serves as a side table, which is topped by a 1970s lamp produced by Valenti.



In the primary bathroom, Kohler vessel sinks, wall-mounted fixtures and medicine cabinets are combined with elements that recall earlier eras: a custom walnut vanity by Vintage on Point, penny-round flooring, vintage milk-glass sconces from 1stDibs and a stool by Shaker Chair Reproductions.

The living room seating includes a custom sofa and chaise designed by Studio Ahead and a wing chair and ottoman by Sabin (upholstered in Edelman leather), along with felt tapestry art milled by hand in JG Switzer’s workshop, a sculpture by Jesse Schlesinger, a Joel Hernandez papier-mâché piece and a commissioned terracotta work by MyungJin Kim on a custom cast pedestal by Manuel Palos.