



Amanda Nisbet's room at Kips Bay Decorator Show House, with a photo by Marilyn Minter, whose work has been in the last few Kips Bay show houses.

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# Kips Bay Decorated, and Curated

By **PENELOPE GREEN**

AAKASH NIHALANI is a 24-year-old Brooklyn-based street artist who uses electrical tape to sketch three-dimensional shapes on public surfaces like sidewalks or brick walls. [His work](#) is playful, even joyous, and suggests all sorts of possibilities. Imagine a bright yellow doorway on a pocked concrete wall, or an enormous pink cube careering along the pavement.

This week, one of his pieces — a cascade of rectangles tumbling down the sky blue walls of a swoopy circular staircase — can be seen in an unlikely place, the rotund front hall of a double-wide town house on East 63rd Street in Manhattan, the site of the [Kips Bay Decorator Show House](#), now in its 39th year.

That a young conceptual artist like Mr. Nihalani would be on view at this show house, which has traditionally been better known for its designers' pelmet art or their collections of 19th-century botanical prints, is an acknowledgement that designers are increasingly flexing their curatorial muscles to animate clients' spaces with contemporary art. It also suggests that Kips Bay organizers are reaching for a younger audience.

"It's more about curating a room than decorating it" is how [Wayne Nathan](#) describes his

job. Mr. Nathan, who brought in Mr. Nihalani, is one of 21 designers participating in this year's show house. You could call him an art fair veteran ([Art Basel Miami Beach](#) and [Frieze](#), in London, are his habitual shopping grounds). Nonetheless, on this room he collaborated with Helen Varola, an art adviser and curator, though the slick pink disk that looks like a giant Skittles at the foot of the stairs here — a Mattia Bonetti coffee table — is his own.

Ms. Varola noted a long tradition of artists playing with domestic objects or, as she put it, of “artists exploring how design functions as a subversive tool and expanding their practice into domestic settings.” She ticked off examples, from Surrealists like Méret Oppenheim (who made that furry teacup) and Warhol (who made wallpaper) to, say, contemporary artists like Andrea Zittel (who makes entire rooms). So it seemed intuitive to Ms. Varola, who was asked by Kips Bay organizers to lead an art tour of the rooms next Tuesday, that decorators would be overtly acknowledging that tradition with interactive pieces like Mr. Nihalani's or with video art.

“It's all about reinvigorating space,” she said. “Transforming décor into a matrix of associations.”

Playing in [Campion Platt](#)'s terse library upstairs was a video piece by [Alex Prager](#), a young self-taught photographer of staged narratives ([Cindy Sherman](#) meets [Gregory Crewdson](#)) who was included in a show at the Museum of Modern Art last fall. The short film, of spectators at a horse race, was Mr. Platt's nod to John Hay Whitney, the clubby, horsey and progressive philanthropist and newspaper publisher who was once an owner of this house. (The house was lent to Kips Bay by the family of Disque Deane, a real estate developer and financial adviser who died last year.) Also on view was a painted drama of '60s-era womanhood by the time-traveling artists [McDermott and McGough](#), called “You Said Your Lips Were Mine Alone to Kiss.” Tubular wall sconces designed by Mr. Platt looked like sex aids; the Venetian plaster walls, done by [Ricardo Brizola](#), looked like ancient porcelain.

In a small study by [Aurélien Gallet](#), a 30-year-old art appraiser, furniture designer and decorator showing at Kips Bay for the first time, a neon-and-mirror wall sculpture by [Iván Navarro](#), a Chilean artist, invited you to peer into infinity.

As the designer Richard Mishaan put it: “My job is to give context to people's collections, to find the commonality in disparity.”

Mr. Mishaan had drawn the prize, the 40-foot living room once decorated by Sister Parish for Mr. Whitney. Or was it a booby prize?

Nodding at the florid gilded mirrors at one end, he said, “At first I thought, ‘Oh, no!’ But you know what? Everyone has *stuff*. Everyone I work with has their collections. It doesn't matter what it is; giving it context is my task.”

Furthermore, he said, pointing out the dark blue Leleu dining table, the vintage Moroccan rug, the mercury glass mushrooms sprouting on a sideboard and the blown-glass tears sliding down grass cloth walls (both pieces by [Rob Wynne](#)), “All good things go together.”

Mr. Mishaan had done some of his art shopping at [Other Criteria](#), the Gagosian emporium, with a quartet of [Damien Hirst](#) butterfly prints. He had also made his own artwork, printing photographs he had taken of significant architectural ceilings — one by Tiepolo, for instance — on canvas and mounting them in ornate gilded frames.

“I call those Guilty Pleasures,” he said.

On another wall were two rather stunning Abstract Expressionist paintings. It took him two weekends to paint those, he said: “Nobody can understand what they are. They’re like, ‘Clifford Sills? [Helen Frankenthaler](#)?’ I’m like, ‘Whatever you want them to be.’ It’s more about the vibe it gives your room.”

[Amanda Nisbet](#), a gregarious Upper East Side decorator with a taste for baroque minimalism, had also made her own artwork, superimposing her face on a copy of a voluptuous nude by Boucher.

“My daughter would just die,” said Ms. Nisbet, the mother of two teenagers.

There was a Marilyn Minter photograph over a gold-flecked bed; on the walls, Ms. Nisbet’s own fabric, called Pink Lemonade, looked like a child’s finger painting.

The house has a complicated layout and a layered architectural history — style overlaid upon style, like the cities of Troy. Built in brownstone in 1870, it was enlarged into a second lot and refaced in painted stucco in 1919. In 1955, when Mr. Whitney bought the place, the architect Ellery Husted gave it a brick front, and Mr. Whitney imported and installed a paneled library from England. He also hired [Philip Johnson](#) to design a fourth story. As it happened, however, Johnson’s modern glass room was too stark and modern for the Whitneys, who asked Sister Parish to mediate. Needlepoint pillows and throws were involved, according to a Kips Bay press release.

This week, the ghost of Philip Johnson would seem to have won out, or so it appeared to a reporter who stumbled up into the sunshine on the fourth floor, after climbing another swirling staircase, this one cocooned in shiny black paint and a giant yellow Ikat-print wallpaper put there by [Janet and Carolina Rauber](#), a designing sister act who had assembled a collection of man-high gold finials at the base of the staircase, reminiscent of “Alice Through the Looking Glass” chess pieces.

[David Bowie](#)’s “Young Americans” roiled the fourth-floor room, which had been divided in two by a raw-edged wood bookcase, and decorated by [Brad Ford](#) and [Robert Stilin](#). Mr. Ford told Kips Bay organizers he would agree to decorate his side of the room only if Mr. Stilin took on the other, and indeed the two halves were much of a piece: Amagansett beach house meets TriBeCa loft, a nod to the appetites of the young money manager or entertainment lawyer who would appreciate Mr. Stilin’s taste in art — Richard Prince, Gregory Crewdson, [Alec Soth](#) and Damien Hirst, all plucked from the Gagosian Gallery — and Mr. Ford’s deceptively post-collegiate taste in furniture.

After pointing out his Gagosian finds, Mr. Stilin wondered aloud about the provenance of Mr. Mishaan’s Abstract Expressionist paintings downstairs. Then, in a bit of the art one-upsmanship, he noted proudly that *his* Damien Hirst butterfly was an original, not a

print.

But back to the furniture: That massive slab of wood under the four-foot Noguchi shade on Mr. Ford's side of the room is also a turntable — yup, a record player — and one of an edition of five custom-made pieces, lent to Mr. Ford by [BDDW](#), beloved outfitters of deep-pocketed TriBeCa residents (you can have the table for \$45,000). He had arranged his vinyl collection ([Patsy Cline](#), Michael Jackson) on the raw wood shelves. “I love a live edge,” said Mr. Ford, a soft-spoken, Arkansas native, running his finger along a shelf.

Downstairs, another young American was finishing up her room. The manly paneled library Mr. Whitney had brought over whole from England had been re-generated by [Celerie Kemble](#), a Harvard-educated 37-year-old decorator with an appetite for education reform and other progressive causes, whose clientele is largely drawn from the world she inhabits — a Palm Beach/East Hampton/Manhattan axis.

“We kicked off the Belgian loafers” is how Ms. Kemble put it. Like Mr. Gallet, this was her first Kips Bay show house, and the lead time, just six weeks, had been punishing. Still, she had corralled an impressive collection of custom-made and antique objects, like an 18th-century leather chair designed, she said, so its owner might keep his sword on. Or her sword, she corrected, explaining that this was now a lady's library. Bookshelves were lined with cream-colored faux leather, and fitted with Lucite shelves (a decorating tip, she said, is to switch out wooden shelves in dark rooms with Lucite ones). Ms. Kemble had lined the shelves with titles from [Assouline](#), the fashion and art book publisher, and with old copies of *The Paris Review*. “Nobody makes a better colored spine,” she said of the magazine. “It's stuff you should read, in colors you can use.”

Above her, a tentacular midcentury Italian chandelier erupted from a ceiling painted with tree branches against a swirling, smoky sky (it was done by [Miriam Ellner](#) in verre églomisé, a technique of painting glass with layers of gold leaf and other precious metals).

“We fiddled this into a room for repose and probably some drinking,” Ms. Kemble said, to reflect the library's new status as a lady's study. Ms. Kemble, who has three children under the age of 5 and a multistate design business and who, the other morning, was on her way to a school interview for her 4-year-old son, was at that moment crouched in front of a custom-made tufted sofa, braiding its double fringe into a neat twist.

What kind of lady?

Ms. Kemble grinned. “A beleaguered decorator who needs someplace to drink,” she said.

*The Kips Bay Decorator Show House, to benefit the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club, is open through May 26. Admission, \$30: (718) 893-8600, extension 245, or [kipsbay.org](http://kipsbay.org).*