

THE WAY THE LIGHT HITS



In the entry of Julie Hillman's home in East Hampton, which she designed with architect Farnaz Mansouri, a Pierre Chateau pendant hangs over the limestone floor. The artworks include a Jannis Kounellis wall sculpture (left) and several photographs by Don Bronstein.

OPPOSITE: Hillman in front of a Sadaharu Horio artwork in the living room. Sofa by Vladimir Kagan; vintage cocktail table by Pierre Chateau.

In East Hampton, Julie Hillman creates a four-season house for her family that plays with sun and shadow—and finds her calling as an interior designer in the process.

By MARISA MELTZER

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In the kitchen, the table is by Martin Szekely, the shearling sofa is custom, and the 18th-century armoire is French. Wiggle chair by Frank Gehry; walls in Benjamin Moore's Cloud White; artworks by Paige Israel (in hallway), Stefan Sandner (center), and Becky Beasley (above mantel).



LEFT: A George Nakashima chair at a vintage Jacques Adnet desk in the primary bedroom. The bed and daybed are custom; nightstand by John Dickinson; artworks by Bice Lazzari (above bed), Friedel Dzubas (over desk), and Russell Maltz (above mantel).

ABOVE: A round mirror by Eileen Gray hangs in the primary bathroom.

It was in 1996, years before Julie Hillman opened her own design studio, that her career began. She was on maternity leave from her job in fashion, and she and her husband were searching for a home in the Hamptons. “We couldn’t find anything, and our realtor was fed up and said, ‘You should buy a piece of land and build a house. You’re wasting my time,’” Hillman recalls.

It took some hunting, but they found a plot in the woody northwestern end of East Hampton with a long entry and a lot of quiet. It is the Hamptons not of sea views and certainly not of parties, but of solitude. The decor had to reflect that—no obvious beachy references, but rather somewhere that could feel at once elegant and familiar.

Hillman proceeded to get hands-on in the design process to a granular extent. She mulled over “every window, every

door,” she says with a laugh. “I didn’t realize it, but here was my new career that included my love for design and my love for collecting.” She went on to found her own interior design firm, in New York City in 2002, and has since decorated homes for high-profile clients in New York, Aspen, Palm Beach, and the Hamptons. But this house was where so many of her design signatures began: liberal use of white, plays on proportion, a mix of ultramodern and one-of-a-kind flea market pieces.

What all her projects share is a sense of timelessness. It’s an approach that began with this house but that she takes for all her projects. “I begin by looking for a deep understanding of how my clients live and what they really want,” she says. “That’s how I progressed for myself, and this is what works now. I want to create beautiful dream homes for clients, centered on who they are and how they live.”

For her house in East Hampton, she opted to source everything herself, piece by piece. Even if that meant living without a sofa for a while. In fact, the first thing she bought for the home wasn’t even furniture, it was a pair of sculptures she found in Thailand to put in niches in her dining room. She knew she wanted fireplaces, and she found three dramatic but oddly shaped ones in Paris flea markets and in Brussels. She installed them and then had the hearth openings custom built around them. Once, in the middle of an exercise class, she left to go claim a white metal chandelier she had spotted at a yard sale on Butter Lane. Several finds were so large they could not fit through the front door; she ended up bringing them in through windows.

The home’s dark floors and off-white walls (Benjamin Moore’s Cloud White, to be specific) are the perfect base for the pops of color in the modern art she collects. The pale

walls also reflect the light that floods every room. “It’s why Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning were in the Hamptons. The light is spectacular, and it’s different from anywhere I’ve ever been,” she says. She takes walks on the beach even in winter, and she uses her house on weekends year-round.

Hillman has no curtains in her bedroom so she can wake up with the light. She admits she would never do that for a client: “They all want blackout shades.” Her house is filled with mistakes—or, at least, quirks. The floors, for example, are ebony-stained pine because she was trying to save money. But pine, while economical, is soft, so the floors are now dented and scratched. Still, visitors assume they’re antique. Or take the pool, which is long, black, and narrow and designed to look like a pond. It’s also quite far from the house, because Hillman didn’t want to look out at a pool cover in the winter. “If you forget a towel, it’s not exactly right off the kitchen,” she says, shrugging.

No one in her family will let her change a thing. “My son just got married, and now he shares his room with his wife,” Hillman says. “It was pulling teeth to remove his hockey sticks and baby monkey chandelier.” The family almost went to war when she converted an old playroom into a home theater during the pandemic. It was the first real change to the house—they haven’t done anything structural at all—since they moved in. After 30 years she’s thinking she might be ready to take on renovating the bathrooms. Her East Hampton home may have been her first project, but it’s one that has clearly pleased the clients. ■



The eclectic mix in the library includes a rug from Morocco, a vintage Greta Magnusson Grossman lamp, and a Paolo Piva cocktail table. Hillman found the chandelier at a local yard sale.



The vintage chair in the library is in the style of Jean-Michel Frank. The vase on the cocktail table is by Ettore Sottsass. The artworks are by Emily Kame Kngwarreye.



The powder room has a custom metallic paint above the wainscoting. The artworks include a 19th-century portrait (left) and a work by Jenny Holzer (center).



The 17th-century French mantel in the living room was purchased from John Saladino. The painting above it is by Emily Kame Kngwarreye.



In the dining room, a Provençal candelabra sits on an antique French wine tasting table. Place mats from Roman and Williams Guild; glasses by Riedel; sculptures from Thailand.

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