

HOME

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An airy Greenwich Village penthouse features a sofa and floating cabinet by Florence Knoll, end tables and chaise lounge by T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, a Greta Jalk coffee table, and vintage Edward Wormley for Dunbar benches. The rug is a custom design by Amy Lau and Revis Studio, and curtains are by Lau and Judy Ross.



Amy Lau

SOMETIMES THE LIFE OF an interior designer is about more than endless shopping trips, leisurely searching for that perfect settee. Sometimes designers feel pressure — intense pressure. Take, for instance, Amy Lau, principal of New York City-based firm Forms of Design. In 2005 she probably endured the most hectic year of her life. In one fell swoop the willowy redhead co-planned, with Ambra Medda, the mega furniture-as-art exhibition, design.05 Miami, which debuted last year as an offshoot of well-established Art Basel.

TEXT NINA KORMAN

Armchairs by Tyler Hayes for BDDW and a natural burl wood coffee table from Japan (c.1800s) warm up a West Chelsea loft. Raku ceramic vases by Sean Moynahan embellish the shelf on the custom-designed fireplace surround by Amy Lau and Ate Atemo. The rug is a custom piece by Lau and Revis Studio.



IN LAU'S WORLD, EVERY OBJECT HAS A PURPOSE. IT'S THAT PHILOSOPHY, HER FASCINATION WITH OBJECTS, AND HER METICULOUS EDITING THAT HAVE MADE HER SEEM TO SOME MORE CURATOR THAN DECORATOR. THANKS TO HER TRAINING – BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL – SHE CAN BE BOTH.

Simultaneously she designed the interior of developer/art collector Craig Robins' guest townhouse at Aqua, his experiment in New Urbanism. She also kept her business afloat in New York City, hunting down classic modern pieces and putting together stunning interiors for some very picky clients. "I was flying down to Miami almost every week and a half," she recounts on the phone from her office in an amazingly jovial tone.

In Lau's case, though, her sometimes-frenetic pace isn't the least bit evident in her work. In fact, it's in direct contrast to what she creates. Warm, calming,

and inviting, her elegant rooms are outfitted with fine modernist furniture and punctuated with colorful accessories, natural materials, and vintage textiles. Her striking combinations appear to be achieved with relative ease. Not surprising since Lau isn't above sewing pricey antique ribbon onto inexpensive Pottery Barn curtains. If it works, it works. What is arresting about her arrangements is the supreme sense of balance. Rooms are not too bare, nor are they crowded with furniture. Wooden pieces are not utilized to excess nor are upholstered ones. In Lau's world, every object has a purpose. It's that philosophy, her fascination with objects, and her meticulous editing that have made her seem to some more curator than decorator. Thanks to her training – both formal and informal – she can be both.

Lau's background is in art history. She earned a degree in the subject from the University of Arizona, in her home state. After a stint working for an Arizona import/export company, she moved to New York City to attend Sotheby's Graduate Program in American Fine and Decorative Arts. There, professors who were bigwigs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick Collection, or who owned major galleries did the teaching. "I learned everything from methodology to connoisseurship to wood analysis," she recalls. And she learned to embrace some of her now-favorite designers such as Tapio Wirkkala and Hans Wegner.

Preparing for a life as a curator soon shifted toward building a career as an interior designer. In 1996 Lau was named the director of Aero, the studio headed by Thomas O'Brien, the Target chain's newest design darling. From O'Brien she picked up valuable knowledge about working with archival upholstery fabrics, classic furniture, and the proper method in which to refurbish valuable case goods and upholstered pieces.

TOP: A light installation by David Weeks for Ralph Pucci illuminates a Downtown New York City apartment, featuring a chair, couch, and coffee table by Vladimir Kagan, a vintage side table by Edward Wormley for Dunbar, German ceramics from the 1950s, and a Rex Ray rug for Elson and Company.

CENTER: A new Edward Wormley for Dunbar sectional sofa co-exists perfectly with a vintage biomorphic coffee table by T.H. Robsjohn-Gibblings and a vintage Arredoluce Triennale floor lamp in the living room of this home on Kent Lake in Carmel, New York.

BOTTOM: In this Central Park Penthouse, a Chinese Scholar's Rock with custom pedestal leads the eye to vintage pieces by Edward Wormley for Dunbar (side chairs) and T.H. Robsjohn-Gibblings (coffee table), plus a new sofa by Christian Liaigre for Holly Hunt.





TOP: A Verner Panton chandelier hangs above a dining table and chairs by Hans Wegner in this SoHo apartment.

Side chairs by Jens Risom, a Vladimir Kagan coffee table, and a Florence Knoll sideboard adorned with a Nagel sculpture fill the living area.

BOTTOM: A glass collection by Michael Anchin, pendant lamps custom-designed by Amy Lau, and counter stools by Harry Bertola for Knoll lighten a Downtown New York City apartment kitchen.



be the aesthetic stepchild," Lau says. Such fervor resulted in design.05 Miami, an invitational exhibition of 15 international galleries, satellite exhibitions, discussions, and a site-specific installation by architect Zaha Hadid, dubbed Designer of the Year. Not just a onetime event, the dazzling show will go on again this year. This time Lau will chair the vetting and Designer of the Year committee, but will not be co-director. "Being a fair promoter is wonderful," she says "but I'm really interested in the design itself."

But Lau will still be plenty busy: The design extravaganza won't be her only Miami-based project. Robins' guesthouse interior proved so alluring to neighbors, it attracted a half dozen clients at Aqua. Lau is also collaborating with artists to create limited-edition lines of enamel mirrors and cigarette tables, light fixtures, and metal pieces.

As Lau's efforts continue to garner increased attention from national publications, she remains her down-to-earth self, devoted to searching out the best in design, assembling rooms with perfect proportions, and leaving those who live in them happy they hired her. "My ultimate goal is just to put a smile on my client's face and have them feel that their home is really something special," she says. "It's about making a good home and a collection that grows with you, and then you put your own little bit of history on it too." ■

Afterward as design director of Lin-Weinberg Gallery, Lau worked surrounded by Mid-Century Modern furniture and inevitably fell into interior design work. "People would say, 'Can you help me do this?' and I would take on projects on the side," she recalls. "It was something that was just natural. I've always had an eye for color and form and shape."

Offering advice on purchases crafted by mid-century designers like Edward Wormley, Vladimir Kagan, and Harry Bertola, Lau began to help clients build furniture collections. Often a favorite object would become the inspiration for an entire room and spawn other pieces she would commission such as chandeliers and fireplace surrounds. In some rare cases a client would just hand her a budget, tell her what they liked, and set her free to create their interiors. Pieces come from dealers all over the world — "from the who's who to mom and pop places," says Lau, who claims three huge Rolodexes of sources. Looking constantly for extraordinary pieces at good prices, she calls the hunt "severely fun," adding, "It's literally what gives me goose bumps."

Although Lau might use a reproduction or two, especially when families have young kids, and inexpensive pieces bought at Crate & Barrel or Ikea, ever since she established Forms of Design in 2000, she has been experiencing plenty of goose-pimple moments. They range from finding a perfect Kagan couch that could run up to \$30,000 to a suitable screen on eBay for a couple hundred dollars. "Once you see that piece put into one of your interiors and the client has a smile on his or her face, there is nothing better for me," she notes. "I just love it so much."

Such affection for her job is particularly important when the design process can take a year or more to complete. Or when Lau is toiling on several projects at once as she was during the frenzied year 2005, planning design.05 Miami and designing Robins' guesthouse. "I'm a big believer that art should be on the same level as design, and it should not