

Among the vintage finds in Glenn Pushelberg and George Yabu's Toronto living room: at left, a ca.-1940s Piero Fornasetti screen from the 1940s, and a desk lamp by Corso Uomo. Vladimir Kagan's Black Swan sofa is in the foreground. Hiroshi Senju's *Cliffs*, 2012, hangs adjacent to Prudencio Irazabal's *Fugue 2 (2M8)*, 2000, behind the collectors.

# PERSONAL BEST

Designers George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg don't leave their work at the office, kitting out their Toronto home in their signature eclectic style

BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER







It was a first for the interior design team Yabu Pushelberg: letting the client choose the art. Of course, the client was Ian Schrager, and the site was his recently unveiled Edition hotel in London, so they were confident the task was in good hands. “We let him direct the art for the whole project,” says George Yabu, one half of the creative duo. “That was a different approach.” Yabu mostly trusts his own eye—or that of his partner in life and work, Glenn Pushelberg—to make those all-important aesthetic decisions, but Schrager didn’t let them down, delivering selections by Donald Judd, Hendrik Kerstens, and Chul Hyun Ahn. The designers themselves are avid collectors whose passion for art over their 30-year career has made them patrons of sorts, in the name of boastworthy clients like the Samsung family, luxury retailer Lane Crawford, Carolina Herrera, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, and Donald Trump, to name a few.

Their pulsating business, which began as a small operation in Toronto, now includes studios in New York’s SoHo district and Guangzhou, China, as well. Last year the partners logged enough miles to traverse the globe four times, with 12 trips to

Asia. The pair must possess superhuman strength—and not simply because they’ve somehow developed an immunity to jet lag. They currently have more projects in the works than can be counted on two sets of hands, including hotels in Rio de Janeiro, Bangkok, Singapore, Rome, and a private compound in Beijing.

In addition to masterminding the interiors from structure to aesthetics, for nearly all their undertakings Yabu and Pushelberg have devised art collections. The duo’s personal taste for contemporary Asian artists such as Zhang Enli, the Gao Brothers, and Shao Fan, as well as evocative photographers Thomas Ruff, Michael McCann, and Robert Mapplethorpe, has found its way from the walls of the designers’ homes to those of their commissioned spaces. “It makes a hotel so much better if it is the real stuff,” says Pushelberg.

Yabu adds, “It can be so commercial, which is why we started inventing stories.” Indeed, that is the trusty secret of many a designer: creating a narrative about “someone who lives there,” in Pushelberg’s words, whether working on a hotel, store, restaurant, or residence.

So do they use the same character to form their approach in Toronto, Manhattan, Miami, and Amagansett? No. “We’re real,” states Yabu. Their collecting does revolve around a core



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THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: RICHARD POWERS



group of their favorite creators, who pop up again and again in each locale: Gio Ponti, Alvar Aalto, Piero Fornasetti, Vladimir Kagan, Jean-Michel Frank—all of whom are by now de rigueur among the culturati, but Yabu and Pushelberg had the foresight to snap them up for enviably low prices in the early 1980s.

“We were in Naples at the Royal Hotel, which was designed by Ponti,” recalls Pushelberg. “We bought our pieces when they were just dumping that stuff out.” All of their homes, from the bones to the surface accents, pivot around objects the duo find just from poking around and discovering.

The couple’s Toronto abode in the Bennington Heights section is a distillation of that sensibility. There, iconic design prototypes meet intimate trinkets in a 1940s cottage that sits on a ravine with a bubbling brook. “Someone once said, ‘You have a Fornasetti niche house,’” Yabu says with a laugh, “except we don’t have a niche house.”

Pushelberg elaborates. “We prefer to have smaller places, and have a few, rather than a grand place, which doesn’t feel right.” Toronto could be called the primary residence of these native Canadians, although they make weekly trips to New York to their Richard Meier–designed Perry Street loft (whose foyer is marked by the couple’s perhaps most notable acquisition: a reflective onyx Anish Kapoor disk, *Circular*

A two-tiered vintage American serving cart, above, does double duty as an occasional table. At left, the Fornasetti screen stands behind a chair by Jean-Michel Frank. Opposite: Two of Frank’s armchairs flank a Simon Gavina Traccia table, while vintage Scandinavian chairs surround a dining table of the couple’s own design. On the wall behind it is Eelco Brand’s oil on canvas *Gras II*, 1998. *Fausto*, 1972, a cast bronze and sheepskin stool produced by Gavina is at far left in the foreground, along with an Arredoluce red shaded lamp, far right.



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*Lacquer Dish (Black 2)*, from 2004, and the works inside their Canadian base contain the essence of their collecting prowess and designing hand. *W.H.S. 10*, 2010, a massive Thomas Ruff C-print of a fuzzy building vista, greets those who cross the Toronto threshold—a marigold door with marine-blue trim—to their three-story brick home. Shoes must come off, but a perch to lean on comes in the form of an unknown designer’s Brazilian rosewood chair.

When they bought the house 15 years ago, the designers replaced the back exterior wall with floor-to-ceiling glass on each of the three floors. “One of our specialties is transformation,” Yabu notes. “I like climbing insurmountable hills.”

“But building upon what’s there is so fun too!” Pushelberg interjects.

The interplay between outside and inside, and the creation of layers, are signatures of Yabu and Pushelberg’s aesthetic—just look at the One Madison penthouse condos that recently opened in New York, or at the Waldorf Astoria in Beijing, where, in the light-filled wood-walled lobby, they installed two Shao Fan sculptures, one of a traditional Chinese chair and the other of teacups. Fan is one of the artists they collect; his canvas *Two Pines* hangs in the living room of their Perry Street apartment. The couple see no barrier to using the same artists in their work and in their homes. “It is an extension of ourselves. We support more artists, and we sponsor them,” says Pushelberg of their decision to feature in their projects some of their favorite artistic discoveries, many of whom come to their attention through their travels. Among these are Zhang Enli, a few of whose paintings they own, including the oil-on-canvas *Portrait II*, acquired in 2006 from H Gallery in Bangkok, and Hiroshi Senju, a favorite from their many trips to Japan.

The collectors have an impressive array of pieces by contemporary Japanese stars, most of which are in their Toronto cottage. In the master bedroom, above a classic Alvar





Aalto No. 37 armchair covered in zebra skin, are contrasting Yoshitomo Nara acrylics on canvas, the cream-hued *Pee* and midnight-blue *Pee—Dead of Night*, both of which depict Nara's distinctive, childlike figures relieving themselves.

The two men have known each other since their days as design students at Ryerson University. Pushelberg hails from a tiny town in Ontario, and Yabu was born in Toronto to Japanese immigrants from Kyushu. (His sisters, who were born in Canadian World War II internment camps, now work for the firm.) “George has a fondness for Japanese people, with good reason!” says Pushelberg with a laugh, enumerating some of the traditional ink paintings hanging in Amagansett and in one of their offices. In the couple's dining room and party salon shines a glorious Yayoi Kusama painting, *My Heart*, fresh from the artist's most recent exhibition in December 2013 at David Zwirner's Chelsea gallery. At the gallery dinner for the show, Kusama and Yabu shared a moment, replete with hugs and hand-clutching—“She's a rock star in her wheelchair,” he offers—and it was that personal connection that convinced Yabu that the painting needed to be theirs.

But it's not just Yabu whose emotions have been stirred by an artist on Zwirner's roster. Pushelberg is currently salivating over a small marble statue by Yutaka Sone, which he saw while working in London during the Japanese

sculptor's show in January. “I'm debating buying one of his pieces,” says Pushelberg with a slightly pained expression. Is there trouble with Zwirner? “No! With George!” he says.

“Fortunately, we have similar tastes,” confides Yabu. In fact, he says, “We were inspired by David Mirvish,” the Canadian collector (and their first client) who converted Toronto's Royal Alexander Theater into the city's gallery hub for emerging American artists in the 1970s. Mirvish, he recalls, would buy so much art that “he had crates of stuff he didn't know what to do with, but knew exactly what he had.” Although Mirvish preferred the American Color Field painters, it was the Canadians that Yabu and Pushelberg snapped up with abandon. Today, much of their bounty from that era hangs in their house, including the quietly powerful black-and-white photographic portraits by Ron Baxter Smith that pepper the staircase leading to the couple's bedroom.

The art, however, isn't the only entity they live with. “We have 13 ghosts,” says Pushelberg matter-of-factly. Although the couple have invited shamans and psychics into their bedroom, so far only their own devices have brought them a modicum of solace. That is why, taped to a cluster of vintage Ponti mirrors mounted above their Antonio Citterio Charles bed are bunches of sage—one of the few flourishes to depart from their formalist design training. “It's our home and it doesn't serve any other purpose,” says Pushelberg. ☐

A quartet of mirrors designed by Gio Ponti serve as a headboard. Opposite, from top: Along the master bedroom wall are an Arredoluce Triennale floor lamp, Alvar Aalto's Model No. 37 zebra armchair, and Gavina's *Omaggio to Andy Warhol*, 1973, which accompany two paintings from 2002 by Yoshitomo Nara, *Pee* and *Pee-Dead of Night*. Ewan McDonald's works on paper *Suite of Drawings*, 2001, hang above a Ponti dresser that the couple acquired in the 1980s from the Italian designer's Royal Hotel in Naples.

