

C E R E A L

In this volume, we explore the subject of collecting. We converse with Pierre Yovanovitch and Daniel Buren, discuss curation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, and visit the home of Phillip Lim. We travel to South Tyrol for the Dolomites, Marfa for Donald Judd's architecture, and escape to Kyoto and Lake Como.

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IN THE
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Home of Designer
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words
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interior photos
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portrait
Matthew Johnson





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In The Frame
*A Visit to the Home
of Designer Phillip Lim*

A silver zipper glints at the heel of Phillip Lim's boot as he leads me through the sitting room of his SoHo loft. We head towards a large image in a white frame. It is a rich, inky black in what appears to be a pure and absolute void. It anchors the room with a commanding whisper, pulling everything beautiful towards it like a collapsing star. On first appraisal, the saturation appears unwavering. But then, as the clouds shift overhead, and the light inside the room dims, the subject of the work is revealed. "Can you see it?" Lim asks. Suddenly: a blurred cheek, a bicep, the graceful curve of an upper thigh. The nude presents itself quietly, an erotic smudge in filtered gold.

The language of art — at least the kind that lives in textbooks and on gallery walls — is one that Lim learned later in life. For a child of working class parents in southern California, art was, understandably, not part of the family's core curriculum. Nor was Orange County itself prolific in terms of cultural inspiration. "I had a suburban upbringing," Lim explains. "It was strip malls." Instead, he occupied himself with various amusements. He orchestrated collections based around the moment's mood, including bicycles, skateboards, Hawai'ian shirts, and rubber bands. By the time he was 11, he was also the proud owner of 100 pigeons.

Each subsequent obsession helped cultivate Lim's eye. He was, as he described it, "picking up syllables and words, building a visual vocabulary." The absence of exposure to more cerebral fare, including fashion, forced Lim to acquire a set of skills that ended up serving him well later on: "I had to find out everything for myself. I had to pay attention and listen to something that was drawing me in." Far from begrudging his art free upbringing, Lim is grateful for the lack of external stimuli. "I was so blessed that I didn't have noise around

telling me what was trendy or influential," Lim remarks. "No one was brainwashing me. Everything I did was out of curiosity, instinct, or pleasure. I was so lucky that I had the space to build courage and develop my instincts, and then to turn the volume up on that."

Walking through Lim's apartment, its walls lined with over a decade's worth of collecting, his exceptional natural instincts are apparent. Since his first purchase — a print by Hiroshi Sugimoto — Lim has gone on to acquire works by Claude Lorraine (a whimsical crossbreeding of cabbage and chicken in bronze), Richard Serra (a gravitational mass of black paintstick on paper), and Joan Mitchell (rhythmic scrawls over canvas in blue, copper, and black). "It's spontaneous, it's instant," Lim says, referring to the feeling that draws him to each piece he acquires. His strategy is, he admits, less head than heart, slavish neither to trend nor return on investment.

Every object in the loft, from his N. Dash painting, to his row of four Donald Judd chairs, shares a sentiment that Lim is repeatedly drawn to. "You feel the artist's hand," he says. "It's not like it's factory made, or built by someone in their team. It's the feel of an artist's soul. I seek things out that have a non-verbal language to them." Lim motions towards a Louise Nevelson sculpture by the back door: a crude collection of mid-century scrap in dull black paint, culled from this very same neighbourhood when it was a very different place. Behind him, a pair of Helmut Lang sculptures lean: tubes of resin and pulverised garments from the designer's archives — quite literally totems of a renounced career. Lim goes on to explain their shade: the soft blush is in honour of Lang's friend Louise Bourgeois. Her own work in gouache rests in Lim's study: a bulbous and watery rouge.

The rooms here operate in perfect accord, each piece perpetually engaged in conversation, not only with the other works, but also with the space itself. Lim points to an imposing black marble pass-through that he designed with his architect, Joe Nix. The wall behind it, he notes, has been left intentionally blank. “To me, it’s not about what is on that wall, but about what is on that table,” he says. “It’s the textures of the Belgian linen and the Mies van der Rohe cane, the pinkish colour of the wall itself.” The marble archway acts like a frame, capturing a living still life of two dozen parrot tulips spilling languorously from three bowls, their peach heads heavy, and petals frayed. The scene recurs at the opposite end of the loft, in Lim’s bedroom. Four Cy Twombly photographs hang in neat rows. Coral tulips burst forth, forever frozen in soft focus.

Lim once described designing clothes as a refusal to accept what exists, and his garments as improved upon versions of the status quo. All around this SoHo loft is the evidence of a man of good taste keen on manipulating space to similar ends. Wires discreetly hold the long arms of a burgundy *Ficus elastica* in place. Muslin pools, deliberately and delicately, around his portrait, as though it is a gift just unwrapped. His art and furnishings — embodiments of an acquired visual language — punctuate what would otherwise be simply a white room with painted brick walls and herringbone floors, six windows facing west and six facing east. In aggregate, the works offer an alternative: a transcendence from reality, and a welcome step into the sublime.

