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Designing dads make room for daughter and art

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Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Living room with Erica Deeman photo (right) in the home of designers Robbie McMillan and Marcus Keller.

The sheer quietude and next-level orderliness of Robert McMillan and Marcus Keller's Potrero Hill flat belies its primary function as a loving home for their daughter, Apple, 3, and its secondary function as the headquarters of the couple's design firm, AubreyMaxwell. While the dads insist that extravagant tea parties for dolls and stuffed animals frequently take place on the living room floor and that Legos often cover the kitchen counter, there is nary an interlocking brick nor a forgotten plastic saucer to be found.

"Clutter is no one's friend," says McMillan, a former director of merchandising at McGuire Furniture in San Francisco.

A seemingly random cluster of ceramic vessels on the dining table is actually a symmetrical configuration designed to showcase longer stems in the center and floating buds on the sides. Even in their office, which occupies one of the home's four bedrooms, fabric swatches and paint chips are neatly arranged, magazines precisely stacked, and a hanging inspiration board seems composed to optimize surface area — it shares space, after all, with a concise to-do list. And yet, beyond such precision, a kind of rich essentiality shines through, owing perhaps to the couple's unwavering faithfulness to a straightforward intent.

“When it comes to design, keep it simple, but make it significant,” says McMillan. Using their 1,900-square-foot home as a design proving grounds, the couple apply this love-it-or-leave-it philosophy to their professional practice. At Rowan, for example, a new 70-unit residential building in Potrero Hill, McMillan and Keller worked with local artisans to appoint two model units with more than 30 one-of-a-kind pieces, from oxidized-redwood-and-brass sconces by Jonathan Anzalone to woven-rope lighting by Windy Chien. “It’s a minimal approach to living that’s based on objects of true artistry and meaning.”

Whether collected en masse or acquired for their singular importance, clearly every piece in the McMillan-Keller home has been carefully considered. The pottery collection, exhibited behind glass cabinets in the kitchen, features rare Japanese works, a few original Jonathan Adler pieces from his days as a potter, and a stalagmite-inspired coil vase by Creative Growth artist Charles Nagle. A rustic wooden stool by the now-fissured Richmond District design studio Anzfer Farms in the dining room and the living room's vintage safari sling chair — a real McCoy that can be dismantled and packed into a weathered rucksack should either of the dads find themselves wandering the Serengeti — are beloved one-off scores.



Designers Robbie McMillan and Marcus Keller with their daughter, Apple, in their Aubrey Maxwell office at home.

Concerning the furnishings, McMillan and Keller instinctively gravitate toward an earthy, and thereby kid-resilient, materials palette. A monolithic stone-top dining table, flanked by Palm Beach-style bent-rattan chairs by BassamFellows for McGuire, is a piece that will become dearer, McMillan says, “as it takes on the patina of life.” Hardy jute floor coverings are found throughout the home, often layered with more decorative kilim rugs — an old design trick, Keller notes, that not only deepens the decor with added texture and pattern, but also helps with soundproofing. A Buka Design solid-wood coffee table in the living room is raw in shape, but refined in finish, with no sharp corners that a rambunctious toddler could perilously encounter.

Amid such a grounded, well-chosen tableau, divergent moments enliven the couple’s design perspective. The claw-foot tub in the impossibly bright and airy master bath was recently painted vibrant green, a capricious deviation from the norm. Apple’s vintage red-metal school desk, as much a sculptural piece as it is a place for her to draw and paint, is located in the kitchen.

Arguably, the most significant of all the unexpected flourishes is the art collection, rooted in local talent. Oakland photographer Todd Hido’s 2006 image, “Untitled 3878,” depicts a hauntingly empty and rumpled motel room glowing from the blue-green light of the television. “It almost has the feeling of water,” says McMillan. The image is, in fact, a little like a fish out of water hanging in the dining room, but then again such an unforeseen placement only heightens its impact. Anchoring the living room is a striking, large-scale portrait of an African American girl by San Francisco artist Erica Deeman. Riffing on Victorian-era silhouettes, the piece struck a chord with McMillan and Keller for its powerful portrayal of a black female and for its striking black-and-white composition — ethnically, the couple is also a black-and-white composition, and, for that matter, so is their daughter.

“Even if Apple doesn’t yet realize it, growing up with such a compelling, beautiful image will be influential in so many ways,” McMillan says. “That’s perhaps the most important reason to keep things simple but significant.”

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Robert McMillan’s primer for keeping it simple but significant

“Take a serious look at your surroundings and eliminate the clutter. Let go of objects and furnishings that do not add value, purpose or fulfillment. Having fewer things of better quality creates a happier, more enriching environment.”

“Incorporate art that you connect with into your home. Mixing larger pieces with smaller works makes for a dynamic display. The galleries and artist studios at Minnesota Street Project are among our most admired.”



Designers Marcus Keller (left) and Robbie McMillan with their daughter, Apple, in their Potrero Hill kitchen.

“Cluster a group of similar objects on a table to create one big statement and increase their visual impact in a space. Our collection of beloved ceramic vases and bowls serves as a dining-table centerpiece.”

“Unique indoor plants add color, sculpture and texture to a home. Look for low-maintenance but offbeat varieties such as the Audrey Ficus or Ming Aralia.”

“Use bright accent paint sparingly for dramatic effect. Benjamin Moore’s Jade Green made a real splash on our vintage claw-foot tub.”

— *L.M.L.*