

By Katherine WYRICK Photography Brian CHILSON

HOW SWEET IT IS: A Q&A WITH SWEET HOME'S JOHN BELL

WHO OR WHAT IS YOUR INSPIRATION WHEN IT COMES TO DESIGN?

I think the main inspiration for my work (as well as most other things) comes from my mom and dad. My dad was a master at building things, and my mom was a junking maven. She was always rescuing and refinishing pieces of furniture. In a way I've sort of melded both their interests. Other inspirations are the vernacular architecture of rural Arkansas, stores in New York like John Derian, Paula Rubenstein and the Annex flea market, the junk piled around my parents' barn in Conway (they never threw anything away), anywhere I see things that have found or need to find a new life, things that show some soul through their patina of crusty paint or rust.

TELL US ABOUT THESE FABULOUS BOXES YOU CREATE.

I began making boxes when I lived in Los Angeles. I lived in a tiny apartment there with no room for a studio so I needed to work small. I started buying old boxes at the Rose Bowl flea market and embellishing them with finials and old hardware and putting legs on them. When I moved back to Little Rock, the work expanded to include cabinets, tables and mirrors. I started Sweet Home eight years ago as a way to share the boxes and cabinets. Since then it's become a gathering of things that echo the blend of grand decay and simple austerity that I try to speak to in my work.

WHAT'S YOUR BACKGROUND?

My background is in display. I had a wonderful first job out of college working in the visual merchandising department at MM Cohn, where I had a lot of creative freedom.

WHAT'S ONE OF YOUR FAVORITE ITEMS IN YOUR STORE?

I love everything in my shop. I think that's the reason it works. Whether it's vintage or new, each piece has a shared perspective, a relationship with everything else in the shop. Right now I'm particularly fond of the wonderful wire birds crafted by Padee Black, a California artist. They're 3-dimensional, but against a solid colored wall they look like line drawings. I also love my collection of greeting cards, designed by artists from Seattle to Belgium.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR AESTHETIC?

I think a lot about contradictions. I'm moved by the juxtaposition of the elegant and the



John Bell with some of his unique box creations. To see more, visit www.sweethomefurnishings.net.

banal. I think pairing the two heightens the beauty of both, whether it's in the mix of materials in a box or the mix of styles in your home. Changing the context of things, bringing lawn furniture inside, for example, or using a porch baluster as a plant stand, can evoke the element of surprise that brings a house to life. The objects around you every day influence the way you feel and they should speak to you, enrich your life and say something about who you are. If you love a piece, that's enough. Don't worry too much if it will "go." ■

John's Top 7

1. Hillcrest — After 15 years, I still find myself saying "I love this neighborhood."
2. My kayak — I go floating every chance I get.
3. Saturday "salons" at the shop — People come by for a visit: it's extra nice in good weather when we can sit out front.
4. Emma's Museum of Junk in Jasper, AR — I spend hours poring over the treasures found there.
5. "World of Interiors" magazine — Every issue is inspired.
6. Etsy.com — It's a labyrinth, but I've found some wonderful hand-made things there.
7. Hel-looks.com — Helsinki street fashion, amazing.

| curiosity shop |

DEER CHEER

When we said in the January issue that all things Russian were in this year, we never dreamed we'd come across something quite like this. Never in all our searches have we found figurines to rival the likes of these delicate deer. The boxes alone are works of art—and so mysterious. Where did they come from? And from what era? What do they mean? There's a deer mystery afoot here (or rather ahoof). The one thing we're certain of—they're as cool as a Siberian spring. Curious tip: color copy these boxes on a single sheet, stick them in a frame and hang them on the wall for instant art. Or hang them separately in small frames. Either way, their graphic elements would add a (vodka) shot of color to any space. Find these and other delights at Sweet Home, located at 2909 Kavanaugh Blvd, Little Rock. ■

