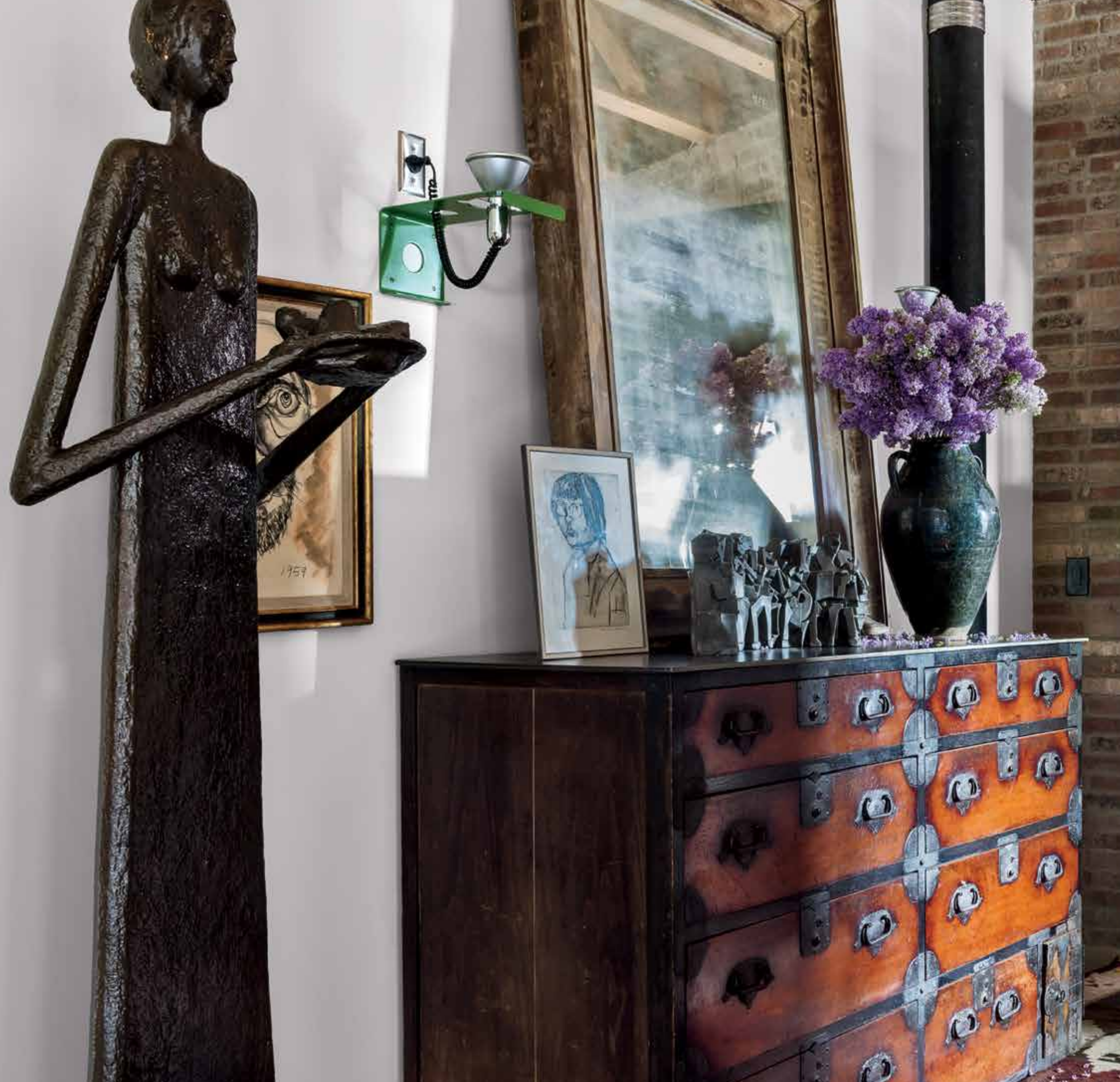


# Outside the Box

Austin designer Kimberly Renner has an eye not only for vintage objects, but also for old buildings that can become a family home

INTERIOR DESIGN BY *Kimberly Renner*  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Peter Vitale*  
WRITTEN BY *Edward McCann*  
ARCHITECTURE BY *Mark Vornberg*







Opening pages: An office building in Austin is now a loft-style home. A modern sculpture stands beside a Japanese *tansu* chest in the entry. Left: In the living room, vintage sofas face a vintage coffee table. This page: Queen Anne chairs upholstered in fabric from Groundworks and Designers Guild surround a Milo Baughman table. Wallpaper is from Phillip Jeffries.





**THE ABANDONED OFFICE BUILDING** sat empty for years at a busy downtown Austin intersection. Built in the 1960s, the boxy, three-level, red brick structure was occupied by a long succession of tenants, the last of whom left—or fled—under cover of night, taking hard drives and leaving everything else behind.”

“And I do mean *everything*,” says the building’s owner, noted Austin-based antiques dealer and designer Kimberly Renner. “In its last incarnation, it was a giant call center lined with cubicles and a hundred phone lines coming into the building. The ceiling was dropped to eight feet, the walls were painted black, and it was stuffed with office furniture when we did our first walk-through—a real time capsule, complete with spoiled food still in the refrigerator!”

But after twenty years renovating historic homes throughout Austin, some of which were considered flawed beyond redemption, Renner was able to see the potential in the building—and a potential bargain. “I’d spent years doing deep restorations, and my husband and children and I moved every eighteen months. We’d lived in many different kinds of homes and were ready for something different this time—and ready to embrace this environment for its uniqueness.”

After a second look, Renner took the plunge, gutting the structure to its concrete skeleton and rebuilding it with the help of the innovative Austin-based architecture firm, Dick Clark + Associates. She and the firm spearheaded an adaptive reuse project in what would be a mixed-use building, designated as part commercial and part residential. Renner and her husband consolidated their lives and interests beneath one roof, creating space to operate a retail business, to work with private clients, and to raise teenagers in a home filled with art and antiques. In an age-old shopkeeper tradition, the family now lives above the store.

“Our kids walk to school, we all ride our bikes, and while we don’t have a traditional backyard, we have some great patios up in the trees; it feels very much like a tree house when you’re sitting up there.”

---

“If you give children a beautiful place to live in, they grow to appreciate beauty and learn to respect it.”

—Kimberly Renner

---

Though sited at a busy urban corner, Renner’s home is located at the top of Austin’s greenbelt, near a trailhead for the city’s Shoal Creek trail system. A nearby path descends to cliffs and a creek bed, to a wild and natural place filled with birds and other creatures.

The street-level shop—The Renner Project—is a 5,000-square-foot retail establishment and studio offering high-style twentieth-century modern, vintage, and antique pieces, curated and presented in a series of constantly changing rooms. The parking area at the rear offers access to the basement or warehouse level, and this is the

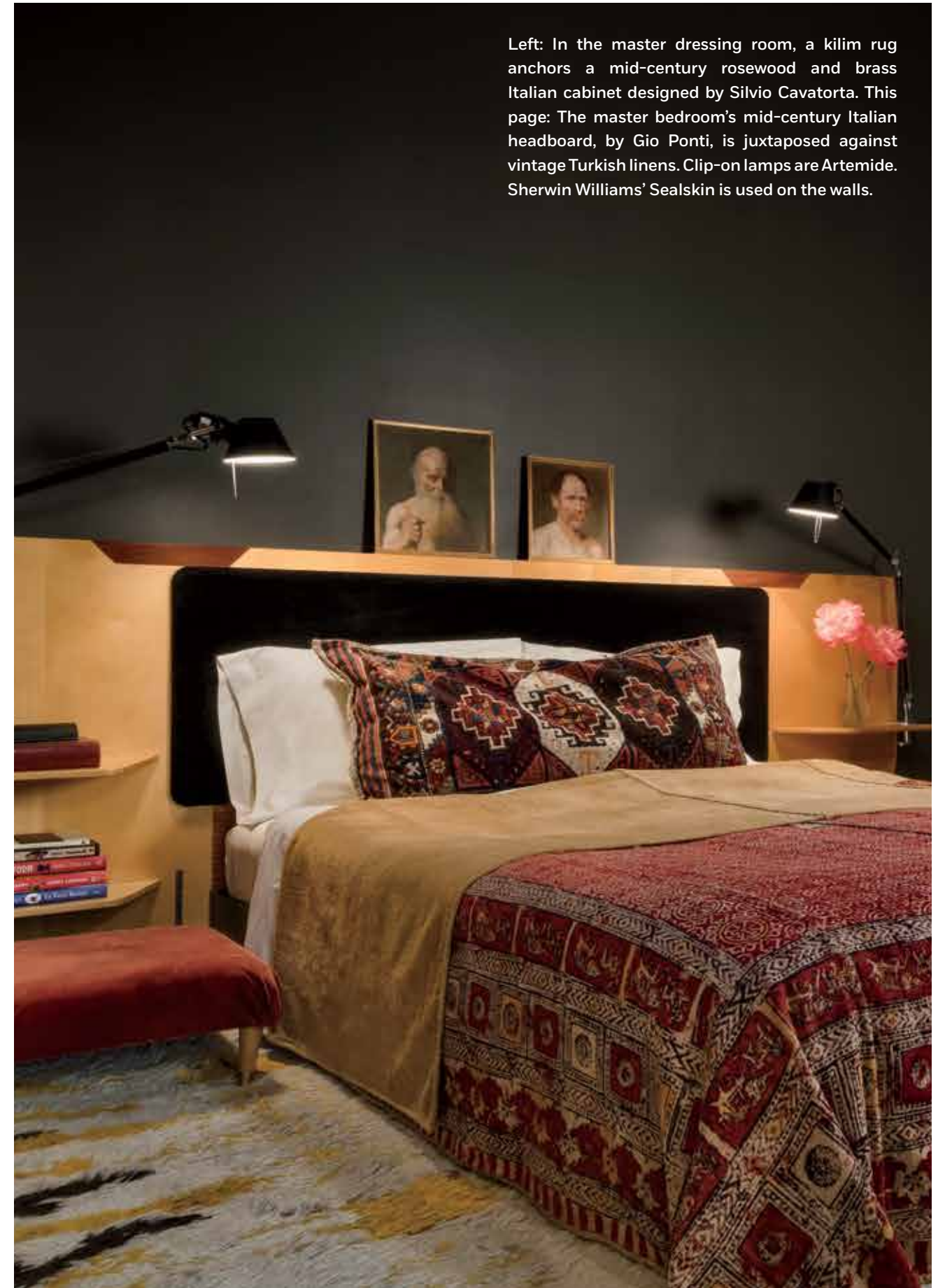
Left: An antique hardware store cupboard displays a collection of early American crockery and vintage rolling pins. “I have more than I can use on a daily basis,” says Renner, “but those are our everyday serving bowls.”





In the kitchen/dining area, Renner-designed light fixtures are suspended from exposed roof trusses. "We're a normal family and we live hard in our house," says Renner. "We're home base for all of my family and all my husband's family, which is why the Belgian oak dining table in our kitchen seats twelve." The vintage oak chairs came from a men's lodge.





Left: In the master dressing room, a kilim rug anchors a mid-century rosewood and brass Italian cabinet designed by Silvio Cavatorta. This page: The master bedroom's mid-century Italian headboard, by Gio Ponti, is juxtaposed against vintage Turkish linens. Clip-on lamps are Artemide. Sherwin Williams' Sealskin is used on the walls.



“This home and every one  
of my homes is very much an  
expression of my point of view.”

—Kimberly Renner

entrance that the Renner family uses, taking the elevator to their spacious, loft-style residence on the third floor. That floor was added in the 1980s to create more leased office space, and while the architect and engineer deemed its construction flimsy, the one salvageable element was the roof system. When Renner and her team tore out the drop ceiling, they discovered an intact series of trusses—long spans with only a single load-bearing wall down the center. “They’d been encased all those years and were in pristine condition,” says Renner. “Some people were appalled when I exposed those trusses rather than hide them above a pure white drywall ceiling, but because it’s my home, I could do whatever I wanted.”

Designing her own home and indulging her desires was something Renner considers a rare privilege. “The things a client wants may not always align with the vision I have for them, and that creates an atmosphere in which I navigate my insights to their property in relationship to their wishes. I don’t ever want to let a client down or be imprudent with someone else’s money. With this project, I felt freer, more courageous, and more willing to step outside the box. Had this building been a design commission for a client, I would likely have backed away from it.”

All of the space’s potential, however, proved irresistible to an avid collector like Renner, who recognized there was enough wall space for her to be able to enjoy the furniture and other pieces she had acquired throughout her life. Renner says she tends to collect “feminine objects”, but is often told her work is masculine in nature. “The things I love the most seem to be more raw, but they don’t express themselves well unless juxtaposed against something refined. In our home, I’ve softened rough edges with bits of

decoration, like wallpaper and fabrics. But I really like steel and concrete as well.”

The value of a concrete floor in central Texas is that it stays cool, and a barefoot Renner enjoys the floor as much as the family dog, which snoozes upon it, stretched out to maintain maximum belly contact. It also personifies low maintenance. “I’ve lived in homes with hardwood floors and antique wool rugs,” says Renner, “and spills on concrete just don’t matter.”

Because Renner loves objects with patina, a sense of history and use, she feels a few extra stains or scratches don’t really hurt anything. “We live like a normal family and our children have learned to be gentle caretakers of certain parts of the house. Their friends don’t expect to ride skateboards indoors, and our kitchen is all soapstone, steel, and old Belgian oak. The kids can cook dinner and hang out or entertain friends there, but they can’t hurt anything—and it still looks cool.”

While none of the objects in Renner’s home are inherited, some things she and her husband acquired early in their marriage and carried from home to home will become family pieces. “I love the Allen Wynn piece in our entrance,” says Renner of the sculpture of a woman with a plate of pears. “Wynn sculpts tall women engaged in common tasks—holding a shovel or pail of water—always some implement of work. I come from a matriarchal family, and that piece speaks to me about my family history, about my mother and grandmother, and the many generations of hard-working women who’ve held our family together.”

Kimberly Renner’s hard work, and her willingness to consider a structure that didn’t fit a preconceived idea of residential space, continues to pay dividends. Because she didn’t simply think outside the box. She reinvented it. ■



Kimberly Renner works at home at a desk designed by Barbara Barry for Baker. The leather chair is by Mario Bellini for Cassina.