

ART • CRAFT • TRAVEL • INTERIOR DESIGN

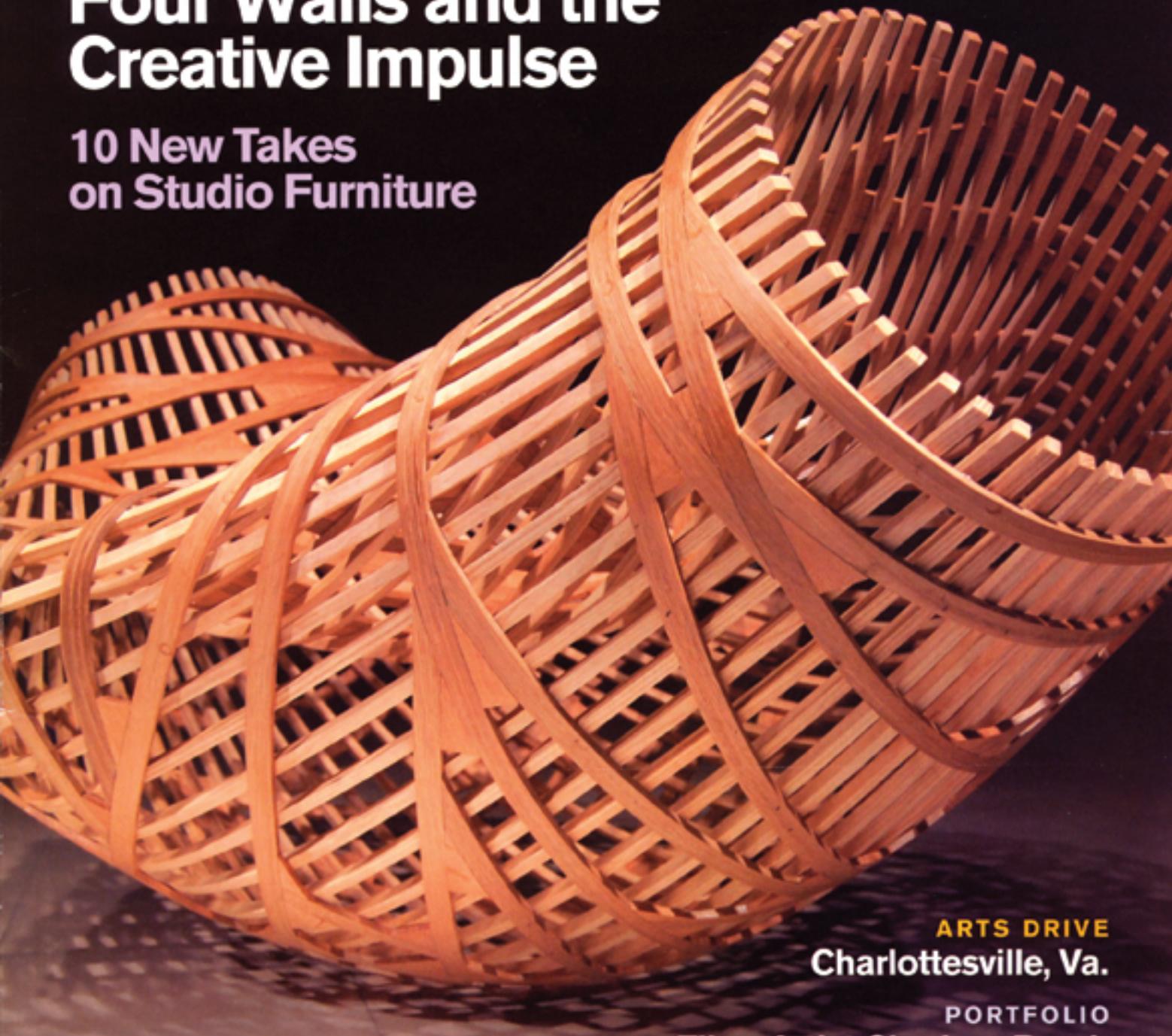
AMERICAN Style

APRIL 2008

2008 ART & DESIGN

Four Walls and the Creative Impulse

10 New Takes
on Studio Furniture



ARTS DRIVE
Charlottesville, Va.

PORTFOLIO
Fiber Artist Charissa Brock

PALETTE
Pastel Drawings by Mary Sprague



HOUSE as ART



Home. It's a solace, a refuge,
a gathering place, a staging ground.
It's where you cook your meals, raise
your kids, welcome your friends.
And it's probably where you spend
the greatest portion of your life.

For the individuals featured on the pages that follow, home is also a canvas. In Pennsylvania, independent curator Eileen Tognini uses a centuries-old property as her tabula rasa. For artist Jackie Braitman, it's a 1905 farmhouse on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. And the 10 furniture artists who round out this year's Art & Design package craft their magic with wood, metal and imagination. ▶▶



Eileen Tognini
marries history and
innovation, bringing
striking contemporary
art into her centuries-
old farmhouse

if WALLS could TALK

BY CAROLINE TIGER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES B. ABBOTT

A party guest hears dripping

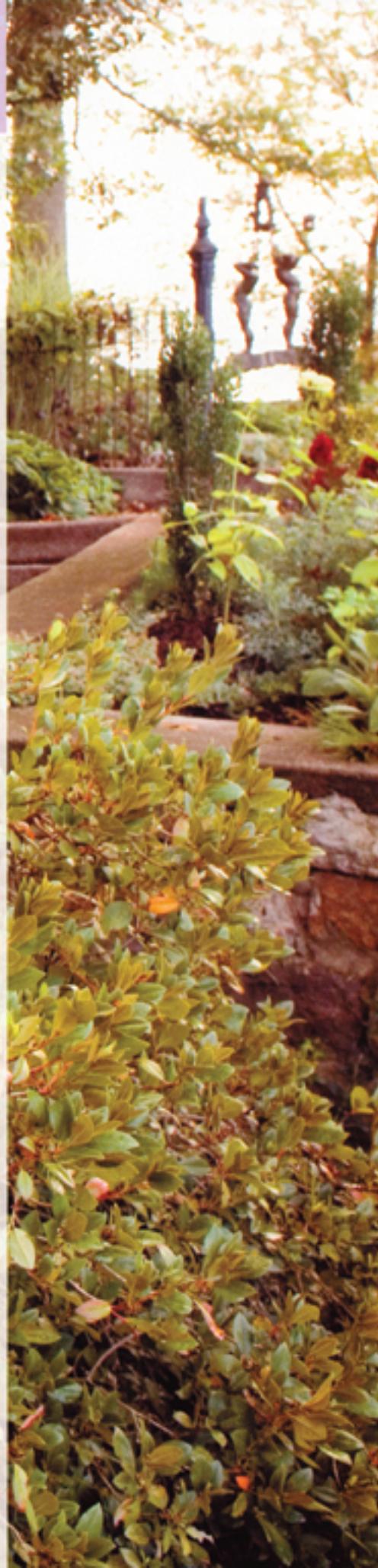
water near the slate patio outside Eileen Tognini's 200-year-old farmhouse. The woman spies an enormous plaster head lying on its ear nearby, and crouches down, wine glass in hand, to figure out if it is the source of the sound.

This kind of tentative exploration is what Tognini, a Philadelphia-based independent curator, loves to see at "Gallery in the Garden," an annual event held over two weekends each September at the country home she shares with husband Tony and daughter Isabella. "GiG," as Tognini affectionately calls it, showcases work in everything from oil on canvas to Cor-Ten steel, created by emerging and recognized artists. Tognini's goal is to demonstrate how potentially rewarding it can be to live with—and engage with—art.

Eileen couldn't have predicted that all of this was in her future when she and Tony bought the house 10 years ago. The couple was combing classifieds for a home in the city when they saw one for a farmhouse and garden at the foot of Hawk Mountain. They made the hour-and-a-half drive from Philadelphia on Monday, fell instantly in love with the property, and by Wednesday night it was off the market.

The house has become their getaway, a quiet place that provides a counterbalance to their primary residence, a traditional Philadelphia row house. Inside, most of the previous owners' design quirks remain intact, including radiator grills embedded in the wall that divides the kitchen from the parlor and aboriginal-style wall paintings in the shower. Eileen and Tony didn't change the interior beyond painting some of the doors chalkboard black to match their contemporary aesthetic. Eileen felt strongly that buying the house didn't give them license to cover up its past lives.

"I got very philosophical about what had happened in this house over two hundred years," she says. "What chapter did people





RATHER THAN DISCRIMINATING BY MEDIUM OR BY CATEGORY, TOGNINI



Each year, Eileen Tognini invites artists to enhance her home and garden with imaginative works for her "Gallery in the Garden" event. Jedediah Morfit's "Listen, listen" head, above, has an audio unit that plays sounds of dripping water. Greg Nangle's "Disheveled," right, is a six-foot totem of cast-bronze tableware, with slumped glass pouring from one vessel to another. On the preceding pages: Julia Stratton's "Pair" fountain dictated the choice of flowers and the paint for the front door, which changes each year.

write while they lived here?" At the time, she was head of marketing for a prominent landscape architecture firm in Philadelphia, and art was very much a part of her life. She'd been collecting since she was in college and through 13 years as a marketing executive at IBM. Traveling for work, she'd always stay an extra day to check out museums and galleries.

Their first year in the house, Eileen and Tony threw a party inspired by the legacy of artists' salons. Immediately people started asking when it was going to happen again. Each year the party gained momentum, and by 2001, when Eileen's firm laid off marketing staff post-9/11, her direction was clear. She took the skills she'd developed in the corporate world and applied them to a new career as an independent curator. "I decided to do what really felt good to me," she says, "which was to bring art and people together."

In nine years, GiG's guest list has grown from 150 to 2,000. Every fall, Eileen and Tony put their furniture in storage so that longtime friend and collaborator interior designer RJ Thornburg can create a new



BUYS WHAT SHE *loves*.

scheme that harmonizes with the year's art. "My strategy is to treat the furniture as a backdrop," Thornburg says. In a few instances the furniture is actually functional art, as is the case with Jack Larimore's sculptural chaise lounge in the living room, made from a large timber and a slab of industrial felt. Nearby tables are vintage ballot boxes found at a Poconos thrift store and covered with glass. The antler candleholders that sit atop them are Thornburg's tongue-in-cheek play on the idea of a country house.

Some of the art at GiG is part of Eileen's permanent collection. In the bathroom, Greg Nangle's bronze sculpture, depicting hands suspended in mid-washing, doubles as a faucet, and Michael Biello's light sculpture provides pops of color above the sink. The fixture above the stairs to the living room was crafted by Philadelphia artist Warren Muller, a good friend of Eileen and Tony's, who creates lighting from groups of found objects.

In late fall, when the last GiG art is loaded up and carted away, Tognini begins to reinstate pieces from her collection of black-and-white photography—including work by Jenny Lynn and Ralph Gibson—plus





BUYING THE HOUSE DIDN'T GIVE THEM LICENSE TO COVER UP ITS *past*





lives.

Tognini invites an interior designer to create a design scheme for each year's event. In the living room, Jack Larimore's "Old Pine Story" bench, above left (see also page 82), sits next to two ballot-box tables. Under the staircase, a traditional Japanese chest, far left, is grouped with contemporary American art, including Warren Muller's light sculpture and Schuyler Blanchard's alabaster "She Says She Thinks You're Hot," left. In the bathroom, a light sculpture by Michael Biello hangs above Greg Nangle's "One Hand Washes the Other."



"I DECIDED TO DO WHAT REALLY FELT *good* TO ME, WHICH WAS TO



Jedediah Morfit's "Cannonball" sculpture sits atop the table on the deck, above. Carlo Travaglia's "Sentinels," left, create a maze throughout the garden. At right, "Growth/Deterioration" was crafted by Brooke Hine from more than a ton of material and hundreds of pieces.



Tour the Garden

This year's annual "Gallery in the Garden" event is scheduled for Sept. 13-14 and Sept. 20-21, as well as by appointment during the week. To request an invitation, contact Eileen Tognini at 215-739-9953 or eileen.tognini@verizon.net. You can also visit www.eileentognini.com for more information.

sculpture, paintings and works on paper. She possesses the Eastern sensibility of treasuring everyday beauty. Art even resides in her kitchen cabinets, in the square plates glazed in pumpkin and sage by ceramicist Teresa Chang.

Rather than discriminating by medium or by category, Tognini buys what she loves. She is drawn to pieces with a sense of humor, and ones that evoke emotion. She's not driven by what's hot, says fellow curator Linda Bantel. "On the other hand, what I've experienced every year is a very edgy show." Nor is Tognini driven by sales, says Greg Nangle, who has participated in GiG as an artist since 2005. "I feel liberated when I work with her," he explains. "I have the freedom to make whatever I want."

Guests seem to feel a similar sense of liberation. Tognini recalls a moment from the previous year's GiG, when a group of guests clustered around a tree hung with frozen clumps of felted hair by artist Elena Fajt. As the ice melted, the guests talked about why they found the balls of dripping hair so repulsive. "I love that they hated it," says Eileen. "I love that they were able to express something they might not have felt comfortable expressing in a gallery."

GiG attendees have come to Tognini for help staging similar events at their own homes. Others have become inspired to build collections after witnessing firsthand how art transforms a home. And others, even if they don't take action immediately, are subconsciously cultivating the seeds that Tognini has planted. That's the chapter she's writing. "You know that old adage that you can't please everybody?" she says. "I try to have something for everyone. If every single person leaves saying, 'I love that one piece,' then quite frankly, I feel like I've achieved everything." ●

Freelance writer CAROLINE TIGER is based in Philadelphia, Pa.

“BRING ART AND PEOPLE TOGETHER.”

