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White Light

IN AN UNEXPECTEDLY SPACIOUS HOUSE,
SANTA BARBARA ARTIST TANI CONRAD
STRIKES A PERFECT BALANCE
BETWEEN SERENE RETREAT
AND ARTIST'S STUDIO

BY DEGEN PENER PHOTOGRAPHED BY LISA ROMEREIN
PRODUCED BY KENDALL CONRAD



Every room in the house, including this sitting area, is bathed in sunshine. Star light from Berbere World Imports, Los Angeles; coffee table from L.A.'s Lucca Antiques. OPPOSITE The painter at work in her studio.



S

ometimes the most unassuming things are full of surprises. Take Santa Barbara painter Tani Conrad's house. Built in 1960 in Northern California-style cedar board-and-batten, it's a weathered-looking anomaly in this city of scrubbed-stucco Mediterranean villas. It doesn't present much of a face to the driveway, either. When you first pull in, you feel like its back is permanently turned

not only to the entry, but also to the passage of time.

Walk in, though, and you begin to groove on the undemanding, elegant California beach vibe that Conrad has created. In the main living space—a combined sitting area and kitchen—the eye casually glides along cool, white surfaces, doing an occasional arabesque over some perfectly selected object. Yet the room feels so self-contained and, despite its lofty ceiling, rather tight. So you start to wonder: Where's the rest of the house? "People are always surprised," says Conrad, who grew up in California

and Florida and lived in Connecticut before moving to the Santa Barbara area a little over a year ago. "The house doesn't present itself directly."

Indeed, the four-bedroom house reveals itself only step by step. It's made up of a series of discrete living spaces—dining room/living room, guest quarters, master bedroom—all of which form a mini-compound built around a courtyard. Breezeways and small hallways con-

nect the warren of rooms, each of which is shed-like in form, with sharply pitched roofs that allow for clerestory windows (second-story windows that let in tons of bright but indirect sunshine). Simple looking at first encounter, the house is, in fact, a masterfully-designed array of shifting perspectives, varying levels and unexpected decks which open onto the outer perimeter garden. "Guests get lost. They think the house is really not that big," says Conrad.

The home—located in a woodsy setting not far from the seaside town of Summerland, just south of Santa

Barbara—has a history that unfolds, too. Conrad purchased the house in early 2005, attracted not only to its unconventionally distributed layout, but also by the cavernous artist's studio in back that forms the fourth wall of the courtyard. The raw space was once the workshop of painter Howard Warshaw (1920-1977), a cubist artist who was part of an influential New York School show at the Whitney Museum in 1945. Recently, the house was inhabited by yet another

artist, Santa Barbara painter Paul Turpin, who sold the residence to Conrad just last year.

In many ways, Conrad makes a soft-spoken initial impression like the house she inhabits. Her early childhood was spent in San Francisco, Marin County and Woodside, California. Her late mother, Dale Cowgill, was an architect, while her father, the larger-than-life Barnaby Conrad, is one of Santa Barbara's most well-known denizens. After Dale and Barnaby divorced in 1961, Tani—whose full first name is Cayetana (after the Duchess of Alba, the famous paramour of the painter Goya)—moved with her mother to Florida at age 10.



Conrad's *Whippet* sits on a shelf near the fireplace in the sitting area. OPPOSITE In the combined living/dining room, a Blu Dot dining table from H.D. Buttercup and chairs from Twentieth sit before avocado trees.



Jonathan Adler vases harmonize with the soothing white environment, while a spiral staircase leads to a rooftop balcony. OPPOSITE A view of the entry from the living room includes an oval "peacock" mirror from Singh Imports, a trio of earthen vessels from Berbere World Imports, a woven chair from Montecito's William Laman and Mecox Gardens' zebra stripe box.



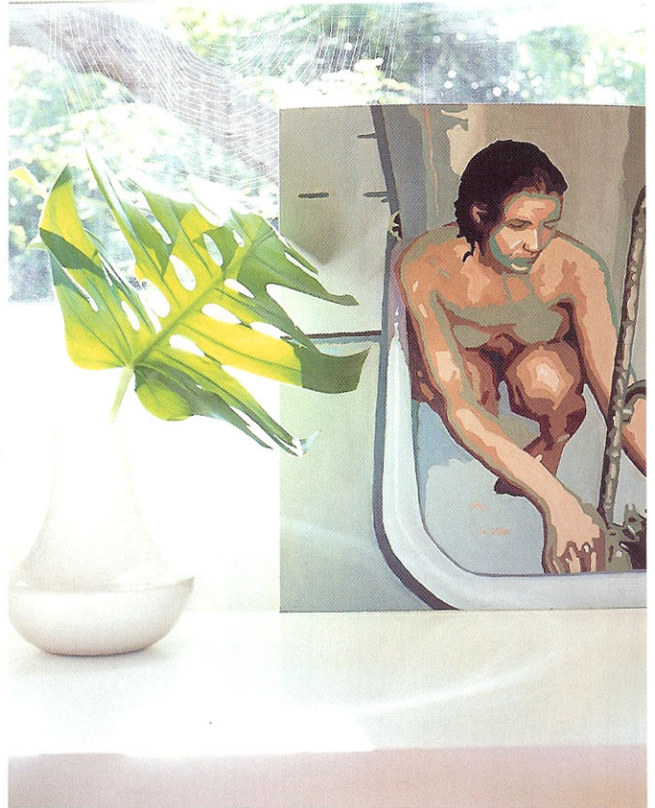


From there, it was onto boarding school and then Yale, where she studied art. “Then I lived in New York City, got married and moved out to Connecticut and raised kids,” she says, summing up her time on the East Coast with unanticipated dispatch.

A week after visiting her house, I ran into Conrad at a party. It turns out there was an intriguing chapter to her life she neglected to mention. “Oh, I think I forgot to tell you that my ex-husband and I used to own a nightclub in Manhattan in the early ’80s. It was called The Dive. It was on West 28th in what used to be a belly-dancing club,” she says. “We had it for about five years. It was sort of a cabaret at first but ended up being a lot of garage bands. I made a lot of things for the club, like a nine-foot marionette of a skeleton.” Google “The Dive.” It comes up that her ex-husband, Glenn Gazin, now a lawyer, was formerly a mentalist who did mind readings at the club. Clearly, this is a woman whose pacific demeanor doesn’t tell the whole story.

After divorcing Gazin in 1998 and living on her own for seven years in Connecticut—in what her daughter Helen calls “an ugly old ’70s house” full of dark, heirloom antiques—Conrad headed back to the West Coast. “All of my relatives are in California and have been here for seven or eight generations,” she says. Her children were all pretty much out of the house, too—Nicholas, 23, is a writer and illustrator; Charlie, 20, studies business; and Helen, 17, also a painter, is a senior at Connecticut’s Taft School. So Conrad began searching for a place in Santa Barbara. “I looked at quite a few houses with her,” says David Cameron, a commercial director and the husband of Tani’s half-

Conrad’s *Girl and Fossils* hangs above a pair of Mecox Gardens chairs and a Jonathan Adler coffee table. OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT) Bamboo bedside table from Barclay Butera; A painting, *Girl in Bath*, by Conrad’s daughter Helen; Custom bed upholstered in Irish linen in the guest room; Antiqued mirror from Montecito’s Maison K, mother-of-pearl dresser from Berbere World Imports.





"PART OF WHY I
ORIGINALLY WANTED TO
MOVE BACK TO
CALIFORNIA IS THE LIGHT."

sister Kendall Conrad. “This house hadn’t sold for a long time. It wasn’t the typical Spanish house people are looking for. But it really struck me as quintessential 1960s *Sunset* magazine California.”

Cameron and his associate, Susan Scott, ended up decorating the house. The process took about eight months. During that time, Conrad lived quite sparsely with just a bed, a few chairs and a very large collection of art books. “My kids would come to visit and say, ‘You’re never going to get furniture, are you?’” she laughs.

Actually, Conrad was busy the whole time meeting with Cameron and Scott, picking out furnishings, making models of key furniture pieces out of cardboard boxes (“We were really able to figure out how big things should be that way,” she says), and discussing how to redo the house, which was painted in a panoply of not always harmonious colors. In the end, the trio decided to wash the entire place in white and cover the floors in leather-bordered sea grass rugs. “It was

really just simplifying things,” says Conrad. In March of this year, Conrad and daughter Helen took a trip to San Francisco for the weekend, allowing Cameron and Scott—who had been collecting and storing the furnishings in Los Angeles—to come in with a crew and work their magic.

“They dressed the entire house all in one weekend,” she recalls. “Helen and I got back at around 6:30 and they said, ‘We need more time.’” Mother and

daughter ambled in downtown Santa Barbara for four hours, shopping and having dinner until finally, around 10:30, the place was ready for its unveiling. Says Conrad: “They had flowers in all the rooms and every candle lit. Everything was perfect.”

What’s most fitting about the decor is the way everything shows off Conrad’s large-scale figurative paintings. While the furnishings have occasional flashes of color, it’s her artwork, in vividly saturated shades of greens, blues and pinks, that springs to life

against the tabula rasa interior of white expanses and raw, undyed textiles. “I find that her colors are so startling and yet subtle at the same time,” says her dealer, Laurie Frank of Santa Monica’s Frank Pictures Gallery (frankpicturesgallery.com), which will present a one-woman show of the artist’s new works this November through January.

With so much creativity not only in her genes—artwork by her parents and her children is scat-

tered here and there—but also imbued in the walls of her home, how could Conrad be anything but inspired? “I’m very proud of her,” says Helen. “She was a homemaker and taking care of children, and she’s finally leading her own life.” And doing it with dedication, too. Almost every morning, Conrad gets up and takes her dog, an Australian Shepherd named Garth, for a leisurely walk up and down the beach. Then, after a bite of breakfast, she spends most of the day alone painting. “I walk out the back of the kitchen and straight out through the courtyard to the studio,” she says. “It’s really sort of idyllic here—this just feels new, fresh and light.” •



A view of the house's Northern California-style cedar board-and-batten exterior. Landscape architect Leslie V. Rowe planted ornamental grasses and sage.

OPPOSITE Embroidered pillows from Maison K decorate a built-in couch along the breezeway.

Conrad works on one of her large-scale canvases in the art studio, while daughter Helen writes and Garth, her Australian Shepherd, sleeps loyally by. OPPOSITE A detail of the painting, *Two Girls Dancing*.



