



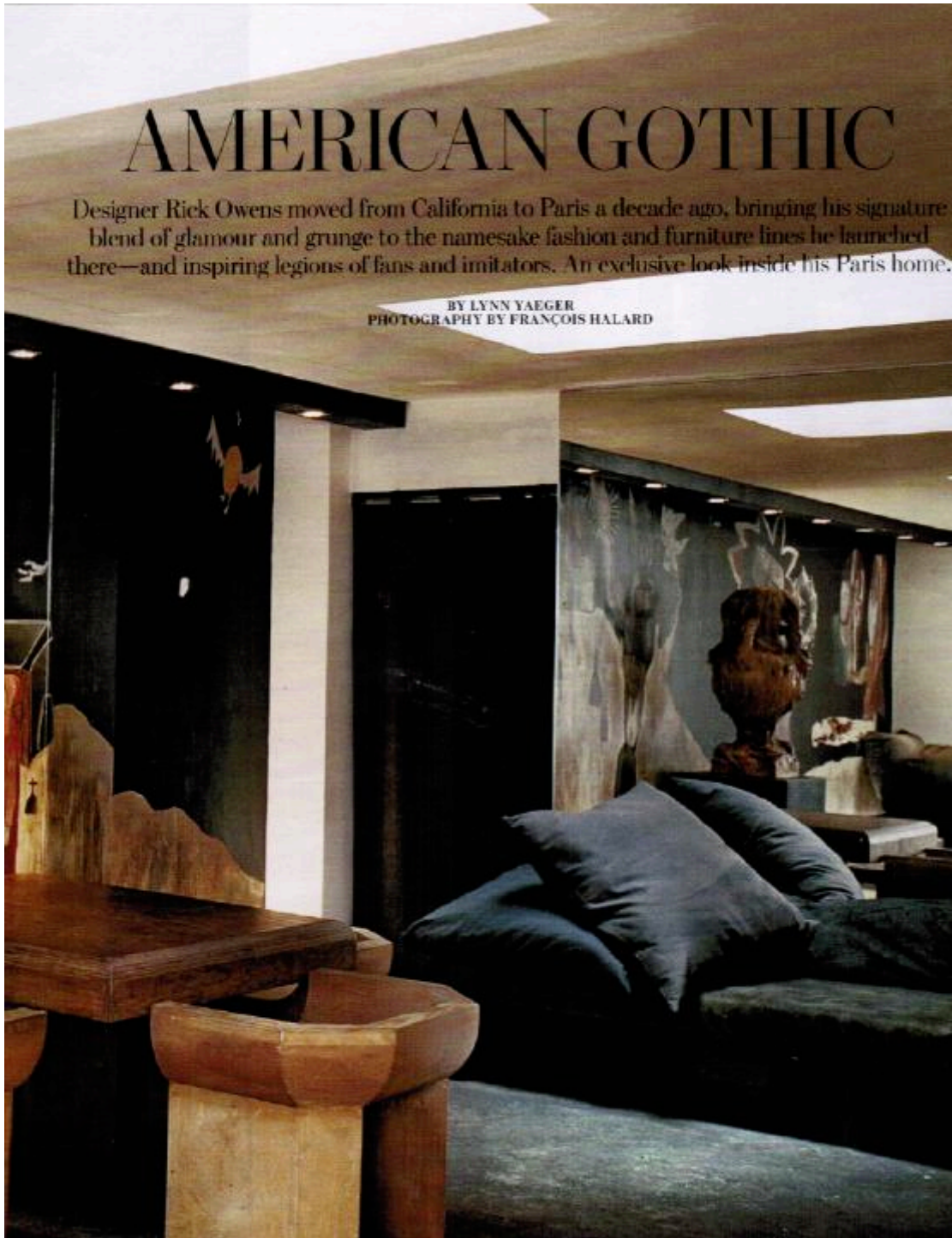
SALON 94

Rick Owens, Wall Street Journal Magazine, May 2013

AMERICAN GOTHIC

Designer Rick Owens moved from California to Paris a decade ago, bringing his signature blend of glamour and grunge to the namesake fashion and furniture lines he launched there—and inspiring legions of fans and imitators. An exclusive look inside his Paris home.

BY LYNN YAEGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS HALARD





RAW EDGES
 Owens leans against a concrete sink in a bathroom he designed. Opposite: A sculpture by Horst Egon Kalinowski in the meeting room.

IN A SALON WHERE SUBJECTS like universal education and health care benefits once held center stage—a room groaning with elaborate boiserie, inlaid mirrors and parquet flooring—a taxidermic monkey now looms over a massive stone-gray table. Rick Owens, the iconic expatriate American designer, has taken up residence in the former French Socialist Party headquarters on the Place du Palais Bourbon, a few blocks south of the Seine.

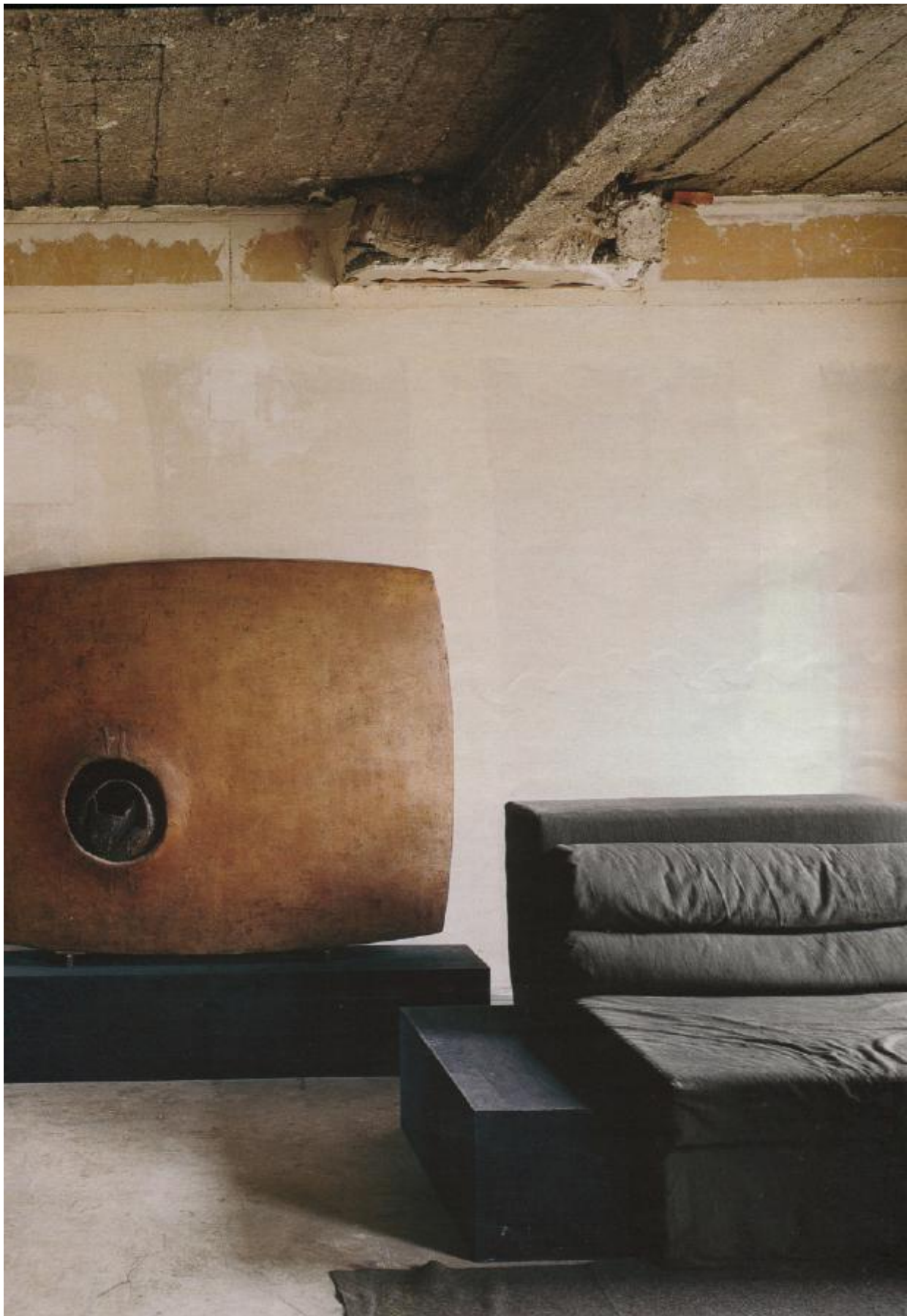
"The building was empty for 20 years before we got it in 2004. It was hideous: office cubicles, insulation tiles, a real rat warren. I think it was too daunting for most people to take on—not too many people would do it the way we did," Owens says, explaining that he "just ripped things out, but left the concrete floors and

some of the other stuff—the bare bones are good."

If a house in need of a total (or, in this case, artfully partial) renovation suits Owens, it may be because it conforms to his particularly unorthodox artistic vision, a love of polished imperfection that informs the clothing that has made him famous—a mode of dressing (and, more recently, home furnishings) that could be described as high-end, glamorous grunge. (Owens himself has called it "glunge.") These creations have mesmerized the fashion world since he launched his first collections in the early '90s, growing into a global phenomenon built on a foundation of skinny leather biker jackets beloved by everyone from teenagers (who admittedly have trouble scraping together enough babysitting money to purchase the original)







to customers Owens proudly describes as "ferce gran-nies." Among the other codes of the house are a willingness to treat sable with an irreverence usually reserved for sweatshirts and the employment of trumpet skirts and narrow trousers dedicated to elongating the body. Virtually everything is made in a palette that a former associate likened to the color of a dying bird.

Owens, who was born in 1961 in Porterville, California, came to Paris with his then-partner, now wife, Michèle Lamy, in 2003, when he was hired as creative director at Révillon furs. He met Lamy in Los Angeles in the late '80s. He had been studying to be a painter at the Otis College of Art and Design but switched to pattern-making; Lamy, originally from Paris, had a sportswear factory at that time and employed him. Today, she is his muse, his goddess, his artistic other-half, the force behind his fur and furniture lines and, by default, his translator. "My French is still nonexistent," he laughs ruefully. "I am so horrified I didn't pick it up easily. I live with a mean French lady, and when she hears my French she can really give me a look of disdain."

Though he remains a quintessentially American guy—soft-spoken but strong-minded, a long-haired, louche, super-fashionable version of Gary Cooper—Owens, like so many American artists before him, is besotted with Paris, thrilled to think that Montesquieu and Proust trod the very same cobblestones he crosses every day. Gazing out a window at the Ministry of Defense garden at the back of his house, he dreamily observes, "On days when there are visiting dignitaries reviewing the troops there's a little band that plays the Marseillaise. It's so sweet."

This Left Bank building, whose glorious front rooms date from the early 19th century, but whose back area is an unimpressive addition from the '50s, served until recently as Owens's entire headquarters and living space. A few months ago he moved his showroom to another Paris location, but the furniture designing still takes place here. The fur department remains in situ, with a second-floor atelier featuring a curtain of mink pelts drying overhead, an eviscerated bear draped over a chair—purely as decoration, Owens confides—and a rack of rare python biker jackets, typically Owens-esque in their feral decadence. (Who knew scales could grow this big?)

This afternoon, a few days after Owens's well-received fall 2013 runway show, the designer has been persuaded to conduct a house tour, clad in his usual uniform: unlaced sneakers, shorts over trousers, a halter T-shirt atop a garment he calls his "level" turtle-neck (because of the straight line across the shoulder, in front of the throat). We ascend the narrow wooden stairs (he has plans to widen the staircase, rip out the charmless elevator and flood the place with light) and arrive at the living quarters, decorated almost exclusively with the furniture that Owens has been designing since 2006. Monumental and dramatic—combining the influences of Robert Mallet-Stevens, Donald Judd and Le Corbusier—the pieces, though spectacular in an Art Brut sort of way, are not exactly what you would call warm and cozy. They aren't meant to be—Owens says they are the antithesis of his clothes, which place a premium on slouchy comfort.



HEAD SPACE

Clockwise from top: An installation of objects on Owens's desk includes a skull and Roc crystals; the Owens-designed bed is pine plywood covered in cashmere felt; a brass-topped table by Owens; two looks from his fall 2013 runway shows. Opposite: Owens's minimalist shower.



"With the furniture, I completely disregarded what's practical—that's art, that's magic!" If the materials are wildly ambitious and the prices insanely high, if these antler chairs and petrified bark tables are scaled for a Texas oligarch or a Middle Eastern potentate, Owens merely shrugs. "The furniture started as a hobby for me. I mean, it's not like I collect cars or anything. It was a personal indulgence. Frankly, I was surprised when we started selling it."

Even when the decor is not Owens-designed, it is hardly candy-colored. On the floor of an area he refers to as Michèle's gym—"I hate boxing," he says. "She's into cardio; I can't do it"—is an elegant all-black boom box (words that don't usually go together), a recent gift from Cher, a new acquaintance who has become a fast friend.

The master bedroom is dominated by a bed that is a replica of the one they had in L.A., a humongous creation made of felt-covered plywood, a design that Owens has also rendered in alabaster, in an edition of two. (Should you be considering asking him to increase this to three, bear in mind that it will weigh two tons—the person who previously purchased this \$180,000 item had to have his floor reinforced.)

"How do we make all the things around us beautiful?" Owens asks rhetorically, explaining his interior design philosophy. "Every switch plate, every sneaker, I want all the everyday stuff to be great. I would like a rock crystal toilet!" In lieu of a crystal facility, there is a wonderful library, which Owens refers to as his "panic room," and features rugs repurposed from surplus military blankets. Owens-designed shelving holds tomes that range from Scotty Bowers's scandalous memoir, *Full Service*, to a compendium of Fellini films to seven bound volumes of *Interview* magazine.

"Honey, are you decent?" Owens calls out as we approach the next landing, where Lamy is just finishing up in her custom Owens-designed hammam. And here is the lady herself, surprisingly diminutive (birdlike, you might say), with a wicked grin that reveals her trademark mouthful of gold teeth. She is friendly and welcoming, and the two of them seem like they couldn't be happier, but suddenly you find yourself wondering, OK, so there is a marble hammam and a bed that could sleep a family of 12, but can you get a cup of coffee around here? The answer is not really; though the work area has a full catering kitchen, the living quarters don't even sport a dorm fridge, which Owens says is fine with him. "We have minibars on each floor—I can always get a cookie."

As it turns out, the couple takes most meals at the Brasserie Le Bourbon on the corner: "We need to get out of the house anyway," Owens says. Recently, they were having dinner at the restaurant when Pierre Cardin, still designing at 90, approached Owens and complimented him on his work. "I was just so touched, he's so French!"

Owens remembers. "It made me feel so validated, like I had achieved major French acceptance." Not bad for a California boy with a schoolteacher mom and a very conservative social worker dad, who grew up in a house with a library that contained volumes of Colette and Huysmans but no TV. (Nevertheless, Owens watched television at friends' houses, and it's easy to guess his favorite program: *The Addams Family*, which was clearly a formative influence.) His parents travel to Paris twice a year to see his women's runway shows, and every season his mom asks if he's embarrassed she turns up in bright colors. ("No, mom, it's fine," he reassures her each time.) She was at his most recent show in February, which offered Asian-inspired women warriors marching to a Wagner soundtrack, their pre-Raphaelite hairdos literally blowing in the wind via steam machines.

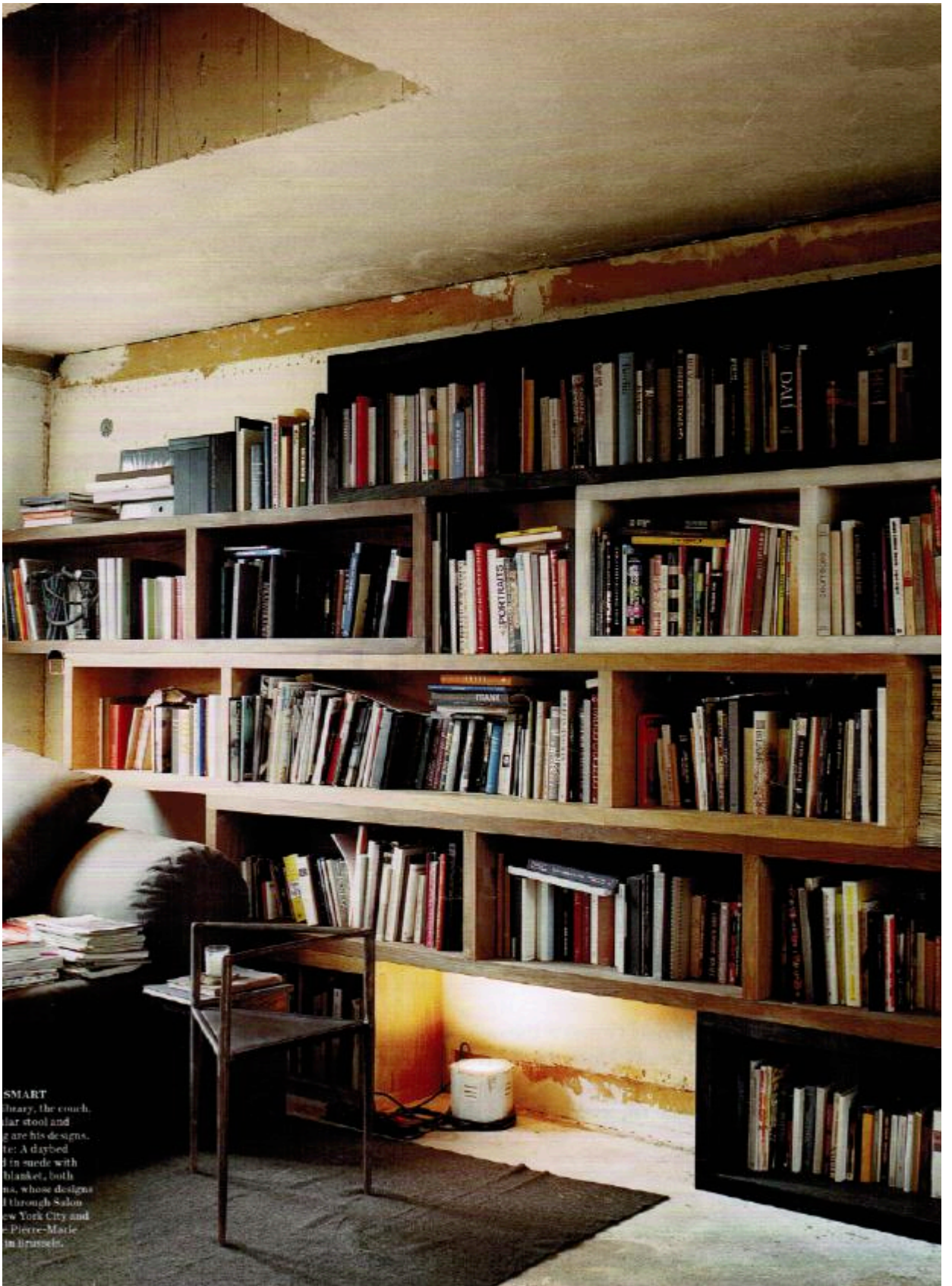
Over lunch—the catering kitchen supplies orange juice and mineral water and a nearby *bio* (French for "organic") restaurant sends over delicious chicken and couscous—Owens talks about his guiding aesthetic, common to both his fashion and his furniture. "When you think about it, my niche has been around forever," he says. "Sarah Bernhardt wore a taxidermied bat in her hair! What I am doing is really a reformulation of exoticism." We are in the room with the monkey (Francis Mitterrand's former office) sitting on Owens's Alchemist chairs—a triangular affair that he describes as "meant more for perching than for reading." (Halfway through the meal this becomes readily apparent.)

The conversation turns to the underpinnings of virtually all his creative work: "It boils down to construction, creating my own language from the inside out, but always keeping my signature," he explains. "Clothes are supposed to be about experience—the damage, the patina, accepting it and enjoying it, making it part of life. We all get impatient when things are too prim."

Still, despite his many European influences—his entire opus, he says, smiling, owes a serious debt to Madame Grès, the French fashion designer and master cutter, and Eileen Gray, the avant-garde Irish furniture designer—Owens's collected works aren't exactly Continental; they are the product of an imagination that resides in a very specific Rick-land. His signature is so recognizable that it has inevitably turned up, massively copied, in high-street stores all over the globe, but Owens takes this in stride, even thinking of it as a compliment, though he admits that lately he has been considering his legacy. He says he is thrilled to be so influential, "but if I wasn't credited, then it would hurt. And if someone was doing it better than me it would kill me. There are moments I want to claim my space a little more strongly. Sometimes I worry, Will I be a small footnote in fashion history?"

He laughs and that Gary Cooper-esque, all-American modesty reemerges, especially striking, and even a little touching from a guy who heads up a nearly \$100 million business. "I know I should just be grateful paying the rent. I started out to do what's cool and what amuses me, and I still try to operate like that. For a long while it was about struggling to survive, struggling to get better. Now it's about staking my place. I'm feeling very protective of what I've done." ●





SMART

Chair, the couch, table, stool and lamp are his designs. The room is a daybed in suede with blanket, both in his designs. He has designed through Salon in New York City and in Brussels.

