

52 Leading Voices in American Interiors*

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{The Design Source}

DECEMBER 2005 | \$9.95

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12





Concrete planters and tables sculpted by Buddy Rhodes for both residential and commercial clients. OPPOSITE: Rhodes sits at a table he fashioned for Orbit Room, a bar on San Francisco's Market Street.

Buddy Rhodes can change your opinion about concrete in an instant. When clients walk into his studio in the Potrero Hill section of San Francisco, “they don’t expect to see the colors or textures I’m able to give concrete,” says this former ceramist. “They’re surprised it can be so beautiful.” Having no preconceived ideas about the material, his clients are willing to take risks too. “Everything is possible,” exclaims Rhodes, punctuating his story of recently embedding a client’s wedding ring into her kitchen counter top.

More than two decades ago, this 54-year-old Long Island native, trained at the Alfred University College of Ceramics in western New York, moved to California to further a career modeling in clay. But he soon found himself frustrated. “I wasn’t willing to live with the size limitations imposed by clay or with never quite knowing how a piece would turn out,” he says. “And I certainly wasn’t prepared for a life of making mugs.” Determined to work on a larger scale and confident he could extend the range of his creativity, he turned to concrete.

Today Rhodes has so revitalized the art of concrete-making that his commissions go beyond kitchen counter tops to fireplace surrounds and wainscoting, even bathtubs. Early on, faced with concrete’s tendency to crack, its inconsistent color and uneven levels of strength, and its refusal to take certain shapes, he found a way to stiffen the mixture, so that before it hardens it doesn’t separate from the vertical or curved walls of his molds. (He sells 70-pound bags of Buddy Rhodes Concrete Counter Mix—a blend of bleached gray portland cement,

sand, rock and 30 percent reclaimed materials, including coal industry fly ash and reclaimed freeway concrete—for \$72.) To create his striking forms, Rhodes uses a variety of molds, including plaster, Styrofoam and melamine.

Once the mold is removed, he applies a coating of concrete, which he then polishes off, leaving a smooth surface displaying only veins and signs of hand-patching. Then he’ll give the piece its wild but highly distinctive surface coloration. “Being handmade, the piece will have a different coloring every time,” he says. Nothing satisfies him more than giving this personal touch to a material once so devoid of it.

—Recommended by Jay Jeffers

Sam Kasten, a weaver with more than 30 years experience and the stellar reputation such experience can earn, believes that hand-woven fabric adds not just decoration but also emotional satisfaction to a room. “When you walk into an interior full of

art, including the art that’s on the floor or used in the upholstery,” says Kasten, “you feel much happier.”

Kasten employs a dozen weavers in his studio in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to implement his luminous designs. He uses all-natural fibers, especially wool, cotton and silk, which, he says, are sensuous to touch, easy on the pocketbook and add both texture and softness to an environment. Although he has manufactured fabrics on machine

SAM KASTEN
413-298-5502
WWW.SAMKASTEN.COM

looms, he is convinced that hand looms are superior. “You immediately see the difference,” he says. “The hand loom treats the yarns very gently, letting its resilience and its liveliness emerge.” By contrast, “machine-made fabric has to

be woven with a high-tension apparatus, which, in my opinion, ends up beating the life out of it.”

Though Kasten’s woven fabrics usually end up as furniture coverings, draperies, rugs and wall upholstery, he doesn’t shy away from unconventional commissions. One business executive asked him for hand-woven fabric to cover not only the office furniture but also the dividers of every secretarial carrel at his company headquarters. Kasten “loved that.” Many architects and designers, among them I.M. Pei and Thierry Despont, the latter responsible for the interiors at the Getty Museum, have embraced Kasten’s deeply intuitive approach. The weaver is quick to credit his attitude about his craft and much of his success to an early apprenticeship with Andy Oates of Nantucket Looms, who studied at Black Mountain College with the legendary Annie Albers.

Kasten explains that he took from his teacher mostly a love of the weaving tradition. “I’m otherwise fairly uneducated when it comes to textiles,” he says, preferring to let ideas come to him when he’s on the loom. He seldom replicates an earlier pattern. “Clients will say they like a particular motif I’ve done, or could I make this square bigger, so I’ll oblige them,” says Kasten. “But our designs all come from particular jobs for particular clients. We set out to solve a problem for them, and all sorts of things then start to come up.”

This highly individual approach to each commission continues to distinguish Kasten from other fabric makers. “We make very fine fabrics in small quantities all to order,” he notes. “There’s almost no other workshop in the world that does that anymore.”—Recommended by Nancy Braithwaite, Tsao & McKown

Growing up in New England, **Kathleen Ash** battled being bored stiff in church by looking at “these fabulous



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