

An Artist's Life in Objects, From a Warhol Print to a Postmodern Lamp

At his Connecticut studio, Peter Halley works among an eclectic collection of furniture and art infused with personal memories.

By Alice Newell-Hanson

Oct. 27, 2021



In the 1980s, the artist Peter Halley helped ignite New York's East Village art scene alongside contemporaries like Jeff Koons and Ashley Bickerton. In 1996, he co-founded the influential arts and culture magazine *Index*. And between 2002 and 2011, he served as the director of Yale's M.F.A. painting program. But he is best known for his often gargantuan neon abstract canvases, which he has made in subtly varying forms for four decades (a show of his recent works is currently on view at Dallas Contemporary). Comprising cell-like shapes connected by "conduits," his paintings are at once luminous and austere, with textured surfaces he laboriously builds up using layers of acrylic frequently mixed with Roll-a-Tex, a surfacing material for houses. A native New Yorker, he works mostly from a 5,000-square-foot studio in West Chelsea, a former industrial building filled with buckets of Day-Glo paint and bins of splattered rollers.

But his studio in Connecticut, a modest two-story house wrapped in black-stained shingles that he bought and renovated in 2010, and where he now spends a few days each week, is a very different kind of work space. It serves as both a refuge for making the 17-by-22-inch studies on which his large-scale paintings are based — a meditative process he likens to composing music but with colors instead of chords — and as a memory palace of sorts, filled with furniture and objects from each chapter of his life.



In a sitting area, “RMF 5218” (2008-09), a sculpture by the artist R. M. Fischer, sits on a Jean Nouvel Less table, designed for the Cartier Foundation in Paris in 1994. Allison Minto

“I’m really, really interested in design,” Halley told me recently over Zoom. “And this has become a place where I bring all my treasures.” In the building’s ground-floor living and dining room, a 19th-century carved wood Indian table stands in front of a geometric, pastel-accented mirror by the Italian postmodernist Ettore Sottsass, a founder of the radical design collective Memphis. And upstairs — where Halley works sitting on the floor at a tubular steel Marcel Breuer side table with a view of Long Island Sound — is a Technicolor hangout area anchored by a chubby French indigo sofa from the ’60s or ’70s and a low-slung Missoni Roche Bobois Mah Jong chair whose hot pink and brown stripes echo the shades of a 1972 print by Andy Warhol that hangs on the back wall. “My taste is very eclectic and disorganized,” Halley said, “and I’m kind of proud of that.” Still, his urge to collect is driven not only by his admiration for a diverse array of designers and fellow artists but also by a deep-rooted desire to surround himself with objects that his loved ones and creative heroes have likewise spent time with. Interspersed with works he’s acquired through trades with artist friends over the years are pieces of furniture from his mother’s Manhattan apartment, where he lived throughout his childhood, as well as paintings by his great-uncle. “The impulse to collect seems very much about holding onto time or holding onto something that might otherwise dissipate,” he said. Here, he discusses six of his favorite pieces.



Allison Minto. Ettore Sottsass's Palafitta lamp (1957) © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Palafitta Lamp (1957), Ettore Sottsass

I got to know Sottsass's work in the 1980s and in 1995, I did a show at Jay Gorney gallery in New York that included some of his ceramics and furniture as well as two of my paintings. My work definitely speaks to his design; it rhymes well with it. This flying saucer lamp is very delicate so I don't interact with it much, but I got it from my friend, the design consultant Jim Walrod, whose collection was auctioned after he passed away in 2017. I never quite know what anything is, because I don't research pieces very much, but the lamp is early and, from what I understand, very rare. It's just crazy looking. I also have a Sottsass dining table with a glass top and patterned legs, and I love that thing. In a way, it's a classic Memphis Group piece — even though Memphis is not necessarily my favorite part of Sottsass's career — but it has such paradigmatic postmodern wit: It has a steel structure that supports the glass and could have been designed by a modernist architect, but then it disappears into these rectangular legs that are topped with a red laminate. The whole thing is crazy impressive. I've worked in Italy a lot over the years and I met Sottsass in Milan a couple of times in the '90s. Later on, I began working with the designer Alessandro Mendini and did collaborative projects with him during the last decade of his life. So I'm sort of embedded in Italian art and design.



Allison Minto. Andy Warhol's "Sunset" (1972) © 2021 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

"Sunset" (1972), Andy Warhol

I'm very proud of this piece. It hangs in the stairwell beneath a surrealist-looking lamp with a flexible neck by the French designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec from around 2000. It's one of an edition of 472 unique monoprints — each one is different because the colors were silk-screened across them — that Warhol made for the Phillip Johnson-designed Hotel Marquette in Minneapolis. There was one in every room and when the hotel was renovated, the prints were dispersed. Warhol made some really amazing prints on paper, including a poster for the 1967 Lincoln Center Film Festival in the form of a giant ticket. I think he chose sunsets for this edition because a sunset is the campiest thing in the world — it's the most appealing picture you can imagine — but these look like sunsets in the most polluted city on the planet. They all have a very unnatural green tone.



Allison Minto. Robert Morris's "Prototype for Earth Project" (1967) © 2021 The Estate of Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

"Prototype for Earth Project" (1967), Robert Morris

I got this work from Nadine Witkin, the owner of Alpha 137 gallery. She's a wonderful person who deals in artists' editions and ephemera. She sells posters, invitations for openings and some small drawings. I traded an edition of mine for this piece. I really love Morris's work and I think he's an important artist, so it's nice to have something of his. It's a model for an earthwork. I also have two Dennis Oppenheim prints from the '70s that document earthworks, or are proposals for them. I grew up in the era of conceptualism and earthworks and all those artists. Elsewhere, I have pieces by Vito Acconci and a little Sol LeWitt.



Allison Minto

Untitled Fiberglass Reliefs (2001), Peter Halley

I guess I have to admit that I like plastic furniture and the use of plastic in design. And so sometime in the '90s, I made these reliefs, which are formed from fiberglass and finished with pearlescent paint. I don't tend to keep my own paintings, but these relate to the Morris relief, which is part of my fascination with shiny, bright plastic design objects. We often think of plastic as something antinatural or cheap, but it's great to make things from. There's a reason it's called plastic: It's malleable, and it's also light but can be embedded with color. Both Sottsass and later Philippe Starck, who also makes a lot of furniture in plastic, have extolled its virtues.



Allison Minto

Untitled Painting (circa 1965), Aaron Wyn

My great-uncle made this painting. He was a publisher and in the '60s, his company, Ace Books, published all the great science fiction writers for the first time: Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany. Through his nephew, it also published William Burroughs's first book, "Junky," in 1953. But they turned down Jack Kerouac's "On the Road." My great-uncle retired around 1965 and began painting. He was a very smart man and his painting was quite good and intelligently done. He died a few years later, when I was 14, and left behind a fully equipped studio at his home in Larchmont, N.Y. I started painting in that studio. And I don't think I would have become an artist if I hadn't discovered painting. It was very fortuitous. He used geometric forms and a lot of color. I've never, except for my own amusement, painted representationally, so right from the start, I was painting abstract paintings, too. I still have some of them somewhere.



Allison Minto

"Barnett Newman" (1971), Thomas B. Hess

This is a catalog of Newman's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971. It's a really important book for me. Hess was a very well-known critic and the editor of ARTnews for a number of years, and the portrait he wove of Newman and his heroic belief in his own work despite the odds — this guy was painting stripes on big canvases that, for many years, nobody really supported — was very moving to me as a young person. I saw that MoMA show when I was 18 and I didn't really understand it at the time, but I'm glad I saw it. I'd just finished high school at Phillips Academy Andover, which had a great art program, and I was going off to Yale to study art. That didn't go so well because the art department was much more conservative than I thought it was going to be, and it wouldn't let me major in art because I wouldn't do what it wanted me to do, which was paint still lifes. So I ended up majoring in arthistory. It was quite discouraging at the time. And then, years later, I came back and became director of the program, which was a really wonderful moment. The book resonates, too, because it took quite a long time for my work to get recognition in New York. I arrived back there in 1980 and didn't have my first one-person show until '85, when I was 31, which is still young but not that young. When I started making my paintings, people said, "Oh, they're so old-fashioned. They're like minimalism, which is not interesting." For a number of years, I just had to stick with it.

Alice Newell-Hanson is the senior digital features editor of T Magazine.