



Pamela Babey, a founding principal of the renowned design firm BAMO, believes that "Everything is valuable," and her Russian Hill home illustrates that conviction. ERIC FURBER

Small space,

For designer Pamela Babey, the more, the better, and every tchotchke tells a story

By Leilani Marie Labong

"I can't throw anything out!" says San Francisco designer Pamela Babey. "Everything is valuable." Indeed, the petite Russian Hill aerie she's shared since textiles that they warrant a category of their own.)

Every inch of the two-story apartment is occupied by meaningful tchotchkes, chic furniture or works of art. Traversing the long entry hall is a good introduc-

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HOME



Photos by Erik Fvalovik

A large mirrored surface in Pamela Babey's home, left, and expansive city views insert some psychic breathing room amid the home's richness of ornament.

Mirrors help make walls disappear

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tion to the intricate tableau. An unfinished wall mural — still visible are David's well-intentioned pencil outlines depicting Venice, the couple's favorite global destination — is the backdrop for the corridor's curated exhibition: In mirrored presentation cases, Babey, a founding principal of internationally renowned design firm Bamo, displays Venetian glass hearts ("I try to give them to David every Valentine's Day," she says), miniature spoons from her world travels and speckled blue chicken eggs from McEvoy Ranch in Petaluma, where Bamo designed pavilions and guesthouses.

Saintly sentinels

Because such sentimental value is priceless, a conclave of *retablos*, Mexican folk-art saints, watches over the collections, with Santa Barbara, the patron saint of architects, leading the charge. "My mother collected retablos, so they remind me of her, and of growing up in New Mexico," says Babey.

The festooned passage leads to the "great room," where expansive views of the city are unapologetically overshadowed by the decor. A vast mirrored surface seems to double the diminutive space, an illusion that appears to create room for even more keepsakes.

"I like mirrors because they're shiny and they make walls disappear," says Babey. The large looking glass is layered with more mementos from her career (among them, a framed architectural blueprint and a portrait of an anonymous gentleman), and yes, even more mirrors, including a substantial cross-shaped piece that David insisted on bringing home from Pacific Heights design boutique Sue Fisher King.

"He was impressed by its scale, but I tend to gravitate toward smaller things," says Babey, picking up a palm-size mechanical bird as an example. Her mother had loved birds. This one chirped on contact. "Look at that! How could you possibly resist?"

While such eccentric design is endlessly capti-



The contents of Pamela Babey's Russian Hill home provide the opportunity to spin a yarn, whether it be travel tales or stories of a beloved pet rabbit.

vating, Babey is the first to admit that it's not for everyone. "The trick is to make your home warm and inviting, even if you prefer minimalism," says the designer. "It's not about piling on throw pillows, but including pieces that are meaningful."

Needless to say, nothing adorning the residence exists for mere "wow" factor, but rather for the opportunity to spin a yarn.

Other landmarks along memory lane include painted portraits of Homer, the couple's beloved pet rabbit — namesake of the Greek poet who wrote

"The Odyssey," not the beer-bellied Simpson, lest there was any doubt — which hang in the living room and study. After Homer died, Babey began collecting cashmere teddy bears to act as warm and fuzzy surrogates — Sally, Violetta and Teodoro are often her loyal travel companions.

The thin gold molding on the perimeter of the great room was an idea

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Pamela Babey

stolen from Babey's friend, San Francisco designer Andrew Belschner. "I loved that something so tiny could be so important," she says. "And it's shiny."

The Venetian chandelier hanging over the Saarinen dining table is another of the home's gleaming conversation pieces. She and David acquired it from an antiques shop in Antibes, France; unsurprisingly, it arrived in San Francisco in

couch in Fortuny fabric as soon as I could," she says. "Now it goes so well with the worn-out silk velvet on the Brno chairs."

The Fortuny factor

One might say that Fortuny textiles are the culmination of Babey's natural flair for opulence, her affinity for Venetian arts and her quest for individualism — subtle variations in the fabrics make them one of a kind, after all. In addition, her friendship with famed Fortuny designer Contessa Elsie Lee Gozzi makes for good storytelling: Babey fondly recalls meeting her in the mid-1970s in San Francisco. Frequent visits to the Fortuny factory in Venice ensued, along with glamorous parties and dinners, but even under the influence of Champagne, the Contessa managed to keep Fortuny's unique production process under wraps.

"She would never let you see how the fabric was made, but you knew there were many, many steps," says Babey, whose passion for the artisanal line is chronicled in "Fortuny Interiors," a recent monograph published by Rizzoli. It goes without saying that Babey has designed extensively with Fortuny in her career, unraveling countless bolts of the luminous, brocade-like material at dozens of locations all over the world, including the executive offices at the Royal Dutch Shell world headquarters in The Hague, Netherlands and at the Four Seasons in Milan, where the textiles were so coveted that guests were stuffing their suitcases with them.

"The housekeepers would find the naked throw pillows hidden under the bed!" laughs Babey. In her own space, Fortuny fabric takes the form of grand valances, sumptuous wall coverings, and of course the famous slipcover, all of which contribute to the home's luxurious overtones. But despite Fortuny's majestic bearing, Babey's approach with it is surprisingly relaxed. "It's just cotton!" she says.

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