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Duchess of Design

Kari Whitman Has a Distinct Sense of Style
She Calls "Eclectic Self-Expressionism"

Story by Debra Kronowitz | Photos courtesy of Kari Whitman Interiors

Before starting her career as an interior designer and host of television design shows on WE and The Discovery Channel, Kari Whitman was an actress. She appeared on episodes of "NYPD Blue," "The X-Files" and "Baywatch," and in films including "Men at Work" and "Forced to Kill." She was also named February's *Playmate of the Month* by *Playboy Magazine*. In spite of her success, she never found the work very challenging or rewarding.


"I really didn't like acting. It was not my scene at all. It was just too much waiting; it bored me. And I worked as an actress, and I completely supported myself as an actress, but it just wasn't for me. I was always waiting around for the phone to ring, but I like to make things

happen!" Whitman recalled. "I was also always redoing my house, helping my friends out with their houses. I didn't set out to be a designer, but people were constantly asking me for design advice, and finally I just said, 'Forget it, I don't want to do this [acting business] anymore.'"

The self-taught designer's career took off 11 years ago, when friend Emilio Estevez hired her to design his wine room. "He was always like, 'You wanna help me, you wanna help me?'" He was such a great client because he loved my style and was so easy to work with. It's funny, he was one of the first people I acted with and his space was the first I designed," she said.

Whitman gutted the two-level home and created a New York loft-style open space.





A metal chandelier — Whitman calls it the "Moroccan Disco Ball" — hangs overhead. Whitman found the piece in Morocco and when the lights are on, a display of light bursts through the cut-outs onto the walls and ceiling, creating a functional art piece.

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Nick-named the "Duchess of Design," Whitman's elegant design, elaborate detail and artful furnishings and finishings have garnered her an A-list client base. She has designed homes for Jessica Alba, Virginia Madsen and Don Henley, to name a few. "When I design I want the house to express the person living in it," she said. "I think it's just important for any designer to really listen to the client. You need to create it for them, not for you. It's not about ego for me; it's about whatever makes them happy. A happy client is the most important thing to me."

So when Whitman purchased a new home four years ago, the same rules applied. "I love to experiment. I'm eclectic and I wanted to create a place that you wouldn't expect to be here," she said of her 2,800-square-foot townhouse above Sunset Boulevard. "I love to experiment and have the freedom to mix things up. My home is cozy, comfy, funky and cool. I have crazy art on the walls, but it all works, it fits together."

Whitman gutted the two-level home and created a New York loft-style open space. "Before, the place had awful white shag carpeting and cottage cheese ceilings," she recalled. Whitman opened up the kitchen, added recycled wood flooring throughout, wrapped a balcony around the first level and added a 500-square-foot deck on the second level to create an outdoor living space. Her use of natural tones contrasts with modern, yet warm textures scattered on the walls and in the furniture. The feel is funky, yet sophisticated. She used her own eco-friendly paint line, Wall Makeup, on the walls. "I used to paint art and do crazy walls... it's like a work of art."

Whitman is eco-conscious and her designs are always as "green" as possible. "To recycle is to reuse," she said.



▲ The master bedroom is a mix of Indian, Moroccan and Asian. Her goal in this room was self-expression.



The space is festive and has, as she describes, a south of France/Moroccan feel to it.

Her self-described style of "eclectic self-expressionism" is everywhere and hits the moment one walks through the double wood doors in the entryway. Here, the walls are painted in metallic silver. A metal chandelier – Whitman calls it the "Moroccan Disco Ball" – hangs overhead. Whitman found the piece in Morocco and when the lights are on, a display of light bursts through the cut-outs onto the walls and ceiling, creating a functional art piece.

The entryway also features a wood table made from recycled teak from Donghia in the Avenues of Art and Design and artwork from actor Don Johnson. "It was a gift. It's a cool painting; it looks like it's not supposed to be there, but it's there," Whitman said.

The entryway leads to the open living space. Here Whitman knocked out the kitchen wall and designed a classic kitchen filled with wood and stainless-steel. She kept the existing cabinets and wood grained them to look like dark wood. The lights are simple and made out of fabric. The appliances are Bosch and Frigidaire. The walls were painted to look like bamboo.

The dining room table features a teak tabletop purchased at Terra Nova in Avenues of Art and Design and an iron base. The chairs, also made of teak, fold into stools. "That is what I loved about the chairs," she added.

To mix things up Whitman added a diamond-patterned area rug and a candelabra centerpiece and light fixture, which create the same lighting effect as her bedside lamps and entryway chandelier.

In the living room area, Whitman played off the high ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows. The space is warm and clean. Here, the walls are marble plastered painted in what Whitman describes as "fun diamonds and squares." The couch

was purchased at the Pacific Design Center and features a mix of Kneeder-Fauchere and Donghia fabrics. A custom-designed cork coffee table and an antique chaise from The Open Door add just the right touch. "The chaise was originally from a farm house in Maine. I covered it with a throw I found in Paris," Whitman added.

The living area also features a wood console by Jan de Luz, a Balinese wood-framed mirror etched with dogs holding their tails and a steel black and silver chandelier.

Off the living room and leading upstairs, walls are covered in walnut wallpaper. Whitman also installed a custom staircase. "I wanted something different. I bought a circular staircase online, but the risers were open. I hired a plasterer to close it. He cut threads, put in recycled wood and plastered under the staircase," she explained. "I painted it silver in the middle and on the handrails, which I found at a junk yard. It looks like the inside of a seashell. I love it!"

At the foot of the staircase Whitman placed two large pieces of art – gifts from Johnson and Estevez. A black mahogany table acts as a pedestal for one of the paintings.

The powder room was one of Whitman's favorite rooms to design – she loves tearing out bathrooms and starting from scratch. "I'm obsessed with making them fit the house; I want people to go 'wow!'" she exclaimed.

In her own powder room Whitman added silver dust to her plastered walls for a shimmering effect. Black Asian pebbled tile is used on the floor and walls. She turned an antique cabinet into a vanity. A black-and-white photograph of Kris Kristofferson by famed photographer Jim Marshall hangs on one wall. On the

opposite wall, Whitman added an alcove to hold candles by Manuel Canovas Candle Co. An antique mirror hangs above the vanity and a four-tiered chain link antique light fixture hangs perfectly in the corner. "I was obsessed with this light fixture since the day I saw it. It's beautiful and perfect for the space," Whitman added.

The master bedroom is a mix of Indian, Moroccan and Asian. Her goal in this room was self-expression. "I love green/blue color, so I washed my walls in it," she said. The room mixes the green/blue with browns, burgundy, copper and bronze. The hand-painted design on the walls was inspired by a medallion Whitman found on a Spanish tile and is done in copper, burgundy and stainless-steel. The ceiling is adorned in copper leaf trim. The draperies are a mix of velvet and chenille that reminded Whitman of antique movie curtains. "They are very dramatic and dimensional; there is a lot going on with them," she added.

The Asian-inspired mahogany headboard is from Terra Nova. Whitman used two Moroccan bedside lamps adorned with lacey peek-a-boo cut-outs that, when lit, cast patterns of light on the wall and ceiling. The wooden nightstands are from India and feature carved stainless-steel mirrors on the face. Propped up on a wall is a full-length mirror made from recycled tin from the 1920s.

Off the upstairs loft is an incredible outdoor living space that Whitman calls her sanctuary. Here she built a 500-square-foot balcony. The space is festive and has, as she describes, a south of France/Moroccan feel to it. The centerpiece is a big tent adorned with custom furniture, lots of colorful pillows and lights from Morocco. "I love having dinner out here and entertaining," she said. "I like things to be open, airy and comfortable."

With no formal training, this designer is on the mark. "You can't train taste, passion or tenacity," she said. ♦

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