

# BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Designer to the stars Kari Whitman has brought her sharp eye for art, L.A.-style energy, and one-of-a-kind vision back home to Colorado.

WORDS: *Natalie Warady*

**W**HEN CELEBRITY DESIGNER KARI WHITMAN BOUGHT A HOUSE IN HER HOMETOWN OF BOULDER SIX YEARS AGO, SHE DIDN'T DO SO JUST TO ENJOY THE GORGEOUS FLATIRON VIEWS.

ALTHOUGH THAT HELPED.

“Boulder is the only place I’ve ever been that I never want to leave,” she says. Whitman initially purchased her home (two doors down from the house where she grew up) as a getaway, a place strictly to relax—but once she realized how much she liked living in Colorado again, she decided to open up a Boulder office, a sister to her L.A. design studio.

“I don’t feel the interior design here matches the beauty of the state,” says Whitman. “I’m hoping I can change that.”

She’s already started to do so. In July, the Colorado chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers gave Whitman its Crystal Award for her work transforming an old grocery store on west Pearl Street into a sleek industrial space that showcases recycled materials like factory windows from Brooklyn framing a shower, a bedroom wall covered in vintage leather belts, and a huge living wall in a guest bath. “I love the fact that when you’re in the shower and it gets steamy, the wall gets more pungent—it’s like you’re bringing the outside in.”

The Pearl Street project is quintessential Whitman, whose tastes are as eclectic and far-ranging as her client roster. “I just finished a three-story hotel in Baltimore, I have a lot of work in New York, and I do projects everywhere: Dallas, Vancouver, Miami, Paris, London, and of course L.A....”

The story of how Whitman first got into interior design sounds like a Hollywood movie: After working as a model and actress



in New York, she moved to L.A. 32 years ago. After finding success on the coast—she was twice on the cover of *Playboy* and having roles in shows like *Baywatch*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Quantum Leap*—she appeared in a film that ultimately changed the trajectory of her life.

“I did a movie called *Men At Work* with Emilio Estevez and Charlie Sheen, and got to be good friends with them. I dated Emilio for a while—we’re still great friends—and when he saw my cheap little studio apartment, which I used to redo weekly, he said, ‘You have a real knack for design. You shouldn’t do acting any more—it’s such a hard world. You should be a designer.’”

Heeding his advice, Whitman started her own company at age 27 (Estevez’s home was one of her first jobs). Since then, her client list has read like a celebrity Who’s Who: Kristen Bell,

Don Henley, Don Johnson, Jessica Alba, Melanie Griffith and Antonio Banderas, and a Middle Eastern royal family. She even designed a dog-friendly room in the White House for the Obamas and starred in her own show, *Designer to the Stars*.

In hindsight, Whitman says, she was destined to be a designer from the very start. “My stepfather was an artist, and he loved buying and remodeling houses in Boulder. I got to watch him do these crazy things; I remember we had a barn-wood shower before anyone had ever heard of barn wood! And one time I had a bedroom where the ceiling was all glass, with a skylight in the middle. The truth is, I always had an affinity for design and got sidetracked by the modeling/acting world, but it was worth it because that world introduced me to big-name clients.” → 135



Whitman describes herself as “a trendsetter, not a trend follower,” who likes to “come up with artists no one has ever heard of, and then watch as their work goes up in value.” Colorado, her home state, isn’t “jet-setty,” she says, but “we have the money, the economy, the nature and the space to pull together and create great design.”



photo: Calvin Baines



photos: Calvin Baines

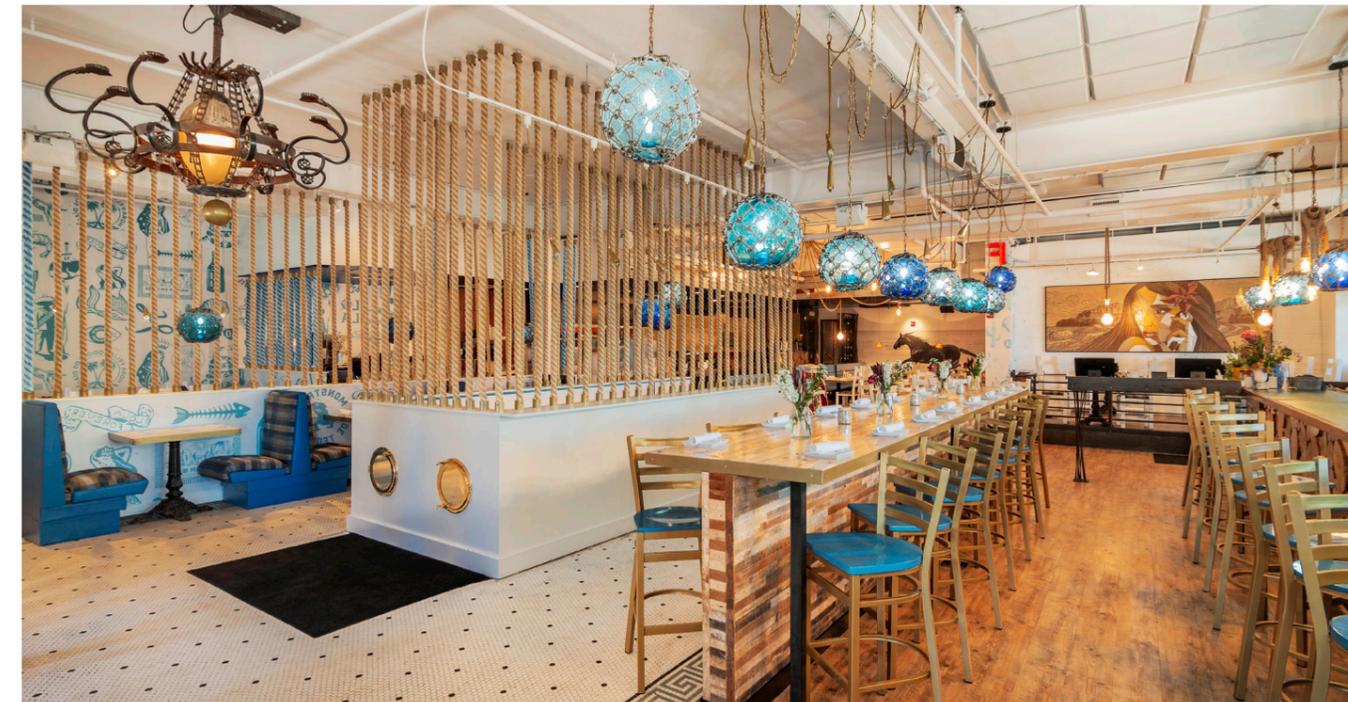
**PEARL STREET LOFT, BOULDER, COLORADO**

Above left: In the guest bedroom, Whitman used organic three-inch-thick ropes to suspend a custom bed, which sits under a ceiling panel made of vintage mirrors. Above right: She used recycled paned windows from a prewar building in Brooklyn, bought at Olde Good Things in New York, for the shower in the master bath, which also includes a long custom-made vanity. Opposite page: The predominant feature in

the guest bath is a living wall of sage, lavender, and moss, which surrounds custom travertine sinks. Previous page: In the kitchen/dining room, Whitman adhered to her “trash to treasure” mantra and created a wall out of recycled wood and cabinets out of hot rolled steel.



photos: Calvin Baines



**LOLA, DENVER, COLORADO**

Whitman went to high school with Dave Query of the Big Red F restaurant group, so when he expanded the popular Mexican restaurant Lola in the Highlands, he asked her to reinvent the dark, tight interiors. "I wanted to pull in the organic feel of the nautical ropes and nature, but also have bling with the sea glass and bronzy brass," Whitman says. Her inventive touches are everywhere, including a Robert De Tesco photo of horses running on a beach, which she enlarged to create wallpaper on a back wall, vintage tile, brass fish hook lights, art by Jon Stievy (opposite top), blue glass fishing balls, and portholes in the walls surrounding a stairwell. "We took all the clientele to the beach!" Whitman says.



photos: Calvin Baines



photos: Calvin Baines



**MARLEY HOUSE, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

For a wealthy Canadian client's second home in Los Angeles, right above the Chateau Marmont with spectacular views, Whitman went for a "modern but cozy" feel with all customized furniture she designed and a focus on art, including Alec Monopoly and Andy Warhol. The living room, top, is dominated by a huge custom sectional, a Stikki Peaches portrait of JFK, and a vintage-inspired double-hoop hanging chair. Separated by a curtain of ball bearings dipped in bronze, an adjacent sitting room,

opposite top, is decorated with a Daniel Dens portrait of Brigitte Bardot, which overlooks a Whitman-designed "magazine table" with slots for periodicals (down the hall you can see a Rubem Robierb butterfly). The bling continues in the powder room, opposite bottom, decorated with Andy Warhol-based Marilyn Monroe wallpaper.

But no matter who hires her, Whitman says, she stays true to her "under-promise and overachieve" motto. "First and foremost, I keep my word, I keep my budgets, and I keep my timelines."

She also prides herself on making each project about the client. "I don't ever want someone to walk into one of my homes and say, 'Oh, this looks like a Kari Whitman project.' Because it's not. It's their home. Or their hotel. Or their restaurant. I want a place to be about the vibe of whoever has hired me.

"I really work hard to make sure the clients ultimately get what they want. The word 'No' isn't a part of my vocabulary," Whitman says. "If a client says, 'I want to hang my car from the ceiling with a stairwell going up for my kid to go and pretend to drive,' that's what I'm going to do. I will teeter to the edge with my



**ARAPAHOE HOUSE, BOULDER**

A recently completed house on Boulder Creek features Italian Resnik wallpaper, created from photos of agate that are stretched and then covered in resin. The birch-bark credenza on the far wall is by Organic Modernism; the rug is by Matt Rugs, and the side tables by Organic Modernism. Downstairs, in the entry, right, Whitman took an old photo of miners on Mt. Sanitas that she found at the Boulder Historical Society and enlarged it into wallpaper. “The owner said, ‘I want this house to be all about Boulder,’ and it is.”



photo: Aaron Colussi



photo: Calvin Baines

clients, whether it’s finding really cool art or figuring out how to use family heirlooms in their spaces.”

Whitman thrives on challenges. The former grocery on Pearl Street is a great example. “Nobody in L.A. or New York wants industrial anymore and when I got the client on Pearl Street, I was like, ‘Oh, he wants industrial.’ But then he also said, ‘You can’t use any drywall’ and I was like ‘Awesome—it’s a challenge!’ So much of the design of this house was sustainable; just about everything but the fabric was recycled. But my whole life is sustainable—I was raised as a hippie living off our backyard in Boulder, and I’ve never eaten meat—and I like to use everything from blue jean insulation to recycled wood.” →139

photo: Aaron Colussi

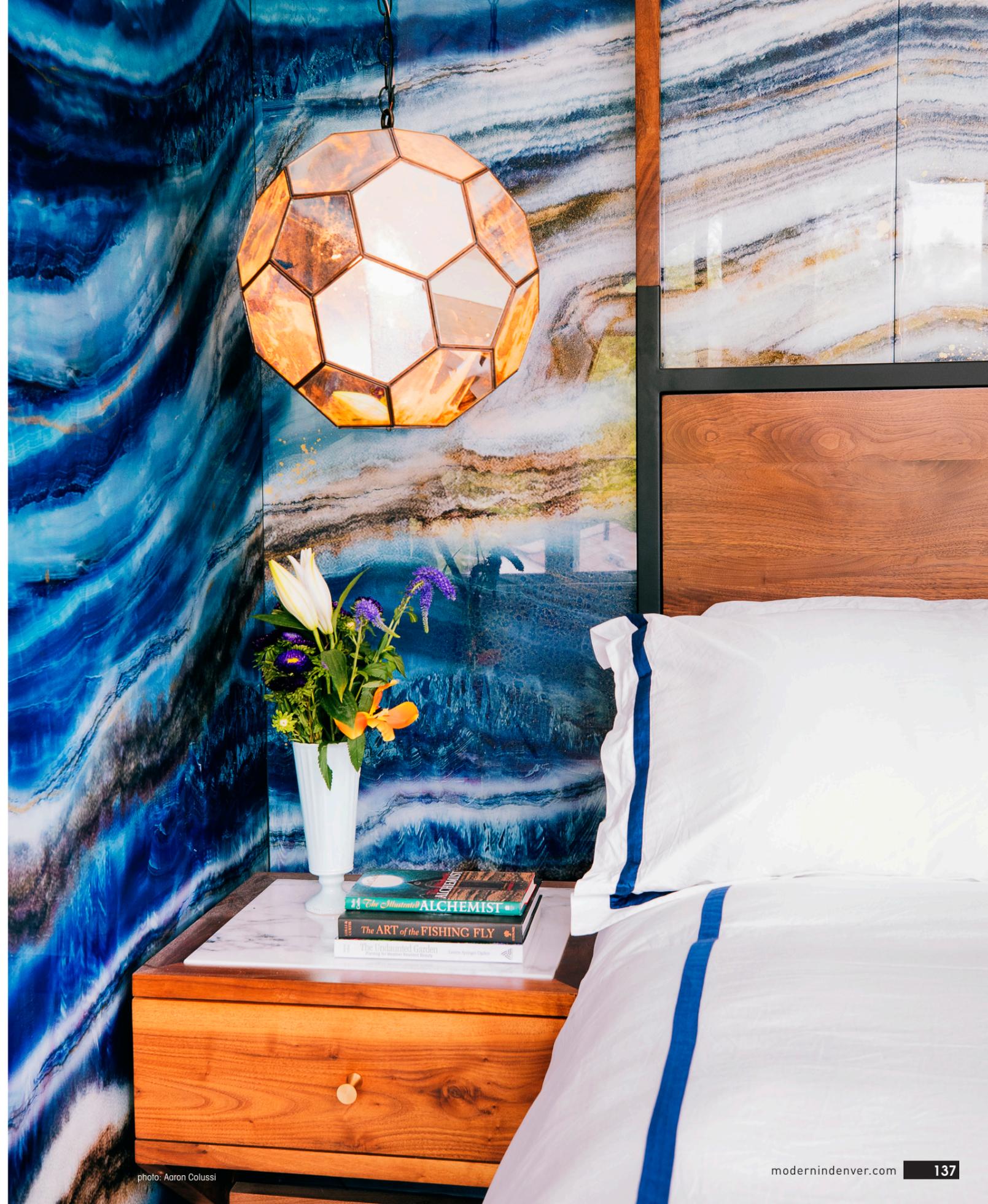


photo: Aaron Colussi



photos: Douglass Freedman

**ROYAL HOUSE - DALLAS, TEXAS**

For a Middle Eastern royal family whom Whitman does a lot of work for around the world, she designed what she calls her “oyster shell house” in Dallas. “I love the insane colors on the inside of an oyster shell, so I created walls to look like that. It took about 45 tries for my wall finisher to get it right.” Whitman has her own line of furniture, including the “necklace table” above, which she presented as a gift to the clients (“Every time I finish a house, I give the client a nice gift”). Above the red Warren Platner lounge chair is a Deborah Richardson photograph of a woman with her dress blowing up. **OPPOSITE:** A central hallway is dominated by a powder-coated birdcage, which Whitman turned into a lamp, and an Alwin Jackson painting of a peace sign.



On all of her projects, fine art is one of Whitman’s main inspirations—“whether it’s an artist I see at a street fair or one of the greats. In L.A., I’ll walk down the street and see somebody just spraying a wall, and their lack of inhibition inspires me because they’re tagging how they feel.”

Her other big inspiration—something in abundance in Colorado—is nature. “We all love nature; we want to feel it, breathe it. The fresh air, the pollinated

flowers, the snow falling in front of you through a big glass window... Just looking at the bark of a tree and seeing all the light and dark, the black and beige and green—it’s like, Why do they work together so well? Why don’t they clash? Nature is brilliant. Brilliant.”

Whatever the inspiration, Whitman says, “The underlying theme in all my projects is that I take the time to find the one special thing that will make the design stand out—thinking outside the box and, say, hanging

something where it shouldn’t be hung. I want every house, restaurant or commercial space to leave people remembering it and saying, ‘Wow, I never would have thought of that!’ “I am a perfectionist when it comes to the feel of a space. A house is about a vibe; it’s not just about a piece of art or a chandelier. Every time I finish a project, I love it so much, I don’t want to give it over.”

We believe her. ■

