

## Nothing dull about gray

What could four Houston design teams do with a neutral sofa and cool art? A lot

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You might consider a gray sofa the most common piece of furniture a person could buy — ordinary, ubiquitous. Combine that sofa with great design and beautiful art, and something extraordinary happens. You get a unique room with personality and style.

That's what we were going for with the Gray Sofa Project, asking four Houston interior design teams to tackle an unusual challenge. Select a gray sofa and art from the vast Sawyer Yards campus in the First Ward arts district, then combine it with anything else they wanted to create a room. Any room.

The theory is that art and design live a symbiotic relationship

in any home. When one is done well, it can only elevate the other.

We chose Cheryl Baker of CDB Interiors to complete a traditional-style room and Denny Lyons of Dennis Lyons Interiors for contemporary/modern. Beth Lindsey and Amanda Whatley of Beth Lindsey Interior Design decorated coastal style, and Kiley Jackson and Aileen Warren, who launched their new Jackson Warren Interiors firm in the fall, took on a casual/industrial vibe.

Though you might expect a different look from each design

*Gray continues on G4*



### Beth Lindsey Interior Design

**Designers:** Beth Lindsey and Amanda Whatley

**Style:** Coastal

**Artists:** Deborah Ellington, Angela Fabbri and Katherine Houston

**Vendors:** Majorelle blue ostrich egg, Harnish bowl, bleached wood coffee tables, drum tables and ceramic bowls, Found; marble-top dining table, rattan dining chair, woven rattan club chair and wooden throne stools, Mecox; blue-and-white rugs, Rug Mart; baskets, Pottery Barn; pillows, Lam Bespoke; coffee-table accessories, Vieux; books, Longoria Collection; moving and installation, Luxe Delivery & Storage



**Jackson Warren Interiors**  
**Designers:** Kiley Jackson and Aileen Warren  
**Style:** Casual/Rustic/Industrial  
**Artists:** Paul Carola and Nicola Parente  
**Vendors:** Sofa, George Cameron Nash; Alfonso Marina chairs, Wells Abbott; cigar-rolling bin with glass top, metal side table and propeller accessory, Back Row Home; antique Italian chest, large steel/antique glass mirrors and pillows, Found; terracotta table lamp, Skelton Culver; concrete planter, Brown; coffee table, Mecox Gardens; flatweave rug, Matt Camron Rugs & Tapestries; pillows and textiles, Carol Piper Rugs; live plants, Tall Plants.



**CDB Interiors**  
**Designer:** Cheryl Baker  
**Style:** Traditional  
**Artists:** Cookie Ashton and Marthann Masterson  
**Vendors:** Sofa, Lam Bespoke; swivel chairs, desk and accessories, Susan Home Antiques; ice bucket, floor and table lamps, The Bien Antiques; rug, Rug Mart; pillows, wing chairs, cocktail table, floor lamps, dining table, side chairs and side chests, The View; gold fragments, bamboo shelves, Mario Silva Designs; flowers, Fleur de Vie; and delivery/ installation, Nice Moves

**Summer Series art event**  
**When:** 6-10 p.m. July 27 (Spring Street and Sabine Street studios) and Aug. 24 (Silver Street Studios and The Silos)  
**Where:** Spring Street Studios, 1924 Spring; Sabine Street Studios, 1907 Spring; Silver Street Studios, 2000 Edwards; The Silos, 1622

**ZEST**



Amanda Whatley, left, and Beth Lindsey of Beth Lindsey Interior Design



Cheryl Baker of CDB Interiors Designs



Aileen Warren, left, and Kiley Jackson of Jackson Warren Interiors



**Dennis Lyons Interiors**  
**Designer:** Denny Lyons  
**Style:** Contemporary  
**Artists:** Tanna Bennett, Ellen H. Ray and Damon Thomas  
**Vendors:** Sofa, pillows and drapes, Hien Lam Upholstery; rug, Rug Mart; canopy bed, Restoration Hardware (with Sferra bedding); credenza and tufted ottoman, High Fashion Home; silver-leafed armchairs, Rose Tarlow Melrose House; tables and floor lamp, Global Views; table lamps, Toso Murano; coffee table and silver-leafed table lamp, Nancy Corzine; slipcovered wing chair, Shabby Slips; side table, Vintaga; garden seats, Krispin & Mecox Gardens; vintage leather Serre-Papiers, Jansen



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style, the vast difference in their choices shows how varied something as simple as a gray sofa can be, and the range of art showed how much a room can change with paintings, sculpture and other pieces.

After weeks of planning, they installed their rooms in empty studio space at Sawyer Yards' newest building — Sabine Street Studios — then stepped back for a photo shoot.

#### **Cheryl Baker, traditional style**

Baker and artist Marthann Masterson sat side by side on a gray velvet sofa from Lam Bespoke, a piece that anchored the space that included two deep-blue velvet chairs, two saddle-tan highback chairs and an eye-catching navy brocade chair resting near a broad bamboo-framed bookshelf lined with books and accessories.

They seemed as comfortable in this composed space as they do in Masterson's own home, which Baker is helping her decorate. One of Masterson's paintings — she shares a large studio in The Silos with her artist friend Cookie Ashton — hangs above a console on one side of the room.

It's filled with blues, lavenders and beiges, long strings of paint in a beautiful pattern, but when Masterson first hung it on a wall, she wasn't satisfied.

"If I create a painting, and I don't love it, it comes down off the wall, and I work on it some more," the third-generation Houstonian said. "This painting has an undercoat, and then I dripped paint on it, but it just didn't seem to come to life. So I said, 'What the heck,' and I took a bunch of paint and threw it on the front of it, and I liked it. It looks like it's dancing."

This isn't the first project in which Baker has used a gray sofa.

"I gravitate to velvet, and I went with this sofa with a notion that we would let the art pull the room together," Baker said.

Sometimes combining art and design means helping clients find new art, but other

times it's about helping them place pieces they've collected over time as they move from home to home.

And, Masterson added, it's sometimes about offering other ideas.

One client asked her to help him hang a piece in his small apartment. When she arrived, she couldn't believe how much art the young man had already amassed. When he said he feared he was out of space, she had one word of advice: "Rotate."

#### **Denny Lyons, contemporary/modern**

Lyons created a master-bedroom suite, with rich brown curtains, a king-size canopy bed, plus chairs, tables and accessories around the warm gray tuxedo sofa he designed himself. He designed a pair of the sofas for the library in his own home and said their classic style and color with nailhead trim works in any style home and in just about any room.

"Gray is easy and, as a style, the tuxedo is a modern classic that's perfect for modern living and a contemporary lifestyle. The mohair fabric is forgiving and durable," Lyons said. "They're low enough to not take over a space but deep enough to relax in with a good book or have cocktails in front of the fireplace."

On a console along one side of the room sits a ceramic bust, a collaboration by artists Tanna Bennett and Damon Thomas titled "Lend Me Your Ear." The bald androgynous head is all white, except for a pink tongue sticking out of the mouth and holding an ear that looks like it's been torn from another head; it's intended to represent someone who doesn't want to listen.

Out of the top of the skull are tall metal nails — it might look like something from a punk-rock concert, but it's based in classical sculpture technique. A vessel and two paintings by Bennett are nearby, and works by Ellen H. Ray claim a good deal of wall space behind the sofa, and above and alongside the bed.

Earlier in the day, Ray

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*Denny Lyons, Dennis Lyons Interiors*

coached Lyons as he knelt on the bed and pounded nails in the wall, creating two perfect rows, each with four small-ish paintings.

Some artists work with designers on commissions, creating works while looking at fabric swatches and tile samples. Not Ray.

"Certainly there are buyers looking to match a room, and they're looking for colors and something that's appealing to them. That's not typically my buyer," Ray said matter-of-factly. "Usually my buyer is someone who's interested in talking to me, in reading the work. Sometimes people will come in off the street and be able to read my work, and that's always a thrill for me because that's the hope. You hope it's not so convoluted that people can't access what your intention is."

Her usual experience with clients is a lingering one; they take their time looking and making a decision. After all, art is something they'll look at every day, and it's often an investment.

"I sold a couple of large paintings to a couple at our last Summer Series event," Ray said. They'd been looking at my art for six months. When they first came, it was, 'Oh we just heard about this, let's check it out.' We hear that a lot. But the more they look at art, the more they can imagine these pieces in their home."

#### **Kiley Jackson and Aileen Warren, casual/industrial**

Jackson and Warren went yet another direction in their very masculine room. Though they usually start projects by finding a rug, they started this one by visiting Nicola Parente's studio, where they fell in love with a painting inspired by a

train ride in the Italian countryside.

"We loved the colors, the rust, the black, the hint of cobalt blue and the orange. That started the color scheme for the room," Warren said, noting that although the painting is vertical, they hung it horizontally. Parente said he didn't mind.

They chose a darker sofa with a handsome tan leather frame and gray wool cushions, and added two cane-and-wood chairs with upholstered cushions. More art came in smaller wooden sculptures by Paul Carola.

"It's a great base because it allows you to change everything around it if you get tired of your accessories. It's also about longevity — it doesn't go out of style," Jackson said of their gray sofa.

A flatweave rug full of earth-tones seemed made to order for the project, matching the painting's colors nearly identically. A rustic wooden coffee table, an antique Italian chest and tall antiqued mirrors propped up against a wall add some Old World style.

When creating rooms, Jackson and Warren work to meet a client's lifestyle. For this project, there were no boundaries, so the two invented a client they were trying to please: a man who was a world traveler, collecting things along the way. Accessories he might have loved included books, a small brass propeller blade, rustic lamps and pillows made of rich textiles.

#### **Beth Lindsey, coastal**

A cool coastal vibe calls for inspiration from the sea, and Lindsey and Whatley found it in both furnishings and art. Their gray sectional sofa from James Craig Furnishings was a cool shade with bluish undertones, along with white upholstered swivel chairs and a pair of rattan chairs with cushions and pillows. On a coffee table was a large piece of blue coral.

Over the sofa hung two large pieces by painter Katherine Houston, a blue-white blend that could represent sky or water — elements that heavily

influence the Galveston resident's work.

"We wanted it to feel not quite so beachy but be very clean and have a nod to coastal," Lindsey said as she gushed over the pair of artsy fake palm trees she discovered at Found, a home-décor boutique she shopped for many of the accessories in her room.

Along another wall was a collection of paintings by Angela Fabbri, small, colorful works that edged up the wall as if creating a trail for your eyes. And on a buffet was a glass vessel by Deborah Ellington.

"Art can bring a room alive in many different ways. We look at something and know if we like it or we don't — it's the right color or size, it's pretty, let's do it," Fabbri said of one type of art buyer. "Then there are other people who say, 'It speaks to me'; they're looking for a deeper connection than the aesthetic. Then there are other clients who take it even further: They want to know the artist, and they look at it like they're taking a piece of the artist home. They want to know your story, more about you so that when they see the art, they love to remember the story and the conversation they had."

Designers approach room or home projects with a checklist of essentials: furniture, art, rugs, accessories and even window treatments. But when many individuals shop for art, they're looking for a piece for a home that's already filled.

"I have so many couples come into my studio who have just bought a new house in the Heights, and their home is gray, the walls are gray. I see it over and over again. If I had to paint a painting to go in a gray room, that wouldn't work for me," Masterson said of matching art to room. "When it works, when it clicks, they do that dance where they come up close and look at the painting and then they go back and whisper. Then they come back up and say, 'How much?' And, hopefully, that's the end of that story."

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