



À la Recherche du Ranch Perdu

REBUILDING HIS CHILDHOOD HOME, KEITH EDMIER IS A MAN WITH A FLOOR PLAN. CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN REPORTS.

The foil peacocks in the dining room and “fur” mushroom stools in the family room were a no-brainer. Ditto the Cortés-gold carpeting and the J.C. Penney jacquard drapes. Just the right grainy wood laminate had been found for the kitchen, a perfect match for the yellow floor and the 25-inch Amana fridge. Now, about that sculpture of the German monk in the commode. ...

What might sound like the retro-misfire of an overly exuberant decorator is in fact Keith Edmier’s latest art project, “Bremen Towne.” For the past year, the 40-year-old artist has been hard at work piecing together — from photos, from plans and from memory — the interior of his childhood home in the Bremen Towne subdivision of Tinley Park, Ill. This past summer, a suite of rooms was under construction on the third floor of the former Dia Art Foundation building in Chelsea. “The kitchen has proven the most tricky,” Edmier says, “because of all of the intricacies. I couldn’t

remember the exact number of cabinets we had.”

Most of us who left behind the suburban Midwest of the 1970s probably feel that one go-round with burned casseroles and Op Art wallpaper is enough. But Edmier has made a successful career of mining the desires and frustrations of his adolescence, lived out almost entirely inside this prefab ranch from 1971 until 1985, when he left for Los Angeles with dreams of working in the film industry. Among his previous forays into ’70s-era Americana

Cuisine art The artist Keith Edmier in the kitchen of the house he is rebuilding largely from memory.

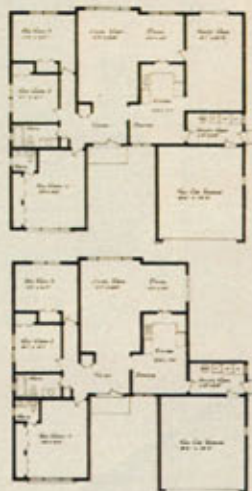


Photographic memory Edmier studied family shots (above) and the original house plans (right). He remade a statue of a monk (below) and gave it his father's face.



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'I'M OFTEN WONDERING HOW WELL MY MEMORY HOLDS AGAINST THE FADED COLORS OF THESE PHOTOGRAPHS.'

In many ways, the ranch-house redux is a model home: the key pieces of furniture are there to suggest a specific familial presence, but the clutter of personal ephemera has been swept under the rug. Edmier originally considered decorating the rooms with available vintage finds, but he quickly reasoned the result would look like "somebody else's house without any of our history." Instead, he decided to recreate almost every piece of décor from scratch. That herculean task meant many months of staring at snapshots of, say, himself and his sister hamming it up in front of a fake-zebra-grained wall on New Year's Eve in 1981 or his sister feeding their pet rabbit chunks of fruit on the kitchen floor, and focusing not so much on the human subjects of these photos as on all the stuff that surrounds them. (The original house still exists, but Edmier's parents renovated it before moving out in the early '90s to a nearby suburb.) "It's kind of funny, everyone is studying these photographs forensically," he says, laughing. "You begin not to think about the family members captured there."

Many months went into figuring out the materials alone. When in doubt, Edmier referred to old Sears and J. C. Penney catalogs. "I'm trying to get the original color of the materials," he says. "But I'm often wondering how well my memory holds against the faded colors of these photographs." Some things, like the clunky rock lamp that looms ominously over the head of his great-grandmother in one Christmas photo, Edmier was able to recreate himself as sculpture. Other times, finding a factory that would produce an outmoded 35-year-old product was a mission in itself. The wood paneling in the family room, for example, was custom manufactured at the Walla Walla Foundry in Walla Walla, Wash., in a labor-intensive process that involved the use of techniques like wire brushing to achieve the exact raised-grain effect.

Family snapshots, of course, do not always reveal the whole picture. At one critical juncture, Edmier's mother called up the woman who currently lives in the house and asked her to chip off a piece of the vinyl asbestos tile from

was a collaboration with the decade's ultimate poster girl, Farrah Fawcett, in 2000; together they created life-size nude sculptures of each other in bronze and marble. Fawcett's precursor was a sculpture of his childhood crush, "Jill Peters," made from white wax and polyvinyl in 1997. The next year, he created a likeness of his mother, Beverly — pink and pregnant and lifting her blouse to reveal what might be the first prenatal self-portrait. And he's taken on other personal heroes of '70s lore: Evel Knievel, John Lennon and his own great-grandfathers. It was only a matter of time before the artist returned to the scene of the crime — immortalizing the Edmiers' three-bedroom prefab, which the family of four moved into when the artist was 4 years old.

Edmier bought the actual floor plans for the Strathmore model on eBay in the late '90s, but it wasn't until about a year ago that he started

talking to Tom Eccles, the executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, about actually building it for an exhibition. "At the beginning it felt a little like an exorcism," says Edmier, who has come to see this faithful rendering as an homage to his parents — his father worked as a computer analyst and his mother held administrative jobs in his school system — rather than as an act of deep-seated narcissism. "I had some angst," he admits. "But the tone quickly shifted. It's more about celebrating my parents, sticking to the rooms where they would have interacted with me." This perhaps explains why the artist focused on the communal spaces — the living room, dining room, kitchen, family room and foyer — blocking imaginary access to the bathrooms and bedrooms behind closed doors. "It would have been too loaded to do the private areas," he says.

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Do-over A kitschy rock lamp that had hung in Edmier's childhood home is now a stunning piece of sculpture.

the kitchen floor. But as with so much of Edmier's earlier art, the workings of his memory are the true subject of the piece. "It's very much a measure of how memory bends things," he says. "Initially, I had the aim of making everything as accurate and as true as possible, but over time, the work starts to have its own life, its own present, that really can't be proven wrong." This is particularly true of the artworks that Edmier recreated for the walls. "When I was a child, I thought they were the real things, not just prints," he says. He ultimately had the Picasso, the Renoir and even the LeRoy Neiman hunting scene his father had picked up at the Playboy Club expertly repainted and framed so as to keep at least one childhood illusion in tact.

When all is said, shagged and flocked, the various room sets will come together at Bard in October. How will his parents feel at the opening, standing inside of the very house they once owned? "They're pretty into it," Edmier concedes. There's even a rumor that Jill Peters might put in an appearance. "It would be great if one day this became a Dia site project," Edmier says, only half joking. "I would love to eventually buy back the house in Tinley Park and have this piece reinstalled in the actual environment." Some artists really can go home again. ■