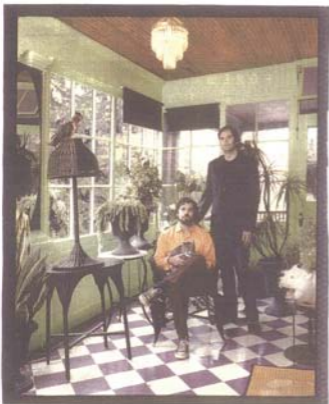


HOUSE PROUD

House of 8 Gables, Back in Black



HOUSE ON THE HILL Top right, Jonathan Horowitz (seated) and Rob Pruitt, in their solacium, painted their 1895 Victorian black to resemble a Louise Nevelson sculpture. Right, \$1 cleavers and plastic birds, with a refrigerator that is not its natural color.



By DAVID COLMAN

FLEISCHMANN, N.Y.

IT could have been a mistake that haunted them forever.

When Rob Pruitt and Jonathan Horowitz, two Manhattan artists, bought an 11-bedroom Victorian house last year in this sleepy former resort town in the Catskills, the first aesthetic decision they made could have made them outcasts, or worse. At a time when neighbors sue one another over minor expressions of individuality, from paint color to the size of new windows, the two men did the design equivalent of throwing down the gauntlet. They painted the exterior a glossy Goth black from toe to turret.

But when the 350 local residents awoke one morning last July to see the 1895 eight-gabled home, one of the grandest in the area, looking like a gigantic charcoal briquette, a funny thing happened: they liked it. "I got a little nervous," said Susan Ferraro, the mayor of Fleischmanns. "But when I saw it finished, I was delighted. They handled it beautifully — it's so elegant."

And, she said, it has nearly put Fleischmanns, which once bustled with vacationers, back on the map. "It became an instant landmark," she said.

The men turned what had once been a picture postcard residence (they have the postcard) into Delaware County's ominous new attraction. Word of mouth has turned out a steady procession of onlookers. "I love how radical it is," said Brooke Alderson, the proprietress of a home furnishings shop, Brooke's Variety, in neighboring Andes. She is also the wife of the New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl and a dem mother to the free spirits settling here.

"It flips the idea of the white, traditional house on its head. In black, you really get the complex personality of the architecture." Though black was a favorite "color" of the Victorians, from widow's-weeds fashion to black hollyhocks and wrought-iron touches, they would never have thought to paint the body of their houses black, said Dr. Roger W. Moss, executive direc-

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tor of the Athenaeum, an architectural library in Philadelphia and the author of "Victorian Exterior Decoration" (Henry Holt).

"It would have been used sparingly as a trim color," Dr. Moss added. "It could easily have been painted dark brown, rich olive green, you will even sometimes find burgundy, but never black."

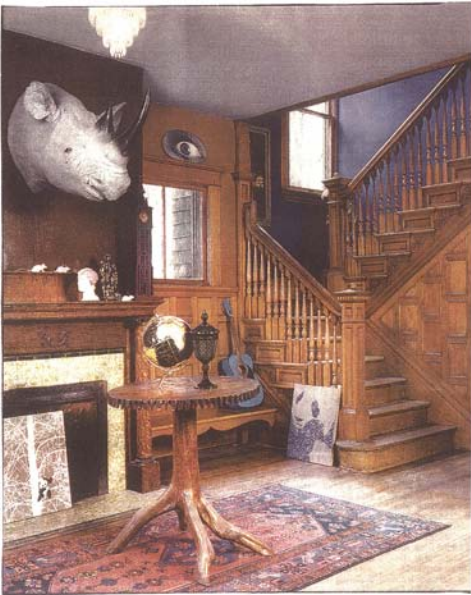
Mr. Pruitt and Mr. Horowitz originally painted the exterior black to contrast with the ultramodern, minimalist interior they imagined.

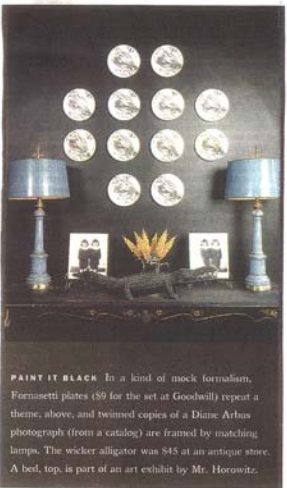
"We wanted it to look like a huge Louise Nevelson sculpture, like a kind of public art piece, which it really has become," Mr. Horowitz, 35, said earlier this week. "Just five minutes ago there were four cars lined up down there."

But doing a proper modern and minimal interior proved beyond their budget. So they decided to go the opposite way and embrace the "high clutterism" of the late 19th century. Fortunately, eclecticism is the specialty at Roberts' Auction Service, which is two blocks from the house on the town's main street and holds auctions every Saturday night. A great deal of their antique furniture came from the auctions.

"No one has ever liked Victorian furniture," Mr. Pruitt said. "It's never been in style except for originally, so it's cheap."

To these local acquisitions they added modern and Pop items they had bought over the years in New York, like a set of reproduction Gio Ponti "Superleggera" dining





PAINT IT BLACK In a kind of mock formalism, Fornasetti plates (\$9 for the set at Goodwill) repeat a theme, above, and twinned copies of a Diane Arbus photograph (from a catalog) are framed by matching lamps. The wicker alligator was \$45 at an antique store. A bed, top, is part of an art exhibit by Mr. Horowitz.

chairs, and a poster designed by Mike Mills that Mr. Pruitt bought from the trendy X-Girl clothing store on Lafayette Street.

While the house's exterior is all dark, its insides are more a stylish wink than a witchy shriek. (Literally: there's a giant hologram of a big movie-star eye in the entry hall that winks as one walks in.) "There are no pentacles," said Mr. Pruitt, whose paintings of pandas will be shown at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, a gallery in Manhattan, this February. "[I think a Goth teenager would be very disappointed.]"

The two men have conjured a décor that variously recalls the dark humorist Charles Addams, the late 1960's interiors guru David Hicks and Andy Warhol, the king of Pop irony. The house functions both as a charming country home with a lighthearted, knockabout elegance and as a statement about its owners' being the new kids on the

An eccentric renovation creates an instant landmark.

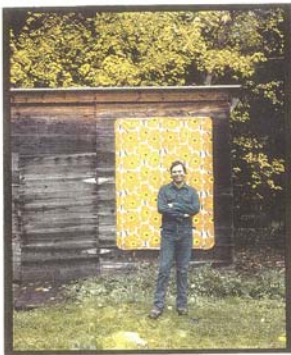
block — the eccentrics on the hill.

Rarely has so little money gone so far. In addition to the \$140,000 purchase price, the men have spent only about \$10,000 on furnishings. They managed to do so by spending nearly every weekend for the past 10 months snatching up cheap, theatrical finds wherever they could. Most of their bric-a-brac came from eBay, including a set of Charles Addams plates from the 1960's (\$75 each), a ceramic owl lamp (\$100) and 16 "Name Your Poison" tumblers (labeled arsenic, strychnine, etc., \$75).

The same contrarian impulse that led them to paint the facade black also led them to float the current design emphasis on authenticity and quality. A rhino head above the fireplace, bought for \$500 at the Brimfield flea market in Massachusetts, is fiber-glass. The plants in the conservatory are almost all plastic, as are the "taxidermy" birds flocking throughout the house and a set of three ghoulishly outsized knives hanging in the kitchen. The couple collect patrician eagles, which, painted black, acquire an ominous quality. Underfoot are rugs woven cartoonishly to look like tiger skins.

"I was going for the look of the Addams family from the 1960's sitcom," said Mr. Pruitt, 38. "Their house isn't morbid at all; it's quite elegant. I'll never forget the image of Moeticia arranging roses and clipping the buds off — they were finding their own, different way to be elegant."

Two years ago, the men, whose primary residence is an apartment on the Lower East Side, began looking for a second home in Asbury Park, N.J., another former resort town, which has attracted an influx of gay men from Manhattan looking for an inexpensive alternative to the Hamptons and Fire Island. "But we really felt like we had kind of missed the boat," Mr. Pruitt said. "The prices went up even while we were looking."



Asbury Park's Victorian architecture caught their interest, they said, but they had no appetite for the kind of earnest and homogenous preservation under way there. "We really liked the idea of being the odd fellows that lived in the house on the hill," Mr. Pruitt said. "We didn't want to fade into the background in a perfectly restored gin gerbread palace with a white picket fence. That would be role-playing someone else's fantasy."

Mr. Horowitz added, "In a small town this haunted house is always the location of fear and intrigue and fascination, so we wanted to play with all of those ideas."

THE FAR SIDE

Jonathan Horowitz, right, and Rob Pruitt, far right, hung a Marimekko sheet outside their house, top left, and a fiberglass rhino head in the foyer, top center.



When the word of their plan got around town, not everyone was thrilled.

"At first, I thought, 'Who'd want to live in a black house?' I thought it looked weird," said Sandra Roberts, a co-owner of Roberts' Auction Service. "But they've done a nice job, and it definitely grows on you. Everyone seems to like it — that is, I haven't heard anyone say they don't."

The men's next-door neighbor, Dennis Beezley, said his only objection is that his own house looks shabby by comparison. "I keep telling them, I can't keep up," he said.

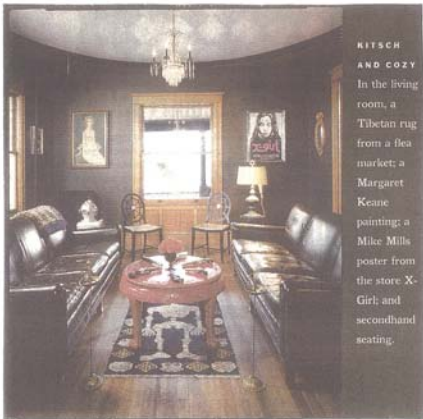
Mr. Pruitt and Mr. Horowitz also felt that

they were making a statement by focusing on the décor.

"Design and decoration are so often distinguished from art-making as superficial and devoid of the meaning that art supposedly has," said Mr. Horowitz, whose current show, at the Sadie Coles HQ gallery in London, features a bed made up with pillowcases embroidered with famous pairs, like John and Yoko and Jekyll and Hyde.

One might think that they would go all out for tonight's trick-or-treating — their turn in the limelight. But while they're having a few people over to celebrate, Mr. Pruitt said, they're not wearing anything special. "We're not having a costume party," he said. "We're just wearing cocktail clothes."

Around this house, Oct. 31 is just another day.



**KITSCH
AND COZY**
In the living
room, a
Tibetan rug
from a flea
market; a
Margaret
Keane
painting; a
Mike Mills
poster from
the store X-
Girl; and
secondhand
seating.

Ghoul Cool on a Budget

WANT the maximum scare for your dollar? This is not the time to shop for it. Off-season is always better, said Rob Pruitt, who recommends holding off until next week at least.

The rule applies in a larger sense. "If you can go with a look that's not in fashion at the moment, it'll be a lot cheaper," said Mr. Pruitt, who finds "really cheap" things off-season.

Year round his favorite sources for things like plastic birds and an iron fountain-turned-planter (right) are flea markets, thrift shops, dollar stores and eBay, where he has found Charles Addams collectibles.

To offset the fake and low-budget, he and his partner, Jonathan Horowitz, splurge on a few items. At an antiques store in Hudson, N.Y., they found a small table in the Adirondack stick style, knew it would be ideal for their foyer and handed over \$500. They also pay what it takes for unusual paint. Deep colors give a kind of confidence to offbeat furnishings — and can do wonders for otherwise dreary white appliances. The two found a vivid acid green called Citrina that gave their washing machine, dryer and refrigerator a spirited look and pulled together



Right: Dishes for The New York Times

the kitchen. It is a type of paint called hascolac from Schreuder, the Dutch paint company ("The swatch book is \$25 but totally worth it," Mr. Pruitt said); about \$25 a quart from Janovic Plaza and at www.finepaints.com.

The exterior paint (Benjamin Moore black) was meant for trim like shutters and doors, but there's no law against using it for the whole house — at least, not in Fleischmanns.

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