

Calm, Cool, and Collected

A Houston homeowner called upon Brandon Fontenot to not only design the rooms of her house, but also to have him create serenity

When you step inside this house in Houston's Boulevard Oaks neighborhood, the first thing you notice is a painting by Dan Christensen. At first glance, the canvas appears to be blank. But closer inspection reveals the eruptions of color and complexity lurking just beneath the surface.

Like the painting, the home's interior appears deceptively simple at first glance: a synthesis of spare spaces, sepia colors, and natural materials. But the calming countenance belies a rigorous design process that harnessed centuries of patina and works by some of the 20th century's greatest design talents. "A lot of the creators that are now in this house—especially a lot of the Italian ones—are people that I've studied my whole life," says the Houston-based interior designer Brandon Fontenot of his work.

The owner, a former interior designer with a teenage daughter and three rescue dogs, never considered decorating the home herself. "It's a lot easier for me to help other people than to design for myself," she confides. After admiring Fontenot's work in a Houston magazine, she bumped into the designer at a carpet store and sensed she had found the ideal collaborator for the house she was building. "Brandon really got me from the minute we met," she says.

Raised in a household with five siblings, the woman craved a serene haven that was casual, but minimalist, with tailored pieces and a limited palette. "She's not a big fan of color," concedes Fontenot with wry understatement. Warm white walls are complemented by floors fashioned from French oak, obtained from a company that makes wine barrels. ("The owner didn't want



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Opening pages: The main directive of a Houston homeowner was for a sense of tranquility. The entry is furnished with a 17th-century French console table and a vintage runner from Carol Piper Rugs. An exuberant light fixture designed by Tobia Scarpa hangs over a table once owned by Axel Vervoordt. This page: A handwoven jute from Carol Piper Rugs serves as the base for the family room furniture, which includes an expansive coffee table fashioned from 16th-century chestnut. The vintage stools were made in 1968.



The early 1800s elm table in the breakfast room was bleached by Brandon Fontenot, around which he has grouped a variety of chairs. The denim wall hanging, *Ecstatic Blues Shape 3*, is by Jamal Cyrus.



Fontenot designed a tall two-arm candlestick for the stair vestibule. He positioned an 18th-century Danish rustic cabinet in a niche by the stairway. The stairway is purposely set to the side, since the homeowner did not want it to be the dominant visual element upon entering the house.

The walls of the powder room are finished in concrete to match the cast-concrete sink. The wooden wastebasket is from England.



The study is the homeowner's favorite room. She had already acquired artworks by Benjamin Edmiston, but Fontenot encouraged her to acquire more of them in order to create the composition above the sofa. The metal chair dates from 1948 and is adorned with leather trim.



An English 19th-century chest of drawers and an artwork by Ruth Shouval become focal points at the end of the hall and vestibule leading to the primary suite.

knots,” Fontenot explains.) The designer repeated the same white window sheers throughout the house, as well as the same curtain rods, lampshades, and upholstery. “She definitely wanted that idea of consistency,” Fontenot says. “Her home is her sanctuary, and it reflects that.”

Still, even a sanctuary needs a bit of variety, and that’s where Fontenot worked his magic, incorporating a rich array of rustic pieces that exude history in every surface. A 19th-century oak workbench (so primitive it feels modern) serves as a console table in the entry hall, while the svelte staircase cradles a mottled Danish cabinet from the 1700s. The coffee table in the living room was crafted from chestnut harvested in the 16th century, and features a top so mammoth the movers mistook it for a dining table. “These rough-hewn pieces really gave the house some warmth and more visual interest,” Fontenot says.

As a counterpoint to those earthy, organic forms, he introduced pieces by a roster of modern design luminaries, including Pierre Chareau, Jacques Adnet, and Jean Prouvé. In the dining room, a Tobia Scarpa chandelier illuminates a spalted-birch table (meaning with natural blackened irregularities) by Axel Vervoordt that once graced that designer’s conference room. (If you look carefully, you can still see the coffee rings on top). In the breakfast area, a 200-year-old bleached-elm table is surrounded by a set of vintage Pierre Jeanneret chairs, still sporting handwritten labels from their years of institutional service. Fontenot and his client first spied the acrobatic Angelo Lelii light fixture above it in an L.A. shop, but were cowed by the five-figure price tag. Months later, Fontenot was pawing through a pile of goods in a nearby shop and found the exact same fixture for a fraction of the price.

But when the designer proposed adding a pair of sleek steel stools to the earthy living room, the owner balked. “She thought I was crazy. But we really needed those pieces,” he recalls. “I said, ‘This is not a farmhouse—we need something in there to give it a little sense of tension.’” Offering to soften them with cowhide cushions, he finally won her over.

“I never felt scared of anything he did,” responds the client. “But it might have taken me a minute to say, ‘Okay, I see the vision.’”

The piece she found most challenging was the massive steel cabinet in the dining room. (“Do you have a coffin in there?” her mother inquired the first time she saw it.) Originally used to store factory parts during the Depression, its monolithic form offers a grounding counterpoint to the room’s graceful Kaare Klint chairs and svelte steel windows. “There’s so much wood in the dining room, it added another element to the mix and gave some depth to the room,” Fontenot explains.

The project was not without its challenges. After construction was completed and the interiors were installed, a problem with the HVAC system caused condensation to collect in the walls and drip from the ceilings while the owner was out of town, rendering the interior unsalvageable. She was forced to gut the house and start all over—prolonging the project for another three years.

Taking advantage of the lull, Fontenot and his client acquired accessories on shopping trips and travels, so by the time she finally moved in, the interior had acquired a layered, collected look. “The only nice part is that I had time to find things I was really drawn to,” says the owner. “I would rather live with nothing than to have something that I don’t love.” Fontenot echoes her remarks, by adding, “Pieces that are a bit more unique can have more space around them, and space to appreciate them. I think that really helped the house feel full and gave it a lot of visual interest.” ■

In the primary bathroom, a minimalist stool designed by Le Corbusier is set on a runner from Carol Piper Rugs. The walls are covered in lime plaster.



The primary bedroom features a custom bed upholstered in a performance fabric. The chest is custom. The bed cover was stitched together from a 100-year-old piece of linen, and comes from Carol Piper Rugs.