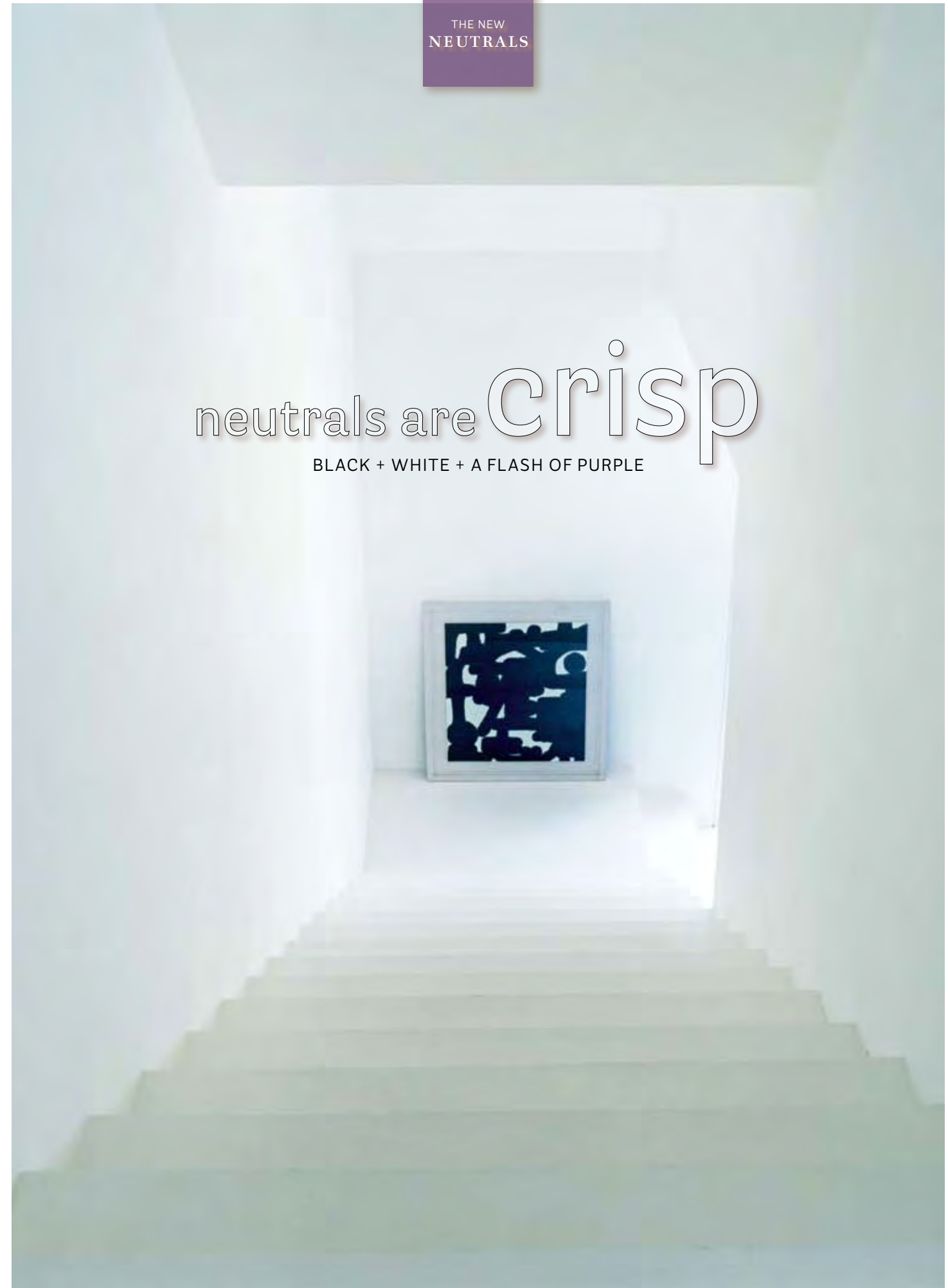


A Dutch ebony and brass mirror hangs above an unusual antique turned gate-leg table. Everything looks sculptural against reclaimed oak floors, bleached and limed; stairs (OPPOSITE) and floors painted Benjamin Moore White Dove; and walls painted Pratt & Lambert Silver Lining. Painting by Jong Mok Lee. THIS PAGE: Vases from Antony Todd, New York.

Interior design by BETSY BROWN
Interview by FRANCES SCHULTZ
Photographs by DON FREEMAN

neutrals are **Crisp**

BLACK + WHITE + A FLASH OF PURPLE





"A harmony of opposites," designer Betsy Brown calls it. The living room is a "comfortable mix of contrasting elements," from the boxy Christian Liaigre sofa to an ikat-covered French bergère. Curtains are contemporary in their stark white simplicity and plain cornice, but ample enough to soften the room's modernist edge, as do the curves and spots of a cowhide rug. Floor lamp by Serge Mouille, bookcases and coffee table by Betsy Brown.



FRANCES SCHULTZ: Well, you sure can't predict a decorator's style by her accent—Alabama, lovely and lilting, in your case. Somehow I expected ruffles and prints and your Great Aunt Bessie's sideboard. Maybe you'd better start at the beginning.

BETSY BROWN: Frances, honey, it all started down on Granddaddy's plantation the summer I was 13.... No, actually that's not how it went, but the truth is just as much of a cliché: My mother was an antiques dealer and obsessed with design. When we were little, my sisters and I thought she was having an affair with some guy named Billy Baldwin. My friends all had proper pastel floral bedrooms, but mine was designed around a recamier covered in a great tiger print. So between Mama and Mr. Baldwin, I was hooked.

So Billy Baldwin was your mother's design idol. Who is yours?

My idols are fearless originals: Andre Arbus, Frances Elkins, Jean-Michel Frank, Serge Mouille, Alberto Pinto, Albert Hadley, Frederic Mechiche, John Saladino, Angelo Donghia, Christian Liaigre.

The house is unusual. What's its story?

It's really just a small stone cottage that was probably built around 1920, in the Mountain Brook area of Birmingham. I live here with the youngest of my three daughters, Collier. I wanted something unpretentious and straightforward but also a simple, modern background. Architect Paul Bates and Jeremy Corkern helped reduce the interior to its most basic elements. The floors are big planks of reclaimed oak, the doors and cabinetry are limed oak, and all the walls are the same soft off-white.

What possessed you to put a parterre garden right in front?

A modern parterre felt fresh and unexpected. We took down a thick stand of damaged pine trees to make space for it.

It's so architectural, like your interiors—a quality your predominantly neutral palette seems to emphasize. Is that deliberate?

To me it just feels appropriate and comfortable. I love color, but I think it should either declare itself as the major player in a composition or quietly add the crucial notes that balance a room and make it intriguing. I usually opt for the latter.

In some—okay, a lot of—cases, neutrals seem to me a cop-out. Dull, beige, boring. How is it that your house is anything but?

I aim for a harmony of opposites. Ancient and modern, shiny and matte, primitive and civilized, serious and witty. My inspiration is Paris. The Louvre with its I.M. Pei pyramid, limestone buildings punctuated with dark slate and ironwork, anything Chanel...it's a black and white city. But the range of blacks and whites, from shiny black to dark bronze to soft gray

stone to gleaming white marble, gives it crisp contrast. Think how great a red Hermès bag looks being slung down the street. It shows up!

Like the way you zing a little avocado green in your office.

It's a great color that's about to sneak in the back door after being banished for overstaying its welcome years ago.

And by the look of your daughter Collier's room, you've clearly overcome your fear of purple. Or was that her mandate?

I don't fear purple. Designers as diverse as Saladino and Liaigre have shown how to use it as a cool shadow-color. It was a good choice with her photography, because purple with the blacks, grays, and whites of black and white photography doesn't bring to mind any cliché color combinations.

The stenciling in the office is such a clever way to jazz up white walls.

The design came from a Bergamo fabric called La Paloma. It gives some structure to the masses of magazine pictures that seem to grow on my office walls.

Is the kitchen-dining area as elegant and serviceable as it looks?

It is serviceable, and looks really elegant with very little effort. It's divided into a preparation and a cleanup area, with open shelving for plates, glasses, and serving pieces. Meals are fun because they're about preparing and eating together.

Tell me about that table, including the cost for the ten fullbacks to deliver it.

Fullbacks are quite plentiful in Alabama.

The table's inspired by an Axel Vervoordt design. It's 16 feet long, made from two old oak planks, made by Tim Bell, a furniture maker in North Carolina.

So many people think of Southern decorating as steeped in tradition—chintz and Chippendale and so on. You don't seem to have gotten that memo.

I think I had it once, but I lost it. Must be with my keys. But I have to say, old screen-printed chintzes can be truly beautiful, and lately I'm tempted again. I love tradition, if it serves you.

So what in the world did you do with all the stuff your mother and grandmother gave you?

The chinoiserie cabinet in my office was my mother's, and the apothecary jars in the kitchen. I was too picky to accept much, so my sisters have most of it.

Well, your cottage is really as good as it gets.

A designer lives to hear the words, 'I would love to live here....' I hear it all the time from people with greatly varying degrees of design exposure—from the electrician's six-year-old son to my jaded friends in the design field who've seen everything.

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In the master bedroom, “the light fixtures and mirror have center stage, so the wall-mounted bedside tables had to float quietly,” says Brown. Bedside lights “are big sconces, basically,” from David Weeks in New York. OPPOSITE: A floor of Carrara marble slabs and waterproof plaster on all walls, including the shower, “give the master bath a monolithic feel. The effect is Zen and peaceful.” Custom cabinets in limed oak.



“The house wanted a big kitchen to be its symmetrical core, but that meant losing the dining room, so the kitchen had to be both,” Brown says. Just as in the master bathroom, limed oak cabinets and Carrara counters reappear to forge a unity of elements and materials. Open shelves that hold restaurant-supply dinnerware and serving pieces are conveniently located by sink and dishwasher. The stunning 16-foot-long oak table was made by Tim Bell. Painting by Guido Maus. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

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