



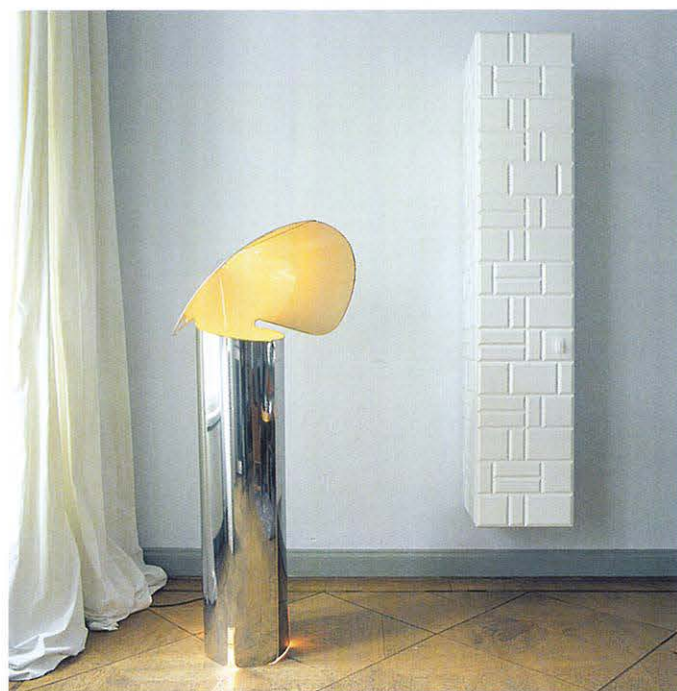
# ALLIED POWERS

In a shared endeavour with longtime associate Remo Lotano, architect Gisbert Pöppler has brought an instinctive colour sense to bear on his own Berlin flat, using it to 'highlight three-dimensional relationships'. His artist friend, meanwhile, has an eye for the city's found objects, from a Sputnik light to armchairs of GDR bureaucrats. Michael Huey analyses their creative unification. Photography: Fritz von der Schulenburg



In the kitchen, the long travertine table with heavy brass legs came from the premises of a Berlin gents' clothes shop, Selbach's (now defunct). The chair is an orchestra conductor's seat from the Berlin State Opera, an object unearthed in a skip





This page, clockwise from top left: the brass cupboard doors here are also from Selbach's – they once enclosed a dressing room; the living-room rug is a re-edition of a Christian Bérard carpet, 'Idylle', by La Manufacture Cogolin; overlooking the dining table, found at Berlin's Evangelical Academy, is a painting by Maibritt Ulvedal Bjelke; made of one sheet of folded metal, Mario Bellini's 1964 'Chiara' floor lamp has been christened 'the nun'. The limited-edition 'GP01' cupboard was designed by Pöppler. Opposite: the velvet armchairs once graced an early-1960s GDR office building for government high functionaries





**IN A CITY** of legendary – and legendarily brutal – divisions and sectors, German designer Gisbert Pöppler and his longtime American associate Remo Lotano have created an apartment where colour demarcates and separates and at the same time unifies the whole with exquisite refinement, ‘highlighting’, as Pöppler puts it, ‘three-dimensional relationships’. The entrance hall, a Wedgwood blue, is darkest; to its left begins an enfilade of rooms laid out parallel to the hallway, at the end wrapping around it towards the kitchen and the bedroom beyond, their related tones shifting subtly from warm blue to cool grey to greenish hues as they run its length, their ceilings in varying shades of pale yellow. Not far from the historical Checkpoint Charlie, this corridor, with its putty-grey doorframes, offers perspective on to four distinct spaces that visually vibrate with it, each in its own unique way: it is as much a border – a viewing platform for differences and similarities – as it is a passageway. Here, as in colour-field painting, the colour itself becomes the subject.

Pöppler moved to Berlin from Bremen in 1989, some two months before what is referred to as the ‘opening of the East’. He settled into this apartment in the city’s former communist zone in 1995. At that time the c1890s building was missing its two top floors, Pöppler relied on coal stoves to heat the place (tending to them in the winter was ‘like having a dog’), and, as for temperature, the kitchen was extremely intransigent: from late November until March the chill so persisted that refrigeration became redundant. (He unplugged the fridge and just left its door open during that season, thus learning to embrace a novel three-dimensional relationship with his icebox.)

Lotano originally intended to spend about four months in Berlin; more than a decade on, he is still in town. He grew up not far from Lynchburg, Virginia – a 20-minute drive from Appomattox, where General Lee surrendered to General Grant, bringing the American Civil War to an end – and only after some time in the city did he really become aware that part of what draws him to it might be termed ‘reunification issues’. He and Pöppler have now been working together for 13 years.

Pöppler’s colour sense is something I have written about before (*Wol* May 2008). It is a gift that, when it comes down to it, he prefers not to examine too closely (‘I would never want to give a colour seminar’): in building his dramaturgy of pigment he goes by intuition and experience, turning a blind eye to supposed rules. He seems to know that he can leave theory to others; colour speaks out all around him in his apartment, posing and answering its own questions, even when he sits there in complete silence. His associate, meanwhile, recounting his own ‘curious connection with the history of things’, reveals himself as the source for many of the found objects and fixtures in the place – the Sputnik light in the kitchen, for example, as well as the long travertine table on emphatic brass legs, which came from Selbach’s, a now-defunct men’s outfitter’s on Kurfürstendamm

Top: the library, with its low-slung chaises-longues and long pendant lamp, has double doors on three sides and windows on the fourth. Above: in this spare bedroom, the 1956 glass vitrine was once installed in the Schiesser underwear company on Kurfürstendamm. Opposite: on a 1920s Chinese rug, an export piece, sits a custom-painted ‘Chinotto’ armchair, designed by Luigi Caccia Dominioni in 1973 for Azucena. The colour-matched cupboard and bookshelves were designed by Pöppler







– as did the two brass-trimmed closet doors, originally used for dressing rooms.

Lotano says he is always picking up things he finds in the streets, sometimes combining them into assemblages: his *Swiss Weapons of Minimal Destruction*, which consists of a traditional webbing-seated wooden toboggan and an old bamboo-and-leather ski pole, stands in a corner of the main bedroom. Elsewhere, too, are velvet-covered armchairs from the Staatsratsgebäude, a GDR building for high-ranking officials whose interior décor Chancellor Helmut Kohl left unchanged in the early years after the ‘turn-around’ in 1989. Lotano continues: ‘I like to keep something from every project.’ To which Pöppler brightly responds: ‘And I love to throw things away.’ He adds, dryly, but not without warmth and gratitude: ‘Remo sometimes saves them.’ Above the kitchen sink with its custom-made brass fixtures hangs the better part of a repurposed farmhouse wardrobe, painted white. ‘I tried to sell it several times,’ Pöppler tells me, ‘but somehow it didn’t want to leave.’

Throughout the flat, scarcely one door handle matches another, and the differences between them, as one navigates it, create a visual and sensual history of the decorative arts from the late 1890s on. Similarly, the pulls on the Pöppler/Lotano-designed kitchen cupboards (in arsenic green) and library bookcases (in dusty rose) are meant to remind one to *feel* what one is touching. The oversized, unpainted, oiled wooden knobs of the latter’s cabinet doors contrast with the indentations in the upper drawers, designed to be opened with a come-hither tug of forefinger and middle finger; in the first case, the knob presents itself as a soft handful of something, in the second, inserting the fingers feels a little bit like one is giving the furniture a physical examination.

While a Chinese-export rug from the 1920s sets the tone in the library, in the living room this is done by a re-edition Christian Bérard carpet – Bérard worked for the Ballets Russes and, in the 1930s, with Jean-Michel Frank – with a background of grey tending towards lavender and humming with colourful vegetal shapes that resemble Matisse’s cut-outs. Pöppler’s bedroom is anchored in another way: in each of its four corners hangs a different-yet-similar light fixture with a coloured glass globe, each one determinedly holding its place like a mighty Allied power.

On one side, the windows of the apartment look out on to a ferocious prefabricated slab construction building from the still-recent Eastern bloc past in this quiet, somewhat forgotten corner of Kreuzberg. Pöppler admits that it was not his favourite thing in the beginning, but over time he has found a way of mentally integrating even this into his sophisticated interior world, mostly by seeing it for what it is: an assemblage of colour and shape that stands for itself and has something to contribute to the ongoing conversation of colour that is unfolding – sensually, sensitively – within his four walls ■

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Top: one of four light fixtures in the corners of the master bedroom hangs next to a stuffed Eurasian jay on a perch, given to Pöppler on his tenth birthday by his grandmother. Above: in the central hallway, the little sewing chest was found at the headquarters of the textile chain Ebbinghaus (now shut down) in Berlin, and in the distance can be seen ‘Paparazzo’ tripod lamps designed by Erik Hofstetter. Opposite: the floor piece, called *Swiss Weapons of Minimal Destruction*, is by Remo Lotano