INSPIRATION Trends

Jonathan Savage: from Music City to Palm Beach

Designer opens Palm Beach outpost thanks to the Kips Bay Palm Beach Show House

For the 2020 Kips Bay Decorator Show House Palm Beach, Savage created a serene poolside getaway featuring a pair of teak daybeds from Sutherland Furniture. The large format photograph of a female nude at The Breakers is by Nathan Coe. Photo: Douglas Friedman

When young designer Jonathan Savage was invited to participate in last year's Palm Beach iteration of the Kips Bay Decorator Show House, one of the last big design events to happen in its entirety prior to the first COVID-19 lockdown, he never dreamed that this limited engagement would turn into a marriage. But it has, as the reception to his stylish cabana was so robust that enough South Florida work has inspired him to not only open a satellite office, but also to purchase his first Palm Beach home, on Ibis Isle.

"I've done so many showhouses," says the soft-spoken southerner who was shepherded into the business by the late design icon and fellow Nashvillian Albert Hadley. "I'm fortunate to be one of those designers who gets work from showhouses. But Palm Beach was unusually fruitive. It's like the gates were flung open and someone said, 'C'mon in, we need you here!'"

Savage's path to success in the interior design business was ignited by his family's real estate development business. There, he was able to observe and at times participate in the building of new residential properties. After a false start at a local college, he transferred into the interior design and architecture program at the American University in London, completing his studies at O'More College of Design in historic Franklin, TN (the institution has since merged with Belmont University in Nashville.) It was during his years at O'More that a mutual friend introduced him to Hadley, the de facto dean of American interior design, most famously in partnership with fellow design icon Mrs. Henry "Sister" Parish. For more than three decades, the firm of Parish-Hadley was considered the most influential design firm in the country, creating rooms that are part and parcel to the collective conscience of American interior design, including the Kennedy White House, the homes of luminaries such as Bill and Babe Paley, Ambassador Henry and Louise Grunwald and the grandest grande dame of all New York society, Brooke Astor. The firm has famously spawned a list of alumni that still stands as the foundation of American design, most notably the industry's current guiding light, Bunny Williams.

Hadley recognized Jonathan's talent, and they became friends, meeting first in New York and later in Nashville. Ultimately, it was Hadley who arranged for Jonathan to work for David Kleinberg Design Associates, another Parish-Hadley alum. During his three years in New York, he honed his craft on a variety of distinguished projects and also met his partner of 13 years, Brad Wensel, the chief customer officer of a healthcare software company. When Wensel was offered an exciting work opportunity in Nashville, Jonathan followed, and opened his own design practice.

While Nashville will always be a part of Savage's past, its decidedly antebellum aesthetic couldn't be further from the spaces he creates. Known for his ability to showcase dramatic contemporary art and modernist furnishings, one would be hard pressed to find a single southern cliché. Indeed, bold combinations of black and white or neutral schemes with dynamic pops of color are Savage hallmarks. "I'm hoping that my same aversion to 'what's expected' in Nashville will serve my new clients in South Florida," says Jonathan. "I want to offer more than white lacquered furniture and pink and green palm trees."

When the 2021 Kips Bay Decorator Show House Palm Beach opens its doors to the public on Wednesday, April 8th (with pandemic-era protocols such as strictly enforced 2-hour sessions with limited attendance), it will also feature a new crop of hopefuls hoping to make their mark on the lucrative Palm Beach scene. Alongside area stalwarts will be a good number of design stars from Atlanta, New York, Washington, D.C., and Boston. To purchase tickets, which support both New York's Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club and Boys & Girls Clubs of Palm Beach County, visit the website or call (718) 893-8600 ext. 11236.

Story Credits:

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