A NATURAL SPIRIT

MET HOME OF THE MONTH

IN CENTRAL WASHINGTON STATE, PAINTER LEO ADAMS UNVEILS HIS MASTERPIECE: A HOUSE THAT GIVES NEW LIFE TO FOUND OBJECTS.

Hanging on a wall of Leo Adams's house is a serene and soulful object shaped like a kimono. Even up close, it's hard to believe that this was once the inside of an old refrigerator abandoned in the desert and used for target practice. By the time Adams found it, rust had spread, bloodlike, from dozens of bullet holes, staining its white enamel surface.

Intrigued by its texture and travails, Adams dragged the piece of metal home, unfolded it and hung it on a gray wool blanket. There, it could be a metaphor for Adams: first discarded, then besieged and finally resurgent as a thing of rare and hard-won beauty.

The son of a Yakama chief, Adams was born on the reservation 60 years ago; he was, he says, "highly creative, feminine, interested in furniture and flowers." That didn't sit well with his cattle-ranching clan. Cursed by his grandfather—"he witched me" is how Adams puts it—the young Leo was deprived of his birthright and banned from his patrilineal home. What made life bearable was a mother who protected him and, later, a tribal scholarship that enabled him to travel around Europe. Then, as a young man, he settled in Seattle and established himself as a successful painter of, most often, russet-colored landscapes—the central Washington desert he never forgot.

In the 1970s, his grandfather died. Adams returned to the reservation and dragged his grandfather's house—the same house he wasn't allowed to enter—onto his own plot of land and began transforming it into a place where even the most humble object is treasured.

PRODUCED BY DORETTA SPERDUTO AND LINDA HUMPHREY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONN COOLIDGE. WRITTEN BY FRED A. BERNSTEIN.

Fittingly, Adams's house sits on the border between the Indian reservation he grew up on and the booming city of Yakima (a three-hour drive east from Seattle), as if astride two cultures. From the Yakima side—the side it presents to the world—the house, with cedar siding and pitched roof, could be in any suburb (Adams had a builder attach a two-story addition containing living and dining rooms to his grandfather's cabin).

On the reservation side, the picture is more complex: Adams's driveway terminates not at a front door but at a series of outdoor rooms, screened by trellises and weathered wood partitions and decorated with found objects. The transition from outdoors to indoors is gradual; it's as if the house is assembling itself from the desert. Eventually, an outside that feels enclosed gives way to an inside that feels open. By then it's clear that this is no tract house: Treating its two-story main wing as a single story, Adams gave his living/dining space a startling, 18-foot ceiling.

But the real surprise isn't the rooms' proportions; it's Adams's ability to decorate them with whatever comes his way. "My life," says Adams, "has been about making something from nothing." Send him a gift, and he'll use the cardboard box for paneling, its texture and grain as precious to him as those of

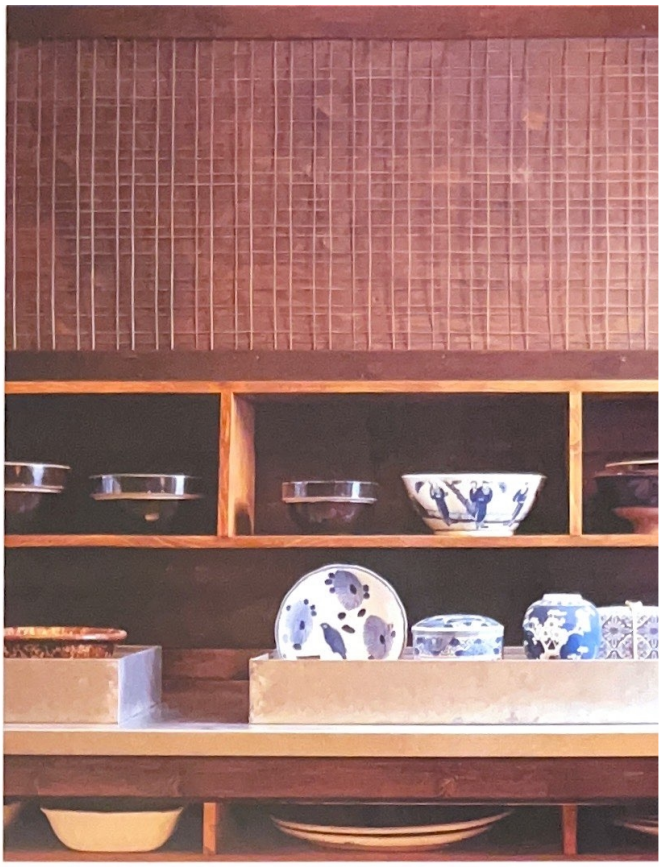
Adams lives in an apple and apricot orchard, 20 miles from his birthplace. Large windows bring northern light to the attic studio. Opposite: Two of his paintings dominate the living room. He created a totemlike sculpture near the window from bits of farm machinery. The banquette is covered in denim and felt.

the finest marble. Walls are made of weathered scrap lumber, arranged in patterns that suggest wainscoting or elaborate stonework. "Area rugs" are Masonite sheets, painted by Adams in patterns that reveal his encyclopedic knowledge of art history and set on floors of particleboard, sanded and lightly stained. Always, the grain shows through; Adams's goal is to reference grand ideas, without ever becoming grandiose. Chairs have good lines, but upholstery that could be silk is duck; walls are swathed not in toile but in army blankets.

And everywhere are Adams's paintings, many of which replicate the grain and patina of his found objects. "One surface influences another," says Adams. "What I see in a piece of rusted metal may appear in a painting."

Adams, who paints landscapes, geometric patterns and even portraits, has established himself as a prodigious talent. Canvases, stapled to the floor of his attic studio, are in various stages of completion. Finished paintings decorate his walls until collectors talk him into parting with them. Still, "gallery owners tell me that to be really successful I have to focus on one thing," he says, shrugging—as if to apologize for working in multiple genres. But how could someone this creative ever focus on one thing?

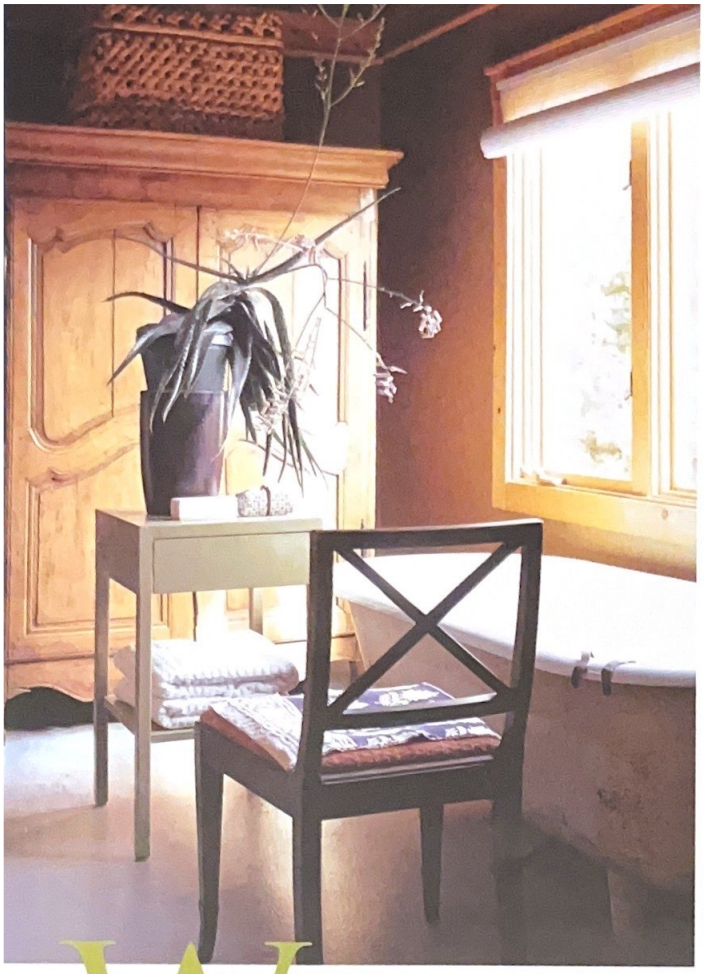
As perhaps the most compelling personality in central Washington, Leo Adams entertains a steady stream of guests in a kitchen that is at once practical and visually rich: He makes room on the prep counter for a Balinese basket and a chemist's bowl. Opposite: In his dining area, an old barrel supports a plywood table (top left). The stairway from the kitchen leads to two guest bedrooms.



The original cabin became what is now the kitchen—the literal and figurative heart of the house. Adams built cabinets from recycled (read: found) lumber and had countertops made from galvanized metal. Not only is galvanized metal inexpensive—Adams says he spent about $200 for the counters—but he finds the material more interesting than stainless steel. "Stainless steel has no life," says Adams, who goes for patina every chance he gets. His china collection (including Bennington spatterware) is displayed in simple galvanized boxes that Adams found at a garage sale. To create the wall behind them, which has the look of a Japanese screen, he fastened two layers of gridded wire fencing to a backdrop of stained plywood.

The light fixtures, which insert bold geometry into the kitchen, were made by Adams from scrap lumber and butcher paper. After building wood frames and folding the paper around them, he treated it with spray starch "to bring out its texture and the grain." A single bulb illuminates each fixture. To create a chandelier over the dining table, he added a second tier. "It's a miracle we haven't burned the house down," he says.

From the dining table, it's only a few feet to Adams's conversation pit. He created the cozy seating area one day by annexing a section of the four-foot crawl space under the house. (All he needed was a saw.) And because the furniture is below eye level, the kitchen seems expansive. The fireplace surround is another trash-heap find (this time, the outside of a rusted water heater); an old English washtub hangs where a less adventurous homeowner might have hung a beveled mirror.



What is a life, if not a chance to make something from nothing? Adams built his four-poster bed from porch posts, old paint still clinging to them. But the fringe is even more surprising—it's corrugated cardboard; inspiration and a pair of scissors were Adams's only tools. The walls behind the bed are old Japanese shutters.

Adams knows the best florist in Yakima but rarely visits; whatever he finds in the desert around his house will do. Weeds are, to Adams, just plants that nobody else has the good sense to admire. Adams's erstwhile partner, Noel, who lives next door, says, "I don't dare cut back anything in the garden."

In the same spirit, a lost dog that found its way to Adams's place is treated like a member of the family. It helps, Adams jokes, that the dog is russet-colored. Clearly, he is partial to the palette of his childhood, when the outdoors was a refuge. The house, he says, "is all about the colors of the desert."

At night, soft light emanates from the butcher-paper shades, but it's Adams who makes the rooms glow, with an ebullience that seems to burnish every surface. "When I come back from a trip, it takes a few days to rejuvenate the house," he says while pouring wine, lighting candles and regaling company with tales of his childhood. In a candid moment, Adams recalls a Native American tradition—"when the master dies, his house is abandoned"—and wonders, poignantly, if that shouldn't happen to his place, too. In fact, because it's on Yakama land, Adams's house can only be passed to a tribal member. The bigger issue is whether the house would still be magical without the man who made it something from nothing.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