

Matthew White Undertakes a One-of-a-Kind Redesign of a Southern California Cottage

The \$5,000

Solution —West

Small may indeed be beautiful. But when it comes to striking terror in the heart, perhaps nothing is as frightening as a residence that must be designed on a budget of \$5,000.

"Five thousand dollars?" the Los Angeles-area designer Matthew White exclaims in a darling-you-have-got-to-be-kidding way. "Many of my clients will spend that on a lamp!"

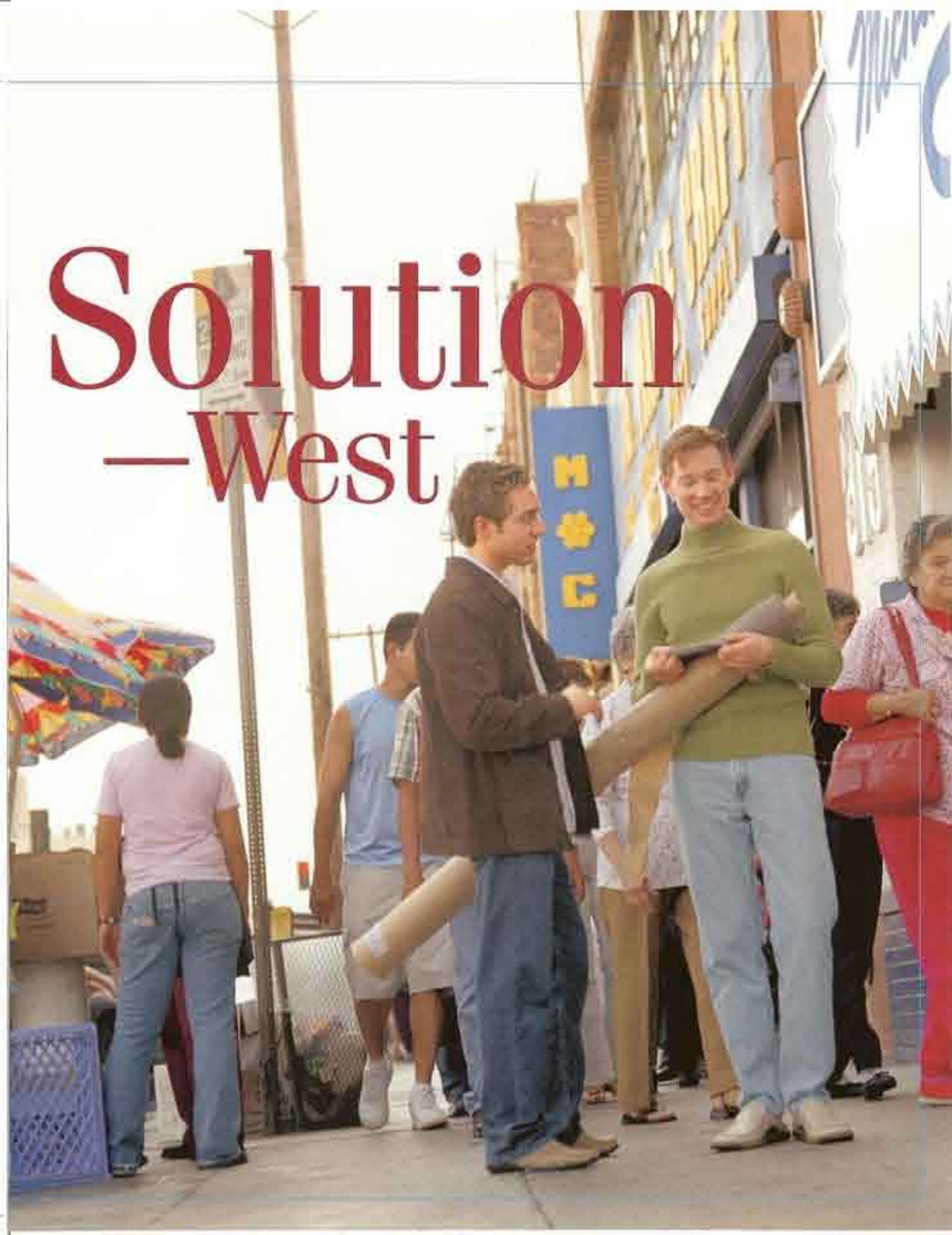
But just as haiku pares language to its lyrical essence, so White and his 25-year-old client Glen Pearson, a third-generation Pasadena contractor, gamely took on the challenge of decorating Pearson's 520-square-foot, four-room, 1920s cottage on \$5,000, offering definitive proof that there is nothing that great taste, plus a glue gun and the yellow pages, can't do.

Let it be said from the start, however, that this is not an ordinary pair. For one thing, designer and client know each other well, having collaborated for many years on residences of 8,000 square feet or more. Unlike mere mortals, Pearson was

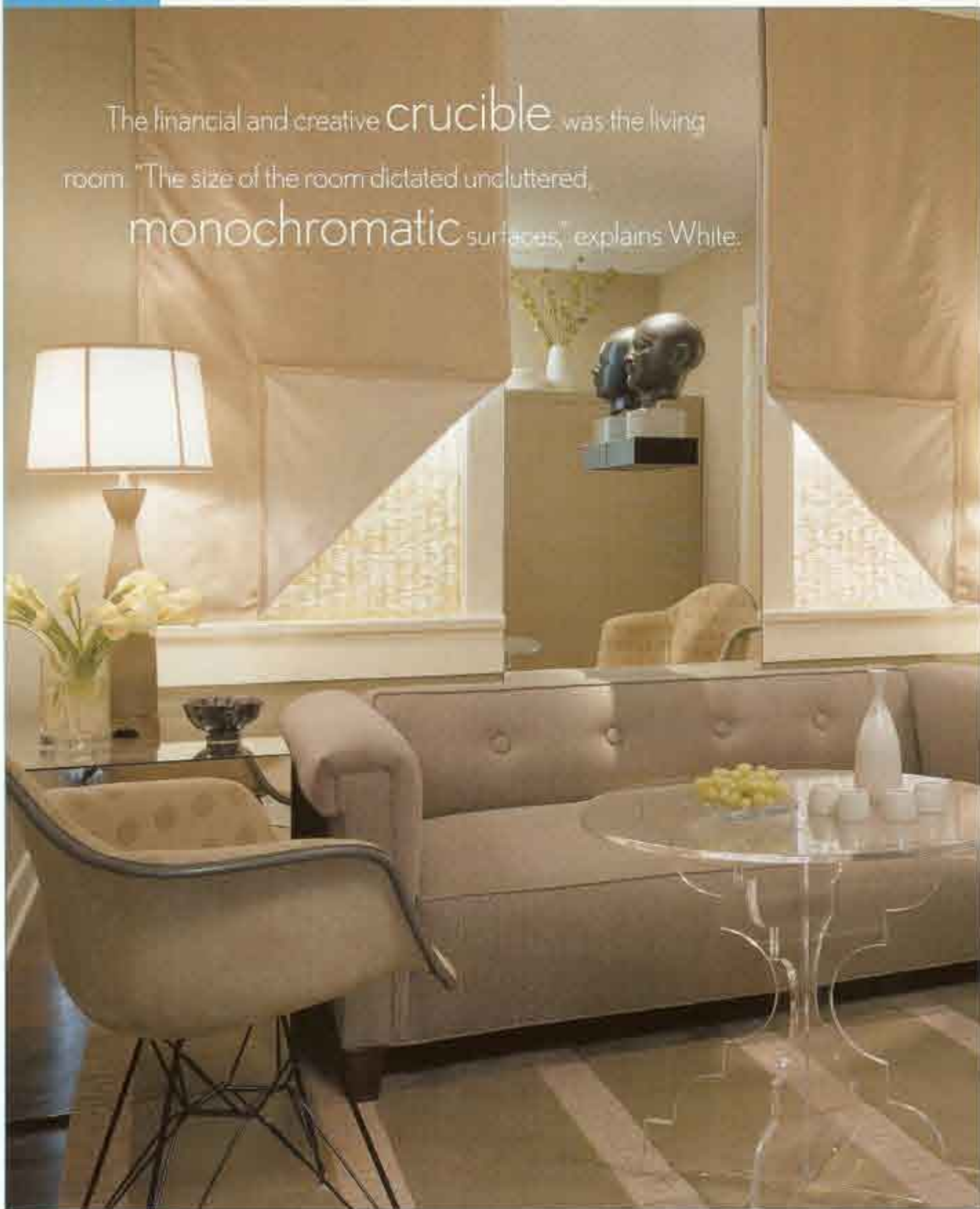


Given a budget of \$5,000, Matthew White and his associate Aubrey James accepted the challenge to design Glen Pearson's 1920s cottage in Pasadena, California. ABOVE: Pearson's crimson living room was cramped, but his two Eames chairs provided White with a place to start. OPPOSITE: Pearson, left, and White examine a sofa fabric.

Text by Patricia Leigh Brown/Before Photography by Peter Valli
After Photography by Fred Licht/Portraits by Jim McHugh



The financial and creative crucible was the living room. "The size of the room dictated uncluttered, monochromatic surfaces," explains White:



LEFT: "My goal for the living room was to create a space that was clean and elegant—like a perfectly tailored suit," White says. He and Pearson found the sofa at a thrift store and its fabric at Michael Levine in Los Angeles (213-622-0259). The reproduction ancient Egyptian head is from the Metropolitan Museum store in Pasadena (626-793-8618). The Plexiglas table was custom-made; the magazine rack is from Crate & Barrel (www.crateandbarrel.com).



also fully capable of being his own contractor. Yet he had hit a psychic plateau when it came to finishing his own house, despite a predilection for photography and collecting midcentury modern furniture. "The residence was already done—sort of," he explains somewhat sheepishly. "I never could quite pull it together."

For the designer and his associate Aubrey James, the trick was respecting the evil taskmaster of a budget while remaining true to the firm's distinctive approach to interiors, which always includes custom furniture and antiques. "To me these are the two elements of any great room," White says. "Though this was a tiny fraction of my

TOP: White discovered a pair of midcentury glass lamps at the Pasadena Antiques Center (626-449-7706). ABOVE: Carpet remnants inspired the rug, custom-sewn at Linoleum City in Hollywood (323-469-0063). Its broad stripe, coupled with a mirrored wall and end tables, visually expands the room.



AFTER

RIGHT The breakfast area lacked character. ABOVE: "The key was to tie it in with the warm yellow tones of the kitchen tiles," explains White, who painted the wall pattern himself. Pearson found the Saaren-esque table base discarded on the roadside. The bench fabric is from Michael Levine.



BEFORE

usual design budget, I approached it as I would any project. The question was, How do you do it and not compromise your vision?"

The answer: Make careful choices and spend money with surgical precision. Avoid the siren song of catalogues as much as possible. Be willing to trek to frenetic offbeat places in pursuit of bargains, such as the Los Angeles garment district, where Pearson and White dodged "people with iguanas on their shoulders," as White recalls without nostalgia. There, after three days of shopping, they found a saffron linen for \$2 a yard—as opposed to the usual \$75 to \$300—which served as the jumping-off point for the bedroom.

"A lot of \$2-a-yard fabrics are kelly green or cherry red," notes the designer, as if discussing a black widow spider. "The saffron had subtlety to it. Most people in small spaces are afraid of color. But color, especially paint, is the most inexpensive way to transform a room."

In the 10-by-10-foot bedroom, the idea was to upholster plywood panels in linen—designer and client did it themselves—then ask artist Clare Graham, who works with found objects, to create a floor-to-ceiling custom headboard. One of hundreds of clevernesses throughout the residence, the headboard consists of mosaics cut from vintage paint-by-number sets. The result: a functional work of art for \$500.

To further personalize the room, White took Pearson's ordinary pillowcases to an embroiderer (try the yellow pages) who monogrammed them for just over \$40.

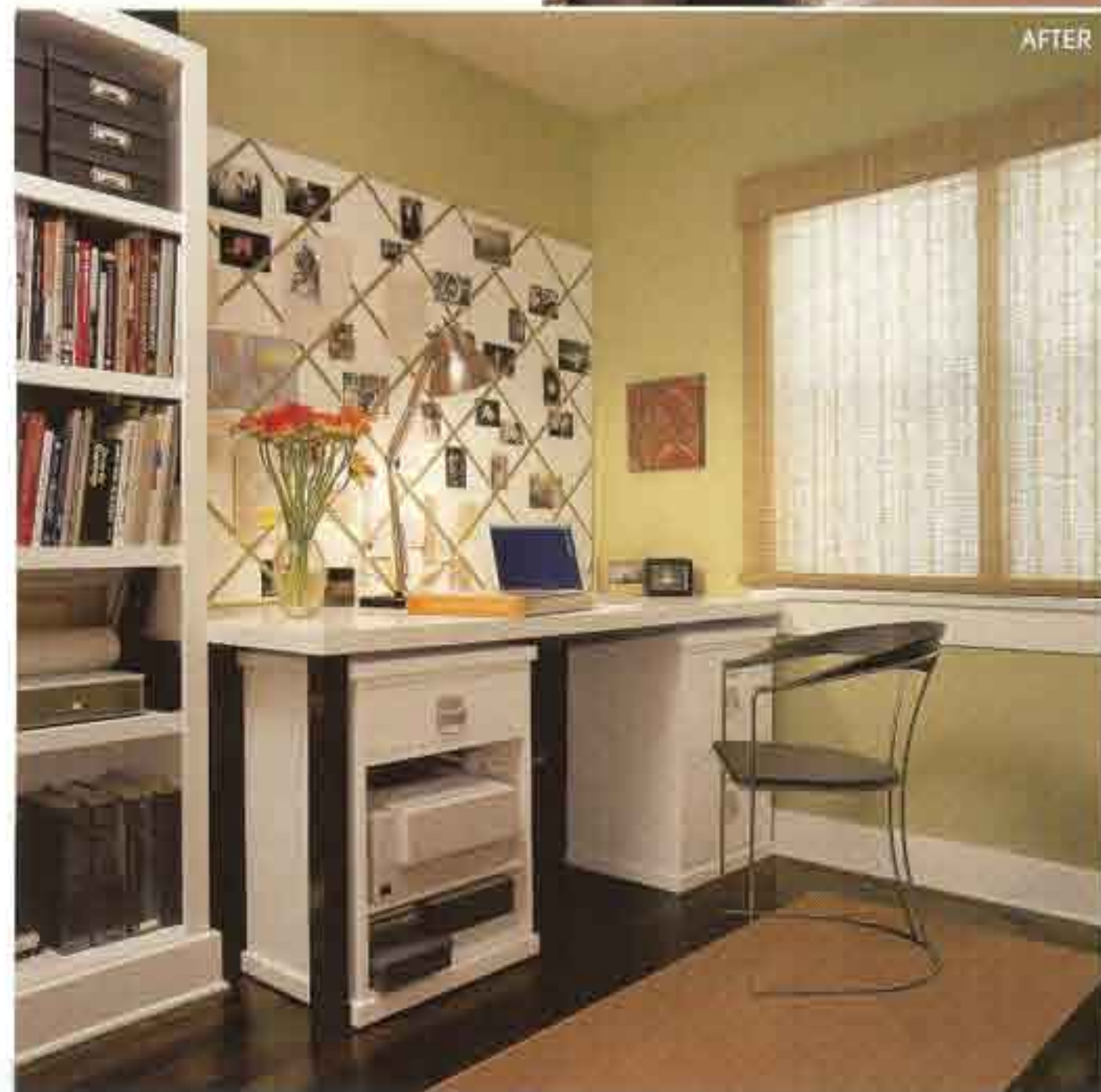
PURCHASES

1 sofa	\$100.00
1 rug	\$703.82
2 lamps & shades	\$343.25
11 mirrors	\$270.83
1 Egyptian head	\$219.33
1 round table	\$425.00
4 fabrics	\$168.89
2 light fixtures	\$100.00
4 headboard panels	\$500.00
3 monogramings	\$42.79
1 desk chair	\$65.00
3 window coverings	\$203.63
17 paints & supplies	\$264.52
8 accessories	\$452.95
labor	\$1,067.00
TOTAL	\$4,920.32



BEFORE

LEFT AND BELOW LEFT "Not a lot was done to the office," White says. "The walls were already a pleasing spring green. We reorganized the shelves and desk (a great way to transform a space with no money!)." The chair is a thrill store find; the bamboo window shade is from Pier 1 Imports (www.pier1.com).



AFTER

"The unexpected is always welcome," White explains. "Otherwise, good taste becomes a bore."

In the kitchen, where they couldn't afford vintage wallpaper ("We couldn't afford *any* wallpaper," White points out), he wanted walls that complemented the old-fashioned 1920s quality of the room. To economize, the designer painted them himself. He calls the abstract motif "spontaneous tribal calligraphy," within which he subtly embedded Gs and Ps à la Al Hirschfeld's "Ninas." Pearson walked in one day to find his kitchen delightfully transformed. "I really like the way it picks up the colors," he says. "The room feels so complete."

The financial and creative crucible was the living room. For reasons he now cannot fathom, Pearson had originally painted the room shocking red. "I felt trapped in red," he admits. It was claustrophobic as well. "The size of the room dictated uncluttered, monochromatic surfaces," says



BEFORE

OPPOSITE: With Graham's artwork in place, White's concept (below) for the fabric-covered headboard was fully realized. Pearson's newly saffron bedroom "has drama," notes White. Simple pendant light fixtures were purchased from West Elm (www.westelm.com). The carafe is from Crate & Barrel.



ABOVE: The bedroom was "a weak, pale hue," says White. "We chose to give it some punch." RIGHT: White designed a ceiling-height headboard for Pearson's bed, commissioning it from artist Clare Graham, center, who made paint-by-number mosaic panels in his Los Angeles studio (323-663-3426).



White. "It is not a room for 3,000 pillows."

Over time, the living room became a space enlivened by wit and serendipity rather than money, though the two decided to part with a hefty portion of their budget there. Pearson owned two Fames chairs covered in reproduction vintage sage-green

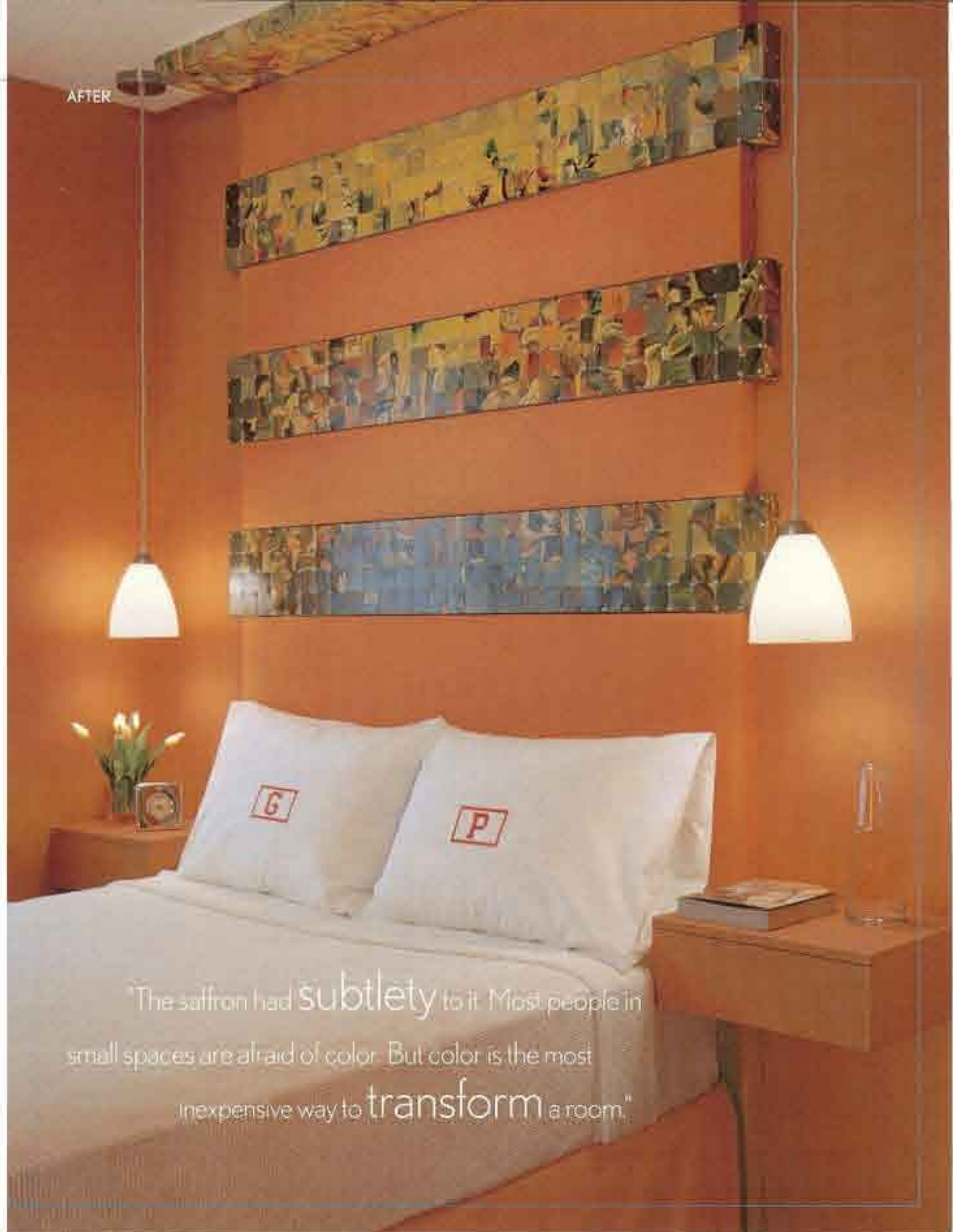
fabric. "The pedigree chairs were the perfect starting point," says White.

The designer, who now commutes between coasts, had owned an antiques shop in Pasadena. His extraterrestrial antiques sense proved fortuitous. In Pasadena he homed in on a pair of mid-century glass lamps that he

considered underpriced ("In West Hollywood they would have been \$1,200," he notes wryly). He spied a mid-century modern sofa in pitiful condition for \$100. "It was worn but had great lines and was the perfect scale," the designer says. They then splurged on \$10-a-yard fabric, paying an upholsterer \$600. "The sofa was cheap," he explains. "But fabric is something you don't want to compromise on."

The budget was dwindling. So White did the only logical thing: borrow from Versailles, bringing the Hall of Mirrors to Glen Pearson's living room. "It's an 18th-century way to visually expand space and bring depth to a room," he says. To

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AFTER

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further fool the eye, Pearson whipped out his glue gun and built two mirrored end tables. As a finishing touch, the designer bought (with a members' discount) a reproduction Egyptian head from the Metropolitan Museum of Art shop in Pasadena. "The room needed a focal point," White says. "In my mind's eye I saw an ancient head. It adds a little soul."

White also created a bold graphic rug out of carpet remnants and designed a Renaissance-inspired round table. He took the drawing to a local Plexiglas fabricator (*P* in the yellow pages). "I like the quality of Lucite," he says. "It gives the room a little glam."

Still, one key ingredient was missing. "We needed an element of surprise," he says. "We needed a big impact with no

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money." While antiquing one afternoon, White stumbled across a pair of oversize sunglasses made in the 1980s as a promotional gimmick for the company Think Big. "They even had Plexiglas nose guards," the designer recalls. "I didn't know what I'd do with them, but they were a cool collectible."

Not long afterward he sent Pearson an e-mail. "I've got these huge sunglasses," the message said. "I have an idea."

White did a shadow drawing of his client's profile, then Pearson used plywood and a jigsaw to render his own larger-than-life silhouette. An elegant but slightly wacky piece of Pop art was born, Pearson's oversize alter ego appearing to emanate seamlessly and mysteriously from the wall.

Especially on a tight budget, two heads (or is it three?) are better than one. "Every morning I leave my house at the crack of dawn for the hustle and bustle of construction," Pearson says, still pleasantly dazed by the experience of encountering his nose on the wall. "I come home to this peaceful, calming place that reeks of style, in my opinion. I can't get enough of it. I laugh every time I come home." □