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SURREAL DESIGN: THE FRONT LINES OF REALITY TV

ONDINE KARADY '91



The Williamsburg loft that set decorator turned interior designer Ondine Karady '91 shares with her husband can induce flashes of déjà vu for film buffs and HBO viewers.

Anyone who's seen the ambivalent ode to addiction, *Requiem for a Dream*, will do a double take upon entering Karady's living room. The gleaming vintage hospital cabinets displaying oversized plastic trolls and other delightfully eccentric mid-century toys served as cupboards in the kitchen that Karady outfitted for Jennifer Connolly's junkie fashion designer—just the kind of woman who would install a gorgeous reminder of sickness next to her stove.

The olive floor-to-ceiling curtains over the windows have hung in the angular living room of *Sex and the City*'s icy editrix Enid Mead. (Karady has brightened them with blocks of swirly sea-color fabric.) And the couple sleep on a bed where Rosario Dawson lay—on the set of Spike Lee's moody *25th Hour*.

But all the years Karady spent on sets, after graduating from Barnard with a degree in European studies and a senior thesis on Truffaut, didn't prepare her for her own screen time as a contestant on *Top Design*. In this recent addition to Bravo's reality-show empire, 13 competitors vie for \$100,000 and a spread in *Elle Decor* magazine by completing harrowing interior-design challenges in record time. (Window display—three hours! Room orbiting around a Swarovski chandelier—nine hours!) Famous designers and a TV audience of 1.7 million sit in judgment.

This past season, Karady tied for second place. The ordeal, she says, was “grueling and bizarre.”

Interior design, toward which she has gravitated after more than a decade in set decoration, usually proceeds by a more relaxed rhythm of give and take

between designer and client. In the work she's doing on the country estate of Allman Brothers guitarist Warren Haynes, for example, “we're still in the beginning stages, even though I've been doing it for a year.” She laughs, “They're busy people.”

On *Top Design*, by contrast, “they gave you 90 minutes to plan a whole house. You needed to pick all the paint, mark the walls you wanted painted, pick all the wallpaper, mark which walls you wanted papered, and measure all the windows. Then you go shopping.” It's interior design as shopping gone wild.

It's also summer camp with Big Brother as head counselor. While sequestered in Los Angeles for six weeks, “I think I spoke to my husband four times, and it's on camera and on speakerphone, because they don't want you giving away any secrets,” Karady explains. “There are probably a hundred people listening to you in other rooms, taking notes to figure out the storyline, their next move. It was so freakish. When you go to sleep, they take your mike off. In the morning, they wait for you to take a shower” before putting the mike back on.

“One night our ‘babysitter’ let us walk to McDonald's with her,” she recalls. They were off-camera for once. “We ordered everything. We just ordered the whole menu. People went crazy.”

Still, she says, “I'm really glad I did it.” The best part was getting to know the other designers. A close second was rising to the challenges. “I'm proud of the work I did.” She pauses. “I kicked ass.”

Karady's townhouse for TV—the final challenge—was full of whimsy and dazzle, delicate details and bold forms, stark colors arrayed in curvy lines, and soft colors set at sharp angles. The sitting room, for example, featured deep-pink sofas with clean Danish lines, a wallpaper of squat little rainbows in coffee and black, and a sculpture that shimmered along the wall like a metallic amoeba.

“It's about mixing it up,” insists Karady. “You have to mix it up well.”