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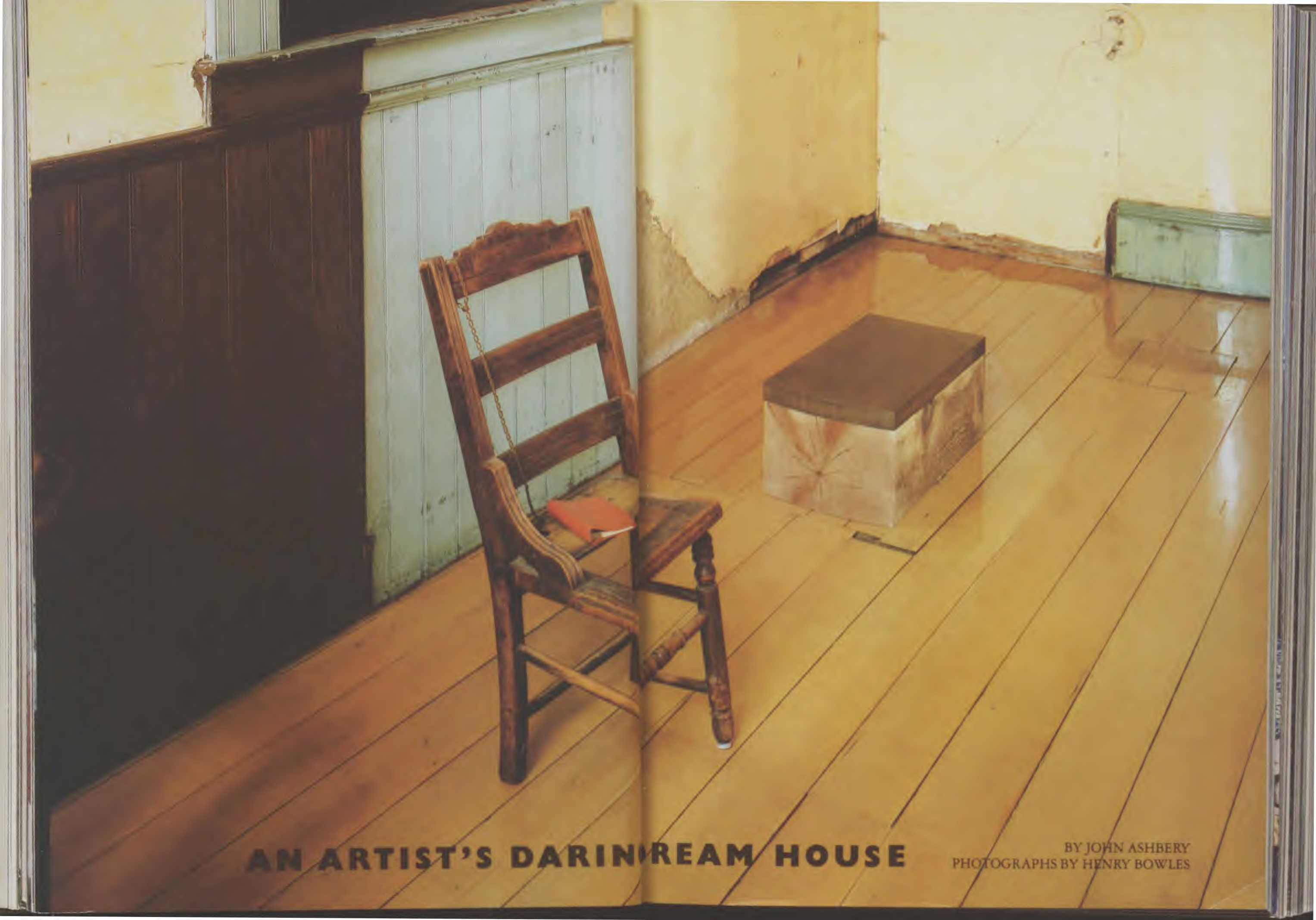
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*The country kitchen
of an old English lodge
quarry tiled and
crisscrossed with original
old beams overhead
Decorated by David Mlinaric
Photographs by Derry Moore
Story on page 66*

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AN ARTIST'S DREAM HOUSE

BY JOHN ASHBERY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY BOWLES



"If one takes architecture as the expression of an individual life, one starts at the center rather than at the face, asking what space is created rather than what plot is filled. Places thoroughly lived in become internalized in a series of adjustments till they represent a person to himself, a process the critic can try to follow in reverse, deducing the life from the quarters."

Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces*

David Ireland's house sits, or squats, on an unremarkable street corner in a somewhat rundown, somewhat bohemian section of San Francisco's Mission District. An anonymous "builder's special" dating from 1886, it echoes only faintly the exuberant, polychromed Victorian architecture that proliferates throughout the city. Painted a uniform battleship gray, and from time to time splashed with the further protective coloration of graffiti, it is easily overlooked. Once you become aware of it, however, it gives the impression of deliberately trying to escape notice—a sedate, vaguely sinister presence.

Inside, however, it reveals itself as an "eccentric space" of considerable authority in a part of the country that has plenty of them, including the Hearst Castle and that bizarre Versailles, the Winchester "mystery house" in San Jose. But the mad grandeur of those establishments is here condensed to a snug set of barely a half-dozen small, sparsely furnished rooms. (Part of the ground floor is a studio rented out by Ireland and is separate from his own interior.) Nevertheless, the evidence of a firm hand in dealing with vagaries of space and atmosphere invites comparison with *(Text continued on page 104)*

Preceding pages: The three-legged chair in David Ireland's upstairs hall was in the house when he took possession. It reminded him of other three-legged things, such as the three-legged dogs kept by an African tribe he once visited. The notebook contains "three-legged stories" written down by Ireland. Wood and steel sculpture is by Peter Gutkin.
Left: A cracked window pane framed in copper and a red-enameled "reliquary" containing collections related to the restoration of the house.



This page: The exterior of Ireland's house in San Francisco. *Opposite:* On a campaign chest in the dining room, a two-volume manual on tropical diseases alludes to Ireland's career as a safari guide in Africa. Above it is a photograph of his mother's family, chosen because it matched the period and mood of the house.



the best surreal architecture California has to offer.

Ireland is a conceptual artist and his house is a work of art that can be lived in—must be, in fact, to be experienced whole. It is a combination often attempted but seldom realized. Surely, day-to-day life in Schwitters's "Merzbau" in Hanover must have been trying, marvelous as the interior looks from surviving photographs. Perhaps the most successful attempt is the town house that Sir John Soane built for himself in London between 1812 and 1814 (see page 158). Like Ireland's it presents to the world an ordinary façade much like that of its neighbors that is belied by the unorthodox unfolding of complex spaces once one is inside. And something of Soane's wry, brooding wit is present in the San Francisco house.

Ireland, born in Washington state in 1930, has had a footloose career that includes extensive travels in places like the Fiji Islands, New Guinea, Malaysia, and Afghanistan; in the late '60s he organized a dozen safaris in Kenya and Tanzania. Returning to San Francisco after a visit to New York in 1975, he saw and promptly acquired the small house on Capp Street from its previous owner, an accordion manufacturer who had lived and worked there from 1930 to 1975. Ireland soon realized that this would be no ordinary restoration job—"consolidation" is the word he prefers to use. "Slowly I progressed, as an artist, and I reached a philosophical point where I realized that the lively presence I was looking for in my paintings was here on the walls, as I stripped away and cleaned off the surfaces." Instead of refinishing the walls and floors, he *(Text continued on page 108)*

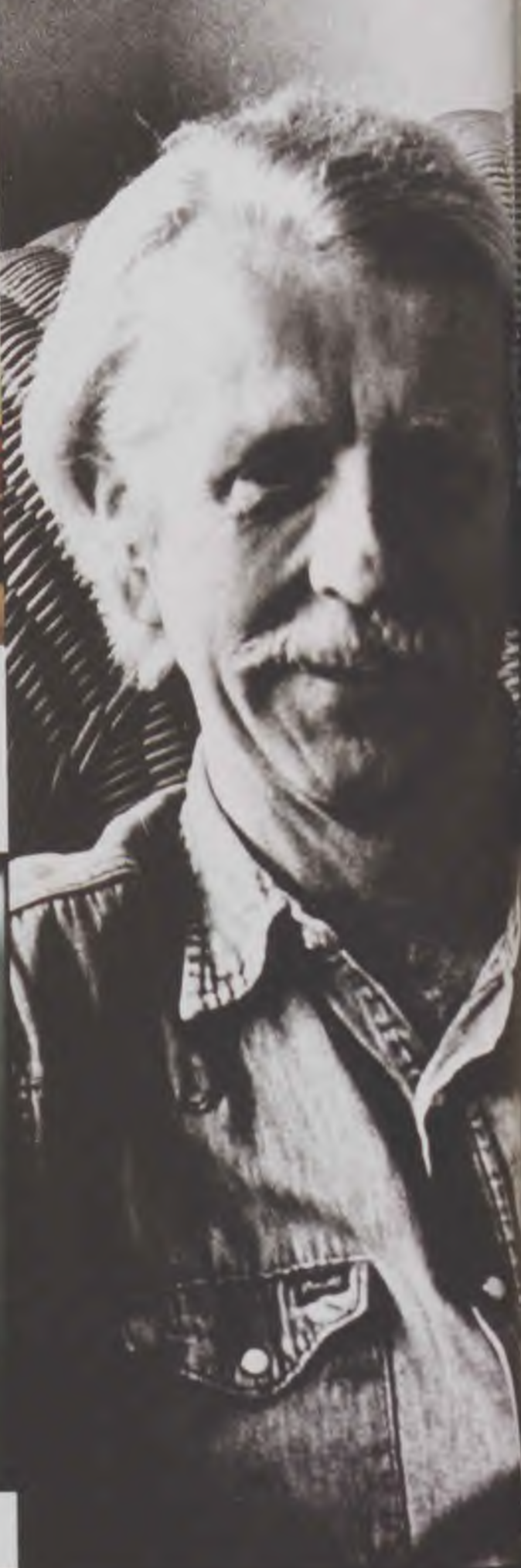
In foreground, arms of two rattan armchairs designed by Ireland (mates are in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). To the left, another reliquary topped by a monograph on Palladio between cement bookends. Rear: Tree stump from Mill Valley and white-cotton upholstered Italian armchairs. On the mantelpiece and the stool at left are wads of wallpaper stripped from the walls.

To the right, an exposed but functioning TV, which Ireland says "echoes the house, being stripped to the bone."





Right: David Ireland. *Above:* The guest bedroom, with Oaxacan bedspread, Victorian bed surmounted by a pair of greater kudu horns. To the left, another chair from the house's *ancien régime* (chairs are for Ireland "symbols of authority"). This one holds two week's worth of newspapers commemorating the span of an exhibition of Ireland's art. *Below:* Door to bathroom.



Above left: Ireland's study. Wire construction above desk is by Susan Marie Johnson. *Above:* A corner of the downstairs vestibule. *Below left:* On a stool, a jar of rubber bands removed from the daily newspaper after it was delivered and saved by the previous owner; a tape recording of the sound of the rubber bands being removed from newspapers accompanies it. *Below:* Ireland's bedroom; a cement picture by him hangs over the bed.



left them as they were after cleaning—pockmarked and stained the indefinite mellow colors of age—merely sealing them with a transparent polyurethane coating.

Decorating was thus mostly a question of hard work, since the internal surfaces were literally *objets trouvés*. Fitting out the place for habitation while retaining its somewhat comical austerity was a more delicate task. There are a few imposing pieces of furniture—a Victorian bed whose headboard echoes the curves of a pair of greater kudu horns fastened to the wall above it; a long, narrow refectory table (actually a carpenter's bench) in the dining room; and two overscaled rattan armchairs made in Hong Kong to Ireland's specifications. Despite their suggestion of some Maughamesque hotel in Malaysia, they seem destined to sit facing each other on the bare, polished floor of the sitting room, beside a strangely beautiful whodunit "sculpture" made of brooms in various stages of exhaustion, which were left behind by the previous owner.

One enters the house through a vestibule like a large closet from which an unassuming staircase ascends to the main living quarters. On the ground floor, behind the vestibule, is the dining room, shuttered—since it faces directly onto the sidewalk—and therefore dark: a room seemingly kept for special occasions. In addition to the table and three campaign chests, the room is furnished with weathered captain's (Text continued on page 192)

The front parlor. On a metal cabinet is a plastic Coca-Cola carrying case containing jars of sawdust obtained by sanding the floors: "In an unknown environment, we order objects to make us more secure." Window has had its glass replaced with sheets of copper. Three jars on the table hold "100-year-old water," obtained by washing a 100-year-old object; "Hollywood strings" saved by the previous owner; and birthday cake, "a social relic" from the 95th birthday party of Mr. Gordon—in snapshot—a onetime tenant of the house. Copy of *San Francisco Examiner* is from January 21, 1981, the date of the opening of an exhibition of Ireland's work.



GARDEN OF THE MIND

(Continued from page 190) In this way I can do a lot of work. I can escape without feeling absolutely ghastly. And I can break things down. It's a way of working that reduces anxiety."

She has the greatest admiration for The Collectors. "In the first place, they don't think it's in bad taste to have a collection in depth. I think many English people have one picture by someone—maybe even Ghirlandaio—whom they consider to be very much in good taste . . . and that picture has to go with their faded chintz sofa, and

their dogs. Those things have a place in their life that can be regulated. But I don't believe that art can be regulated. I think specifically that new art can't be regulated into taste. You have to give it free rein if you are going to become committed to it any way, and that is what The Collectors do."

The Collectors are perhaps somewhat in awe of their dining room now that it has been transformed into a Work of Art. Although it was finished months ago, they still take their meals in the large and handsome kitchen.

"When they entertain," the artist says wistfully, "they bring their friends to see the collection. They look at the room. Then they go to a restaurant, like the Japanese." Some furniture has been set down with an "on approval" look—nothing definite. Jennifer Barlett has a more casual approach. "They always hoping that they would be there every so often, and invite guests sometimes." □

Rosamund Bernier is widely known for her vivid, illuminating lectures on art.

ARTIST'S DARING DREAM HOUSE

(Continued from page 108) chairs from Ireland's safari days, African artifacts and trophies. Among the latter are mounted impala and oryx horns, a giraffe's skull, a Cape Buffalo's skull, and a crocodile head on the rough-hewn "sideboard."

The second floor with its large bay windows seems light and even spacious after the claustrophobic ground floor. Here Ireland's collection of home-grown *arte povera* begins to assert its presence. Besides the broom sculpture one notices a pair of cement bookends on the floor of the hallway; a chair missing its seat and part of a leg, with a notebook attached to it by a chain; a window whose cracked glass has been removed and replaced with a copper plate (the glass has been framed in copper and mounted as a freestanding sculpture in the upstairs hall). Close to the rattan thrones is a battered metal storage unit whose shelves hold jars containing various accumulations related to the restoration of the house—sawdust; dust from the window frames; and, for some reason, a typed poem by Rimbaud. In the adjacent parlor is a wooden stool supporting a mound of wadded-up balls of wallpaper taken off the walls, and a bottle of "100-year-old water"—the result of washing a "100-year-old object." Accumulations of the building's previous owner stored in jars include some disgusting-looking dried pears and a cache of rubber bands that once held

the daily newspaper when it arrived—a tape-recording of rubber bands being removed from rolled-up newspapers accompanies it, preserving a specific splinter of lived time. At first glance these humble exhibits look very much at home in the house, though they would seem to belong in the cellar. Their oddity announces itself only gradually. Even then it is hard to know exactly what message is being transmitted, beyond a sense of the holiness of the detritus that accompanies us through life. The trivia that Joseph Cornell enshrined in his boxes affects one similarly. What is finally conjured up is a strong sense of the past—the light of a specific Tuesday afternoon in San Francisco 80 years ago.

A certain standard of comfort is maintained despite the austerity—two white-upholstered Italian armchairs in the second parlor echo the wicker ones in the adjacent room; placed beside a fireplace, with a tree-stump table between them, they give a fleeting hint of European elegance reinforced by a wooden stand holding newspapers mounted on poles as in older German cafés. (But the newspapers—some 20 consecutive issues of the *South China Morning Post*—are another votive exhibit, commemorating in this case a visit to Hong Kong that Ireland made several years ago.) The imposing guest bed with its woven Oaxacan blanket suggests a Gold Rush hotel room, except for the anomaly of the non-indige-

nous horns on the wall. Just off a small pleasant office, the master bedroom with its unpillowed bed, is almost monastic, except for the presence of a few artworks including a "reverse drawing" by Ireland—that is, a Play-Doh rectangle to which scraps of paper have been fastened.

Ireland's house goes a step beyond Post Modernism's tongue-in-cheek acceptance of things as they are by actively celebrating the beauty to be found in grit, decay, and the incomprehensibility of contemporary lives less than a century behind them. Like Schwitters and Cornell, and the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, he draws attention to the poetry of the baggage of daily life as opposed to that of "privileged moments" where we might expect to find it. Apollinaire wrote that modern poetry lives in the clutter of the bershops windows; Ireland sees it in the palimpsest of scarred walls, dangling light bulbs, cracked windows, and regular, anonymous spaces, as well as the polyglot exotica that coexists with them. In its small way, his house bears witness to the glacially slow formation of both mundane and extraordinary. It has gone into the shaping of late 20th-century American consciousness. □

*John Ashbery received the Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets in 1982, and his most recent book of poems is *Shadow Train*, published by Viking Penguin in 1981.*