



Room to grow "El Cielo," an installation by David Wiseman in a private residence in San Antonio.

The Secret **GARDENER**

DAVID WISEMAN CULTIVATES HIS VISION OF NATURE ON CEILINGS AND STAIRCASES MOST PEOPLE NEVER GET TO SEE.

BY SUSAN MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT POLIDORI

The 1929

Georgian-style house on Hudson Avenue is situated smack in the middle of Los Angeles and squarely within a vision of Old World elegance: crystal chandeliers revel in their antiquity, a zebra-hide rug stretches out by the library fireplace and a battalion of neatly trimmed shrubs zigzags through the garden, a beautifully restored classic parterre. The house reveals even more of its particular charms as the designer David Wiseman amiably leads the way to the formal dining room. "This," he states appreciatively, pointing upward, "was a dream commission." Above the original wood paneling and French doors, Wiseman has installed an elaborate ornamental ceiling, a ghostly arabesque pattern of white plaster branches and 500 hand-finished porcelain cherry blossoms.

With his dark tousled hair, faded T-shirt and easy manner, Wiseman, 31, might be mistaken for a student unwinding at home over school break. Growing up in Pasadena, Calif., the youngest of three brothers, he loved to build forts and "stare at nature." Throughout high school, he roamed the nearby Huntington Botanical Gardens and took classes at the Art Center College of Design. He received the commission for "Cherry Blossom Canopy" in 2005, just two years after he completed his B.F.A. in furniture design at the Rhode Island School of Design, where his senior project, Wall Forest, was a "three-dimensional wallpaper" of scavenged branches cast in water-based resin. "I loved the intensive, Old World approach to making things," Wiseman says. "At R.I.S.D., I saw people learning how to sharpen chisels and knew that was what I really wanted to learn — how to make things from scratch like a 19th-century artisan."

Over a yearlong period, Wiseman worked alone, slip-casting porcelain cherry blossoms and building long branches from seven-inch segments to ensure lightness and seismic safety. The largest of the branches "were constructed the same way you would build a surfboard," he explains matter-of-factly. "They're sculpted from foam and then layered with epoxy resin." Before installing the work on-site, he configured the 20-by-20-foot composition by arranging branches and blossoms on his parents' front lawn, where he'd played soccer as a teenager.

Since then, Wiseman has received a windfall of such dream commissions: a variation on "Cherry Blossom Canopy" appeared in the Carnegie Mansion in New York when his work was included in the 2006 Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum; for a private residence in San Antonio, he created "El Cielo," an abstracted vision of pomegranate trees, clusters of robust fruit and delicately curving limbs in a vaulted neo-Classical setting; for a contemporary apartment in downtown Manhattan, he created a pattern of flowering wisteria vines

and heart-shaped linden leaves that takes root on the first floor and wends in and out of view, clinging to walls and climbing four stories to a skylight, where an owl is perched on the highest branch. Wiseman's voluptuous cascades of lily of the valley, porcelain branches and bell-shaped flowers dangle over mantelpieces and spill across ceilings in Christian Dior stores in Shanghai, Tokyo and New York. And most recently, for a permanent installation at the West Hollywood Library, he created an ornamental hybrid, "Platanus Bibliotechalis," a book-loving subspecies of the local sycamore trees, trained into a towering free-form arbor rising over 60 feet in the building's vast, sky-lighted central staircase.

Wiseman used to work out of a rented metal shop and a porcelain studio set up in his parents' garage, where, in addition to making the hundreds of elements required for each new installation, he made a variety of individual objects — porcelain vases, bronze twigs, mixed-media chandeliers that bring to mind gigantic charm bracelets — and a collection of faceted crystal vases and whiskey tumblers, inspired by glacier formations, for the Prague-based company Artel. But, he says, "when you're working with such diverse materials as porcelain, ceramics and metal, it really requires separate areas. When I got the San Antonio commission, I made the jump to a much larger studio."

Wiseman now works in a free-standing industrial building, a former sewing factory with an outside work yard, in Glassell Park, north of downtown Los Angeles. Gearing up for his first solo exhibition, which opens on Nov. 13 at R 20th Century gallery in New York, he has produced an enormous body of new work. On the day I visited the studio in July, a chorus line of rejected porcelain owls was stashed out of reach on a high shelf. Ceramic vases were being sanded, and a light dust filled the air. In one corner stood a small enameling kiln, inherited from his grandmother, along with heirloom jars of glazes featuring her handwritten labels and nylon lids cut from stockings. Cast bronze interpretations of botanical specimens — pomegranates split open, camellia buds, quince blossoms — were spread out across tables. The yard was set



Branching out
Above: Wiseman in his studio in Los Angeles.

up for metal work, and a "collage table," with a lattice-work base featuring a collection of Wiseman's objects — an owl, flowers and leaves — was being assembled. His faceted vase, a stout ceramic pot festooned with a honeycomb surface, has been reimagined in bronze and has swelled to three feet in height and girth.

For an individual designer, there is a surprisingly collaborative aspect to Wiseman's process. In preparation for a given commission, Wiseman interviews the clients, listening to their histories and taking in their environments. In San Antonio, while touring the local missions with the homeowners, they noticed how pomegranates appeared as a decorative motif, recurring frequently in plaster and adobe ornamental flourishes. Brought to the New World by the Spanish padres, the pomegranate is a curious and beautiful fruit, an ancient symbol of birth and eternal life. Through such subtle inquiries, information begins to take shape visually and generate forms. "But first and foremost," Wiseman says, "I'm interested in material explorations and how I can advance my imagined world of drawings and ornamentation into a space." No matter what



WISEMAN'S INSTALLATIONS ARE IN CHRISTIAN DIOR SHOPS IN SHANGHAI, TOKYO AND NEW YORK. NOT BAD FOR A KID WHO WAS WORKING OUT OF HIS PARENTS' GARAGE.

his medium, he continually asks the material what it would like to be, echoing words from the architect Louis Kahn's memorable 1971 lecture. "When you want to give something presence, you have to consult nature. And there is where design comes in," Kahn declared. "If you think of Brick, for instance, you say to Brick, 'What do you want, Brick?' And Brick says to you, 'I like an arch.' ... It's important, you see, that you honor the material that you use." Kahn's dictum, Wiseman confesses with a sweet, conspiratorial smile, is constantly simmering on the back burner of his imagination.

Back at the house on Hudson Avenue, the one with "Cherry Blossom Canopy," Wiseman is seated comfortably at a round mahogany table, its surface bare save for a few glasses of chilled rosé beading against the polished wood. The room is quiet but the mood is celebratory, if a bit nostalgic: his show had shipped to New York, and the house has recently been sold. The new owners have agreed to a proviso: if they plan to remove or alter the ceiling, Wiseman and his gallery must be contacted to deinstall it and take possession of the work. "There's this fantastic John Adams quote," Wiseman says. "I know I'll probably get it wrong, but he was so zealous about the revolution and building a new society. He said that he had to study politics and war to make the revolution so his sons would be able to study history, philosophy and mathematics in order to give the next generation the right to study painting, music, architecture, writing and porcelain. He had an idea that this was the natural progression of occupations, of aspirations. Isn't it an honor to live in this day and age and be able to do this work?" ■

Natural selection

Clockwise from top: Wiseman's installation in San Antonio; a bronze vessel; components of an installation in progress; a porcelain pomegranate.





PAST PERFECT

IN HIS NEW EAST VILLAGE PAD, JOHN DERIAN LEAVES WELL ENOUGH ALONE

Fall Design The artist NICK CAVE and a few thousand of his favorite things; A ONE-MAN MUSEUM in Paris; ORHAN PAMUK'S object fixation; THE SELBY rings the dinner bell; apartment envy in Copenhagen; PLUS Diane Keaton, DAVID WISEMAN, Scholten & Baijings, OKI SATO, Valeria Napoleone and LAUREN CORNELL.