

Art house...

By Paul Jablow
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Eric Mencher / Staff Photographer

Objects by the thousands: That's the decor principle for this Fitley Square couple. They find art, they create it, they display it, and "it's never too much."

For their neighbors in Fitley Square, the Philadelphia Open Studio Tour every fall offers the best shot at seeing what goes on inside Burnell Yow and Betsy Alexander's place.

Oh, there are some hints in the other seasons. The glass eyeball wedged into the flowering cherry tree in front of the three-story whitewashed brick building on Naudain Street. The two tiny doll's legs protruding from the ground near the tree.

Or the ramshackle sculpture of wooden chair parts on the front door, the slats engraved with sayings by creative geniuses from Thomas Edison and Andre Malraux to Oscar Wilde and Philadelphia's own wildly eccentric mosaic muralist, Isaiah Zagar. Not necessarily in that order.

Perhaps the broadest hint, though, is a saying painted on one slat from Neil Benson, photographer and guru of the Dumpster Divers, a group of Yow's fellow artists that works with found objects: "Trash is simply a failure of the imagination."

"People always say, 'We've always wondered what goes on in there,'" says Yow, a

slight, bearded man who wears sunglasses indoors and an exclamation point after his last name (Yow!).

What "goes on" is a house inseparable from its occupants, who are, in turn, inseparable from each other.

Yow is an artist who also writes music. Alexander is a musician and music teacher who paints and collects art. The house contains their living quarters and studios and is filled floor to ceiling with thousands

of artworks and objects they have collected: some by them, some from their friends or by fellow artists, more that they found in flea markets or that were given to them. Or even just left outside.

There are also six cats named after artists, including Nora, the piano-playing cat on YouTube who is more famous than her owners. "Nora" is for the British surrealist painter Leonora Carrington, and if you want to know more or hear the cat play, go online. This story isn't about her, although she thinks it is.



Yow, 57, and Alexander, 52, bought the place in 1999 after what seemed, at least to Yow, like an endless search. Alexander had a list of 10 requirements that included a buzzer on the front door and a half-bathroom off the music studio, so her students wouldn't have to traipse all through the house looking for it.

The modest size was an asset for both of them.

"We love to be surrounded by art," Yow

says. "It's never too much for us. I just like to fill things up."

"I can go into a modern house with Scandinavian furniture and be blown away by it," says Alexander, who is known as "E.A." to her students and in the theater world, where she has written many musicals. "It's just that I couldn't live in it."

"In the suburbs, you can have one purpose for every room," she says. "This is the city. You need rooms that serve multiple functions."

All flat spaces and almost all the wall and ceiling spaces are filled, but the couple are still conscious of the overall effect of every piece, rather like feng shui on steroids.

"You can't handle one bit of chaos in this place," Alexander says. "Whenever I buy anything new, it's really weird. Like, 'Where is there a place for this?' But there always is."

They say they can find almost any object quickly and notice immediately if anything has been moved.



The house is called "Ravenswing" (more on that soon). The tour starts on the first floor with a small room containing an afghan-covered couch and glass objects on shelves and in breakfronts that serves as Alexander's student waiting room and her yoga and meditation room. She has collected

glass since she was a child in Altoona.

Yow's studio is on the other side of the narrow stairwell, reached by walking through a small grotto where he has embedded objects in grout - Scrabble pieces and religious figurines and a trophy Alexander's father won for selling work shoes, to name a few.



The place is packed without seeming jumbled, with work tables, a mural-sized group of 52 collages - one for every week of the year - and Yow's signature line of "Dolls of the Apocalypse." These are Barbies twisted and oxidized almost beyond recognition, which Yow describes - without seeming grim at all - as "the toys of the last children on Earth."



The second floor is the music room, airy and light-filled, with two pianos and handsome wood cabinets for Alexander's materials, including sheet music and instru-

ments for her students to use.

The kitchen is small, neat and rarely used, with no dining room table. They usually eat out.



The third floor is their bedroom, reached by a ladder-style wood staircase that also serves as extra seating for Alexander's recitals. The bed is flanked by Yow's favorite chair, covered with a sheepskin afghan, and a cedar chest he had as a boy growing up in rural Michigan.

That's where he learned the American Indian legends that the raven and the crow are the link between the material and spiritual worlds. On the mantel is Adrian Arleo's *The Raven Woman*, her hands and arms morphing into the raven she grasps, a nest in her lap. Nearby, Alexander's jewelry is draped over a female figurine.

The third floor also contains the couple's computer room, the only cluttered space in the house, perhaps because it has less art and is the cats' home base.

The couple met in 1993 with briefly exchanged shy glances at Zeke's Deli on Fifth Street.

"I kept thinking, 'Be cool. Don't get food in your beard,'" Yow recalls.

They get testy only when hanging pictures. She's meticulous, he isn't. He makes her

a lovely found-object art valentine every year.

"We don't have any children," Yow says, "so when we go, someone's going to make a lot of money on eBay."

Alexander has already chosen her own vehicle of departure: cremation with her ashes embedded in a glass paperweight.

"I'm very excited about it," she says.

For more info: <http://ravenswingstudio.com>

The photograph below is by Burnell Yow!, and was not included in the original article.

