Rodman Primack Designs an “Ungallery” for Art Advisor Lisa Schiff

Part office, meeting room, exhibition space, and hangout, Schiff’s new HQ is a different type of art venue—just don’t call it a gallery

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Photography by Max Burkhalter
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To make it as an adviser in today’s griddle-hot art market, you need a mix of skills that lie somewhere on a spectrum of sherpa, psychic, and psychotherapist. For veteran New York art specialist Lisa Schiff, that sometimes entails throwing out the playbook. Last year, for example, Schiff peered into a vacant storefront in a historic cast-iron building and signed a 10-year lease within 24 hours. “I had a hankering for a ground-floor space,” she recalls. “It was a gut feeling.”

In her mind’s eye, the space, located in Manhattan’s Tribeca neighborhood, would not only become the home base for her business, Schiff Fine Art Advisory (SFA), but also offer a mix of sustainably sourced goods, artwork on consignment, and a rotating slate of exhibitions. “I wanted to capitalize on walk-ins,” says Schiff, who, before starting her consultancy in 2002, worked at Phillips, the auction house, and Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art. But she also wanted to distinguish herself from a typical gallery, which represents artists. Rather, she posited, “There is great inventory sitting in storage, and I thought, why not give it a new life?”

In the art-consulting universe—where most of the action is conducted on the fly between galleries, auctions,
and fairs—such a move is virtually unheard of. The art-world press caught wind of Schiff’s plan (“I posted on Instagram,” she admits) and the pressure was on.

A view of the storefront. The window allows for a rotating selection of art curated by Neville Wakefield.  Photo by Max Burkhalter

Schiff quickly phoned her longtime friend Rodman Primack. “We come from the same generation of art-world kids that are no longer kids,” explains the AD100 designer, who, in addition to his design practice RP Miller, has done stints at Gagosian, Phillips, and Design Miami. “She said, ‘Okay, I am doing something crazy—I’m going to open a storefront space. Can we go look at it together?’”

Primack obliged, but upon first glance, it was clear that for the type of Swiss-Army-knife space Schiff envisioned, the job was going to be complex. For one thing, despite being a historic 19th-century building, inside “there was not a single attractive detail,” the designer says. “The ceiling was different heights, like people had continually intervened.” The other issue was that the deep, open ground-floor space offered few discreet areas—a concern for private clients viewing valuable works. “I wanted to actually create some privacy and a little bit of intimacy,” Primack says.
Almost exactly a year later, the new SFA headquarters has been reborn as a bohemian-chic respite—more living room than office, more hangout than gallery. Incorporating a spectrum of rich hues, heaps of texture, and artisan touches, Primack has designed a setting where both clients and contemporary art can feel right at home.

The space is full of eye-catching moments: a canary-yellow Triscuit-textured chair designed by Thomas Barger in a small reception area, a massive floor-to-ceiling bookshelf at the storefront's back, a delightfully wacky lamp by Katie Stout composed of
two nude female figures, one hoisting the other up like a pair of exhibitionist figure skaters.

A vignette in the entryway features a table by Jonathan Muecke, artworks by Richard Prince, and a chair, made from paper pulp, by Thomas Barger. Photo by Max Burkhalter

The new SFA space is chock-full of design pieces, such as this whimsical lamp by Katie Stout, and these specially commissioned mirrors from sisters Annette and Phoebe Stephens. Photo by Max Burkhalter

In the midst of such a creative feast, it takes a few beats to realize that the space’s main elements are doused in a deep blue, including the floors, the shelving, and a low-slung banquette that snakes along the storefront’s west edge. Though Schiff gave Primack relatively free artistic rein over the place, she initially balked at the use of color, she says: “I was like, are you kidding me? That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard.” But Primack won her over. “We wanted to prove that it could be as much of a neutral as gray,” he says. (It was a prophetic choice: The color became Pantone’s pick for 2020.)

Just as color becomes a neutral here, pattern functions as a solid. This is especially evident in the lounge-like meeting area. The custom banquette, upholstered in a diamond-patterned fabric from Peter Dunham Textiles, is topped with a ledge made from a colorful resin terrazzo by Max Lamb (a material Primack has used with gusto in his own New York residence) and is strewn with a rainbow of cushions in solids, ikats, and florals. “One of the benefits of this space is that a lot of Lisa’s clients are
working with art in a domestic landscape, so this allows the artworks to look how they will look at home.” Indeed, one consigned work—a monumental painting by Ugo Rondinone rendered entirely in smoky strokes of India ink—feels even more poignant when viewed up-close-and-personal from Schiff’s couch.

A woven tray alongside the banquette holds some of Schiff’s whimsical trinkets. Photo by Max Burkhalter

Apart from artworks, Schiff’s office is filled with kicky personal flourishes. A towering bookshelf, complete with its own ladder, is filled with volumes she has been collecting since she was a teen, as well as design-minded bric-a-brac like Haas Brothers critters, miniature Shio Kusaka dinosaurs, and ombre-effect Alex Israel sculptures. On side tables, hand-thrown ceramic bowls are stuffed with bright Guatemalan trim and ribbons. Even an adjacent lamp has been accessorized, draped with beaded necklaces as if it were an abstract neck. (“It’s something that my husband started doing to our lamps at home,” Primack says.)
“I try to figure out how things can be nourishing,” says Primack. That means sourcing vintage pieces like these Axel Hjorth chairs, and the work of artisans, including this lavastone table base made in Guatemala by Agnes Studio.

In less skillful hands, this might all feel frenetic, but the scheme is perfectly balanced with natural and handmade elements that serve as a visual chaser to the kaleidoscopic objects and textiles. The conference table, illuminated by an Isamu Noguchi lantern, features a lavastone base designed by Guatemalan firm Agnes Studio and is surrounded by simple wood chairs by Swedish architect and designer Axel Hjorth. A living wall by Gennaro Brooks-Church—a requirement for Miami-born Schiff—sprouts ferns, mosses, and orchids.

“I try to figure out how things can be nourishing—not only to the client but to my practice,” Primack reflects. “So that means buying something vintage or commissioning something from a designer that you’re going to keep for 30 years, not for five years. You bring that thing into your life, and with it thoughtfulness and beauty.”
Primack was also careful to offer Schiff the flexibility she wanted. There are traditional administrative and storage spaces, both tucked behind the bookshelf, as well as on the basement level (where the blue theme continues, save for a bathroom clad in an 8-bit pattern of Heath Ceramics tiles in shades of gray, tangerine, celadon, and crimson). Upstairs, a panel mounted on two brass columns floats behind the storefront window and creates an ad hoc exhibition display programmed by noted curator Neville Wakefield.

“If you use it in a wabi-sabi way, pattern can act like a solid,” says Primack. Case in point: this custom banquette.
A retail portion displays eco-friendly sunglasses (a collaboration between Schiff’s environmental initiative, One All Every, and RVS Eyewear), jewelry, handbags from sisters Annette and Phoebe Stephens, and colorful candlesticks from Mexican designer Fabien Cappello. In fact, virtually everything in the revamped space is for sale. “The Richard Princes, the rug—if people wanted to come and buy any of it, I would be okay with that,” Schiff says. “Someone referred to us as an ‘ungallery’.”

Ultimately, Schiff wants a place where passersby can simply stop by and appreciate art. “It was so good to work with someone who can create that,” she reflects on her work with Primack. “I know what I like, but I don’t have that spatial depth that a designer has. It slightly irritates me.”

But, she points out, “I can build a great collection.”