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Making Things Work in Greenpoint
Artist Austin Lee's quirky, happy home.

By Wendy Goodman



I wasn't looking for anything specific — or anything," says artist Austin Lee of this 1899 house he bought three years ago in Greenpoint after a brief stint living in a rather boring new condo, and he has been tinkering with it ever since. "I think that is the kind of vibe of the house: making things work."

Lee is a native of Las Vegas and spent his 20s in Philadelphia. He got his M.F.A. at Yale in 2013 and started working with gallerist Jeffrey Deitch five years later. He spent a decade renting a house in Long Island City similar to this one, along with a separate studio. But after a six-month stint in Berlin, he gave up that place. And condo life wasn't for him.

When you walk into the Brooklyn house, you are dazzled by walls of bright color, along with his own paintings and sculptures and those of his friends, including Jordan Casteel and Peter Schuyff, and surprised by the staid furniture mixed in — his dining table and chairs are oddly normal. With the help of contractor Nick Leone ("Amazing guy who has worked with a lot of artists in the past, so he totally understood some of the unusual ways I was thinking about everything"), he turned the basement into his studio. It was Leone who gave Lee the not-unusual dining table. "I'm usually into strange objects," Lee says, "but this one is classic and timeless and

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works with everything else really well, too.”

A large canvas of Lee’s interpretation of Matisse’s 1910 painting *Dance* faces the dining table and opposite wall. “I first made a little sculpture based on the *Dance* painting and then the painting came after,” Lee says. “It’s nice to live with artwork you love, so I’ll sometimes make a copy of something if it’s not possible to have the original. It also helps me understand the work better.” An original work he does own is one of Jordan Casteel’s paintings — actually two, if you count a work he gave Casteel and that she then gave back, having painted over it. There is also a tiny sculpture on the wall of a falling figure that Lee made as a self-portrait based on a drawing by Marc Chagall.

In the kitchen, Lee made the wood counters, and he says that although they are not perfect, “it makes it a little more special but also less precious.” The metal table is from a restaurant-supply store. “My brother is a chef and used to work at a nice restaurant called *Wallflower* in the West Village. It’s closed now, but I loved that place. It was super-small, and the kitchen was really tiny — barely enough room for two people in it. When I would see him cook there, I realized everything was within arm’s length for him and thought that is kind of a nice idea to try for. I kept that thinking in mind when I set up everything in the kitchen. Trying to make it so everything is next to you so it’s all within reach.”

He made the mosaic over the stove. “I found a bunch of old tiles in the back- yard when I moved in and was cleaning up the yard,” Lee says. “They were all covered in dirt and kind of buried in the ground. It seemed crazy to throw them away, so I cleaned them all up and decided to use them to make a mosaic tile on the wall.” He taught himself how to do it from YouTube. “It was way easier than I was expecting, actually, and super-fun. Hoping to do more in different areas of the house eventually.”

His main gallerist, Jeffrey Deitch, tells me that “there is an entire Austin Lee vocabulary that you instantly, whether it is a sculpture, a painting, or a kinetic piece, know it’s him,” pointing out how he works in digital, airbrush, and 3-D printing, among other contemporary mediums, and experiments with motion- capture technology and virtual reality. “I also appreciate the exuberance and optimism of the work.”

“I think sometimes I will unconsciously paint things that I want or am lacking in my life,” Lee says. “So happy paintings are sometimes more about the desire of happiness rather than the actual direct reflection of my day-to-day.”

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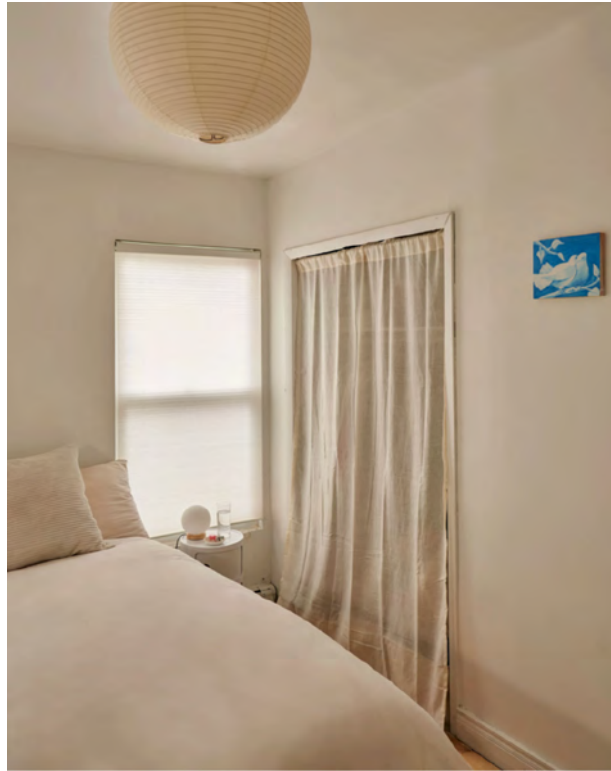


The Pink Wall (Dining Area): *“This was the first painting I made in grad school. It’s called *Back on the Saddle Again*,” Lee says. The stools are his design. “I call them stumps. They’re a cross between a seat and a stool. I made them in virtual reality, so it’s a special crossover between my digital world and physical. A design firm called Case Studyo produced them for me.”*



The Art Studio: *Lee in his basement workspace. The boxers on the left are part of a painting- and-video installation now in South Korea. “I have been using the computer to make my paintings for a while,” Lee explains, “and have recently been using motion capture to capture realistic body language.” The blue painting on the right is called *Me and My Dad*.*

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The Bedroom: Lee removed all the doors in the house to make it feel more open. But “it turns out it’s nice to have some doors, actually, to hide a messy closet.” So he turned sheets into a curtain. The painting is by Dena Winter.



The Art Wall (Dining Room): From left: a green and orange grid painting by Peter Schuyff, a picture of a small head that was a collaboration with Jordan Casteel, two wall sculptures by Lee, a white horse head by Ambera Wellmann, a small painting of a pill bottle by Casteel, a head with an X on the cheek by Nina Chanel Abney, and an abstract painting by Lou Fratino below.