

# Have We Been Here Before?

A new book welcomes us back to Suzanne Rheinstein's perfect

Montecito house, a case study in the way California was meant to be.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PIETER ESTERSOHN



The living room at Suzanne Rheinstein's Montecito home balances monochromatic tones with contemporary art and good antiques of generous scale.





Richard Bories and James Shearron reimaged the hacienda style often found in the region in Modernist form.

“Go Rolex or go Timex. It’s the middle of the road that’s the kiss of death.”

*You might call Suzanne Rheinstein’s Montecito retreat, designed in a very sure 1940s style with architecture firm Bories & Shearron, the most exciting California house never built—until now. It feels as though it should have always been here, perhaps lived in by Carole Lombard and photographed by Margaret Bourke-White, but this is an illusion. The reality is this style is a lost art, and houses like this are very hard to make today.*

*The architecture picks up where architects like Wallace Neff left off—not Modernism, but an abstraction of regional hacienda stucco and tile roofs that somehow ends up being modern. There is great discipline but also great risk-taking (look at those raking chimneys), with a thread of Georgia O’Keeffe’s New Mexico taste throughout. The result is enchanting, strict, stark, sensual, sculptural, and—most of all—surprising.*

*My first visit was a pilgrimage to what I knew would be a perfectly executed trifecta of architecture, decoration, and landscape. (The garden, by Nancy Goslee Power, is a very important component of this story.) I left feeling I had seen that, and also something more: the work of a decorator exceeding everyone’s perception of her abilities. Suzanne always makes beautiful rooms, and she is known through her books and her own house in Hancock Park as the most gracious and sure-footed “classical” decorator in the west, but the Montecito house is more than pretty. In its singular success at adding a chapter to a style very few people can conjure, it is important. It is OG.*

*This house has already been beautifully presented in print, but when something is this perfect we feel it needs to be looked at and celebrated again. Suzanne’s latest book, A Welcoming Elegance, published this month by Rizzoli, includes a chapter on the Montecito project, excerpted here, along with the stunning new photography by Pieter Estersohn seen in these pages. David Netto*

Rheinstein had long been hoping to find a house in the area, but the desire became even more intense after an accident in the fall of 2015 shattered her foot and elbow and left her immobile for months. “I was in the hospital, coming out of surgery, when I saw photographs of the place, and a floor plan,” she says. “The house hit the market on a Friday, and that Sunday I put in a bid without even seeing it.” ➡➡



JASON RICK (EXTERIOR)

Whether Rheinstein is alone or with her granddaughters, this room’s “Princess and the Pea” bed is an ideal spot for enjoying the view of the Santa Ynez Mountains.



A wrought iron chaise from the 1930s nestles in the lush garden designed by Nancy Goslee Power.

An antique folk-painted French cupboard plays well with the freestanding Laufen tub in Rheinstein’s spacious bathroom.





What attracted her was neither the design of the house, which had been built circa 1971, nor its condition, which she frankly describes as “in pretty horrible shape,” but the property itself, and the setting. “The place has fantastic views of the Santa Ynez Mountains. It was sad and overgrown, but there was a huge back yard with a circular pool—perfect for senior synchronized swimming,” she jokes.

For help, she turned to the team of Richard Bories and James Shearron, whose work she admired and who had worked with her daughter Kate. Bories and Shearron retained the footprint of the house but totally transformed its look, managing to find within its 1970s Fire Island aesthetic the ghost of a more appropriate form, one that echoed the early Spanish vernacular intrinsic to Montecito. Now the pale, stucco-clad forms seem to hug the landscape, as clean-lined and strong as a modernist sculpture.

Because this was a personal project, Rheinstein could adapt the interior to her desires and needs, ignoring convention. So there is no dining room. “One thing I knew for sure about this house is that I wouldn’t be giving any formal dinners,” she says with a laugh. But there is an expansive flower arranging room off the garden. What had been the guestroom became her primary bedroom. “So now I can lie in bed and see the mountains.” The kitchen chairs are all on wheels because her three granddaughters love to scoot around on them.

The living room contains her signature mix of eras and origins, with boldly sculptural Portuguese furniture mixing with antique Italian mirrors, African spears, Etruscan wine vessels, plush, pale upholstery, and art by Lucio Fontana and works on paper by Pablo Picasso. The den is fitted out with a custom banquette perfect for lounging on and the first television she has ever mounted over the fireplace. “It’s where I spend time alone in the winter,” she says. She considers the room her “cabinet of curiosities,” with Giorgio Morandi prints, Japanese brush pots, and architectural fragments from India.

What had been the dining room became the reading room, centered on a raised mattress she calls her “Princess and the Pea bed,” where she loves to sprawl with her granddaughters, who share her love of



The primary bedroom, flooded with sunlight from the garden, contains painted European furniture and a spartan yet feminine palette.



reading. The wall over the fireplace is adorned with plates from Robert Kime—faded, mottled, and encrusted after having spent a century or more under the ocean after the ship that was transporting them sank.

Each detail is considered, with color and texture as important as shape. The monochromatic plaster walls are the color of the palest sand, and it seems to change throughout the day as the sun moves across the sky, behind and out from clouds. The furnishings and objects all stand out strongly against the simple planes and barely-there color. That prominence justified her in indulging in hand-cast brass hardware and iron latches from van Cronenburg, a foundry in Ghent. Though she is no snob (she happily incorporated light fixtures from Pottery Barn and accessories from RH), “I always say, go Rolex or go Timex. It’s the middle of the road that’s the kiss of death.”

As with all her projects, the outside was as important as any of the rooms within, so Rheinstein enlisted the help of her old friend Nancy Goslee Power, a renowned garden designer based in Santa Monica. The circular pool was replaced with an elegant rectangular lap pool set off with, on one side, yellow-painted wicker lounge chairs on an expanse of gravel, and lush perennial beds enclosed by a hedge of Japanese blueberry on the other. Every room opens to the outdoors. A pergola topped by a screen of bamboo softens the abundant sunlight, with an outdoor fireplace and custom banquette at one end on which Rheinstein spends many evenings.

William Morris famously said, “Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.” Rheinstein’s house in Montecito is such a success because here each item fits both criteria. Like a Matisse cutout or a late Joan Mitchell drawing, the place stands as a distillation of her art, evidence of her hard-won knowledge of who she is, what she loves, and how she wants to live. It is a very personal work by a master who had nothing to prove, no one to please but herself, and only the joy of her creativity to express.

*Reprinted from A Welcoming Elegance by Suzanne Rheinstein, written by Michael Boodro, Rizzoli 2023. Photography by Pieter Estersohn.*



An outdoor fireplace comes in handy on crisp California evenings.



Meals are always elegant, even by day in the kitchen.