



Jonathan Adler

THE MAKING OF A (NEW) MODERN MASTER

By Matt Singer

Ceramist, decorator, merchant and style guru Jonathan Adler holds a singular position in the ongoing evolution of modern design. Unlike contemporaries such as Karim Rashid, his creations make overt reference to those of earlier designers, particularly late-modernist practitioners of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Adler views Modernism as a vocabulary, one that, like that of any language, can convey beauty, instruction, history, humor and even pathos. As individual elements, the colors, shapes and textures of his pottery might seem familiar, but together they constitute work that is *sui generis*, neither reproduction nor homage.

Adler achieves this through a unique sensibility that blurs the boundaries between art and kitsch, craft and commodity, irony and seriousness, and conventional notions of good and bad taste. Although he demurs from calling himself an artist or designer (he'll acquiesce, instead, to the more humble term of potter — or even merchant), it is precisely the qualities associated with such disciplines — exceptional sensitivity and ability to manipulate materials, proportion, color and composition — that enable him to transcend his stew of influences and intentions and produce something new, distinctive and meaningful.

Adler is, first and foremost, a potter. His professional career in ceramics was launched in 1994 with a single order from Bameys, the trendsetting New York retailer. Adler presented his debut line — a dozen curvaceous, biomorphic shapes redolent of Modernism's

more organic currents (especially Scandinavian and Italian glass), enlivened with undulating Op Art stripes in Pop Art palettes — to the store's buyers on the floor of his Chelsea walk-up.

Today, little more than a decade later, Adler heads a burgeoning empire that includes more than two dozen lines of handmade pottery, approximately 200 models in all. They are sold through his eponymously named stores in New York City (on Greene Street in SoHo and on Madison Avenue), East Hampton, Los Angeles, Miami Beach and San Francisco, as well as other independent shops and galleries across North America, Europe, Japan, New Zealand and Australia. His products are also available via catalogue or Adler's website. His offerings have gone beyond pottery to include a newly expanded collection of furniture, handbags and a line of licensed designs called "Happy Home," which includes lower priced, machine-made ceramic dinnerware and accessories, bath products, table and bed linens and stationery.

Is Jonathan Adler the Horatio Alger of today's design world? If so, his clay-to-riches story began, fittingly, in what he describes as a "farm town": Bridgeton, in southern New Jersey. But Adler's semirural childhood had a distinctly modern twist. His parents, Cynthia and the late Harry Adler, both lawyers, provided Jonathan, born in 1966, and his older brother and sister with a 1970s childhood filled with intellectual and visual stimulation

Above *Birds*, Menagerie Collection. Introduced in 2003. High-fired stoneware with matte glaze. Made in Peru.

Opposite Jonathan Adler has turned the world of ceramics upside-down. He is shown here with his *Giant Anemone* vase, top, and *Giant Weight* vase, bottom, introduced in 2001.



and experimentation. Adler *père* was an artist by avocation. He and Adler's mother joined together in shaping a "groovy" (a signature Adler descriptive) modern home — "lots of Knoll furniture and very, very white but with bursts of exuberant color via Marimekko fabrics" — in the south Jersey wilds.

Adler's emerging sensibility was nurtured by his parents. "My dad was sort of a rigorous modernist and my mom was a bit more loopy in her aesthetic," he says. "I would like to think that I'm a perfect fusion of their spirits." Adler made his debut at the potter's wheel at summer camp in 1978, and his parents celebrated his bar mitzvah by answering his fervent wish for his own wheel and kiln.

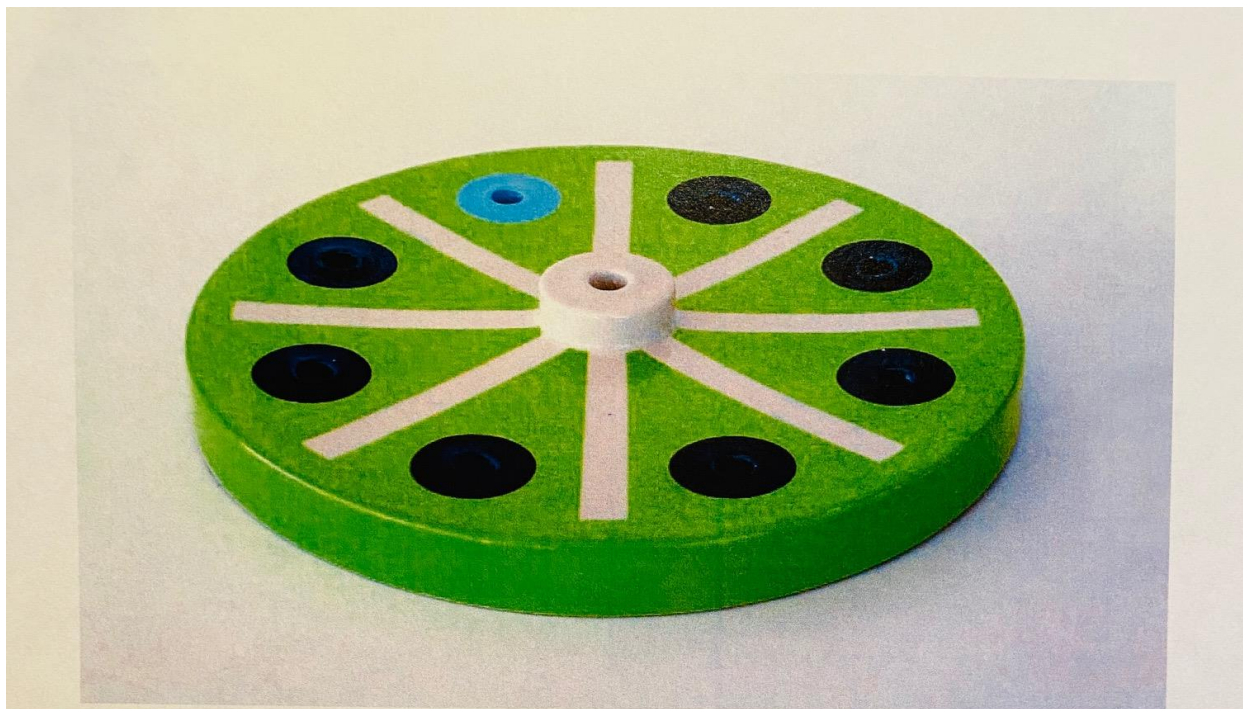
While rejecting the taste of one's parents is a rite of passage for many, Adler remains inspired by the colors, shapes and textures that enthralled him as a child. He took his confident sense of self and style — along with a growing interest in fashion, music and other aspects of popular culture — to Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, where he "allegedly studied semiotics and art history but actually spent all of his time at the [nearby] Rhode Island School of Design making pots" (as noted in the biography he includes in his catalogues).

Adler's time at RISD, however, was not without contretemps. Highlights of his tenure include exploding a kiln and designing a Chanel-inspired pottery group — complete with quilting, pearl-like beading and interlocking Cs — deemed a definitive failure by his instructor. Although this appraisal dissuaded him, albeit briefly, from a career in ceramics, the work that provoked it foreshadows Adler's professional sensibility: unabashedly stylish, humorous, retro-inspired, fashion-informed, sometimes campy and often at odds with the more earthy, and earth-toned, aspects of studio pottery.

Left Billy Watertower vase, Pop Collection. Introduced in 1993. High-fired stoneware with high-gloss glaze. Made in Peru.

Below Pop canisters. Introduced in 2002. High-fired stoneware with high-gloss glaze. Made in Peru.





Above Pop menorah, 1993.

As a visually astute and pop-culture savvy Generation Xer who came of age late in the media-saturated 20th century, it is not surprising that Adler began his professional life in the entertainment business, working for a talent agency. His three years in talent were such a trial, however, that he vowed never again to take a normal job, and returned to ceramics, spending 1993 throwing pots. This group of pottery coalesced into the Pop-inspired collection — with decanters and vases named after the master and denizens of Andy Warhol's Factory — that caught the eye of Barneys, as well as designers Todd Oldham and Aero Studios and others in the overlapping worlds of interior design and fashion.

"Even though I made everything by hand," says Adler of his earliest work, "I was very intent on it looking as machine-made as possible," reflecting both his interest in the shapes and surfaces of modern glass and his gentle rebellion against the pointedly handcrafted appearance of much studio pottery. Fortunately, he has the remarkable ability to reproduce his designs by hand (even without molds) with striking uniformity.

From 1994 to 1997, Adler filled every order himself, throwing, painting, glazing and firing thousands of vases, bowls, plates and mugs. He found relief from the day-in-day-out demands of production through Aid to Artisans, a non-profit organization that connects craftspeople in developing countries with American companies in need of their specialized skills and talents. His work with the group led him to a "creative explosion," says Adler; freed from the constant demands of production, he had more time to spend in his studio following

his muse. New pottery groups, as well as woven textiles also produced in Peru and inspired, in part, by that country's native weaving traditions, were featured in Adler's first store, opened in SoHo in 1998. "The gorgeousness of being a retailer is I don't have to think about the expectations of the design or craft worlds," says Adler. "I can just make what I make and put it on the shelves and see what happens."

With his debut as a retailer, Adler began to demonstrate the diversity of approach, paired with a consistent sensibility and vision, for which he has become known. Following fashion's lead, he organized his ceramic production into two categories: "Couture," designs that Adler throws and paints himself, and "Pot-a-Porter," which he designs for production in Peru. Among Adler's early "Couture" offerings were the 1997 *Aortas* — creamy white, matte-glazed ovoids topped with valvelike spouts.

"Pot-a-Porter" includes the "Relief" group, introduced in 1998, which departed significantly from Adler's previous work; its surfaces are decorated with raised repeated patterning rather than painted stripes and dots. "Stripes are one great way to accentuate form," says Adler. "The 'Relief' group expresses the exact same impulse, but in a textural rather than graphic way."

The "Relief" collection was inspired by nature — the pieces have names such as *Tamarind*, *Octopus* and *Seed* — and glazed in muted shades. It evokes mid-20th-century pottery that hip, young urbanites scour flea markets to find, and then display in their apartments in eclectic little clusters. "I wanted to have everything not match perfectly," says Adler, "but work well as a group." The "Relief" pieces also embodied Adler's affection for



Above *Lantern* candlesticks, *Lantern* Collection. Introduced in 1999. High-fired stoneware with matte glaze. Made in Peru.

Opposite *Slide*, *Relief* Collection. Introduced in 1998. High-fired stoneware with matte glaze. Made in Peru.

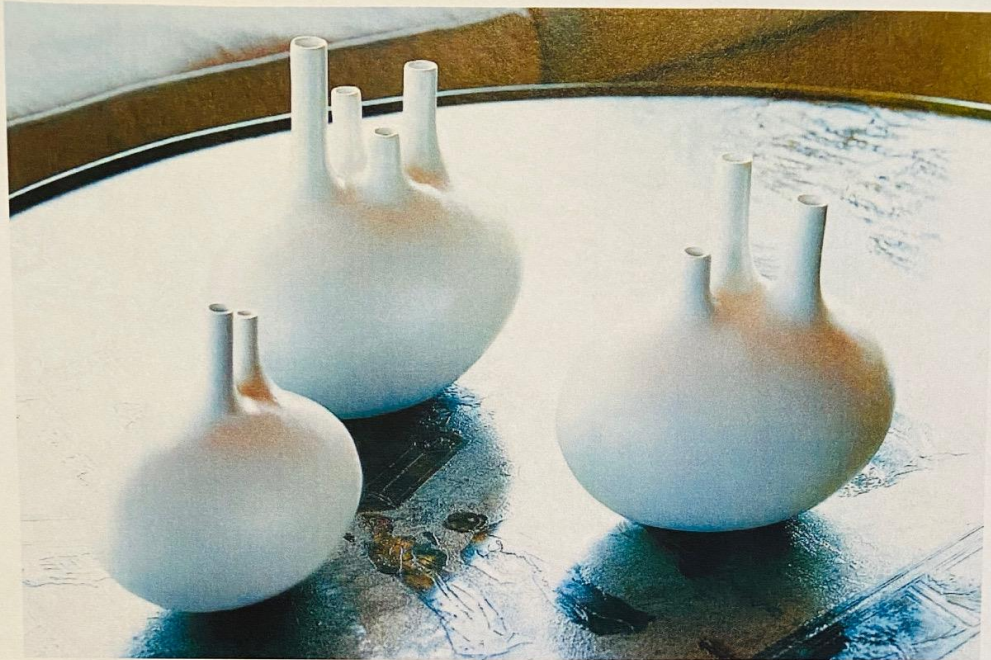
mid-20th-century "brutalist" architecture, which he describes as having an "extruded, concrete-y vibe." The influence of this style — associated with Le Corbusier and which derives its name from *béton brut*, the French term for "raw concrete" — is most overt in Adler's 1998 *Brasília* dinnerware, named for the Brazilian capital city built in the late 1950s.

Brutalism's influence can also be seen in the 1999 "Moko" collection's rounded geometry and its dark gray metallic surfaces marked with chattering (an effect achieved by bouncing a potter's tool on the surface of the clay). The collection also evokes traditional African and other non-Western art and the austere, powerful work of the German-British ceramist Hans

Coper (1920–81), whom Adler reveres, and whose work recalls the substantial but streamlined silhouettes of Cycladic pottery and that of other ancient cultures.

The fluted and scalloped vases of Adler's 1999 "Lantern" collection, which Adler describes as "ceramic skin stretched over an armature like a Japanese paper lantern," are arguably Adler's most direct nod to his design heroes, conjuring George Nelson's iconic *Bubble* lamps.

But while the "Lantern" collection saluted the creative breakthroughs of the mid-20th century, the *Model* bottles, another 1999 debut, wink at the post-hippie stoner culture of the 1970s. Curvaceous and elongated, they evoke the period's



trippy youthful craze for stretched glass Coca-Cola bottles. Adler's *Double-Spouted Wink Wink Vase*, is, by all appearances, a bong. Completing the "Pop" pharmacopeia is a set of canisters labeled "Uppers," "Downers," "Quaaludes" and "Prozac."

Adler went from the psychotropic to the surreal — and from the abstract to the figural — with his 2001 "Muse" collection, in high-fired matte porcelain. A circular vase named for Picasso's early muse, Dora Maar, features a woman's face repeated in the round, conjuring the multiple perspectives of Cubism. A vaguely phallic vase with a jaunty, swooping mustache is titled *Salvador* (as in Dalí), and is paired with the decidedly more feminine *Misia* — a pair of lips on a streamlined bust.

"I was at the breakfast table and, being married to a window dresser, [Barneys' creative director, author and pop-culture commentator Simon Doonan] there was a mannequin head on the table," recalls Adler. "It was sitting next to one of my pots. I thought about the human form and how compelling it is — which is why artists have been addressing it for millennia while I've been making all these codified references to architecture! So I had this eureka moment, and took representational body parts and used them as the geometric patterning that I usually do with graphics or textures."

If high art inspired the "Muse" collection, it was the timeless appeal of the *tchotchke* that spurred another foray into the figurative. A lifelong collector of ceramic animals, Adler's own glossy white "Menagerie" collection of horses, birds, fish, bulls and giraffes suggests Raymor and Royal Copenhagen figurines with a dash of the seminal modernist sculptor Constantin Brancusi.

But Adler's formalist explorations — he says his goal in all things is to achieve a perfect marriage of shape and decoration — took another decidedly architectonic form with the sloping shapes and raised geometric patterning of the 2002 "Quadra" series.

Then, in 2004, he introduced the emphatically tall and tapering *Reform Temple* vases, which feature window- and door-like openings. Adler has often noted the inspiration he found in the suburban synagogues he visited as a young person in the 1970s. In 1998, *The New York Times* quoted him as saying, "I have always been driven by and fantasized about moving into those synagogues. They have such a groovy, brutalist, modern thing going on." This unique source of inspiration was the starting point for "Jonathan Adler, Re:form," an exhibition organized and presented from December 2004 to April 2005 by the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art at the city's historic Congregation Rodeph Shalom. "Re:form," which was Adler's first museum retrospective, paired his pottery with photographer Paul Rocheleau's images of striking modernist synagogues.

Samuel Gruber, a professor of Judaic studies at Syracuse University, architectural historian and author (Rocheleau's photographs were featured in Gruber's book, *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community*, Rizzoli, 2003), notes, "Many of the synagogues built after World War II were designed in a raw Modernism that was in stark contrast to two centuries of highly decorated American synagogue design. The best of these new synagogues featured expressive shapes, dramatic lighting and a rich mix of materials that included old standards, such as wood and brick, and new favorites, especially concrete and steel."



Above *Model* bottles. Introduced in 1999 (platinum glaze introduced in 2002). High-fired porcelain with platinum overglaze. Made in Peru.

Opposite top *Aortas*, introduced in 1997. High-fired porcelain with matte glaze. Hand-thrown by Jonathan Adler.

Opposite bottom Clockwise from top: *Baby* bottles (1999); *Model* bottles (1999); *Essential* vases (2000). All in high-fired porcelain.



"Houses of worship have always been architectural gems, from Renaissance churches to Le Corbusier's Ronchamp," says Adler. "Communities really open their handbags wide to pay for temples, and architects really go for it in an attempt to create a transcendental experience. Reform Jewish and other synagogue architecture of the period embraced organic Modernism as a style and took it to the extreme, with abstract, free-flowing forms and, often, a decorative-patterned overlay. My pottery uses an organic modernist vocabulary with a layer of pattern and decoration."

Adler brings this proclivity for pattern and decoration to interior design as well. Strong-willed architects like Frank Lloyd Wright are (in)famous for designing every last detail of a project, down to the smallest flowerpot. Adler started with the flowerpot and has been expanding outward ever since. "It's no accident that I've become a decorator as well as a potter," he says. "I've always thought about things in a residential context."

With his Peruvian-made textiles — his first foray beyond ceramics — Adler took his initial steps towards realizing complete interiors. His pillows, rugs, throws, table runners and placemats reveal his talents as a colorist: signature combinations of red and brown, blue and brown, pink and orange, and — fondly recalling his Bicentennial-era boyhood — red, white and blue. Abstract, geometric patterns of dots, stripes, paired



Opposite *Reform Temple* vases. Introduced in 2004. High-fired porcelain with clear gloss glaze on textured recesses. Made in Peru.

Right *Cubes* pillow in hand-loomed wool, 2004.

Below *Morrow* settee, 2005, upholstered in orange striated bouclé fabric. Manufactured by Rowe Furniture. The name was inspired by Doris Day's character in the 1959 film *Pillow Talk*.





Above Lobby seating area, Parker Hotel. Palm Springs.

Opposite top Lobby lounge, Parker Hotel.

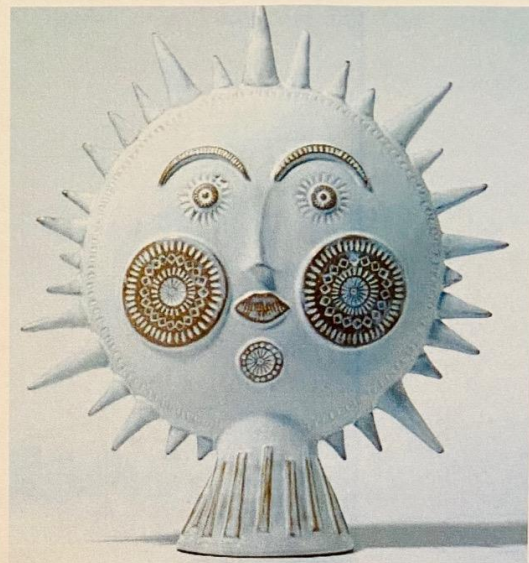
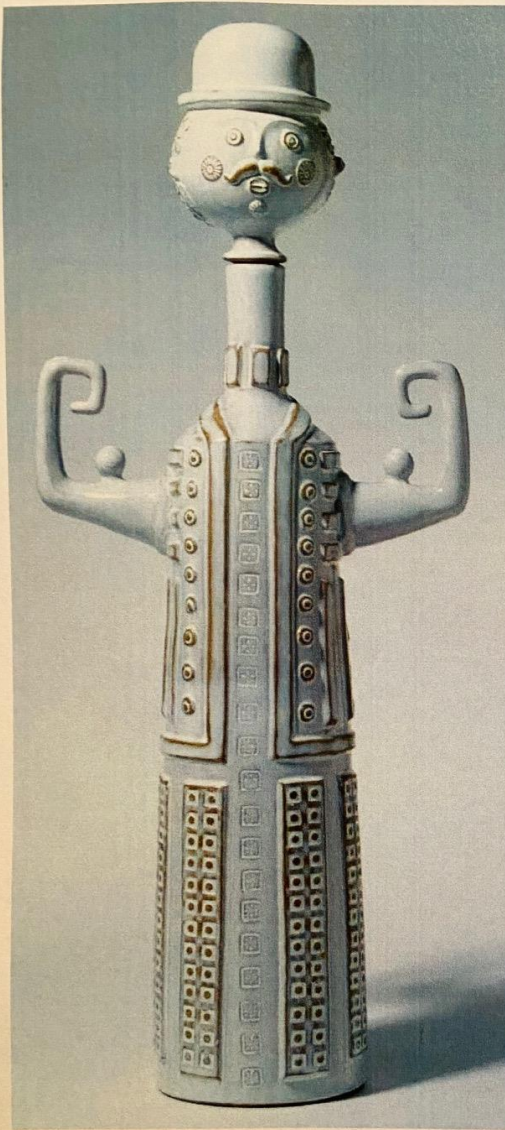
Opposite bottom Lobby entrance, Parker Hotel.

ovals and concentric squares rendered soft and fuzzy in alpaca suggest the mid-20th-century color field paintings of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell. Other pieces graced with single butterflies, hearts, apples, flowers and snails evoke the brightly colored folkloric designs of textile designer Alexander Girard, while testifying to Adler's heartfelt belief in the palliative effects of "infantile, happy emblems."

The textiles were perfect complements to Adler's pottery and important steps toward realizing an all-encompassing domestic style. After introducing a small group of sofas, tables and chairs of his own design in 2002, Adler recently expanded his

upholstered furniture collection and introduced case goods, in partnership with marketer and distributor Rowe Furniture. The tables are in an exaggerated Parsons style, with massive legs, while the upholstered pieces reflect Adler's love for David Hicks's eye-popping sense of color and pattern and the elegantly neoclassical but electrically modern grandeur of what Adler calls "Palm Beach Regency." Adler's take on the once ubiquitous Chinese Chippendale dining chair — most emblematic in lacquer-like acid-green paint and brown corduroy upholstery — has become a favorite of his customers.

Most of Adler's interior design projects have been commis-

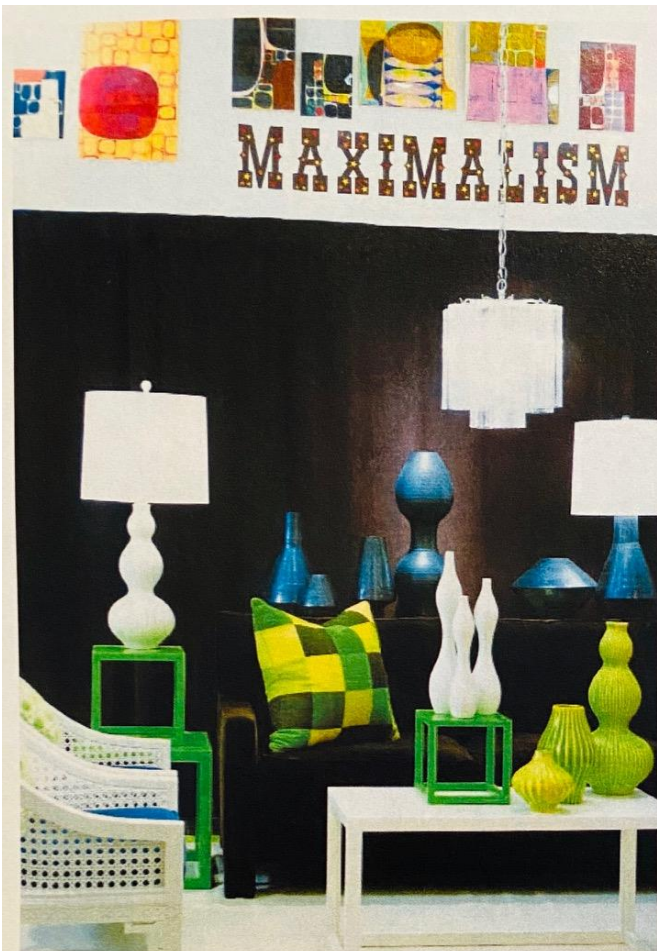


Above, clockwise from left *Man* decanter, Utopia Collection. Introduced in 2004. High-fired stoneware with white glaze. Made in Peru; *Large Sun Face*, Utopia Collection. Introduced in 2004. High-fired stoneware with white glaze. Made in Peru; *Dora Maar*, Muse Collection. Introduced in 2001. High-fired unglazed porcelain. Made in Peru.

sioned by clients who are themselves creative professionals — the photographer Andrea Stern and graphic designer Jane Wagman, among others — who share Adler's sense of humor and appreciation for the late-modern architecture and interior schemes of their 1970s childhoods.

The Parker Palm Springs Hotel presented a different opportunity for Adler: a large-scale, public setting to create a *gesamtkunstwerk* — or, at least, an all-encompassing realization of at least one strand of his creative vision. The Parker is a

sprawling, 13-acre compound that was originally Gene Autry's Melody Ranch and most recently Merv Griffin's Givenchy Resort & Spa. Adam Glick, the Parker's owner, contacted Adler in 2003 after seeing a spread in *The New York Times Magazine* illustrating Stern's Shelter Island home. Adler brought a spare but highly tactile Scandinavian-like aesthetic to the Parker's 131 guestrooms. For the public spaces, he designed an eclectic mix of mid-century-inspired furniture and wall hangings that render heraldiclike emblems in distinctly primitive forms.



Above Jonathan Adler SoHo Store, opened in 1998.

Right Jonathan Adler at the wheel in 1999.

To describe Adler's work, with its heady array of references, inspirations and allusions, many writers (this one included) resort to strings of unlikely adjectives, such as "retro-mod baroque." Adler describes himself as everything from "schizophrenic" and "a shape and silhouette queen" to a "postmodern semiotics freak." He knows that his consciously light-hearted "Happy Chic" philosophy is "probably not appropriate for either craft or design" and the seriousness of purpose with which they are often approached. But he doesn't care. "My greatest hope is that it is embraced by people."

Adler is delighted to share his aesthetic with an ever-broadening audience through his own and licensed lines. The approach is the same for both: "The more idiosyncratic the better." *The Jonathan Adler Book: My Prescription for Anti-Depressive Living* will be published this fall by Regan Books. Adler's self-diagnosis? "The reality of my life is that I have no time to make pots. I need to get myself into the studio." n

Matt Singer is curator of the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art at Congregation Rodeph Shalom and a writer for the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Adler All Over

Jonathan Adler Stores

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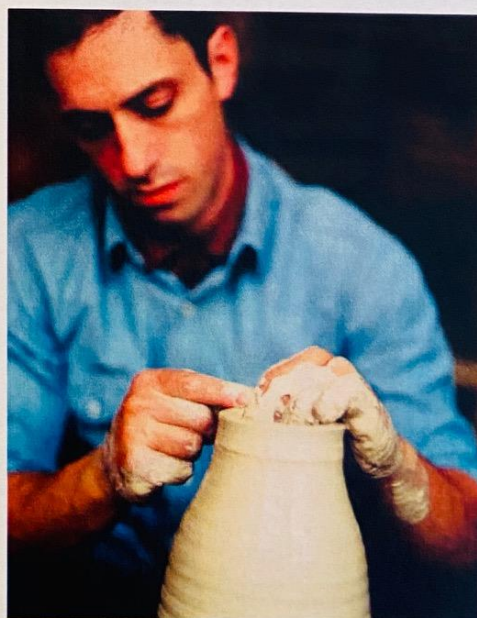


Photo by Jürgen Frank.