

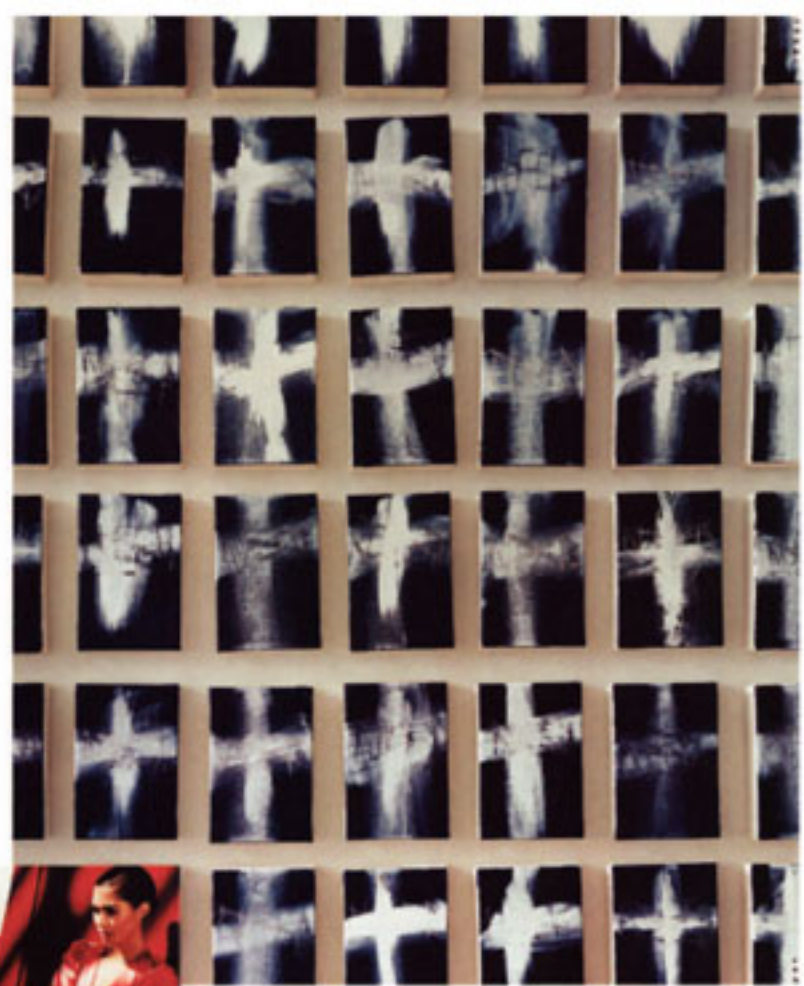
ZEN AND THE ART OF CATHOLICISM

STORY BY ALEX GARINGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTYN THOMPSON

CREATIVE DIRECTOR ANDREW EGAN'S
NEW YORK OFFICE AND APARTMENT
STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN
TWO DISPARATE BUT HARMONIOUS
PHILOSOPHIES



THIS PAGE: EGAN'S NEED, AN ART INSTALLATION COMPOSED OF MORE THAN 40 PAINTED CRISSES, HANGS IN HIS BEDROOM TO COMMEMORATE LINENRY COMPANY SATOR'S 30TH ANNIVERSARY. ECHOLGRAPHEVEN CREATED THE ART OF NATURE, A BEAUTIFUL BOOK RELEASED IN LATE 2007. OPPOSITE: THE WORK OF ARTIST ANDREA BYRNE HOLDS A MAJOR PRESENCE IN BOTH EGAN'S HOME AND HIS DESIGN PROJECTS.



How much office space does a four-person creative direction firm really need?

Okay, let's grant Andrew Egan and his CoolGraySever colleagues this: They had certainly outgrown Egan's one-and-a-half-bedrooms West Village apartment, that half-bedroom (which is more like an outcrop off the living room) operating as a makeshift headquarters.

"It was me and Amy in the office," Egan recalls. "Ernie was working on the sofa, and Johanna was in the bedroom, and I was just like, 'You know what? We have to get an office.'" About eight blocks up Sixth Avenue, their search ended emphatically the moment they stepped into a loft space on 7th Street.

"We walked in at first and looked around and said, 'Whoa, this is great,' and then turned the corner, and went, 'What?'" The incredulity is understandable. Even today a stern wall to the right of the entrance hoodwinks visitors — you walk in and think, "This is a nice space." A few more steps and a turn of the head, however, and you're suddenly wondering where that adjoining football field with the 10-foot ceilings came from. "It was really a much bigger space than we needed," Egan, a Brit who moved to the States about eight years ago, admits sheepishly, "but it was within our budget. It was amazing."

At 2,000 square feet, amazing is an understatement, and the only consolation for your own office-space envy is just how elegantly they've treated the cavernous room. "This space is so inspiring," Egan says as we sit down in a far corner at what can best be described as the ultimate conference table — two



WE USE DESIGN IN A WAY THAT'S VERY SIMPLE, WHERE THINGS ARE MORE UNDER-DESIGNED IF ANYTHING.

identical hunking rectangular wooden tables, at the moment joined at their longest sides to form a square. "The work we do is very simple; it's almost zen-like in its thought process," he continues. "The aesthetic value of it is quite monochromatic; we use color when it's necessary — we don't use color for the sake of it." Indeed, the office is a mix of white, black, and dark gray, with the occasional splash of red. But the aesthetic philosophy goes beyond simple color schemes: "We don't use design; well, we use design in a way that's very simple, where things are more under-designed if anything. I think the calmness in the work needs to be reflected in the environment."

CoolGaySeven's portfolio includes fashion and luxury brands (Dana Buchman, L'Occitane, and Donna Karan's Urban Zen initiative), books and publications (they redesigned *Esse*, the Village Zendo's Buddhist Arts Journal), even hotels and restaurants. Natori, the Asian-inspired lingerie company, is the firm's longest-running client. The day CoolGaySeven opened for business three-and-a-half years ago, Natori called up looking for creative design help. By day two, Egan had met with owner Josie Natori by day three, the firm was on retainer ("which was in God saying, 'Yes, this was the right time to do it,'" he says now with a laugh). While recently creating a book to celebrate Natori's 30th anniversary, the loft's sprawling space came in especially handy.

"We had everything laid out on the floor, and that's how we figured out the flow of the book," Egan explains. "When Josie came in here, we were literally picking up prints and moving them around. I love that idea that you'd use this space in that way."



The office remains so open in large part because inner-offices or cubicles don't clutter the space. A single, long desk hugs the length of one wall, where at least six computers hum, depending on how many of the often-eight-strong team (freelancers included) are working on site. In this office, the computer is simply a tool, Egan explains; the real creative process — the drawing, brainstorming, and strategizing — takes place elsewhere in the space, which can adapt easily to whatever project or task is most pressing. Those adjoined conference tables, for example, can be arranged lengthwise to form a production line when the firm must put the finishing touches on a bespoke project, like clients' custom invitations or Christmas gifts.

The space can also adapt to become more than just an office — say, a performance studio or art gallery. "A friend of mine is a cellist," Egan says. "She's recording the Bach suites right now, and before she goes into the studio, she'll come in here, and we'll invite 20 people over, and we'll just have some wine, and she'll play. The acoustics are fantastic." What's ironic, of course, is that the space can easily hold 200 people, if not a cramped 2,000. In September, the office will temporarily give way to the art work of painter Jessica Langton. The artist is already well represented in the space: Seeing Red, a large canvas that hangs on one wall (at one time above two white Barcelona chairs, now over another single row of



THIS PAGE: IN EGAN'S OFFICE, TWO GIANT WOODEN TABLES FORM A CENTRAL LOCATION FOR PLANNING, DESIGNING, AND STRATEGIZING; THE FIRM'S PROJECTS OFTEN INCLUDE PRINTED MATERIALS, LIKE A BOOK DEDICATED TO DESIGNER ROX ARAD, OPPOSITE; IN EGAN'S HOME, THE FIRM'S FORMER OFFICE NOW COMFORTABLY ACCOMMODATES JUST ONE, FOLLOWING SPREAD: CRISSES, CHECKER BOARD NUMBERS, AND BOOKS PRESENT IN THE BEDROOM.

computer) provides the biggest splash of red. Like the cello performances, an intimate gathering will mark the opening — Egan says he doesn't want "50,000 people drinking warm white wine and not even looking at the paintings," as at other openings. After four or five evenings as an open gallery, the paintings will then be available by appointment only, as the busy firm gets back to work.

The logistics of the office-cum-gallery is charming in Egan's head, but he's also eager to show me the apartment where CoolGraySeven first sprang to life, so we take a quick walk down Sixth Avenue. The weather today is a touch of London gray — dark clouds linger with misty, spitting rain. When I ask Egan if he misses the city where his career began, he says he still whets his London appetite when he visits to meet with clients. "I love New York, though, it's more inspiring."

We soon find Egan's apartment on the second floor of an understated brownstone. The tour begins at the little space off the living room; it's smaller than one of the conference tables in the new office, though now with room for just one, it seems reasonable. The apartment sticks to the color scheme that seems to define Egan's life and work: white, black, gray, with touches of red thrown in for good measure. In his bedroom, however, another design motif emerges: Christian crosses.

"Being brought up Catholic in the North of England, which is kind of cold and miserable," Egan says, "I think I just became fascinated by the iconography of it." Crosses found in Mexico hang on one wall above his bed, while more than a dozen more run along the length of one shelf of a wall-stud bookcase; these came from a church in London. On another wall, his own artwork, *Nosif*, hangs. The piece is comprised of more than 40 white crosses painted on individual black tabloids. Though the cross pattern repeats itself, each cross is different and each is emblazoned with the word "NEED," which has then subsequently been crossed out.

"I guess the thing about Catholicism is that I'm aesthetically attracted to the religion," he says. "I'm not heavily into the whole spiritual side, though I do love church, but maybe from an aesthetic or an emotional perspective — things being cold or dramatic."

Although Egan's grays prevail in the apartment, it is balanced by natural light that pours in from the bedroom — which looks out onto a courtyard — and from the living room, which overlooks the street below. That balance seems to extend the deal Egan has struck between his Catholic upbringing and his more Eastern tendencies. "My thesis [at university] was about comparing Buddhism and poetry," Egan says of the early roots of the latter. "It was called, 'Zen and the Art of Writing a Dissertation.' It was bizarre."

For Egan, the art of decorating an apartment evidently means surrounding oneself with objects and art that represent simple beauty. In a small vestibule by the front door, a cello waits patiently, flanked by a wall of photographs. It turns out the "friend" who often performs impromptu sessions in CoolGraySeven's loft is in fact Sara Sant'Antonio, a Grammy Award-winning cellist who has been teaching Egan, a one-time bow-slinger in his youth, for eight years ago.

In the living room, art work by Andrea Byrne, another Egan favorite who often contributes her paintings to his design projects, finds equal space alongside modern, skin-high pieces of furniture like an elegant Kartell white foam seat, more of Egan's cross paintings, and found items from his worldly travels.

His collection is ever changing, he says. "I'm always moving pictures around and taking things off the walls and hanging other things." Every new trip seems to yield a new piece. On a recent trip to the Philippines, he found three pieces of art that use — what else? — Manila envelopes as their canvases. Metal numbers from an Australian cricket board run along another shelf in the bedroom, while a Chinese lamp sits in the small office. Sometimes, the discoveries can happen in New York as well. "When I first moved into this apartment, I didn't have any furniture, except maybe a table and two chairs. I went out to buy furniture, so I went into Paula Rubenstein [a downtown design store], and I came out with those." He points to a collection of long, red-and-white surveyor's poles propped up in a corner of the living room. "Oh great, poles, they're really useful," he says with a smile, "but I do love them."

And with that, Egan's iPhone buzzes, beckoning him back to the office. It's an eight-block journey he's more than happy to take. ■

