

# Out of Order

By Rachel Meade Smith

ERIC'S APARTMENT ON AVENUE A WAS SUPPOSED TO BE HIS FIRST FORAY INTO SOVEREIGN LIVING.

College and immediately post-college years were spent sharing small spaces with dirty roommates, or subletting spaces furnished with someone else's wares. In 2012 he became, for the first time, the only name on a lease. A bright pre-war railroad on the 5th floor of a walkup, the apartment sits above a popular lunch joint and a rock and roll bar. Since then, Eric has hardly been the only one to call the apartment home; a cast of girlfriends, friends, and hefty mutts have come, gone, and occasionally left scars. The apartment has thus transformed from a veritable man-cave, to a zone of impromptu domesticity, and finally to a gallery of the process of change.

Now a photographer, when I met Eric he was a San Diego transplant attending NYU on a volleyball scholarship and living in a dorm room. Since then, we have shared an assortment of loved ones, living rooms,

books, t-shirts, and furniture. The longer I know him, the longer I know his things. But we spend less time together now, and fewer things in his interior were once a part of my own. Inside his space are many objects I can trace from memory—familiar book spines (*Vagabonding in America* is a hard one to forget) and mounted prints taken from the inventory of “damaged goods” housed in the back of a gallery I once worked for. But there are more whose provenance and plot are foreign to me. Now, Eric's apartment offers me both a comforting and dispiriting nostalgia: at once it avows the endurance of our friendship, and prompts me to wonder where and when our lives diverged.

The apartment is Vedicly blessed, with a generous supply of windows along its north side. Light streams in throughout the day, and faces few barriers inside. It travels freely through the long, narrow space whose divisions—bedroom, living room kitchen, office, and bathroom, in that order—proceed from one to the next on a straight trajectory.



*Images taken by Eric Chakeen*

More alcoves than rooms, doorless thresholds section the sleeping, living, and eating spaces, so three people, standing one-per-room, might converse without raising their voices. Cordoned off behind a door in the kitchen are the office and bathroom, camouflaged as a closet.

In the visible spaces, the collection of things reads like a poorly ordered archive. Here, time is discounted and the oldest artifact sidles up next to the newest; here, everything waits to be touched. An excess of antique tables and chairs, photographs (framed, unframed, Polaroid, large format, dynamic, discrete) and swarming southwestern textiles beg for a nose to press up against them, for a finger to run across their grooves. But these aren't the parental hand-me-downs that fill a starter apartment. This is the silt of almost a decade's worth of highly active collective tendencies. The couch, a battered brown leather behemoth,

was brought down from Westchester in a rented truck—a lucky Craigslist find. The fabrics and rugs—mostly Navajo print, almost all with fringed edges—accumulated in the apartment while a girlfriend lived here, but are now a signature trope of the interior. I recognize the cashmere scarf hanging between the living and bedroom as payment I provided in exchange for some photographs. The bigger pieces were largely thrifted, and many are nicked and stained—vestiges of lives lived elsewhere. It's hard to find anything at all that might have recently been new.

The office and bathroom are the only spaces not visible from the apartment's front door. As such, they have a perceptibly bonus quality. Their discovery is exciting, like finding there's an extra pocket inside your coat. The office—really a generous term for this five-foot square—holds a desk, a small dresser, a clothing rack, a stack of



papers. The only space for movement is that which you walk through to reach the sinkless bathroom. A sitter at the desk is thus hemmed in on three sides, but offered a plentiful view through a sunny window. While the rest of the apartment invites communion, this space invites Eric, alone. Here are his clothes, the portrait of his mother, his laptop—the stuff of privacy, the stuff asking for quiet. Its aura—only slightly claustrophobic—is appropriately that of a cocoon.

Some of his things found their first home in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, where Eric once shared two sprawling floors of a brownstone with a friend. The excess space had allowed his trove to thrive, and for two years he collected couches like he does cameras. The move back to Manhattan was a purge. Now his space holds only the intimate artifacts, the ones that speak. The apparent disarray is in fact the product of a careful

discernment, of the active attempt to include only the threads of the past worth remembering. Present here is still far more than necessary to live with, but the surplus feels appropriate, cozy—things cuddle. Corners and surfaces, of which there are many, do not sit bare. A wooden baseball bat peeks out from behind a radiator. Books are piled neatly on the floor beneath the living room window, and on the small dresser a few feet away. A cupboard in the office holds a stack of frames propped against each other like a 3-D collage, one enclosing a painting by an old friend, the other a polaroid of a frowning Eric chumming with a smiley LeBron James. In the kitchen, a neat assemblage sits on the windowsill: a still life with three ceramic houses (once vessels for free booze on a flight to the Netherlands), a stone, and a pack of matches. Democratic in his dispersal, Eric has given every surface its due—even the lowliest of side tables is topped with a hastily folded swatch of cloth.

All this filling-up creates an undeviating quality of warmth and noise. The other, more literal cause for this liveliness is Daisy, a 60-pound pitbull-mix navigating the racket of wood grains, objets trouvés, and Native American geometry. Her mass and detritus are interior elements as pronounced as any other. Where Daisy is not, traces of Daisy are. A ragged chew-toy sits in the middle of the kitchen floor, its dingy neon accented against the muted periwinkle rug; a bone lies beside the bed; a smattering of coarse golden hairs blight the dark linen cover of a coffee table book; a vintage chalkboard in the kitchen holds the faded memo “DAISY WAS HERE.” And the interior pervades to



Daisy, as well—her collar is a hardy strip of nylon with a familiar Navajo pattern.

Almost the entire length of the apartment can be seen from the front door, but to know it one must know its little things. These details activate Eric's photographs, wherein his interior is a recurring backdrop. His images are un-posed, ad-lib captures of the moments of the everyday, usually smacked with a cool pulse of artificial light. The apartment itself aids in these productions: its narrowness and excess of surface space means there are always at least three cameras within arm's reach.

Amplly memorialized, the interior serves as the stage for the unrehearsed act of living. The pictures themselves ape the affect of the space: deliberate in their apparent chaos, roughhewn yet dynamically composed. It's too bad Eric despises self-portraits—the materials and minutia of his home sketch him more vividly than he may care to acknowledge.



*Images taken by Rachel M. Smith*

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