

# CULTURED

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DESIGN | ART | FASHION



"A museum must be engaged with its urban context. Museums of all types have distinct publics, roles and missions."

—EUGENIO LOPEZ

\$10 U.S.

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PHOTO BY AKIHIRO YOSHIDA

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The *Ume-play* and *Karakusa-play* collections by Nendo were created in collaboration with Gen-emon, a 260-year-old Japanese ceramics company.

# THE ART OF REINVENTION

Restoration Hardware creator **Gary Friedman** opens up to Rachel Wolff about his singular approach.

PORTRAIT BY ALEX FARNUM

This summer, some 74,000 tourists and locals queued up for hours in the balmy Manhattan heat for a brief jaunt inside *Rain Room*, an art environment at the Museum of Modern Art. The tech-savvy brainchild of London-based art collective rAndom International, *Rain Room* is a 1,000-square-foot black box in which a persistent drizzle halts wherever its sensors detect the presence of a human body. What results is a sort of Moses Effect—it's raining all around you, but you're not getting wet.

The work was not a MoMA commission but rather on loan from a corporate collection—that of RH Contemporary Art, a new platform from the California-based home goods behemoth Restoration Hardware, which used the exhibition to jumpstart its unprecedented foray into the world of contemporary art. The company will debut a six-story New York gallery in Chelsea in November with solo shows from five eclectic emerging artists. And like many of the brand's recent facelifts and endeavors, RH Contemporary Art was the vision of its charismatic chairman, creator, curator and co-CEO, Gary Friedman.

In discussing his vision for the ever-burgeoning brand, Friedman seems more like a spiritual counsel or in-house guru than he does a fearsome executive overseeing a major luxury brand and publicly traded corporation. "The vision of our company," he says, "is to create an endless reflection of hope, inspiration and love that will ignite the human spirit and shape the world."

Friedman attended Burning Man this summer—that wild, freeform party in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada—and he's looking to acquire some of the art he saw there for Restoration Hardware's corporate campus in Corte Madera. The nuances keep coming. He detests the term "lifestyle" so much that he rebranded the company's marketing team as its "Truth Group" and had all his employees sport a bracelet bearing his personal credo, "Believe."

Friedman doesn't have the traditional executive pedigree either. He barely eked through community college and famously worked his way up through the ranks of several West Coast consumer giants (Williams-Sonoma chief among them), starting from the lowly post of stock boy at the Gap. His visionary approach to retail—which transformed Restoration Hardware from a traditional home furnishings outlet to a design-forward, trendsetting destination—seems to be rooted in the personal.

"We don't talk to trend experts," he asserts. "We tend to not want to follow and we tend to do what we love. We sell a lot of things in Belgian linen and if you came to my house, you would see a lot of things in Belgian linen.

We like to say that [the company] is our cause. It is a reflection of who we are and what we believe in. It's not about a brand, it's about beliefs."

Friedman started to consider the current model for buying and selling art when he moved into his first house—a stunning estate in Belvedere overlooking the San Francisco Bay—about 12 years ago. The Sonoma County native had lived in small apartments his whole life, including those he shared as a kid with his widowed mother, and never had the wall-space to actively acquire art.

"A friend introduced me to an art consultant, who took me to the galleries," he says. "And I found the process of buying art to be somewhat confusing and what I would call closed—where the art was being exhibited, how it was being exhibited, the process of buying it..."

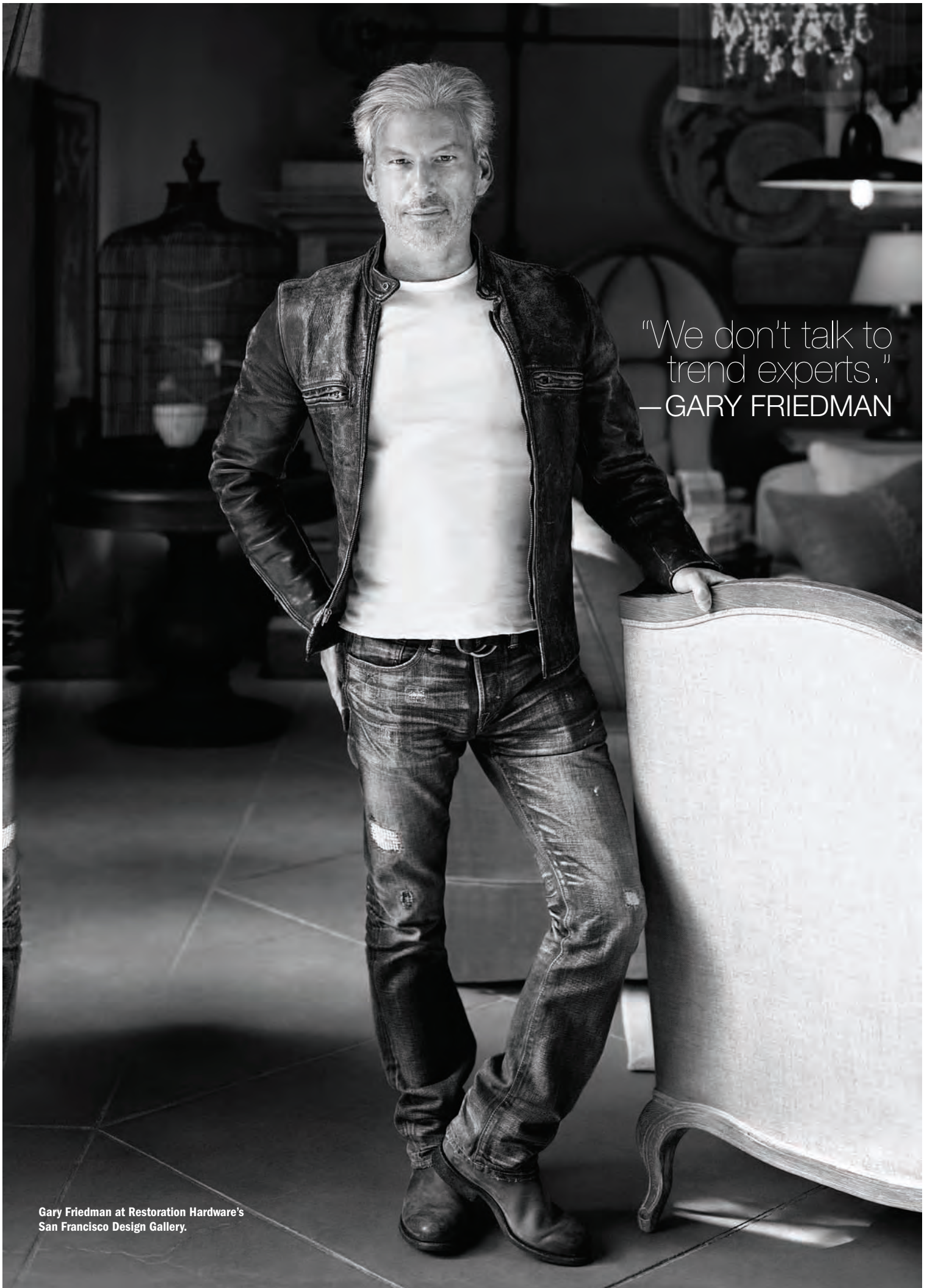
"It really surprised me that it was mostly consignment," he adds. "Artists are generally under-capitalized." And while many artists have nurturing relationships with their dealers, the model itself often requires artists to show exclusively with a gallery (or several, in different regions) and exhibit work on spec. "I thought that there was an opportunity to kind of think about this model," Friedman says. The idea simmered over the years and reignited when Friedman met San Francisco art advisor Holly Baxter. He hired her to bring his vision to life.

Most basically, the model is to seek out great emerging talent, acquire and commission new work, then sell it in a transparent manner to the public. RH Contemporary Art is currently selling pieces by about 50 artists (working in all media and hailing from all over the world) for about \$4,750 to \$26,000, both online and at its colossal New York gallery.

Friedman is also a personal patron of their work. He and his team are so confident in the program that they announced that they would open a second location of RH Contemporary Art in Los Angeles before the inaugural New York exhibition even debuted. An RH-branded record label, apparel line and hospitality concept are on the way, too.

It all goes back to Friedman's core vision for the company and his personal mantra. "When we really believe in something and we really love something, we will become great advocates for it," he says. "We will shout from rooftops. I told the group that we have to be comfortable making other people uncomfortable, otherwise no one's going to care."

"We're not going to fit into the art world as it currently stands," he adds. "So we're going to try to do something that hasn't been done before. And I can't help but think it's inspiring." He returns, in closing, to the subject of Burning Man, gushing about his favorite work of art that he saw there: an 18-foot-tall sculpture of the word "Believe."



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trend experts.”  
—GARY FRIEDMAN

Gary Friedman at Restoration Hardware’s  
San Francisco Design Gallery.