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Dark Beauty

A Washington artist's paintings become bright stars in a night sky

By Linda Hales
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ARTIST JUDY JASHINSKY DID NOT CREATE THE DARKLY MYSTERIOUS AMBIENCE OF HER CAPITOL HILL ROWHOUSE, with its coal-black interior. But she clearly relishes the drama of the stage set.

THIS STORY

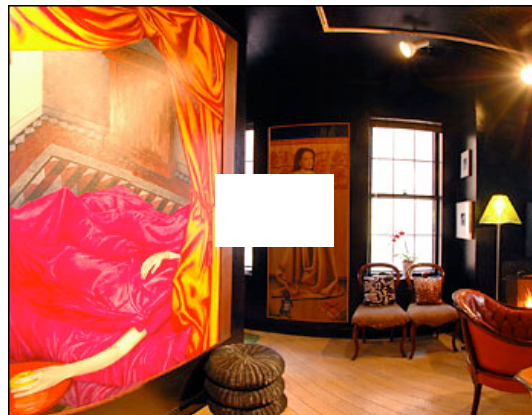
Dark Beauty

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PANORAMA



Dark Beauty: The Living Room

PANORAMA: Black walls and pickled oak floors create a dramatic showcase for paintings in the Capitol Hill home of Judy Jashinsky and Larry Finfer.

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Inky high-gloss paint flows up the walls and over the ceiling, a perfectly brooding backdrop for her larger-than-life history paintings. From one black wall to the next, mural-size canvases ooze a swashbuckling palette of magenta, apricot and turquoise, banishing any possibility of gloom. In the flicker of candlelight, the artist's signature figures in grand 17th-century fashions look strangely at home. The house could be a torch-lit Tuscan castle, except for the stylish pickled oak floor.

"It's a great party room," Jashinsky says, recalling the time she and her husband, Larry Finfer, both 60, removed the furniture and invited friends to a dress-in-black party in their camera obscura. "All you could see were faces, hands and jewelry."

As she sips a mug of herbal tea in a salon dominated by art and vintage treasures, Jashinsky explains how she and Finfer, who is deputy director of the Interior Department's policy office, landed in their startling digs. Less intrepid home buyers, and many artists, would have run from a cave-like interior. But the couple were intrigued, not intimidated, when they encountered the house in 1996. The previous owners, an architect and a decorator, had gutted the three-level Victorian to make it more loftlike. And painted it all black. Jashinsky recalls looking right past the Bette Midler posters and black leather Wassily chairs to imagine a dramatic private gallery of her own.

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"I just kept picturing what the artwork would look like," says the artist, who is a familiar figure in Washington's gallery scene.

Jashinsky is best known for paintings depicting the tumultuous life of the 17th-century Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi, whose place in early Baroque art history was assured by a scandalous rape trial pitting her virtue against that of the accused -- her painting teacher. The story inspired Jashinsky's Artemisia

series, part of which was shown at the National Museum for Women in the Arts and is included in the rare book collection of the [National Gallery of Art](#). The exclamation point of the project is a full-length portrait of the Italian painter, which hangs in the Jashinsky-Finfer rowhouse, along with a mural-size scene of Artemisia in bed. Dark walls make the rich colors pop.

Through history, daring designers such as Sir Edwin Lutyens and Dorothy Draper have dabbled in truly dark rooms. A recent issue of [Domino magazine](#) touted the virtues of [Benjamin Moore's](#) coal-black "Soot" on the walls of a contemporary dining room. But few examples are as unrestrained as the Jashinsky-Finfer residence, where black envelops all of the main level, most of the basement and parts of the top floor.

Finfer says he was immediately attracted to the space. "I like the juxtaposition of the black walls and the white floors," he says. "Neither would work without the other."

Or without the art.

The color choice emerged at the end of a 1980s remodeling project. Previous owners moved the kitchen from the main floor to the basement, where it opens to a sunken terrace. In the old kitchen's place, they had installed a wet bar and a powder room between the enlarged salon and a light-filled sitting area. Old plaster was covered with brown burlap. In a second decorating phase, those previous owners ordered up the glossy black paint, which matched the seats on their [Marcel Breuer](#) chairs.

Jashinsky and Finfer's taste mixes Victorian sofa and chairs with black wicker from [Ikea](#). Jashinsky prefers pieces that reveal the scars of history, such as a vintage armchair with a worn patent leather seat. "Furniture is about memory," she says.

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