

WHITE CHRISTMAS

Designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz decks the halls of his Manhattan apartment in shades of silver, pearl, and cream and sets the table for holiday entertaining

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In the white-and-silver home of designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz and his partner, Steven Wine, the tinsel tree and white shag carpet are among the retro 1960s symbols that have been updated to create a very contemporary Christmas.

This page: Noriega-Ortiz creates over-the-top still lifes from silver balls, ostrich feathers (a signature of his), and flowers, which provide the apartment's only bold color. Opposite: The simple wreath and the paper doves came from New York's flower market, a few blocks away from this Chelsea apartment. Wine found the 1970s base of the coffee table on the street, and Noriega-Ortiz topped it with glass. The designer also took a 1930s sofa and customized it with vinyl and cotton seat cushions—all in cream, of course. The clear polycarbonate chair is a Philippe Starck prototype.



WHEN INTERIOR DESIGNER Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz tells you he's definitely planning on a white Christmas this year, he's not under the illusion that he can control the weather.

Snow or no snow, it's always white inside the duplex apartment in New York's Chelsea neighborhood that he shares with his partner, Steven Wine.

"I've never done anything quite like this for clients," Noriega-Ortiz says of the dramatic monochromatic scheme he loves year-round. "But my home is where we practice these things."

The whites he has chosen for his own home are not just white, of course. They span several shades of silver, pearl, and cream, starting with the walls—a Venetian plaster with a shimmering mica finish.

When he first bought it, Noriega-Ortiz

gutted the apartment to give himself a blank decorating slate. Known for his modern and contemporary look when working on other people's apartments, he stays true to form at his own home.

Two different styles of Philippe Starck chairs made from clear polycarbonate grace the living room and kitchen, areas that can be separated by a sheer curtain. For coffee tables he has a 1970s model (the base of which Wine found on the street), as well as kidney-shaped tables made of cast aluminum that are reproductions of a Frederick Kiesler design, circa 1935.

Older pieces are easily incorporated into the look. "Being very watchful of the color," says Noriega-Ortiz, "makes the antiques look more modern."

For instance, a set of 1940s Queen Anne-style chairs were painted white. But he didn't stop there—the seats were covered with fluffy white Mongolian lamb's fur. "The chair becomes a sculpture, and not just a chair," says the designer. A 1930s sofa was covered in a groovy vinyl, except for the cotton seat cushions.

"People always ask, 'How do you keep it clean?'" says Noriega-Ortiz of his white theme. "We never have any problems. Whites can be bleached. But no one ever believes me."

At Christmas, things get even more monochromatic, not less. No red and green trimmings for this house. But don't mistake a lack of color for a lack of enthusiasm—both Noriega-Ortiz and Wine love to celebrate the holidays and are known for entertaining in a very New York way. First, they host a big cocktail party with drinks and appetizers; then they take everyone out to dinner at a nearby restaurant.

The tinsel tree remains an icon for both of them—think of the trees that Lucy



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This page: Noriega-Ortiz placed white Mongolian lamb's fur on the seats of two Queen Anne-style chairs from the 1940s and turned them into fluffy sculptures. He also designed the table himself, from a leatherlike plastic top and an acrylic base. Opposite, clockwise from top: When visitors arrive for a holiday party, they're greeted by a stuffed rooster on the stairs, a sign that the residents don't take themselves too seriously. Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, left, and Steven Wine. Veuve Clicquot awaits guests on one of the kidney-shaped, cast-aluminum tables; reproductions of a 1935 design by Frederick Kiesler. For more details, see Resources.

wants Charlie Brown to buy in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* before he settles on the frail fir.

"I grew up in Puerto Rico with one of those tinsel trees, and Steven's parents had them as well," says Noriega-Ortiz. It looks especially good decorated with 1950s vintage silver ornaments, and the acrylic white shag carpeting furthers the retro feel.

Few would dare to use white ostrich feathers as a garland, but for Noriega-Ortiz that happens to be a signature note of whimsy that he often employs for clients. The stuffed rooster on the staircase, however, which greets visitors as they enter the apartment, is a purely personal touch.

"For some reason I just like roosters and chickens," he says. "And the white feathers are kind of fun. I wanted something at the entrance that wouldn't feel pretentious."

Flowers provide the only note of bold color in this holiday scene, and they're even more dramatic against the white background. Since New York's renowned flower market is only a few blocks away, it was easy for Noriega-Ortiz and Wine to pick up a wreath made of plain branches, which they hung over the retro-fitted living room couch.

In addition to the rooster and ostrich feathers, there's one other bird reference in this house with a slightly deeper meaning—a couple of white paper doves perched on the wreath. As Noriega-Ortiz says, "The whole theme for Christmas is peace." ●





THE BIG CHILL



Designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz celebrates the season with his singular vision of a holiday spread: the accoutrements are sleek, the fare monochromatic, and the scene festive

Producer: Mary-Ellen Weinrib
Photographer: Antoine Bootz

This view: *Coquito*, a coconut milk-based version of eggnog, is a Puerto Rican holiday favorite; Heritage decanter and glasses are by Steuben. The white sangria in a Steuben footed bowl adheres to the dress code; it's served with a silver-mounted bamboo ladle from Ruzzetti & Gow. Opposite: Even the fruit that studs the sangria—apples and grapes—follows the no-color rule; the Vega wineglass is by Baccarat.

