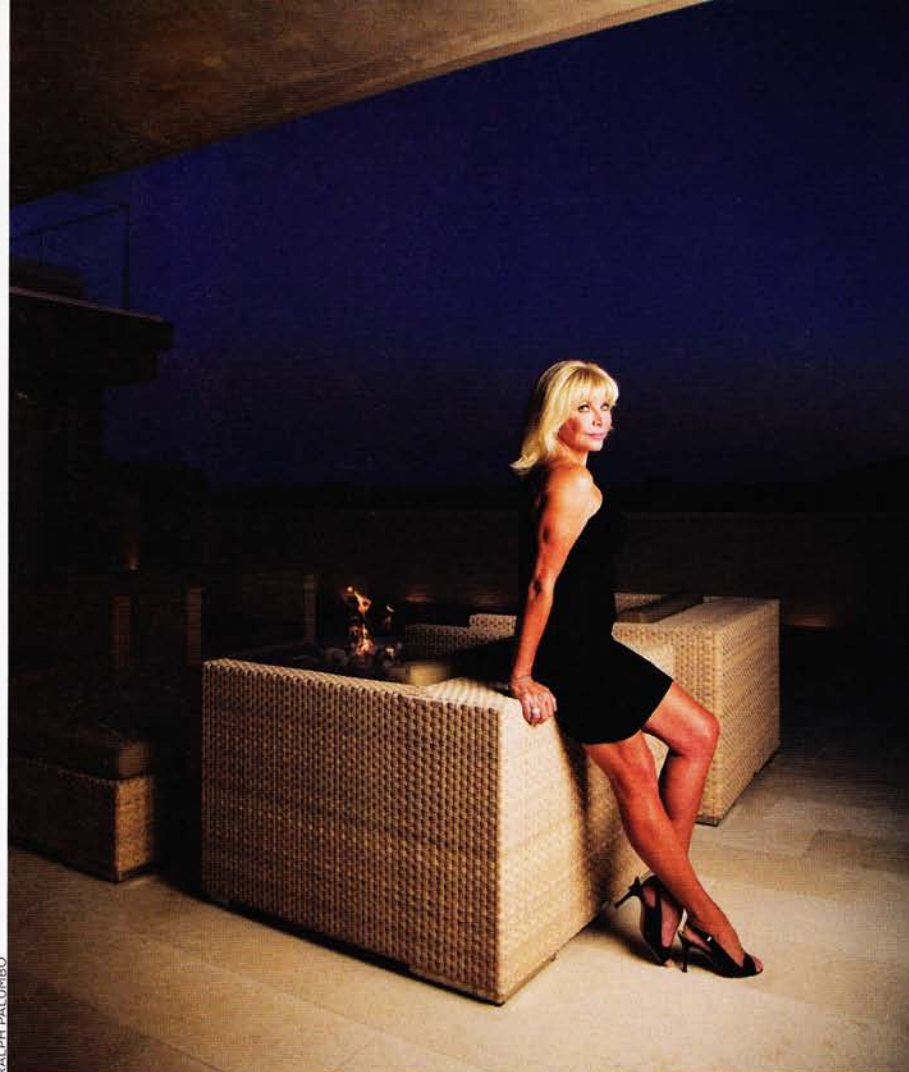


Paradise Found

BY LISA LIDDANE » PHOTOS BY ERIC FIGGE



RALPH PALUMBO

LEFT Frank Stella's 1983 work, *Imola Five II*, adorns the wall behind the dining room; ABOVE Toni Alexander found paradise at home in Laguna Beach.

It began with an ember that had made its way through the cracks in the fireplace in the middle of the night. The flames grew, and eventually the smoke and fire woke up Toni Alexander at her home in Laguna Beach. After snatching up her family's most important belongings, she fled outside. And when Alexander saw the firefighters, she implored them, as only she could, "Please save the art!"



ABOVE The living room/library features a glass sculpture by Dale Chihuly on the table and has a view of a large multi-colored work by Charles Arnoldi; **OPPOSITE** The long hallway begins with a spectacular photograph by Dennis Hopper and ends with Toni Alexander's favorite art acquisition: an untitled sculpture by Isamu Noguchi.

The Laguna Beach firefighters understood all too well. They worked in a community that breathed, ate and drank art. So they gathered the Lichtenstein, the Ellsworth Kelly, the Ruscha, and every single canvas, photograph and sculpture before the fire devoured most of the house.

Nothing was left except for the walls and pillars.

For Alexander, the fire was, as she calls it, a "life-changing" event that made her stop and contemplate what was important: Family. Living in the moment.

The fire didn't kill her passion for art – it only heightened it.

Over the years, Alexander had amassed a carefully chosen collection of mostly modern works from the mid-20th century to the present, especially those by American artists. Suddenly, she had an opportunity to give them a better environment.

So Alexander, president and creative director of InterCommunications Inc., a Newport Beach-based international firm specializing in marketing and branding luxury resorts, started anew.

She built a home on the same site, this time, with the art collection as muse.

With architect Carlton Graham and designer Kit Lietzow, Alexander planned the placement of every work, which consequently involved removing walls to make room and adding walls when art needed a larger background to rest upon. In the skylit hallway, a large-scale 1964 photograph showing Bruce Conner, Toni Basil, Teri Garr, and two other women takes up horizontal space that could easily span a dining room. It's easy to see why the photograph has a special spot in Alexander's heart – it's full of joie de vivre, and was taken and given to her by Dennis Hopper.

But her favorite work lies at the end of that same hallway, in an alcove that bisects the master bedroom from the master bath. It's an untitled Isamu Noguchi sculpture from 1981 that stands on a pedestal framed by a floor-to-ceiling window, with a view of soothing greenery. And it has become a mandala of sorts for Alexander.

Sometimes, homeowners who are proud of their art collection show it off in ways that make a house feel gallery-like or sterile and cold. Thankfully, the atmosphere of Alexander's home is anything but that.

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