

text: craig kellogg photography: adrian wilson

Aero Dynamic

From Aero in New York, Thomas O'Brien sets out to conquer the design universe

Forget about Ralph or Calvin, and don't even mention Martha. It's not Tommy, either—it's Thomas. At 43 years old, Thomas O'Brien may still look a bit like Ferris Bueller's older brother in tortoiseshell horned-rimmed glasses, but the engine behind the New York shop Aero and design firm Aero Studios is well on his way to becoming a recognized national brand in his own right.

Hired to design an interior, Aero Studios is sure to produce a result that's grounded and unpretentious. A similar attitude reigns at the shop, which mixes mid-century seating with deco lighting and turn-of-the-century hardware from the flea market. Splurge on a hobnail-glass pitcher, shagreen-covered lamps, or framed black-and-white portraits—you need only add a boho Isamu Noguchi rice-paper lantern to complete the scene.

A dozen years ago, when O'Brien and William Sofield opened Aero on the second floor of a nondescript building in SoHo—far from the decorating mecca of the Upper East Side—some people wondered why. "To break the rules," O'Brien says. That first space swiftly became a downtown destination. For a whole generation of young designers, the shop was the fantasy living room they could never afford, with its 14-foot ceilings, cocoa-painted walls, and gauzy floor-to-ceiling curtains. Frequent visitors rarely found it furnished the same way twice, so quickly did the merchandise move.

Sofield left the partnership in 1995, but O'Brien went on to score interiors jobs and licensing partnerships with major manufacturers. Tiffany & Co. came first, followed by makers of lighting, bedding, furniture, and fabrics. This year, he trademarked the name Thomas O'Brien.

Marshall Field's now produces his eponymous cotton bath towels, available in white, taupe, sage, and no fewer than 16 other colors. In the department store's fall-sale circular, a selection appears alongside a portrait of the designer in crisp shirtsleeves, cuffs rolled nearly to the elbows. (Text reads: "Part cultural archaeologist, part interior designer, Thomas O'Brien has pioneered the look of warm modernism.") Given the planned introductions to O'Brien's tabletop line, Aero threatens to become a one-stop lifestyle shop.

The deluge of products solved one retailing challenge at the original Aero location: O'Brien's production →



Previous spread: At the latest Aero shop in New York, a pair of leather-covered chairs, circa 1970, sit before mahogany-framed Thomas Oval mirrors that Thomas O'Brien designed. For the rear conference room's two 14-foot-tall doorways, O'Brien joined hollow-core doors vertically and painted them black.

Left: A vintage settee, upholstered in his Keiki Stripe green-cotton, faces stained-mahogany Arc lamps.

Opposite top, from left: The first store's parchment opening banner, now displayed in the basement studio. A vintage glazed ceramic bowl for sale, despite the business card. A driftwood lamp and a pop lithograph placed on a vintage bureau in the shop. **Opposite bottom:** A 1960 leather-covered console, attributed to Karl Springer, takes a modernist stance in front of O'Brien's acapulco mahogany Lakehouse bed, modeled after his grandmother's.





Opposite: Beside the front stair, walnut cubbies display O'Brien's glasses and ceramic tableware.

Right: Brigitte Shim's phosphorescent Bug lamp enlivens vintage case goods in the shop.



pieces could fill gaps on the floor as vintage merchandise sold. But the new things were causing a space crunch—chandeliers, chests, creamers, leather bags, nearly a dozen bedding collections, almost 100 SKUs in his Hickory Chair Company furniture line. And sky-high rents had changed SoHo. O'Brien began to wonder if his customers were getting as tired of the makeup and shoes as he was.

A few blocks to the southeast, abutting Chinatown, he found somewhat larger digs for about the same price. The new facility is 9,500 square feet, split between a ground floor with cast-iron columns and a basement with partial natural light. In moving there, the Aero mood would go from mid-century to mercantile—textiles and smalls are dry goods, after all.

O'Brien started by changing the paint on the cast-iron storefront from soft green to blue-black. "It needed to be a little tougher," he says. Inside, he painted the pressed-tin ceiling white. Some walls are pale blue; others are darker in homage to Paul Klee's painting studio in Dessau, Germany. The main level's new floor planks of powdery raw walnut are dotted with wooden tables and chairs finely finished in blond and cinnamon as well as black and, of course, chocolate. "Dark furniture sells better," he explains. At the rear, a skylit conference room is revealed behind 14-foot-tall black-painted panels built from two ordinary hollow-core doors joined vertically.

Around a corner and behind a sliding door, O'Brien gets his administrative work done in a tiny, windowless →

room overflowing with papers. His larger "show office," directly opposite, presents a far more polished face to the world. There's a German 1920's rosewood library cabinet, a hair-on-hide patchwork rug composed of small, carefully matched blocks, and an en suite executive washroom.

In the basement, at the bottom of the front stairs, a gallery is devoted exclusively to Thomas O'Brien licensees. The back stairs, meanwhile, lead down to spacious alcoves for Aero's architecture, interiors, product, and textiles departments. Nearby, a cook prepares staff lunches in a smart galley kitchen.

A week before the grand opening, O'Brien has been on the premises nightly until 11:30. "The shop was barely a business for years, but I love being a merchant," he says, collapsing like a rag doll on his own dark green velvet-covered sofa. "I used to play store when I was a kid." Clearly, it's child's play no longer. On the sign outside the new shop and studio, the words "Thomas O'Brien" get equal billing—just under "Aero."

STUDIO DIRECTOR: MICHAEL ADAMS; ARCHITECT: LAURIN DISON; LICENSING DIRECTOR: KEITH KANCAR; GALLERY/BUSINESS MANAGER: TERRI CANNON; PROJECT TEAM: BETTYNGE, EUGENE CORLESS, PETER HRAL, CAROLINE TAGGART.

CUSTOM MIRRORS: ACORN; POST-BED DESK: HICKORY-CHAIR COMPANY; SETTEE FABRIC: LEE JORA; TABLEWARE: STARNWELL SALTON; TREAD, LANDING SURFACE: FLEXCO; BRAINS LAMP STUDIOS; LAMPS, SCONCES, PENDANT FIXTURES: GALLERIES: VISUAL COMFORT & CO.; FLOOR TILE: BODROGI; BOBBIE REISPOL; STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: BUREAU HIPPO; HEP: RAHSHAN AND MALEY ASSOCIATES; GENERAL CONTRACTOR: EURISTRUCTURE.



Left: O'Brien's Longacre lamp in hand-rubbed brass illuminates the basement studio.

Opposite top: A German rosewood library cabinet from the 1920's stands in O'Brien's "show office." Opposite bottom, from left: The studio's cork flooring. Michael Thonet's maple and tubular chrome chairs from the '30s. Some of the 76 lighting designs in the licensee gallery.

