


A POETICS OF TRANSLATION

Anchored atop Portugal's tempestuous
terrain is interior designer Vera Cristo's
vision of purpose and place

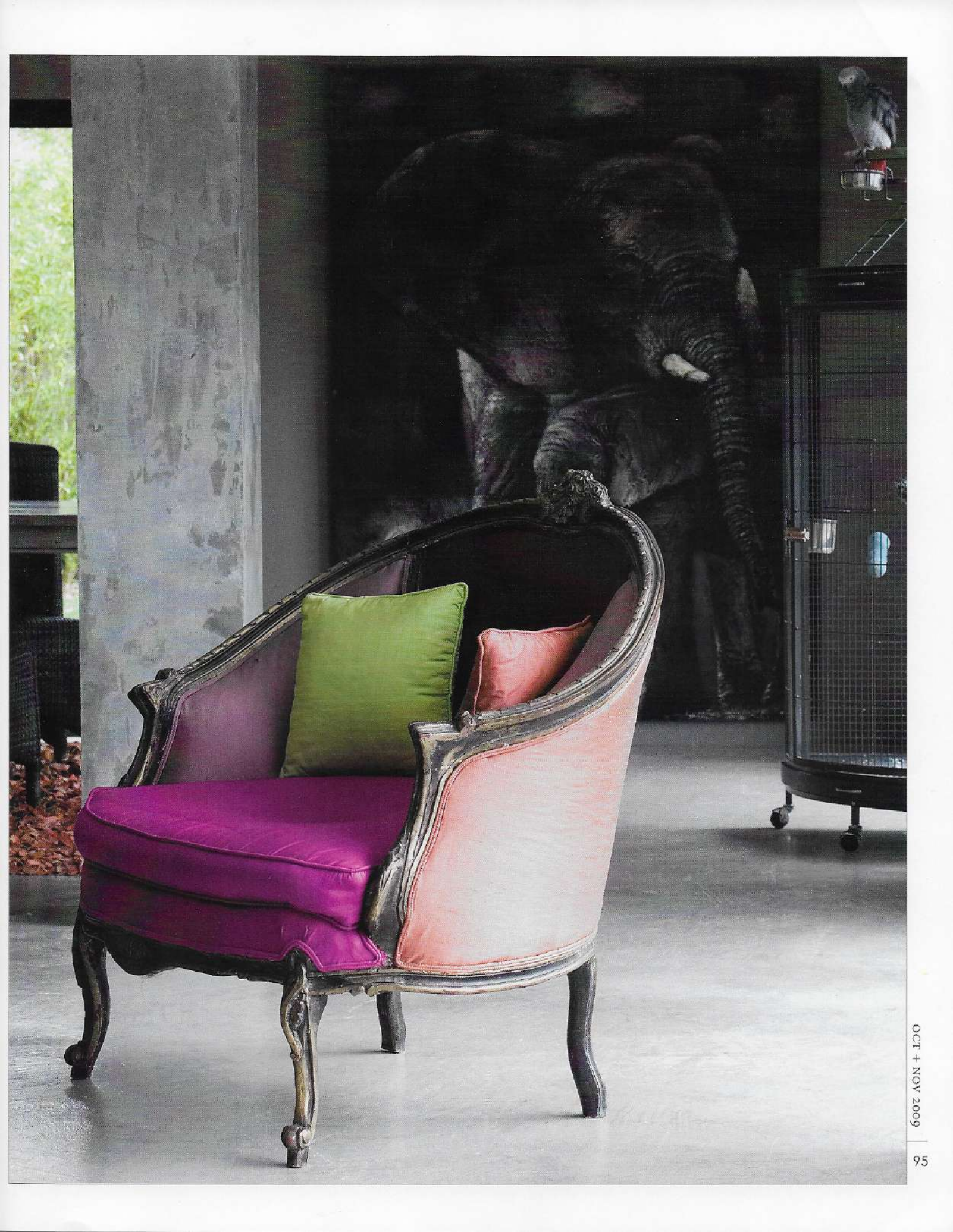
text: Saxon Henry photos: Nicolas Lemonnier







If unaware of the maritime winds buffeting the rugged coastline surrounding this retreat in the seaside town of Cascais, Portugal, one might mistake it for a palace of a modern maharaja. Indeed, with ancient origins in Portuguese, the Sanskrit word for elephant, Gaja, symbolizes abundance, boldness and royalty, and it personifies fertility. Reveling in the interstices of cultural translation, designer Vera Cristo created a sanctuary that transcends time and territory.



Perched on a hill punctuated with the bravado of bristling pines that overlook a beckoning sea, the once lackluster 1950s style home was in search of salvation. The owners approached Cristo with the hope of a ripe vision and inventive spirit that would breathe new life into this formerly nondescript dwelling. Contemporary, luxurious—overused but pointed descriptives—was the way the owners described the feeling they wanted their new residence to evoke. Simple but special, a specific shade of blue tile for the swimming pool was among the few but carefully considered special requests from the clients who chose to trust the life of their home to Cristo. “And boy,” Cristo remarks, “did we have to work hard to find that particular blue!”



But a magician's wand was also in the hand of architect Luis Bigotte, who transformed the dense fortress with small windows into a vessel that would capture the light embracing its surrounds. In addition to engineering a design attuned to scale, proportion—and the need for emphasizing the privacy necessary for the pleasure of a secret hideaway—Bigotte and Cristo sought to capture a connection to nature that escaped the original architects. "The fact that the magnificent views were there at all probably wasn't even appreciated back then," she muses. Walls crumbled and organically honed glass was inset into every exterior wall.

Materiality and dimension act as foils to the neutral background employed by Cristo to anchor the larger spaces. Distressed cement finishes and polished concrete floors serve as textural complements to smooth walls of white, grey and taupe.



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ill, within this serene setting, the designer's playful side was pronounced. "There were three gigantic fireplaces, and we were enamored with this oversized theme and applied it to the décor," Cristo explains. "It was a great way to achieve a sense of grandeur in such a large, airy space while still maintaining something of a minimalist approach." Dramatic proportions for furnishings intermingle with drenching jewel tones to form the home's most expressive gestures.

"To live in the house now is to breathe in the sea air and the scent of the pine forest," she says, "to be aware of the changing shapes of the clouds in the sky and their reflection in the pool, and to revel in the sense of place both night and day" ■ additional research by Rebecca Winward

