A dramatic three-story Italian Carrara marble staircase is the centerpiece of this stately Portland home, influenced by the refinements of European luxury. Designed by Christopher Gelber and executed with precision, each detail: the railings are clad steel, the balusters are bronze, and the walls were surfaced by French plaster artist Francois Pascal. A Post Modern chandelier by Giancarlo Gualandi hangs above a vintage deco-inspired console table. Opposite: The house is clad entirely in hand-applied, charcoal-hued cement stucco. Surface variations show the marks of workers’ trowels. German-engineered Impact windows afford views into the surrounding forest. A 1,100-square-foot garage houses the homeowner’s Porsche collection.

Dark Star
A moody, inward-looking house in the Portland hills reveals a new face of Northwest design.

Written by RACHEL GALLAHER | Photographed by DAVID PAPAZIAN

Design Team
Design and Construction: Christopher Gelber
Interior plasterwork: Francois Pascal
Exterior plasterwork: Kingsmen Contracting
Like an ancient stone fortress, the imposing walls of Casa Nera exude stately beauty. Set in Portland’s West Hills, the 4,400-square-foot residence is a bold departure from the gold standards of Northwest architecture: open floor plans are eschewed in favor of a cloistered layout, and indoor-outdoor living inclines toward the first part of that vaunted equation.

Designed by Christopher Gelber and built in 2012, Casa Nera (named for its black-hued cement exterior) takes a cue from Mexican architect Luis Barragán in its focused palette and sense of containment. A series of 12-foot walls on the main floor guides residents through a controlled progression of rooms, while framed windows—rather than curtain glass—separate indoors and outdoors. “We wanted nature to be something that you can selectively engage, so there is a high ratio of wall space to window space in this house,” Gelber says. “You sense boundaries—it’s safely cradled in the architecture.”

A formal walled entry court “allows guests to orient themselves before they enter the house,” says Gelber. “It slows their pace and shifts them into an interior view so they forget that they’re in the middle of the forest.” Once inside the house, guests are enveloped in sumptuous materials—Italian marble, hand-troweled Venetian plaster, leather-wrapped door handles, black walnut flooring—that impart formality without fussy-ness. “From the beginning, the homeowners wanted something slightly more cosmopolitan than you usually find in this area,” Gelber recalls. “We’re still in the Northwest, we’re still in the woods, but inside this house is an elevated sense of elegance.”
The crown jewel of the house is its kitchen, replete with pavonazzetto marble, black hand-troweled plaster, and stainless steel. The marble, named for the finlayyain markings of a jaywine, or peacock, was a prized material in ancient Rome, adorning Julius Caesar’s triumphal palace and numerous state buildings. “I fell in love with this marble at a local supplier a few years back,” says Gelber, who readily admits his passion for Old World materials. “It introduces drama and theatricality and elevates cooking by making the kitchen almost a temple rather than just a functional space.” The bold patterning—which includes spatter of pumice rust, sea foam, and turquoise—was a hard sell at first, but the client came around. A custom stainless steel apron sink features twoarbon faucets by Kohler. Niche Modern’s Stamen pendant lights gleam above the island.
OPPOSITE: Modern lines and timeless materials, such as the statuario and Nero marquina marble on the master bathroom floor, lend sumptuousness to the home. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A William Lescault painting above a stainless-steel prep sink in the kitchen complements the home’s European feel; marble-faced drawers with bronze Rocky Mountain Hardware handles keep culinary tools out of sight. The Cube tub is by Wetstyle, with a custom marble surround. The library is wrapped in faux-crocodile Venetian plaster. The clients purchased the Foscarini Big Bang pendant from Hive Modern. *
"THE ARCHITECTURE SETS A BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE WILD WORLD OUTSIDE AND THE ZONE OF REFLECTION INSIDE, A SPACE FOR WITHDRAWAL."

—CHRISTOPHER GELBER, DESIGNER