

Design Happens Here

Los Angeles retailer Austere is a high-end design store-cum-incubator for Scandinavian aesthetic ideals.



THIS PAGE: COURTESY MELISSA DI MEGLIO; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY SIGHT UNSEEN; COURTESY BLOCK SHOP



Contrary to its name, Scandinavian design shop **Austere** in downtown L.A. sells an array of cozy, colorful wares: traditionally woven Norwegian blankets, plush midcentury armchairs, forest-scented Swedish candles.

"It's not that the design itself is austere, it's the condition in which they were designed," explains Swedish-born founder Fredrik Carlstrom. "Scandinavian homes are actually not austere at all—they're filled with light and beautiful objects because we spend a lot of time inside."

In contrast to traditional retail models, Austere's mission is less to sell products than to show them. Carlstrom opened Austere in May 2014 in a 5,000-square-foot former department-store parking garage with the goal of creating a "magazine you can walk into," noting the changes taking hold of the retail industry. Not only have a number of design magazines ventured into retail with e-commerce and brick-and-mortars, department stores have begun to shrink. "They've become giant showrooms where people go to look at things for free, then buy them online," says Carlstrom. "We're all competing with Amazon."

To guard against this showrooming effect, Austere earns its revenue like a magazine, through branded partnerships rather than sales. "Brands pay us as a showroom, or they pay us as a partner to advertise or market with them," Carlstrom explains, and ads often take the form of events, such as the immersive Snarkitecture-designed pop-up shop for Swedish clothing brand COS, for example, which opened for a spell last fall.

Austere's curatorial leanings, Carlstrom says, champion the Scandinavian ideal of "forgoing those unnecessary bells and whistles in order to pay attention to detail and respect the



Opposite and above: Currently open at Austere, the *Site Specific L.A.* exhibition explores Northern European design ethos through the work of young Los Angeles designers. The shop will debut a designer workshop program later this year in collaboration with Block Shop Textiles. Left: The latter's Magnet linen pillow

materials"—whether or not its featured designers actually hail from Scandinavia. *Site Specific L.A.*, an exhibition assembled by online tastemakers Sight Unseen on view through February 14, features a group of local designers whose idiosyncratic use of natural materials like marble, wood, and wool demonstrates how that ethos isn't unique to Northern Europe. In the spring, Carlstrom plans to roll out the Austere Workshop, a designer residency program that will designate 1,500 square feet of the showroom as a workspace for a designer-in-residence. And already on the roster is design firm Block Shop Textiles, a downtown L.A. studio that produces its fabrics by traditional methods in northern India.

"There is this tribe of designers around the world that design by these ideals," says Carlstrom, "and those people are not bound by geographical boundaries." —Janelle Zara