VOGUE

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660 Pages

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Baker, with an unfinished new work. "I love painting large," she says. "I want the paintings to create an environment that envelops you."
Fashion Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

color surge

How do you paint the modern world? Kristin Baker's riotous abstracts on PVC are inspired by both art history and Nascar racing. Dodie Kazanjian reports. Photographed by Norman Jean Roy.

Every once in a great while, a young artist comes out of the starting gate so fast that shock waves radiate in several directions. Kristin Baker is one of these. A month after she got her M.F.A. from Yale's School of Art in the spring of 2002, her large-scale, fiercely colorful paintings, whose volcanic energy evoked, in abstract terms, the excitement and danger of Formula One car racing, appeared in a group show at P.S.1 in Long Island City and blew whatever art happened to be nearby to smithereens. Jeffrey Deitch, whose Deitch Projects gallery is a Mecca for new talent, had already agreed to represent her by then. In 2004, the Centre Pompidou in Paris gave her a solo show, and not long afterward big-time collectors Charles Saatchi, François Pinault, and Steven Cohen started buying her work. "She's one of the most convincing abstract painters of her generation," says Alison Gingeras, the former Pompidou curator who is now the chief curator of the François Pinault Collection, "and she's just at the beginning of her arc of experimentation and of finding her voice."

This sounds like heavy baggage for the 33-year-old, blonde, soft-voiced, and rather shy person I meet when I visit her studio in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. The studio is immense—72 feet long by 48 feet wide by 20 feet high. Four new paintings are in the works here. The largest, a 30-foot sweep of atmospheric orange and yellow forms, dominates the entire wall in back; it is loosely based on Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* in the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice, one of the greatest masterpieces of the High Renaissance. In spite of her shyness and obvious reticence

to talk about a work in progress, Kristin is clearly comfortable with big ideas and big pictures. "I love painting large," she tells me. "It's just a lot more fun to conquer. I want the paintings to create an environment that envelops you."

The studio is Kristin's world. Her obsessive need for order is reflected in the color charts on the wall, which document the hundreds of acrylic colors she mixes herself and keeps in identical plastic deli containers (she buys them wholesale), on wheeled metal trolleys. Her originality shows up in the materials she works with—metal spatulas in many sizes (the largest is three feet wide) instead of paintbrushes; rolls and rolls of blue masking tape that she uses to get the collage-like effects of her compositions (two mounds of discarded tape are steadily growing on the floor); plastic PVC panels instead of canvas. Bright colors are everywhere. The risers on the steps leading up to her platform office are painted alternately red and yellow. The file cabinet and the Haier mini-icebox are fire-engine red. Pink and orange plastic buckets hold kitchen utensils, paper napkins, and ready-made servings of coffee for her high-tech Le Cube espresso machine. Kristin herself, who almost never wears color, has on a long black wrap sweater by Comme des Garçons, with jeans and brown Yves Saint Laurent boots. She's very pretty, but her manner is low-key, quietly humorous, and somewhat self-effacing.

The three other unfinished paintings in the studio are smaller than the big one but still monumental. The abstract images in one of them remind me of her earlier race-car pictures. "Yeah, that's a Nascar crash," she says, "or it's coming from that." In the paintings she showed at Deitch Projects last spring, Kristin had moved away from the racetrack theme, with its explosive planes of color and car fragments hurtling outward from the center. Her new work channeled some of art history's famous evocations of natural or man-made disasters: Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa,* Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus.* Her Géricault-inspired piece, which she called *The Raft of Perseus,* is the least abstract of her "history paintings." It shows the raft and the sea, but with all the people removed. Painting it made her feel "hokey" at the time. "Was I just drawing from the general energy of it, or was I interested in redepicting it for our time? I'm still going back and forth with this one. After finishing that, I wanted to run far away from it and go right back into abstraction." What she's really doing now is trying to absorb art history and transform it into a contemporary idiom.

SMOKE SIGNALS
Montagues and Capulets, 2007, references Nascar driver Dale Earnhardt's untimely death.

"If I look at trends in contemporary art," she says, "I don't feel within them at all. The big trend right now is about being unambitious and unmonumental, like the opening show at the New Museum, this unfabricated assemblage kind of thing. I'm definitely not a part of that. My stuff is very technical and very ambitious."

Kristin's parents were both nineteen when she was born, in 1975, in Stamford, Connecticut. Her father had wanted to be a sculptor (he was a studio assistant to Ruben Nakian at the time), but eventually he gravitated to his grandfather's bottled-water business, which he took over and expanded. He also got deeply involved with car racing, as a driver and later as a corporate sponsor. "When I was young, my parents were really into racing," Kristin tells me. "We'd go to races and watch races on TV. It was a really big part of our environment." Her mother made all of Kristin's clothes, but the earth tones she liked clashed with Kristin's preferences. "My whole life has been obsessed with color," she says. "As a child, I had a very colorful room and wouldn't allow my mom to have any brown or black in there. When they bought me a stereo in fifth grade, I freaked out because it was black."

Kristin struggled with learning disabilities and didn't do well in school. In her sophomore year at the Gunnery, a boarding school in Washington, Connecticut, "I didn't have very good grades, and I broke as many rules as I could. I was a really bad girl—partying and boys and stuff like that." Afraid of being kicked out, she wangled a switch to the Berkshire School in Massachusetts, where she hoped to find a more creative program, "but it didn't turn out that way." Her main interest then was in writing, not art, but between her junior and senior years, she took a summer art course at Bennington College. "That's when I first painted. My teacher there was really supportive. He said, 'You're doing something special here.' I don't know if he said that to everyone, but it really made me feel confident and want to make art."

Turned down by Bennington, Bard, and "all the usual suspects" of liberal arts colleges, she ended up taking the five-year course offered jointly by the Boston Museum School and Tufts University, where she got A's and B's in her philosophy and art-history courses. At that time she was mainly interested in poetry, sculpture, video—"anything but painting"—but one of her art teachers was so impressed by her paintings that he offered her a studio of her own. She took a semester off to live at home and work in a high-end Italian restaurant. Returning to Boston, she "gradually

Montagues and Capulets, 2007: © Kristin Baker; acrylic on PVC, 80"x120"; Courtesy of Deitch Projects, New York; photographed by Tom Powel Imaging.

became more and more obsessed with painting." Her paintings got larger and larger, de Kooning–esque abstractions, oil on canvas, which gave way to mostly abstract industrial landscapes in enamel paint. "She was incredibly focused, incredibly hardworking, and always engaging with contemporary art," according to Kurt Kauper, an artist who taught at the Museum School. "At the end of her time there, she was doing really interesting work."

In her last year, she persuaded the school to let her finish her academic courses at the New School in New York. "I just wanted to get the hell out of Boston." She lived at the Chelsea Hotel and went to all the gallery and museum shows she could. After graduating from Tufts and the Museum School in the spring of 1998, she and a friend found a space in a building in Williamsburg, with room for two studios and living quarters. "I never knew Brooklyn existed before that. I would drive around in my car, taking pictures. I learned every nook and cranny from where I lived to the Verrazano Bridge." She discovered a warehouse full of materials for making signs; this was where she learned about plastic PVC panels, which come in very large sizes. Her paintings got more and more industrial and sci-fi-looking, with glossy enamels on aluminum. "I didn't really make anything very good," she tells me. "At this point, I knew I wanted to go back to school to figure out what I was doing."

She applied to UCLA, Yale, Goldsmith's (in London), and Columbia, and got into all of them. UCLA was her first choice. There was a buzz about the school, and Kristin, who had never traveled, wanted to experience California, where her mother had grown up. But her parents begged her not to go there. Over the years, ironically, both of them had developed travel phobias (which applied to highways and bridges, as well as flying); they were afraid they'd never see her. They offered to buy her a car of her choice if she'd go to Yale. She chose a silver Audi wagon and spent the next two years in New Haven.

The colorful, gritty spectacle of car racing, which had been so deeply ingrained in Kristin's growing up, became a central element in her art-making at Yale. She went to racetracks, photographed and videotaped every aspect of the action there, and began to work elements of it into what were still mostly abstract renderings of crowds, tire burns on concrete, hurtling cars, logos, and sheer breakneck speed. All this had been informing her work for some time, she realized, but now, with the maturing self-knowledge that good art comes from deeply felt, personal experience, she embraced it directly. She had stopped using enamel paint, because the fumes were making her sick. Her new materials were acrylic paints on PVC panels, plastic on plastic; she layered high-gloss, transparent colors on top of other colors to create depth. With increasing assurance, she developed a unique personal language to convey her highly personal subject matter.

"Kristin is definitely one of the best artists I've ever worked with in a student-teacher relationship," says Kurt Kauper, her Boston Museum School teacher, who had joined the Yale faculty the same year she started there. "You don't really teach students like Kristin. You have conversations with them and you watch them develop." In February of her final year at Yale, Kauper, who showed with Jeffrey Deitch in New York, asked Deitch to come up and look at the work in Kristin's thesis show. Deitch did so and immediately decided he wanted to give her a show. "I lost a lot of friends over that," Kristin says. "Everyone thought I dragged him out of the main thesis show, to look at my work, so I left Yale being hated by my peers."

BRIGHT LIGHT
The artist, in a Chloé dress sprinkled with brushstrokes, in her Brooklyn studio. Hair, Renato Campora for Kérastase Paris at the Wall Group; makeup, Carla White for Chanel at L'Atelier NYC. Details, see In This Issue.

The next time I visit Kristin's studio, I'm greeted first by Cooper, her overly friendly Weimaraner. The piles of discarded blue masking tape on the floor have grown mountainous, and the new car-crash painting is finished, titled, and sold. It's called *Montagues and Capulets,* and the buyer is Steven Cohen. "With this one I was thinking about the Nascar crash where Dale Earnhardt was killed," she says. "None of my race-car paintings have dealt with anyone actually dying. I wasn't thinking directly about Nascar or Dale Earnhardt but about untimely death and tragedy, and that's how I got to *Romeo and Juliet.*"

Tragedy seems to be a definite presence in Kristin's paintings, although they end up looking very full of life. Her own life at the moment is certainly upbeat. Singled out as a young artist to watch by *Artforum, Vanity Fair,* and many other magazines, she has made her mark internationally, showing in François Pinault's "Sequence 1" show at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice last summer and in Charles Saatchi's "USA Today" in London. Saatchi, who owns more of her paintings—seven—than anyone else, paid $600,000 for one of them on the secondary market.

NORMAN JEAN ROY

COLLISION COURSE
The Unfair Advantage, 2003. To create her work, Baker uses acrylic paints, metal spatulas, blue masking tape, and PVC panels.

Next month, she moves into a new apartment in Williamsburg—the first one she's ever owned—with her boyfriend, Sam Kusack, a sculptor as well as a leading metal fabricator for artists and architects. (Sam makes the metal frameworks for her PVC boards, and also made the supports for the huge, curved freestanding work that was in her last show.) "I've never had my own place to do exactly what I wanted with," she says. She's bought an orange sofa and yellow aluminum chairs by Jasper Morrison. "They come in blue and red and other colors. Sam and the guy in the store say you can't get every color, it'll look horrible, but I have to have them all." She and Sam are designing their metal-and-glass dining table, which Sam will build. "We're both very stubborn about what it should look like, so we've been at war about this for

The Unfair Advantage, 2003; © Kristin Baker; acrylic on PVC panel, 60" x 108"; Courtesy of Deitch Projects, New York; photographed by Tom Powel Imaging

eight months." Kristin is also designing wallpaper for the whole apartment, ceiling included. When I suggest that the result will be like walking into one of her paintings, she says, "That's what I'd like. That's why the table has to be what I think it should be. Sam tells me to stop overobsessing about rearranging everything, but that's what I do in my paintings. I like creating environments."

The big work in progress on the far wall of her studio, the Tintoretto painting, has gone from orange and yellow to what looks like all colors of the spectrum. When Deitch took her to see the original in Venice last June, she says, "I was overwhelmed by the atmosphere and the energy and the overall composition. It just felt so human. It was like going to another world. Spatially, it was so interesting, with things coming *(continued on page 652)*

of *The Senator,* starring Georgie Drew Barrymore as Mrs. Hilary, "a susceptible young widow." There are also biographies and memoirs of Georgie's children, Ethel, Lionel, and the especially tragic John, who died of complications of myocarditis and cirrhosis of the liver at 60. Their memoirs reveal that, like Drew herself, they received precious little parental supervision; and though the boys had ambitions to be painters and Ethel to be a concert pianist, they all went into the family business as a means of survival.

Although her grandfather, great-uncle, and great-aunt were all dead by the time she was born, Drew derives a certain strength and reassurance from her remarkable gene pool. "I had my own little Yoda in the form of my family," she tells me at Formosa, where John Barrymore's photograph hangs on the wall. "Maybe they were crazy, but they were talented and they were interested and they were passionate about life, and they weren't afraid to live it to its fullest. Maybe that hurt them in some ways, and maybe they didn't understand family values as well as some other families, but they're still an interesting tribe, and I'm proud I come from that circus. When I was a kid, I used to look at the moon and think it was my grandfather. I always knew where he was."

On her first night in Toronto for the *Grey Gardens* shoot, Drew pulled out a *Life* magazine devoted to *Twentieth Century,* the great Howard Hawks film starring John Barrymore and Carole Lombard, whose astonishing, rhythmic voice she can imitate perfectly. "I was in my hotel room, and I suddenly felt very close to them. I burst into tears and started screaming at the ceiling, 'I need you right now; I need you by my side.' Why do we do this? Why do we remove ourselves from the world and all the people we love and go into the darkest part of ourselves?"

The upside of having access to that "darkest part," of course, is that it can inform the transformation into a complex character like Little Edie. "It's her pain I connected to. I always knew I had a lot on reserve, but I also realized that I am basically a really happy person."

Perhaps it is that essential disposition, as well as her ancestral "Yoda," that contributes to Kwapis's assessment of her as a "great bona fide movie star in every sense of the word. No matter what role she's playing, with Drew, you feel involved. Especially in romantic-comedy roles, it's like she's holding up a mirror to the audience with all their flaws and foibles—she knows your story, and she's telling it."

When they formed their company, Juvonen suggested they focus initially on romantic comedies. It was, she says, a no-brainer: "Drew loves love more than anyone I've ever known. It's euphoric, and everyone gets to share in it."

I know what she means. On the phone, when she and Long are looking for lunch, Barrymore asks me, "Can you feel me smiling? My cheeks hurt, I'm so happy." In the background I hear Justin saying, "She makes my cheeks hurt, too, and you can quote me on that." Somehow, I am not only not nauseated by this whole exchange, I am tickled to death for Drew. Especially when she brings it back around to the clan. She has inherited their talent, but, generations later, there are also, it seems, lessons learned. "I have no sense of traditionalism, but I'm learning it on my own, slowly but surely. I'll be the first Barrymore who will tell my children, 'I'm going to pick you up at three' and actually turn up." □

A GOOD RUN

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"I just wasn't very good at marriage. I've been friendly with almost everyone I have been involved with. It's nice to have somebody to go to a dinner with, so that you're not that extra woman, but that's not enough reason to stay married.

"I've always been indecisive—marry, not marry; marry this one, no, that one; leave, stay? My indecision spilled over into every personal thing. I do it with clothes: If I bought a long dress it should have been short; a blue one should have been green. I do it with stories. . . . My idea of hell is, I've finished an interview, I think it's great, and then the cameraman says, 'Did you ask such and such?' and I go—*'Aahh!* That is the one question I should've asked!' I drive myself crazy."

Walters thinks she should have spent more time with her daughter "and been with her when she needed help. But then I don't know if I would have this life if I had said I'm going to give up the *Today* show." Jackie, a glowing six-foot-tall blonde, now 39, lives in Maine, where she runs a therapeutic wilderness camp for teenage girls in crisis.

Now past her mid-70s, Walters thinks she doesn't "have ambition anymore, but if somebody came to me tomorrow and said, 'You can interview Osama, in two hours you have to be on a plane,' I would say yes," says Walters. "That's the old drive and the old warhorse. That's different from 'I can give you an interview if you want to go to California and do one of the young movie stars who just came out of rehab.' I would say no.

"If there is any lesson . . . I don't believe that the best is yet to come, and I don't know why at this point in my life, at my oldest, I am more content than I have ever been. If that gives anybody hope—I don't feel depressed, even though I know that my working life is going to be less and that probably my greatest work is behind me. I am very happy. I have accomplished what I wanted to accomplish; my Jackie is fine and happy and successful in her life. I have this book coming out. I'm not forced to do anything—I can do *The View* two days a week or five days a week, I have great freedom in my life now, and it's not something I'm going to do forever. I know when I'm going to stop. I haven't picked the hour and the day, but I know."

In her dressing room at *The View,* the makeup chair is covered with pink silk, and there are canvas curtains printed with pink tulips. Walters is wearing tan trousers, an ivory shirt, and a long knitted vest, all from H&M—it's "A Week of Clothes for Less than $100." She's relaxed, alert, fluid. In the studio, a man is warming up the crowd of women. By the time Barbara comes out to greet the audience, the women are dancing, and they cheer her like the Second Coming. "I did a morning show today to promote *The Ten Most Fascinating People;* this makeup's been on so long it's congealing," she says. They laugh. Whoopi Goldberg, Joy Behar, Sherri Shepherd, and Barbara take their places at the high table, to more cheers. Banter, news, politics—Barbara does not opine. The show is humorous, good-natured, full of energy, and reaches its conclusion with the announcement that everyone in the audience will receive "a $250 massaging backrest." The crowd goes wild. Barbara Walters, smiling, comes over to my seat. "This," she says, "is dessert." □

COLOR SURGE

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forward into your space, and other things really far away." When she got home, the painting kept coming back to her. "I didn't really want to go there, but then finally I decided I might. My painting is not going to be a clear depiction. What I want to take from Tintoretto is the energy and the crazy dramatic space and light."

The dramatics in her show at Deitch Projects last spring drew Kristin's only negative review so far, from Roberta Smith in *The New York Times.* Referring to such space-devouring works as *The Raft of Perseus* and *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold* (Kristin's take on *Tu m',* the last painting by Marcel Duchamp), Smith wrote that they "strike the eye with a harsh and dazzling newness. But the eye adjusts and eventually is bored, despite the surfeit of thought, skill, and art-historical

asides." To my eye, the show was fresh, unlike anything else being done right now, and certainly not boring. Kristin was upset by the *Times* review, but not enough to slow her down.

"I feel like I'm doing what I have to do," she tells me. "I have no other choice. Painting takes over everything—relationships, life, the idea of having kids, which seems like it could be impossible. . . . I'm really into contemporary things, but I'm embracing anachronistic points in the history of painting. Sometimes this clashes with everything else in my life, but it's coming from somewhere deep inside of me. Painting is more complex than a lot of other things out there, and the complexities of painting are still relevant. That's what I love about it. Painting is not what you think it is. There's a slowness and a stillness in it, and I enjoy this fight to make it full of motion and something else. But the subject and everything else about it are not as important as the actual act of doing it. All the millions of decisions that go into it. I'm constantly figuring out the puzzle, and then I finally have all the pieces together, and there it is." □

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

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are very lucky. I don't want to spoil them. I want them to think that their mother is a good person; I want them to lead happy, meaningful, useful lives. You're allowed to spoil children with love but not with material goods." This means that on birthdays the girls are limited to choosing two things at FAO Schwarz, and that they have chores: Grace feeds the puppy, and Chloe waters the flowers. Frugality (of a relative kind) is the order of the day. "I recently bought a pair of $45 shoes for Grace one size too big. The nanny said, 'You don't have to do that.' " Nicole Kidman says, "She used to worry about her children so much. When they were little she wouldn't leave them, even for a few hours. Now that anxiety has eased. I can't wait to see what her girls are like at eighteen to 21. They'll be spectacular."

Kelly Behun Sugarman, a mom at the playgroup and the person who (with her business partner) decorated the Murdoch home on Long Island, says, "Everything revolves around her kids. They are her priority; that hasn't changed." And whereas the other moms are prone to fretting about their children's well-being, Sugarman points out, "what Wendi does at a certain point is say, 'Let's solve it.' She's able to see solutions to things. She's not frivolous. When she's not there, we say, 'What would Wendi do?' "

NEW YORK—CHINATOWN

One thing that Wendi does, in relation to her bicultural identity, is support P.S. 184M, the Shuang Wen School, in downtown Manhattan. It's the only public school in the nation offering a mandated bilingual program in Chinese and English for all students. The Murdochs fund the entire middle school, whose students visit Montreal and Quebec City in order to witness another bilingual culture at work, as well as an after-school program that extends the school day to 5:30: More than two-thirds of students' families fall below the poverty line, and most parents work six to seven days a week. The school's dynamic principal, Ling Ling Chou, says that Wendi's intervention has enabled the children to venture beyond Chinatown, which many of them would otherwise not do (80 percent of the kids are of Asian ethnicity). "Wendi and I share the same philosophy: Education can change your person."

It was at Yale that Wendi's person most changed. "I had the best two years of my life. This was the first time I didn't have to work to pay for my tuition." (She even liked New Haven: "After you live in China, everywhere is good.") She was "quite outgoing," says Sally Shan. "At parties she could speak to everyone, unlike other Chinese students, who tend to be shy. She really helped bring me in: where to shop, where to go." It was Costco for food and fashion magazines for inspiration. Wendi took classes in film studies. "The media universe has always been her interest."

"I don't want her to take over the company from me, nothing like that. Have a useful life; make a contribution to business"—that's what Rupert Murdoch has in mind for his wife. (Note that Rupert, 76, has a mother who's 99 and counting: He's not going anywhere.) Each morning, while Wendi works out, he marks up the papers with everything he thinks Wendi should read. This means, says Wendi, "anything to do with China, the Internet, acquaintances, competitors; Thomas Friedman, Maureen Dowd. He wants me to read in order to talk about politics." The educational traffic runs both ways: "She's never free of her bloody texting," Rupert growls. "She's making me learn it." David Geffen says, "She's very in touch with what's happening and brings that to Rupert. She's brought an enormous amount of fun to his life."

Thus, on the first snow day of the winter, Wendi leads her family to Chinatown for dim sum. It's a frequent weekend activity. They bundle into Golden Bridge Restaurant, a bustling, barely decorated second-floor establishment, and the recurrent theme of dumplings is taken up again: Grace goes for shrimp, Wendi for pork. Chloe eats Chinese doughnuts, as befits the littlest one. Rupert picks at various fried delicacies—"Rupert doesn't eat carbs. I love pasta"—and the talk (bilingual for the girls) is of Christmas movies and Christmas cards. (He does 300, she 200, and that's their project for this snowy Saturday.) Rupert seems chuffed indeed about his having another chance at paternity. "It's different to be a father today," he observes. "Much more is expected. They're a joy. I went and picked up Chloe from school on Friday. To see her happiness made me so happy." Says Elisabeth Murdoch, "My sisters Grace and Chloe are wonderfully curious, kind, and intelligent young girls, and that must be a testament to Wendi and my dad as parents."

The bill comes. It's $38. "Can you believe it?" Wendi says, thrilled. She leaves a $10 tip. They have been treated no better or worse than any other family there.

NEW YORK—FIFTH AVENUE

"She is a star!" exclaims Diane von Furstenberg. "Her life is a novel with lots ahead of her." Wendi's next chapter is the stuff of the heavens: In August, she and the family will move into the top three floors of a grand Fifth Avenue building overlooking Central Park. The former Rockefeller triplex is under reconstruction and restoration, with interiors designed by Christian Liaigre. Three rooms will combine to form one Boffi kitchen. There will be a third-floor movie theater, an indoor/outdoor gym and Pilates studio, gold Chinese door handles, fourteenth-century fireplace mantels from Paris, and a Buddha near the entrance. On the day we visit, it's a hard-hat zone. Wendi asks the site manager, "How many people are here today?" When told 38, she replies, "Don't you need more?"

The apartment was actually Rupert's dream first. He lived in the building, on a lower floor, in the seventies, when he and his first wife came over from Sydney. From the beginning, he hankered after the top floors. When he read the obituary of the relevant Rockefeller, he didn't hesitate.

Wendi is most excited by the children's quarters. Where the Rockefellers once stored their art, there will be a sleepover-party space. Next door, the girls will share a room—"good for their friendship"—with an aerial view of the Central Park Zoo. We wander over to the window and peer down. Pavilions and playgrounds are visible. "Sometimes you can see the polar bear," says Wendi Murdoch. "Where I grew up—dirt floor, no bathroom." □ *(continued on page 654)*