DECOREX SPECIAL ISSUE

# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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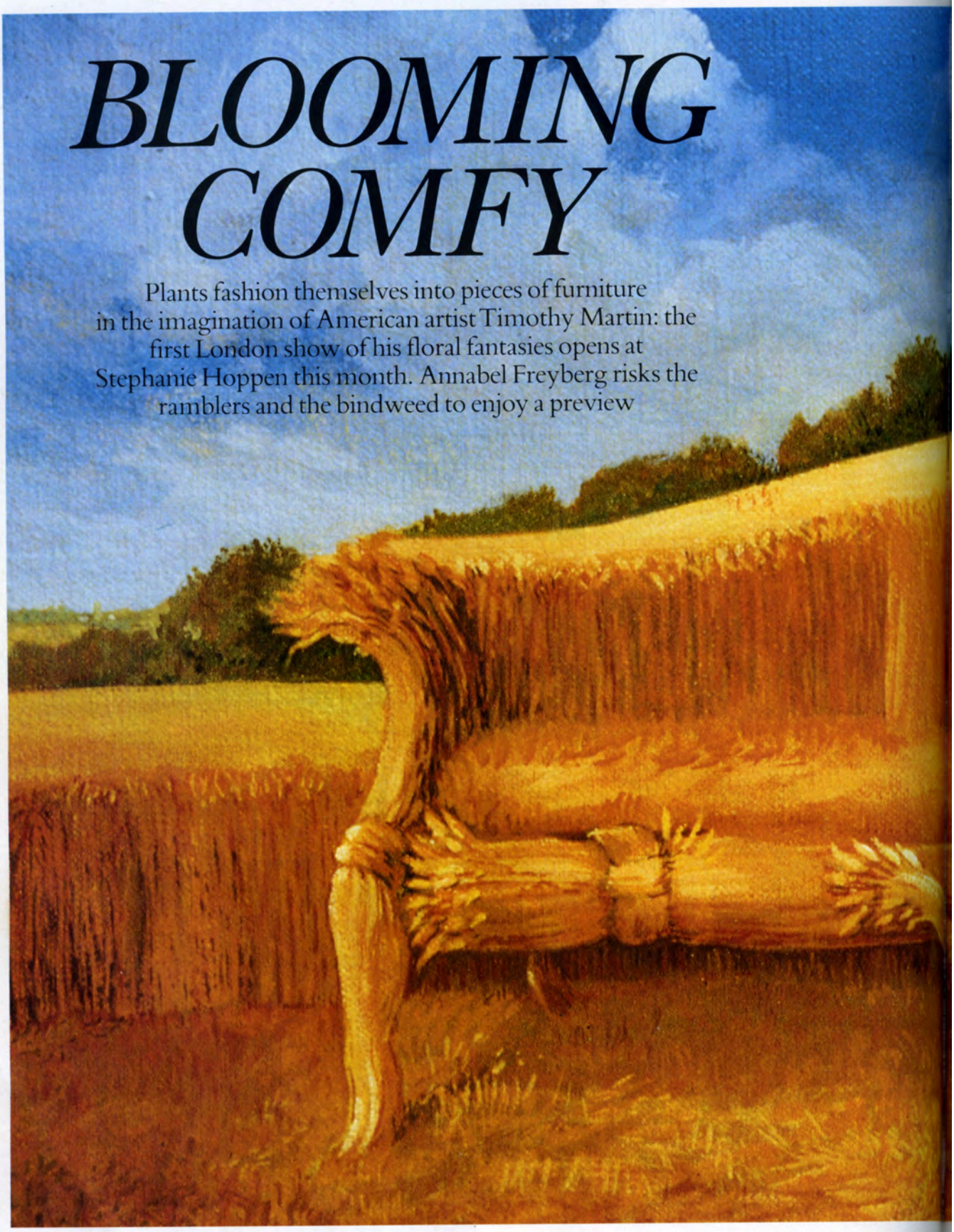
# BLOOMING COMFY

Plants fashion themselves into pieces of furniture in the imagination of American artist Timothy Martin: the first London show of his floral fantasies opens at Stephanie Hoppen this month. Annabel Freyberg risks the ramblers and the bindweed to enjoy a preview



It all started off as a pun. Artist Timothy Martin thought it would be amusing to draw a wing chair with feathered birds' wings for arms, and enjoyed himself so much his imagination blossomed. Quite literally. He began to create pictures of chairs made entirely of roses, to grow grapes all over their arms, legs and backs, and he even submerged one (Regency) chair in water by constructing it of waterlilies and adding goldfish for legs.

These startling floral fantasies achieved a wider audience earlier this year when Tiffany's of New York mounted an exhibition of them in their windows. Now the Stephanie Hoppen Gallery – ever on the search for enterprising and entertaining artists (remember her human-dog portraits by Poncelet featured in *The World of Interiors*, November 1990?) – is to host his first show in England.

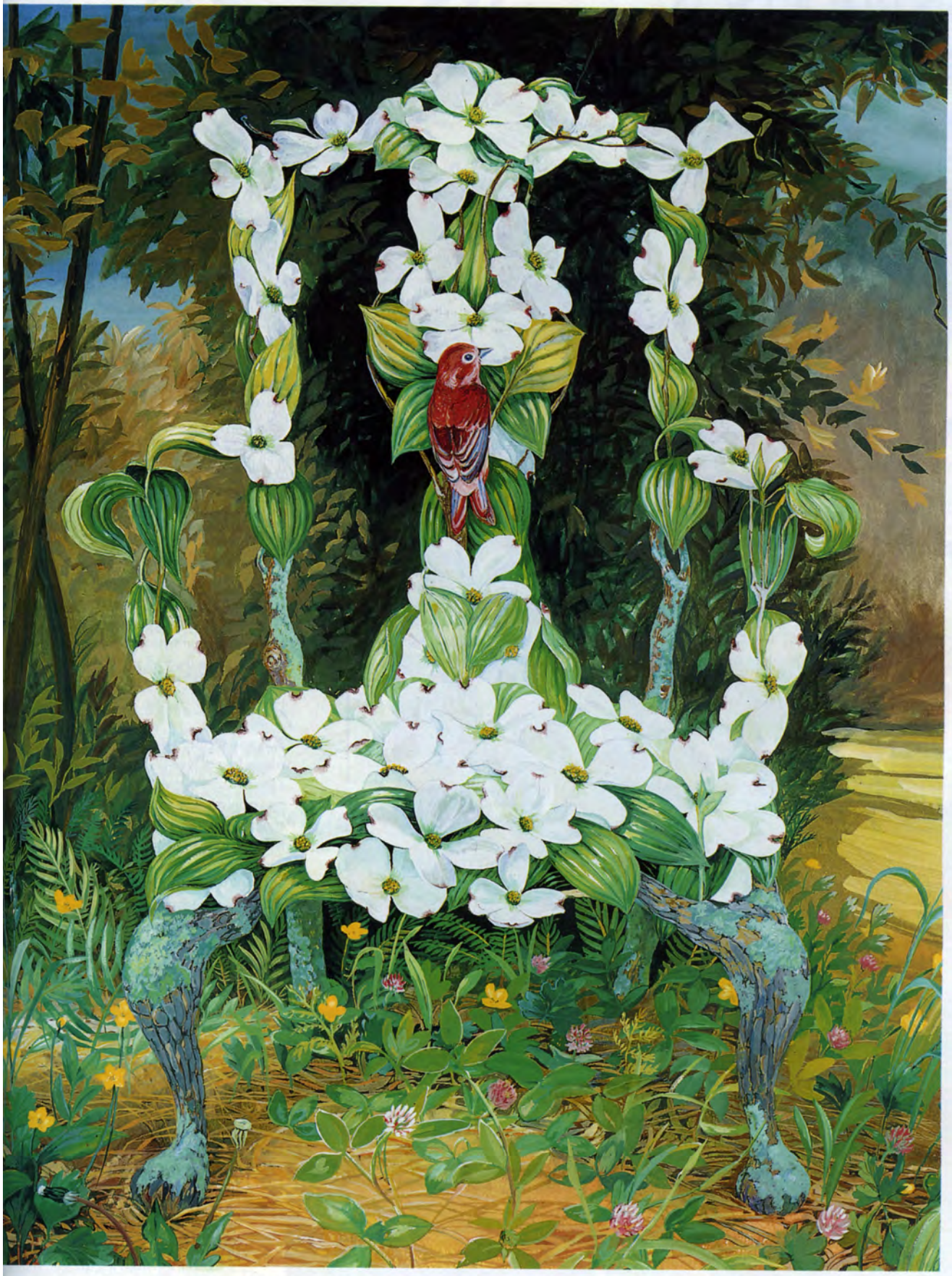
Since Tiffany's, Timothy has been hard at work producing new gouaches and drawings, effortlessly devising more impossibly-blooming seating, prompting the question, which comes first, flower or chair? 'Sometimes a flower or plant suggests the kind of chair it would make,' Martin muses, 'But I love classic furniture, and often I'll see a chair I want to paint and then I'll think about what kind of natural element will work best with it.'

Martin's first chance to study flowers at close quarters came as a student, when he paid his way through college by working at a greenhouse and nursery. Today his wife Janis Burenga and he live in rural New Jersey in an 1816 Greek Revival stone farmhouse which they have been meticulously renovating since the mid-1980s. They are surrounded by vegetable, herb and flower gardens, but, as Martin admits, 'my interest in gardening is more in the atmosphere it creates than in the actual gardening itself'.

Similarly, although Martin is also a sculptor (his commissions include a musical-instrument-strewn landscape piece for Unistar Radio Network's new headquarters in New York), his interest in turning his elaborate drawings into reality so far extends only to a couple of terracotta chair sculptures. He still has too many ideas to put down on paper. Apologetically he explains that 'the chair lets me know what it's going to be'; and as this keeps changing – even for the same chair – he is not going to run out of ideas for some time yet.

He points out that conventional furniture has often used nature for inspiration, citing chair feet in the shape of claws, and that he prefers to work with plants that are in season so he can draw from life. A spring reverie is created by delicate forsythia heads outlining a Windsor chair, while swathes of dogwood, roses and berries are gathered and brought into the studio to work from.

'I like to think my furniture series does exactly what real furniture is supposed to do,' says this Arcimboldo of the chair world, 'relax and draw you into a daydream.' With Martin's chairs, the phrase 'sitting pretty', for once, really is apt ■

*At Stephanie Hoppen, 17 Walton St, London SW3 (Tel: 071-589 3678), 18 October-10 November, Mon-Fri 10-6, Sat 11-4*

*Previous page: Shorn lamb on corn sofa. Top, from left, forsythia Windsor; berries-and-cane chair; and waterlily Regency. Above: Rose-bower shield-back. Opposite: Dogwood and foursquare armchair*