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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES HEIRRELL

Once upon a time there was an unloved 1840s town house split into dingy flats. Then along came an interior designer set on turning it into a bright, modern home for her family and art. By ROS BYRNSHAW

# Return to splendour

Opening the door to her London house in an exceptionally well-located garden square, Harriet Anstruther looks like a gorgeous housewife from the 1950s in a full-skirted, tight-bellied cream dress and high wedge sandals, her wavy blonde hair tied back from her wide blue eyes, a cigarette waving expressively in one hand. The interior of the house proves as glamorous as its owner, with a sweeping cast-iron staircase of Portland stone, high ceilings, parquet floors, glistening white paint and a brilliantly edited selection of art and furnishings. Harriet Anstruther probably runs her household like a well-oiled Cadillac, but it would fill the rest of this article to enumerate everything else she does. Principally she is an interior designer, a finalist in this year's Society of British Interior Design International Design Awards, and currently running several prestigious projects including an apartment in the Dakota Building in New York, and the redesign of a high-profile government office. She also has a finger in such a banquet of art and design-related pies – the V&A, the Royal Academy, the Royal College of Art, the Design Museum and more – that you wonder when she has time to eat, let alone get on with writing a book about design, due to be published next year. It is enough to bring on an attack of terminal



In the West Room, Harriet Anstruther chose the broken and faded of the striped sofa as well as a modernist chair. A French chandelier hangs between the two windows.

66 stella



Decorative from above: the watercolor above the fireplace is by Harriet Anstruther and the carved wood chair is by Nikola Wolgast. Midcentury wallpaper by Cole & Son in the bedroom; vintage Robin Day plastic chairs and a Saarinen table in Henry's studio.



inadequacy and it comes as a relief when, settled on the graphic black and white sofa in the first-floor drawing room, she leans forward and announces that taking on so much is 'probably the result of some kind of ridiculous mid-life crisis' and that she is actually 'a bag of nerves'.

It seems her current level of productivity is relatively recent. 'About six years ago,' she confides, 'I decided to up my game. I had done all kinds of things after art school – designed a range of scarves, worked with Kit Kemp on the Covent Garden Hotel, done some writing and styling, a ton of stuff. But I wanted to throw myself into a bigger pond, and I enrolled at the Inchebald [School of Design] so I could learn how to project-manage as well as design. This is the

house I cut my teeth on.' The result is not only an advertisement for her talents but also a comfortable, practical home and workspace for her, her husband, Henry Bourne, her daughter, Celestia, and their dogs, Pearl and Etti.

When they acquired it seven years ago, they found a house that had been 'horribly messed with' in the 1940s, the gracious proportions of the architect George Basevi's original siting design countered by the extra staircases and walls necessary to turn a six-storey town house into three separate flats, 'she explains. 'I chose Alex Michaelis, a friend since I was 16, and who knows what an opinionated old boot I am. I love his style, and it was a great collaboration, but the poor chap didn't really get a look-in because



I knew exactly what I wanted – to restore the original architecture and allow it to speak for itself, but also to add a sense of modernity'.

As for Bourne, a photographer with his own distinctive vision, Anstruther says he is a minimalist, but loves Georgian proportions. 'He wanted a contemporary studio space in the basement but, aside from that, was happy to take a back seat.' Bourne later confirms that the finished house is 'the best of both worlds, old and new'. And there are plenty of his elegant photographs on the walls as testament to their shared tastes.

Bourne's photographs are in illustrious company. Anstruther has been collecting art for 20 years. 'I buy for pure pleasure,' she insists, 'never for investment, never to fill a particular space.'

Decorative from above: Osborne & Little fabric wallpaper and a lamp from Heath in the guest bedroom; a pink glass weight cache in the bathroom; a vintage brass and Carrara marble in the kitchen.



So a Lucian Freud etching (bought with a legacy from her father, Sir Ian Anstruther) and a Tracey Emin collage hang in the drawing room, with works by lesser-known artists. Whether a sizeable Harland Miller oil hanging on the stairs, or a sketch by Duncan Grant propped on a mantelpiece, the art sits in these meticulously restored, light, bright spaces, and is complemented by the furnishings, which are a combination of serious antiques, modern pieces, eBay finds, lighters from a hand-ship and towering metal letters from a petrol station.

There is also originality: the chaste marriage of unlaqueered brass and Carrara marble in the kitchen; the pink skylight that makes the shower glow like a neon art installation; the antique fire bucket plumbed in as a basin. If only nerves and a mid-life crisis could be so productive for us all. **O**

harrietanstruther.com

68 stella

70 stella