

# HOUSES & GARDEN

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# insider LIFESTYLE

**Olinda Adeane** visits the home and studio of textiles designer Karen Nicol and her husband, collage artist Peter Clark, which they have decorated with economy and originality



PHOTOGRAPHS RORY CARNEGIE





OPPOSITE Karen and Peter both have studios at home. THIS PAGE The sitting room, like the remainder of the house, is decorated simply, with quirky elements to provide creative stimulus. The flag chair cover is by Karen ▸



KAREN IS WELL KNOWN FOR HER CREATIVE WORK AND ESPECIALLY HER WONDROUS EMBROIDERY DESIGNS



THIS PAGE Metal 'trees' made by Peter add colour to the dining room. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Karen at work with Bruce Oldfield. A collage jacket by Peter. On this cushion, Karen reproduced in embroidery a snapshot from a photograph album. Glass bottles make informal vases in the kitchen



The wear and tear and expense of family life can often result in compromise and clutter in the home. This isn't the case for Karen Nicol and Peter Clark and their two teenage daughters, Katy and Grace. Their large semi-detached house, vibrant with original ideas, is somewhere where home life and busy careers coexist in considerable harmony.

Karen is well known for her creative work and especially her wondrous emb-

roidery designs. She works with fashion designers Betty Jackson, Bruce Oldfield, Julien MacDonald and Clements Ribeiro, among others, and designs fabrics for horsehair textiles manufacturer John Boyd, and for Clarence House, Zimmer + Rohde and Brunschwig & Fils. She also teaches at the Royal College of Art.

Peter made his name as a designer and illustrator, working largely in television and animation, but following the success earlier this year of his exhibition at

Rebecca Hossack Gallery, he is concentrating on collage work and has three further shows planned for this year.

The couple share a delight in ephemera; items that have been neglected or simply overlooked. This is partly to do with the nature of their work, but also for the pure pleasure of finding antique textiles, old letters or a box of buttons. They often visit car-boot sales and antiques fairs, from Ardingly to Newark, and they rarely return empty-handed. ▷



Karen and Peter bought their large semi-detached house in East Molesey six years ago, when they decided to work from home and so save time and avoid the cost of keeping individual studios. The house is beautifully light. In some rooms, including the sitting room that leads off the central hallway, white-painted walls softly change colour as the walls reach the stuccoed ceiling. The decoration, uncontrived and sensitive, reveals an underlying humour on Peter and Karen's part. From the sitting room walls protrude fragments cast in plaster of Michelangelo's *David*; above the chimneypiece, a large, round mirror reflects one of Peter's 'paper suits'. At the dining end of the kitchen, sculptural steel 'trees', made by Peter, stand on either side of the chimney breast, emphasizing the room's spare elegance. Broken masonry is grouped on the chimneypiece. Mismatched glass jars, each holding a single stem of flowers, blossom or foliage, stand on the buffet made from basic Ikea cupboards with an added marble top. The jars were collected when their daughters had Saturday jobs at a local florist and would return with exotic leftovers.

Little surprises are everywhere: for example, Peter treats window surrounds as frames for the views beyond, rather than as part of the room's general scheme, and chooses the paint colour accordingly. So in the kitchen the window frame is painted with pale blue 'Pole Star' by Crown Expressions rather than the surrounding white, to set off the view of the garden.

The bathroom walls are hung with an assortment of quirky bevelled mirrors. 'At first we only bought fragments – bits of dressing-table mirrors, and so on – but we couldn't resist buying others with interesting shapes. None of them cost more than £12,' says Karen.

'Peter and I have the same kind of taste, but we discuss everything. We also have a pact to be honest and critical about each other's work. Even if it's painful.' >



ABOVE LEFT Peter's studio. LEFT A room at Knightsbridge Hotel includes Peter's collages. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Karen finds inspiration at Sheila Cook. Karen's studio. Karen and Peter with their dog, Harry. Karen in her studio; and with students at the Royal College of Art. Rustic style in the porch



insider  
LIFESTYLE

ABOVE LEFT and BOTTOM RIGHT Peter and Karen are joined by their daughter Katy for lunch.  
TOP RIGHT Peter delivers his latest work to Rebecca Hossack at the gallery

Interconnecting workrooms on the garden level allow for lots of lively discussions. Peter's studio has a filing system filled with every imaginable kind of old paper: record sleeves, love letters, maps, envelopes and rubber stamps – many of them garnered from the Paris flea markets. From these, he chooses fragments that have a connection with the subject of the collage he's working on.

'Kit Kemp saw my show of dog collages at Rebecca Hossack and commissioned ten works for her new Knightsbridge Hotel. I lined some of the dogs' ears with maps of the area.' Peter enjoys working with his hands in this way: 'I have always liked paper and the way it tears and fades. I also like the idea of recycling and change of use. I am starting to introduce drawing and paint to my collages.' These will be on show at the Affordable Art Fair in Battersea Park this October.

Karen's workroom is the larger space as she often has other people working with her – she works on up to 1,000 garments during a season – and it is brimming with work in progress and with the inspirational pieces she collects. Examples of

Karen's work are strewn across the work table: abstract designs; embroidery enriched by paint, or inspired by the intricate folds of origami, worn silk damask or Brazilian painters. Her shelves are filled with boxes of hatpins, children's hair slides, tiny dolls' limbs, beading and braid. 'In textiles you have to keep moving all the time, keeping up with other advancing technology. I have built up a huge stock of materials and threads so that I'm prepared, because I often have to create designs at very short notice.'

She finds considerable inspiration at Sheila Cook's antique textiles shop,

#### ADDRESSES

**Affordable Art Fair** (October 16 to 20), Battersea Park, SW11 (tel: 020-7371 8787)

**Bruce Oldfield** 27 Beauchamp Place, SW3 (tel: 020-7584 1363)

**Knightsbridge Hotel** 10 Beaufort Gardens, SW3 (tel: 020-7584 6300)

**Sheila Cook Textiles** 283 Westbourne Grove, W11 (tel: 020-7792 8001)

**Rebecca Hossack Gallery** 35 Windmill Street, W1 (tel: 020-7436 4899)

whose stock spans three centuries and ranges from patchwork quilts and Delhi shawls to a pearly king's coat. 'I'm looking all the time for the unexpected,' says Karen. 'New insights or technical differences can add real magic.'

Karen is senior tutor of the mixed-media textiles course at the Royal College of Art. 'Originally the course was called "embroidery", but the word sounds very limiting to a young person. Whether our students are working on textiles for fashion, cars or furnishing, using feathers, crochet or vinyl, they are encouraged to develop fully as designers, and to think about the market they are preparing themselves for.'

Karen bemoans that textile design is still considered a service industry and doesn't receive the credit it is due. 'The price for designs has hardly increased in twenty years and few textiles designers are known in their own right. Fashion is glamorous and gets all the press, but textiles play a large part in its success. Somehow, we have to find a way to create more glamour' □

*Karen Nicol and Peter Clark  
(tel: 020-8979 4593)*