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NZ \$7.50

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# art in action

A CREATIVE ADELAIDE COUPLE LIVE SURROUNDED BY ART – THEIR OWN AND DISCOVERED TREASURES.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARREN CENTOFANTI

The old brick building stands solidly on the corner of a leafy Adelaide square, seemingly uninhabited, its blank windows displaying little but a disappearing stairway and a pile of empty packing cases. Unknown to passers-by, however, creative alchemy is taking place beyond the bland facade. A large upstairs section of what used to be a city printing works is now home to a couple whose artistic flair and love of life seem boundless.

This is an apartment with a difference, one in which domestic life takes second place to work, but where work provides a visual context that enhances living.

A sturdy old stairway leads up to the heart of the building, a former office section (now a bedroom) and an open, 350-square-metre space that is now a studio inhabited by painter David Bromley and his partner, Tori Dixon-Whittle – a potter, actress (she played the female lead in the feature film *Spank!*, released in February this year), writer and designer.

The warehouse was a mess when they arrived, but its clean-up has not disturbed the atmosphere of times gone by. The bathroom is a slide back to the '30s, with chunky taps, exposed pipes and a tub built to serve its purpose, nothing more. This fits in well with Bromley's nostalgia for a time when economic restraints curtailed pretentiousness and when everyday objects were functional rather than fancy – were mended rather than trashed. A few discarded objects have made their way into the smallest room: a ship's funnel, bought at auction, and an old metal bicycle basket, used to hold shampoos.



Shelving gives order to Dixon-Whittle ceramics and collectables. In Bromley's studio space beyond is his portrait of Hugo Weaving.





Light pours through the large industrial windows of the one-time printery into Bromley's studio space, [opposite, top](#), where works in progress have been laid to dry. On the floor is a Cyclops toy car with a home-made caravan attached. [Opposite, below](#): the unobtrusive kitchen, with provisions stored in an old wire food safe and pots and pans kept on a recycled work-table.

In the vast studio space the emphasis is on art, and the functions of daily living intrude with such subtlety they are barely noticed. Dixon-Whittle's workstation takes up one roomy corner, while Bromley paints in another, making the most of the gentle light that floods through the apartment's steel-framed industrial windows. Some of the panes are frosted, others are left uncleaned to soften the sunshine. A host of paintings hang on off-white factory walls below ceilings of finely corrugated iron, while Bromley's latest works-in-progress lie drying in neat rows on a floor of painted concrete.

The favoured theme of the artist – a man who fears flying and is uncomfortable at sea – is enthusiastic *Boy's Own Annual* figures testing their strength by rowing, climbing and taking on nature as part of pre-adolescent evolution. "I surround myself with things that represent human endeavour, and my work is about adventure, a narrative played out on the sea and in the world, a blossoming of self," Bromley says. He describes his work as a marriage between figurative expressionism and Pop art, but the latter is not seen in his large portrait of actor Hugo Weaving and son, destined for entry in the Archibald Prize.

Bromley is also keen on sculpture and photography. The flow of open space, supported by concealed timber roof beams and gutsy steel pillars, is uninterrupted by built-in furniture and bulky couches. Discreet divisions mark various separate functions,



The fruit bowl is an Indian stool; the jug is from Denmark. On the left is a memento of a less famous Harry's Bar. [This page, above](#): 1950s furniture in the 'foyer' at the top of the entry stairs. The painted wooden figure is from Africa, a member of a 'family' that brings a sense of satire to the apartment. [Left](#): Tori Dixon-Whittle and David Bromley.

solutions achieved with thoughtfully placed coir matting and functional Australian furniture from the 1930s. These are no-nonsense pieces in Baltic pine, karri and gum, belonging to the Depression period. Sturdy farmhouse tables serve as workbenches and a table in the 'camouflaged' kitchen is so pitted with use that Dixon-Whittle dusts it with a vacuum cleaner. On it stand an elegant Danish black jug and an Indian stool serving as a fruit bowl. Nearby, food is stored in an old wire safe. Other storage is provided by a low leather-hinged timber chest and a stack of pull-out mail packing boxes from some long-ago post office. Old shoe-drying racks hold the couple's paints and brushes, while pigeonhole shelving forms a subtle separation for the living room, furnished with a low table and 1950s chairs.

The shelving displays a fascinating collection of discovered treasures. Because flying is off Bromley's menu, Dixon-Whittle explains, the two spend a lot of time driving and call into every small-town junk shop along the way. Finds include Australian pressed-metal Boomaroo toys of the '50s and '60s, leather boxing gloves stuffed with horsehair, shoe lasts, ancient rugby balls and cogs from machinery long since rusted on some outback farm.

Pigeonhole shelving imposes order on Dixon-Whittle's classically shaped ceramics, part of a creative surge that takes in writing, photographic modelling, homewares design and acting.



The dining space, above, with bedroom beyond, seen from the seating area at the top of the entry stairs. Dixon-Whittle ceramics sit under a painting by Ian Abdulla. Below: casually stacked wooden drink crates are used for storage in the bedroom, a former office. Dixon-Whittle designed the 'Camouflage' futon cover as part of her Hallo Homewares collection.



Tucked beside the kitchen area, the bathroom epitomises a no-nonsense 1930s practicality, with a twist. A wire bicycle basket serves as a shampoo holder, but the funnel is purely for fun.



“We both live our lives to the full, and we have an infrastructure here that allows us to create,” says Bromley. “There’s a certain rawness in the space, size and dynamics of this place. In itself it’s a piece of art which provides an arena for creative juices to flow.”

The scope of the duo’s interests and output suggests that space must soon run out. However, while they admit that living in a hangar would come closer to their needs, they both practice discipline, bravely shedding objects as they introduce others, and ensuring that the vast room remains uncluttered. Bromley explains: “I can’t produce in the rambling, messy studios in which some artists thrive. We take a lot away, which is a battle for collectors. We throw out things because there is too much, not because they’re bad.”

Unlikely to be discarded are an ancient Indian abacus, a group of 300-year-old Chinese pots, and a comical ‘family’ of painted wooden figures from Africa – caricatures of white colonists standing stiff-backed and self-important – grouped at the base of the studio’s support pillars.

Somewhere near the ceiling of the studio there’s an open casement used by sparrows, as if it’s an entry to a magic cave. They fly in and out and feed on moths, which, claims Dixon-Whittle, means they are house-trained. It’s just as well, considering the lavish array of targets beneath their flight path.

While these two prolific creators have shared other apartments elsewhere in the city, here they have found a safe haven that has triggered their best and most productive work.

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