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Casting a spell

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Photography Thomas Stewart

A sculptor's eye and a passion for experimentation have shaped Kathy Dalwood's work, culminating in a commission for Habitat – meaning the whole world knows of her inspired designs

At the age of seven, Kathy Dalwood hung up her ballet slippers and set out on a path that would eventually lead her to become a successful designer whose pieces can be found in homes all over the world, thanks to a recent collaboration with Habitat. Today, working primarily in plaster and concrete, her latest creations include sculptural planters, vases and tiles, whose monochrome surfaces are indented with bold motifs borrowed from disparate architectural styles such as Modernism and the Baroque.

'My mum used to drop me and my sister off at the town hall for ballet lessons,' remembers Kathy. 'But I hated them, so I began sneaking off to the library to pore over all the books on interiors – I could sit and look at the pictures for hours.'

At this early age, Kathy also whiled away many an hour in the studio of her father, Hubert Dalwood, a prominent sculptor in the Sixties and Seventies, who cast his bold abstract works in bronze and aluminium. It was at her father's feet that her penchant for plaster was born, as she and her sister played with bits of clay and attempted plaster casting for the first time. Given this nascent love of all things three dimensional, why did she go on to study painting at university? 'It was a big mistake,' she says ruefully. Frustrated by the limitations of this medium, Kathy soon dropped out of college and

went into teaching instead. But she couldn't suppress her creative tendencies for long. In a display of reinvention that is characteristic of her designs, she woke up one morning and decided it was time to get back into creative work. She soon made up for lost time, designing a range of furniture based on the multifaceted, wonky café tables and stools seen in Cubist paintings. 'They were functional, but they had a sculptural edge to them, which I would say is true of all my work. I think of myself as a sculptor, really.'

It was the late Eighties: Thatcher was prime minister and the City was experiencing its legendary 'big bang' that, in turn, fuel-injected the design trade. 'The word "designer" went from being a noun to an adjective: everyone was talking about "designer" clothes and furniture,' says Kathy. 'It was really at the beginning of that whole boom in design as we know it now.' Launching her new career in this era gave her the freedom to experiment with one-off pieces, selling through interior designers, shops and galleries that specialised in unique designs. As well as creating colourful furniture, she experimented with rococo shapes in wrought iron and made dramatic chandeliers with bespoke pieces of glass made for her by a company specialising in scientific implements.

Then, 10 years ago, a chance encounter with a computer hard drive led her to return to her plaster-casting roots. 'Looking at its geometric shape and the surface details, such as the lines of the ventilation grill, I could see its potential as a piece of abstract sculpture,' says Kathy. The unfortunate bit of kit was swiftly disassembled and used, along with other pieces of electronic equipment, to create a mould for a collection of vases made from plaster and concrete, which subsequently sold like hot cakes.

'I just completely fell in love with the process of casting,' she says. 'You take away the mould and you have this riveting moment when you've just created an object out of nothing. In that second when it comes out, your gut tells you whether it's worked or not.'

Kathy is a big fan of the work of British sculptor Rachel Whiteread, but whereas Whiteread's casts of the empty spaces of baths or the underside of chairs become immediate pieces of art, Kathy uses casting as part of a design process. 'I kept the idea of abstraction but felt I had to make more conscious aesthetic decisions,' she explains. Decisions such as pairing two seemingly incompatible architectural styles – the pure geometry of Modernism and the elaborate ornamentation of the Baroque – to create her satisfyingly sculptural range of concrete planters. 'I love the flat planes you find in Modernism and civil engineering, so when I became interested in the Baroque, I wanted to look at it in a new context by combining elements from the two periods.' The result is a series of individually cast planters, whose boxy shapes and smooth surfaces are indented with voluptuous baroque curls and garlands inspired by eighteenth-century facades.

Kathy cites London's iconic Southbank Centre as a source of inspiration for her recent Habitat collection, which came about when their head of design and accessories spotted her stylish modernist Setsquares tiles and commissioned her to create a new line of tiles and vases for their stores. 'I see buildings as sculptures, so it's very easy for me to reduce their scale and turn them into domestic objects,' she says. Her simple casting method mirrors that used to create the concrete building blocks of the Southbank Centre. Suddenly, her work was in stores all over the world. 'It was fantastic to see the finished pieces because they were so brilliantly made and they stuck very closely to my original prototypes.' The prototypes were made in Kathy's studio – a large, sunlit room on the first floor of the home that she shares with her partner, artist Justin Mortimer. The air is thick with the smell of the latex that is setting in moulds on the floor, and a thin layer of plaster dust has settled over every surface. Books and maquettes jostle for space on the shelves that line the pale walls, and above her desk, rows of casts inspired by industrial grain silos stand side-by-side with an assortment of miniature Louis XV chairs. Among the works of art on display is a painting by Justin of a black bin bag – an example of how this couple give new meaning to overlooked objects.

The house itself is a spacious, late nineteenth-century terrace on a peaceful street in north London. The previous owner had lived there for more than 50 years, so when the

couple moved in they set about transforming the space – opening up the living room to the hallway, knocking out chimney breasts and inserting floor-to-ceiling Crittall windows overlooking the garden. But Kathy and Justin were also keen to preserve original craftwork: ‘If you were to remove the dado rail you’d see the pencil marks of the original carpenters on the back; we wanted to respect the work that they’d done and not simply rip everything out,’ says Kathy.

Inside, cool white walls and grey-painted floors provide the perfect neutral backdrop to showcase the couple’s colourful finds, collected on regular visits to French street markets and a recent trip to Georgia, USA, which they spent rummaging in thrift stores. ‘Our home is like our very own Sir John Soane’s Museum (a house built by Soane as a resting place for his own works of art), in that it houses our many collections,’ laughs Kathy. Her passion for reinvention, so obvious in her design work, is also evident in the way in which these once-humble objects are lovingly displayed throughout the house – in the living room, clusters of cut-glass candlesticks picked up in local charity shops glint in the light that pours in from the generously proportioned windows; old tapestries have been transformed into stylish cushions or used to upholster chairs, and reproduction Louis XV-style furniture has been given a new lease of life with a lick of paint.

In the kitchen, sleek units, designed by Kathy, are topped with worktops reclaimed from school science laboratories – here and there you can still see the graffiti etched into their surfaces. Cantilevered cupboard doors house the couple’s more everyday objects. In addition to her sculptural work, Kathy runs a successful interior design business, Shift, injecting her successful blend of simple white spaces filled with colourful French period furniture and accessories into other people’s home. ‘The first thing I usually do for my clients is rationalise the space by designing cupboards and hidden storage systems. I believe that everything you own should have a designated home.’

Upstairs lies the bathroom, with its sculptural

modern basin and eighteenth-century-style wallpaper, and a master bedroom, with views of the garden's enormous lilac tree and carefully curated selection of her planters. The guest bedroom is home to a set of china figurines, some of which Kathy has cast in stark grey concrete as part of her new, more figurative designs.

'I love the monochrome of my work, but after our long holidays in France, it's great coming back to our colourful home,' enthuses Kathy.

'I suppose, in an ideal world, I'd like to live in an eighteenth-century French chateau,' she laughs, 'but it would probably have to have a modernist studio built on the back.'★

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