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# THE DESIGN OF THINGS

From a Tuscan Ruin to a  
Midcentury Masterwork. Alluring  
Objects to Abstract Ideas,  
Small Rooms to Big Gardens

# The Language of Light

The artist and designer Marianna Kennedy is a master of reflection, as captured in the furniture and fixtures of resin, lacquer and glass she makes and sells from her handsome London townhouse.

BY SADIE STEIN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JO METSON SCOTT



WALK INTO MARIANNA KENNEDY'S low-lit, generously proportioned house and you are at once seduced by the smell of wood smoke from the many fireplaces and by the distinctive patina of wax that gives the wide board flooring its mellow glow. Colorful resin on the windowpanes lends a stained-glass effect. The decoration is spare, the better to highlight the elegant dentil moldings and the canvases hanging throughout the house, hand-lettered with words and phrases from a 17th-century book of alchemical devices: "Dites-Moi," "Persévérez," "The Marvelous Seed of Love," "A Restless Life." These are the artist and designer's "emblem paintings" — elliptical, cheerful, hard to characterize.

Long before Spitalfields had gentrified into a hipster's playground, the Canadian-born Kennedy, in her 50s now, was a fixture on this quaint East London street lined with 18th-century brick houses: a distinctive, bustling figure in her uniform of pleated skirt, men's shirting and stout brogues. As a student at the Slade School of Fine Art, she became involved with the movement to protect and restore the historic area, and for the past 15 years she has lived and worked in the same Georgian house, with a mullioned ground-floor shopfront. "This neighborhood has always been my muse," she says. "I think the buildings on this street are particularly well suited to being used as we do — as working houses. After all,

it's how they were intended!"

As such, her four-story 1754 home — originally built by a Huguenot silk weaver — serves also as a showroom for the jewel-toned resin that she has become best known for, and as a space to meet with the clients who seek her out for her lesser-known furniture, mirrors and light fixtures. (It houses her husband Charles's book bindery, too.)

"I thought, I'm going to create my own world, where people come and see me the way I think it should look," she explains.

This is critical to an understanding of Kennedy's work and of



**A ROOM OF HER OWN**  
Clockwise from top left: Marianna Kennedy's drawing room, where she often meets with clients, featuring her wooden table lamps, her lacquer tables and a Carlo Scarpa easel displaying one of her paintings and mirrors; Kennedy; her Spring resin lamp; her bronze Badges of Poets mirror, with a Cy Twombly-inspired white patina and azure glass.



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#### THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Clockwise from left: in the library, Kennedy's Marvellous Seed of Love carved mirror, with gray glass, bronze sconces above the sofa and her Cawdor lamp, cast from a circa 19th-century original, with horsehair shade; the bathroom, with book-cloth window blinds; in the drawing room, Kennedy's lacquer and bronze Gueridon table, her resin Trumpet lamp and resin candlesticks in front of one of her emblem paintings.



Kennedy herself. "The art world won't quite take me, and neither will the design world," she says. "My pieces can be difficult for a decorator, but some art people might think they're too old-fashioned." To many, Kennedy is a maker of lovely decorative objects — those delightful lamps; candlesticks; book-cloth shades; totes made of glossy horsehair — elegant, versatile pieces available through a few select retailers. (Pentreath & Hall carries her lamps in London, and a limited-edition line of her totes is currently for sale at New York's Neue Galerie.) "To the extent people have heard of me, that's how," she concedes. "And I've always felt the lamps are important: I like to help a young couple who're doing their first apartment and saving up for a lamp. I'll always do them."

But that work is a very different business from that of her lacquer sideboards, bronze-and-mercury-glass mirrors and hand-carved, bronze-cast sconces, bespoke commissions made with the help of fine artisans she employs, which tend to go straight into private homes. What might feel "too strong" or too unusual as a decorative object might appeal, in a different context, as a piece of art. Her pieces now keep company with works by Joseph Beuys and German Expressionists in clients' homes. And, in a funny twist, it's the large, serious pieces that allow her to make the lamps and





**IN GOOD STEAD** Clockwise from top left: a stairwell window with resin-glazed panes; a four-poster bed designed by one of the artisans Kennedy employs in her studio, with a Chiaratella Cattana bedspread; Kennedy's carved and gilded Fetters of Gold mirror, made with convex rose-colored glass; the house's shopfront, with the original 1870s pawn-shop sign restored; in the showroom, pairs of lacquered, bronze-based tables, Trumpet lamps with book-cloth shades and Noir mirrors, made with black glass.

candlesticks: "The couture pays for the commercial work," she says merrily.

Kennedy cites as inspiration the ateliers of Coco Chanel and the great Irish designer Eileen Gray — women who invited clients directly into their workspaces. "You have to have a degree of modesty, to deal with the materials," she says. "Chanel would pin a dress on a client; you have to be humble! Although I'm not saying you don't have to have a big ego as well." Indeed, despite her concessions to commerce, she holds firmly to a notion of integrity. "I think the push for everything to be businesslike is dangerous," she says. "For a while, people told me, 'People won't want what you do, it's just like an antique!' But I knew they would."

She tells the story she once heard about some of Gray's furniture arriving, after her death, in Paris in the back of an anonymous van and still appealing to dealers on the strength of its beauty. "If it ends up in the back of a van — if someone looks in the van and says, that looks interesting — you've done something!" she proclaims. "I think that's the test, don't you? With everything stripped away from it, if you found the lacquer table in a garbage dump, I hope you'd say, somebody's thought about this." ■

